

UNIVERSITY *of*
TASMANIA

Inland by Sea!

The Mystery of Emotion and Creative Praxis

by

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Statements and Declarations

Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does the thesis contain any material that infringes copyright.

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Other Information

I earned my doctoral degree in English Literature in 2011. The doctoral thesis covered the fields of narrative poetics, semantics, and literary genre theory and discussed metaphors of embodiment in narrative (seeing and speaking, for example, but not feeling). Thus, I bring to this project a broad understanding of literary theory and narrative poetics. Importantly, although I undertook some study of literary affect theory prior to beginning the Master of Arts, my work in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, represents new research, thinking, and writing by me on this topic.

The concept of ‘the mystery of emotion’ and the argument relating to it was developed into a book chapter, ‘Contemplating Affects: The Mystery of Emotion in Charlotte Wood’s *The Weekend*.’ It will appear as Chapter 3 in *The Rise of the Australian Neurohumanities: Conversations Between Neurocognitive Research and Australian Literature*, edited by Jean-François Vernay and commissioned by Routledge. The book is scheduled for publication in 2021.

The images in this thesis were formed from photographs taken by me and altered using the application Image Change (for iPhone) by Masato Hazama.





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Abstract

This creative writing thesis explores narrative emotion and reader engagement and comprises a novella, “Inland by Sea!”, and critical exegesis. The novella develops its creative praxis around the role of emotion in establishing reader engagement through perspective-taking. “Inland by Sea!” tells the story of a continent settled by pirates during the middle ages and, in so doing, offers an allegory for Australian settlement and colonialism more broadly. With its protagonist, Robbie, involved in a quest for a house hidden at the centre of the continent, supposed to contain untold riches, “Inland by Sea!” addresses the motivations behind colonial settlement and the effect of such endeavours upon local populations.

Narratives engage readers in the cooperative discourse of reading through the interplay of perspectives, which the reader must negotiate in order to understand the story. Every instance of perspective-taking will involve the reader in appraisals of feeling, suggesting that reading, and the social and cultural experiences that underpin it, is always a matter of feeling. Our social and cultural constructions form bases of knowledge about possible perspectives, enabling us to comprehend experiences that we are unlikely to encounter directly. Perspective-taking is thus a cognitive process that has the capacity to affect us through invocations of remembered feeling (about things that happened or were merely imagined) resituated in respect to newly imagined positions, but also through the somatic effects of reading itself.

Drawing on critical work about emotion, cognition, and the role of perspective-taking, the exegesis speaks directly to the creative practice developed in “Inland by Sea!” Arguing that, the reader, through the recursive intimacies of multiple perspectives, rubbing up together, sometimes nested, one within the other (a character, for example, seeing herself through another’s eyes; the narrative voice seeing what she sees as well as seeing what the other actually sees, etc.), is called upon, in the marshalling of their recollections, to take up these diverse stances in respect to identified correspondences. Thus, through the process of recursive perspective-taking, the emotional meanings of the text come to further inform the emotional meanings of the reader’s personal experience. It is by this means that “Inland by Sea!”, through its allegorical relation to myths of Australian settlement, challenges readers to take on new perspectives of Australian history and culture.



Creative Work: *Inland by Sea!* A Novella

Inland by Sea!





Novelists climb in through windows. Historians press their noses up against the glass and leave those nasty marks best removed with methylated spirits.







One: Brewers Finest





Chapter One

On an island continent, settled by pirates.

No. Too straightforward, thinks Robbie, as she draws a firm line through those words.

A pirate without a ship must surely be in want of a treasure.

Nah, that won't do. She scribbles over the words with a jagged up and down action.

Tis told our forefathers went inland, by sea.

Too archaic. Mind you, some folk still talk that way—but, nah. A wriggly line despatches that foolish remark.

'There is a man here, Miss—'

No one begins a novel like that.

'Excuse me, Miss—sorry, Dr Glenda.'

'Yes?' says Robbie looking up. 'There is a man here to see you. About the inland sea project.'

'Right. Thank you,' says Robbie.

*

On the western side of the country, in a dusty little town, an old man lies under a



truck—not dead but tinkering. The vehicle is in bad shape, by all appearances, but the engine is good, and the rust is merely cosmetic, or so he tells it.

‘What do you reckon?’ comes a woman’s voice. She is roughly the same age as the old man.

‘It’ll go the distance, all right,’ he answers from beneath the vehicle.

‘Here,’ she says, ‘I brought you a cuppa.’

He pulls himself out from under the truck and gets up. ‘Ah, right. Thanks.’

‘You’ve hardly any food in those cupboards. Not even a biscuit. What are you living on?’

‘Your cooking,’ he says with a wide grin.

‘That’s not enough. A meal once a week, at best.’

‘Twice.’

She sighs. ‘You’ll starve to death. No wonder you’re skin and bones.’

‘I get by. Don’t you worry. And the biscuits are in the truck,’ he nods.

‘What on earth are they doing in there?’ says the old woman as she tuts and climbs up to get them. ‘And what’s all this in aid of, anyway?’ She is wearing a mustard yellow cardigan and shivers as she speaks, wrapping herself up as snug as she might, though it’s early spring and as warm here now as it will be in the capital come high summer. ‘You’re not planning on going back there?’

‘Lord, no,’ he says, as he draws in a breath. ‘I just have this feeling.’

‘You and your feelings,’ she laughs.

The wind stirs the air, then gathers speed. The truck disappears in a cloud of dust—the old man’s face merging with the ruddy shade of the metal just before it dissolves, while the old woman’s yellow cardigan flutters in the air like a cape.

The wind has come from the plains, deep inland, bringing fine particles of earth with it. The red dust coats everything—the old man’s shack, and the old man himself.

The woman is standing in the mud room of the house, which is sometimes a shack, and sometimes a chicken coop or a shed.



He, the old man and owner of this shed-cum-house—her cousin by birth but brother by nature—looks on as she coughs and splutters while shaking out the dust from her cardigan.

‘I’ve eyes in the back of my head,’ she says. ‘Stop hovering. I’m all right.’

She turns around as she puts an arm through the second sleeve and looks him square in the eyes. Her face is round and kindly by nature, but up close, right now, it seems stern and annoyed.

‘Just imagine what it would’ve been like, before this lot,’ she says.

Before this lot, the waters ebbed and flowed. They rose and subsided. The wet season was long. It began with autumn rains. The fish had legs. Crayfish lived amongst the roots in the swampy ground. They’d burrow down into the soil and hide out the dry summer in the cool of the earth. When people came, before this lot, mind, they had to dig deep—and careful, like, so as not to kill the trees.

This was a long time ago. Long before Thomas More, in fact—he who first wrote about this place. This was further back than even he could imagine—almost before time came to this island continent. Time was here, only, it wasn’t the same. It was a different time back then. No people, at first. No time keeping. Time was slow and then it was fast. Evolution, they call it. Fish and birds, and people too. Then, five hundred or so years ago, they come. This lot. A band of pirates. One ship at first. They happened upon this isolated land, not by hook or by crook, but by mistake. They took it for a deserted place. So, they buried their treasure, they did. They came and went and came back again. They saw it was not deserted. That’s when the trouble started. That’s when they got an idea in their heads. One among them had read a book about such a place. The book. Thomas More’s, like. And this was it. Utopia, he said.

*

Berta took up the pole and began pricking the punt along from the stern, gaining speed and skipping over the water as she ran along the treads. She imagined herself to be on a wide shallow river or estuary. But it was not an estuary—it



could not be—because the current was taking her deeper inland. And neither could it be a river, since all rivers flow to the sea.

The Maelstrom (1989), Roberta Glenda

Robbie sighs and closes the book. She is supposed to be writing a new novella, not reading her old one. A new book about the inland sea ... and buried treasure—a tale of adventure set in a magnificent palace or a house. That's as it is described in her nation's folktales. A grand house hidden somewhere in the middle of the country. And that's what she's promised the Dean. A modern fairy tale.

She had sent out her call for tales of the inland sea and the house and begun interviewing almost right away. Yet, with her interest waning from time to time, she's been having trouble getting started. She has yet to establish an outline for her novella. Just a flurry of false starts. But she has a title already and is pleased enough with it. It runs off the tongue quite nicely, she thinks.

She looks at the wire basket on the desk before her. There is a transcript on top. Placed there no doubt by someone in the typing pool. She'd sent this one in weeks back, the slackers.

Her eyes scan the document tray beneath it. There are a bunch of forms, wedged in tight with odds and sods. Taunting her, they are. She knows they're there, all right, even though she's buried them. She is supposed to lodge these forms for ethics clearance. 'In case anyone dies,' the Dean had said with a laugh when he handed her the forms. 'You probably won't need them. But, you know, due diligence, and all.'

She looks at her watch. Nearly five o'clock. Happy Hour. But then she remembers. She's late for another interview. This time in the old town. She rises and grabs her coat, swinging it round as she places it on her shoulders, slipping an arm into one sleeve, then the other. The papers in the in-box flutter slightly, sending the transcript to the edge of wire basket.

Grabbing her bag, she's through the door in an instant, slamming it hard behind her. A flurry of air surges in her absence. It catches the corners of the transcript—a single sheet of paper—and up it goes, flying free of the wire basket, and out across the room where it rises slightly before falling to the floor.



Transcript of Interview with Ernest B.; conducted by Dr Roberta Glenda in her rooms, Arts Faculty, Brewers University, March 18th, 2019.

Roberta Glenda: Thank you, Ernest. Please take a seat.

Ernest B.: Oh, thank 'ee, Miss. Here, this is nice, innit?

RG: Yes, it is. I just want to begin by saying how much I appreciate you coming in, Ernest. It's so important to gather these stories before they're lost forever.

EB: Right enough.

RG: So. What have you got to tell me?

EB: My wife was in here the other day.

RG: Was she?

EB: Yes, she was. Came home, she did, and what does she tell me? 'You won't believe who I just seen,' she says. And she was right. I didn't believe it—least, not 'til now.

RG: Well, there you go.

[Long pause here]

EB: You want to know about the house inland, then, heh?

RG: Yes, if you like. That'd would be great, actually.

EB: I don't know much about the house itself.

RG: Right.

EB: But I can tell you that the people were strange.

RG: Strange? How so?

EB: Well, when one of 'em died, they'd close off the room, like.

RG: Really? Why would they do that?

EB: Dunno. But it was a bloody big house, so they could.

RG: Do you know how big?

EB: No, but it was big enough for 'em to need servants.

RG: Servants? And how did you hear about this?

EB: From me nan.

RG: Did she tell you how she came by the story?

EB: No. But she told me summin more.



RG: She did? What was that?

EB: Twas 'bout the inland sea.

RG: Go ahead.

EB: Well, it was shallow like you said in your book.

RG: Yes?

EB: And very, very big.

RG: Yes?

EB: It was so big, them that came first built and launched a galleon from its shores.

RG: Fascinating. I haven't heard this before.

EB: Only the water was really shallow, right?

RG: Right?

EB: So, it fell over an' sank. [Laughter. Goes on for some time.] It fell on its side, see?

RG: [Sound of Dr Glenda speaking—muffled and indecipherable.]

EB: They cut the bottom off it in the end—so me nan says.

End of transcript

*

'This lot is our lot, too,' the old man says. 'We can't undo that.'

'You're right, I guess. Dad was a decent enough bloke.'

'That he was.'

'It's the worst of them, I can't stand.'

'Nor I. But who can?'

'Probably can't stand themselves.'

'You could be right there.'

'Rough heads and drunkards the lot of them.'

'They're not all like that.'

'No, they're not,' she answers him in a tired tone as she goes out into the other room. 'I'd best be getting home.' She had gone into the kitchen and is now returning with the dishes she had washed earlier when making the tea.

He looks at the sky from the porch window and nods. 'Right you are, then, sis,'



he says, and carries the bags out to her van.

*

Robbie sees him in the corridor as she's on her way out—the bloody Dean.

'Dr Glenda,' he says. Then, when she fails to stop: 'Robbie, ahoy. What's the rush? The bar won't close for a few hours yet.' He has a smile in his eyes. Merry already, she thinks.

'I have an appointment,' she tells him.

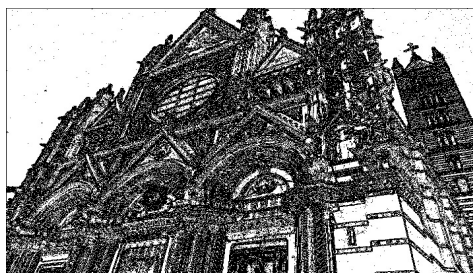
'How's it all going?' he asks, falling into step with her.

She had promised the Dean something brighter and more cheerful than *The Maelstrom*, her first and only published work. 'Something adventurous and fun,' she had said when she suddenly found herself seated before him four months ago. *The Maelstrom* was rather dour, after all, since she'd drowned her poor heroine, Berta, in the abyss that was supposed to be at the heart of the nation.

*

Brewers University

Distilling knowledge



BREWERS UNIVERSITY SEEKS A DYNAMIC AND HIGHLY CREATIVE INDIVIDUAL IN THE FIELD OF POETICS. THE SUCCESSFUL APPLICANT WILL HAVE A SOUND TRACK RECORD IN THE FOLKLORIC TRADITION. CREATIVE WRITERS ARE STRONGLY ENCOURAGED TO APPLY.

'Excuse me,' said Robbie to two young men on campus that first day. 'Do you know where I might find the Arts Faculty?'

'Do ye want the office, lass, or are y'after a specific lecturer?'



‘The Dean’s office, I think,’ said Robbie, thinking that she was old enough to be the lad’s mother and why’s he going in for those piratical overtones?

‘Well, now, it be just behind ye, lass.’

‘Yeah, in that building over there,’ said the other man, pointing at a flagship monolith of enormous proportions. Black, windowless and imposing, it looked more like a factory than a university building.

She had walked up the neat gravel path, the doors to the building opening before her, and found herself in an imposing space, with cases of rum and ale resting on pallets and arranged like artworks in a gallery. In the far corner was a forklift.

Hauling herself up the internal staircase, which wound around a courtyard decorated with outdoor furniture, umbrellas, and a plunge pool, of all things, Robbie sketched an idea in her mind. Instead of a whirling void in the middle of a lake, she would find a palace full of innumerable treasures.

Robbie had returned home to The Antipodes after a thirty-year absence to discover that her novella had been a huge success. When she saw the paper that first day, she found to her astonishment, an advertisement for a musical adaptation of *The Maelstrom*. Its heroine, Berta, it said, was being reprised by an up-and-coming star, fresh from Hollywood. A photograph revealed the young actor’s long hair, streaming out behind her and rising up in imaginary winds. She saw, above the advertisement, a review of the musical’s opening night. And what high praise they had for it—the book, that is, because the musical did not (nay, could not) do justice, apparently, to the masterpiece upon which it was based.

She saw her own name in that sentence: ‘... Roberta Glenda’s masterpiece, *The Maelstrom*.’

Robbie had missed the fanfare of her meteoric rise, having left the country shortly after the novella’s publication. She might have discovered her success sooner, but her people are a backward lot and have yet to digitise their news media. Secretive, that’s why. It was one of the reasons she’d left. That and the drinking.

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of publication—a headline above the double-page spread that followed the review shouted as much. The text beneath it



spoke of the ‘story that captivated a nation.’ It described the author as ‘The Dead Darling of The Antipodes.’

Yes. Dead.

She had died tragically at sea at the age of twenty, apparently. As her agent explained in an earlier interview: Roberta Glenda perished doing what she loved most, sailing the high seas (a convenient ruse, since, as Robbie later discovered, he’d pocketed the royalties and moved to South America). There was a photograph of Robbie—the only known in existence, the journalist lamented—showing her with ‘her long mane framing charmingly impish features, and those lively eyes,’ which have been ‘staring at us from the back cover of *The Maelstrom* for these last thirty years.’

On looking at the page opposite this news item, Robbie had been confronted with an artist’s impression of ‘the young Roberta Glenda at work on the novella.’ There were more images of the young Robbie on the double-page spread: one had her clinging to a mast, another had her in a crow’s nest, peering at roiling seas. The article mentioned a veritable industry of paintings, sculptures and garden ornaments, syndicated cartoons and colouring books, and as well a rather attractive wallpaper depicting the sultry, nubile Berta lying in her punt, her hair streaming out behind her as ‘her little bark navigates the reeds in the eternal, timeless present captured by the artist.’ Repeated, over and over, the idea of Berta and Roberta, drowned, but still lovely, seems to have held a morbid appeal ‘which has endured these past thirty years and will for millennia to come.’

Approaching fifty and with nothing to show for her time abroad, Robbie had been rather alarmed.

‘Really?’ said the Dean, on hearing Robbie’s story. ‘Roberta Glenda? You’re sure about that?’ He was leaning back in his chair and gazing out the window as he spoke, having turned his eyes from the rather plump (nay, overweight) middle-aged woman seated opposite. Her hair was dyed such a bright shade of red that a pair of sunglasses wouldn’t go amiss. He smiled at the thought, then frowned. Being a self-confessed ‘legs man,’ he couldn’t help imagining Robbie’s—and she didn’t fare well: heavy and hairy.

‘That does sound very interesting,’ he said at last. ‘A bit of merrymaking,



perhaps?’ he suggested, turning back to her. ‘Berta is lovely, but there’s not a drop of hard liquor in sight. I’ve always found that aspect a little—well, unrealistic.’

The window to his office fills a whole wall, rising from floor to ceiling and across the length of the room. Like all the rooms in this building, it looks out onto the courtyard. The deans and the vice-chancellor are housed here, at the head of operations—their duties crossing over from educational matters to logistics, for the university has a sideline, something like the monasteries and abbeys of France. On the south side of this enormous monolith, is a distillery; in the eastern wing, a warehouse. A combined postgraduate and staff bar is on the ground floor, where sliding doors open out onto the garden and the whole place comes alive during the long nights of summer. This rather charming arrangement is known as The Lab—a nod to the old days when the science department began its little sideline. The Lab is also where the product gets tested, so to speak.

‘What say you?’ said the Dean on getting no response.

Is he upset that Berta’s not a lush? Robbie wondered.

Not having a copy of her novella with her in all her years abroad, she had just reacquainted herself with her young heroine, and was rather surprised by the dark, brooding nature of the story of a young lass, punting across a lake only to drown in a maelstrom at its centre.

‘What say you?’ said the Dean once more.

‘Sure,’ said Robbie. She had been momentarily caught in a moral dilemma but managed to shake it off—needs must, after all. ‘Yes. Of course. I was very young and, I guess, nobody’s perfect. I mean, the whole point, you see—Berta’s issues are kind of, well—’

She had come about a degree. She meant to study, and she had just told the Dean that she wanted to write another book. It would make a good research project for a higher degree. But now, with him wandering in and out of enthusiasm for the idea, Robbie was unsure how to proceed. She didn’t quite know how to make her point, but the Dean did. He had his own agenda.

‘Any chance you might make mention of our product. I mean, not a specific endorsement as such—’



‘Of course, yes. I get you. There’ll be a scene or two of that nature, I’m sure.’

The Dean smiled his most winning smile. He was charmed, of course he was. The idea, it had definite appeal there, for a moment, at least.

Robbie, on seeing his interest fade before her eyes, decided to catch it by the tail and lean into the moment. She began pitching her new book to him. There would be treasure at the heart of the nation, she told him—untapped wealth, yes.

She had come across a key and a map, she added, thinking on her feet. That raised a spark, she could see it plainly enough.

The Dean sat forward, tilting his head slightly and looking at her from the corners of his eyes.

‘It’s been my talisman of sorts,’ said Robbie in a rush, reaching into her handbag and pulling out a piece of parchment with what look like two circles—one within the other—drawn upon it. ‘It’s my compass, I suppose,’ she said handing him the map. ‘I won’t say it brought me back home or served as any point of correction,’ she continued, watching his expression as he looked at the thing—turning it this way and that. ‘But it reminded me of who I was—not the best, but the worst of me—and that was humbling for sure. I don’t think it’s good to run away from the truth.’ Talk about running. She was running off at the mouth and couldn’t stop herself— ‘No matter how hard you try,’ she said, ‘you always come face to face with yourself...’ She hesitated on realising the cliché. ‘I ran away once,’ she continued. ‘I kept running—but it was in circles.’

The Dean smiled once more but he was somewhat troubled by this lurching confession of a person facing up to themselves like that. She wasn’t making much sense either. Worried about her relevance, no doubt. Time marching on and all. He took in the figure of her. A look of distaste played across his features. Robbie registered it.

On seeing that she’d seen, he quickly mounted a course correction: an expert in pastoral care, he counselled her not to be so hard on herself, then asked if she had the key she mentioned.

‘Yes.’ She looked startled, at first. But she was soon rummaging through her handbag. And there it was. She held up a little drawstring bag, made of soft blue suede. She had fetishized these things, in a way, and she knew it. It began perhaps with this little suede bag, which she’d purchased to hold these two items—the key and the map,



that is (along with a little leather-bound notebook full of odd doodles, half-finished sentences, and the odd incoherent paragraph, but she wouldn't show the Dean that).

She removed the key and passed it across the wide oak desk and into the Dean's own hands.

'My dear,' he said, fondling the thing, 'this is fascinating stuff. There's just the matter of, well, you do know you're supposed to be dead. Buried at sea, they say.' He cleared his throat. 'Thirty year ago now.'

Robbie blushed. He meant supposedly, surely. She reached into her handbag once more and handed him her passport and birth certificate.

'Right,' he said, peering at the documents.

Dubious, she thought. 'Here,' she said, passing him her phone. 'I've put together a compilation—across the years—the early ones are scanned, but the later ones are selfies—from my travelling days.' She had been so struck by her transformation, on comparing the photograph on the back cover of her novella to the image in her mirror, it occurred to her that she might encounter some measure of disbelief, and so she came prepared. Her nose looked bigger than it actually was in some of the early selfies—the technology back then wasn't exactly flattering. She was worrying over this, and about to explain, when the Dean exclaimed—

'Yes. But, ah—' swiping left and right.

She sat up straight in the hope of mollifying the effects of a double chin.

The Dean, pulling his head back, peered at her long and hard, then he asked if she had any samples of 'current writing—what you've been working on. Anything at all.'

Robbie looked blank.

'Something, surely?'

She started and then hesitated.

'Anything at all. You do understand my position?'

She did. Only too well. Reaching into her bag she pulled out the notebook. The Dean snatched it up and, flicking through its pages, said: 'I'll have to show this to the chaps in the English department.'

Robbie nodded.



He'd have to borrow her phone to show the others, as well, he said.

It was she who looked dubious this time.

'Just for a moment,' he assured her.

The Dean left her seated in his office for nearly an hour. It was worth it, though. Worth the wait. She had come to study, but the university was so excited to have the famed author of *The Maelstrom* in its precincts, it conferred upon her an honorary doctorate in Folkloric Studies and Creative Writing and appointed her to a recently advertised position. They had her set up in an office within a fortnight. Advertisements were run calling for creative writing students. Interviews were held with the press. And a graduation ceremony was arranged especially for her benefit.

Jack Breitling was on hand at the ceremony to straighten her bonnet and sash. 'Congratulations, Dr Glenda. Nice one.'

Robbie, having experienced a sudden pressure on her hips, turned around, looking for the pair of hands that had arraigned her from behind as she was chatting to the Dean.

'Oh, Robbie, this is Professor Jack—'

'Breitling,' said Jack, 'as in "bright Lyn",' he added, mouthing the syllables for extra emphasis. It was easy to get it wrong. People often pronounced it as Breetling, for example, which sounded like Beetling to his ears. Some fools, thinking they knew their Germanic languages, even dropped the 'n' instead of the 'g' at the end. And some went soft on the B, simply because Utopian Antipodeans tend to roll their Rs. What's more, and worst of all, the Dean, when he'd had a few, pronounced it as Bwightfing, which sounded like 'bright thing,' and that made people think that he was being patronised when he wasn't. Something to be avoided, obviously.

'Breitling?' said Robbie.

'Cultural Studies,' explained the Dean. 'Your Department.'

'I hear there's a scheme afoot,' said Jack with a wink at Robbie.

'Scheme?'

'Oh, I'm sorry Dr. Glenda, I should have explained—I discussed your ideas with the chaps in humanities—it was part of the selection process, you understand.'

'Chaps?' said Jack, giving Robbie an odd look.



‘Chaps?’ said Robbie.

‘We’re all chaps now,’ said Jack placing an arm around her and leading her to the bar. ‘Tell me about this scheme of yours.’

‘Oh, you know, it’s a writing project.’

‘I heard it was more than that.’

‘More?’

‘You have a key—and a map?’

‘Not a map—more a puzzle, of sorts. Um, I’m not sure I want to talk about it here.’

‘Now’s the perfect time. You’ll need funding, my dear.’

‘Well, I’ve sent out a call for contributions—continuing Margaret Westward’s work in the gathering of folktales but focusing on inland tales specifically.’

‘I’m sure there’s more to it than that.’

‘Ah, well, we’ll see,’ said Robbie looking around for someone else she might talk to, but she only knew the Dean, and he was on the other side of the room and wearing a three-cornered hat. These people certainly know how to kick on, she thought, watching the Dean as he removed his jacket and donned a brown-suede waistcoat. There was a cutlass on the wall, and he was reaching for that.

All this time, Jack was watching her. ‘Well, I’d be very interested to hear what turns up,’ he said.

‘Sure.’

‘The Dean neglected to mention my background.’

‘Cultural Studies,’ said Robbie turning back to look at him.

‘Well, I’m more of a specialist in art—stolen art, in particular.’ He was making eye contact now.

‘Right. Fascinating.’

‘And the house is said to contain stolen artworks from the Second World War.’ Those eyes bore into her.

‘Really, I’ve not heard that.’ She took a step back and found herself pressed up against the bar.

‘Oh yes. There’s talk of more besides. Treasures of innumerable wealth. Enough



to fill fifty museums.’

‘That’s a lot.’

‘It could make one’s career.’

‘I guess it could, if such treasures existed.’

‘There’d be room enough to make a few careers, in fact—given your interest is in the story, and mine in the treasures.’

‘I see. But aren’t you happy where you are?’ Robbie, at this point, began to look at him more closely. He was in his late thirties or early forties by her reckoning. A tarry pigtail hung over his right shoulder and in his left hand he held a glass flask, small and flat enough to settle into the breast pocket of his jacket. His moustaches were neatly trimmed. They ran down the sides of his mouth and under his chin, along the path that spittle might take, and she could imagine him dribbling his booze after a few. But he was astonishingly good looking. Rakish, to be sure, but tall and broad-shouldered. His hair was wavy and as black as night, and his eyes were the deepest and brightest shade of blue she’d ever seen. His whiskers were equally black and shiny to boot, his lashes were long—so long in fact that she wondered if he was wearing mascara—and his complexion, though weathered by the sun somewhat, was otherwise tanned and smooth.

Jack nodded and raised his flask to her glass.

Robbie, smiling, brought her tumbler forward for the clink. ‘Cheers.’

‘Cheers,’ he said with a wink. ‘To new horizons.’

‘To new horizons,’ said Robbie.

She remembers little more of the night. It had worn on, and there was much merriment and singing. She still has the hazy recollection of Jack Breitling’s voice booming out, loud and pure, some song of murder and mayhem, and everyone laughing and slapping his back because he was a good sort to have around. But when she caught his eye, she saw a glint in it that was sharper than the cutlass the Dean was waving around. The old coot had sliced the ear of a postgraduate student who threatened to sue the university for all it had, until Jack Breitling smoothed things over.

He was standing in the centre of the room. Robbie had collapsed in a corner



with some undergraduates. Breitling had his arm around the postgraduate, with the other arm extended to a distant horizon. Then he was rowing or punting with that same arm and pointing to Robbie in her corner. His eyes were narrowed, like he was seeing into a great distance in time, and the lad was laughing and nodding, even as he held a blood-stained rag to his ear.



Chapter Two

Robbie has shaken off the Dean and is heading out the University's gates for the old town to meet this fellow about the inland sea—or was it the house? It's the worse time of year to be out and about. Lubber Day—celebrating five-hundred years of settlement. There are media crews everywhere—especially in the old town, where most of the festivities kick off. And now, with The Darling of The Antipodes home again, she is in the thick of it. The last thing she wants is another public appearance. A couple of months ago, it was the radio. They'd got her talking on that old chestnut—the locals and other bogeymen, supposedly hiding out in the void at the centre of the continent. It was the type of stuff used to scare children at bedtime. She'd made the mistake of mentioning that she was modernising an old fairy tale, and that's where it got her. There were lunatics phoning in and ranting about the locals.

Last week, she was the subject of a documentary. It was his doing. The bloody Dean. Him and the University's media machine. They think it'll push sales of their rum, for Christ's sake. Brewers Finest. He'd been leaning on her to churn out chapters from the outset. And now she is committed to weaving fragments of this and that together because, so far, all she's managed to come up with are scraps of ideas.

She has to settle on something fast. At least he hasn't gone public on the story involving a 'genuine' key and map—that's what he was calling it. 'Dr Glenda here has the real article—an actual map,' he said to the coterie of higher ups—the professors and associate professors who might be trusted to keep their mouths shut because they have shares in the distillery and brewing vats. The Dean has sketched a new line and the University's media arm has begun publishing a lifestyle magazine. She's supposed



to be supplying folktales and bon mots. So far, she's dug up and authenticated the story of the school boy and the doughnuts—entitled, 'The Boy Who Thought He was a Local,' it jumbles up the mythological locals with the inland sea and describes their island continent as a giant doughnut. Of course, that's what it looks like from outer space, no doubt, except, for some reason, no one has been able to get a clear picture of it. The centre is always blurred, as if someone's half-cut uncle, more often involved in stuffing up the family photographs at Christmas, had somehow infiltrated NASA.

The University's gearing up for the big reveal. The magazine's publishing old treasure maps depicting sea monsters and other nautical dangers. There are illustrations of ancient, crumbling towers, of islands in the midst of wide flat seas, flying fish exiting and entering the water, and sailing ships besieged by sea rams. The magazine runs items on retro-style—with fashionistas presenting a dazzling array of peasant blouses, skirts and bodices, and jaunty little waistcoats for a more contemporary look. All because she showed the Dean the map and the key that she had found quarter of a century before. She had just thrown it in there, to add a little spice to her story, but both the Dean and Jack Breitling are taking her seriously on the subject. They think she actually means to discover the house and the inland sea.

It is embarrassing, to say the least. It illuminates what she is most ashamed of, since the key and the map, along with a substantial wad of cash, had belonged to a strapping young man from her part of the world. Robbie had met him on the Underground when she was in her mid-twenties. He had spied her soon after boarding and made a beeline for the comely young wench the moment the decks cleared. She had sloughed off much of her country's rusticity and looked, to her mind at least, like a regular Londoner. Sitting down beside her, he had asked her where she was going, told her he was from The Antipodes, and then suggested that if she wasn't doing anything that night they ought to hook up.

He was seated beside her for no more than two stops. Excited and eager like a puppy, he was dressed in a waistcoat and boots with two-inch heels that announced his presence as he stomped down the aisle and sat down beside her. His hair was tied back in a pigtail, and he had the confident smirk of a shark. Robbie, who didn't want to give the fellow any leverage by giving herself away as a compatriot, spoke in monosyllables



like an angsty teenager. He seemed not to notice; having dumped his rucksack on the seat opposite, he was rummaging through it—looking for his A-Z, he said. He had to get off at Green Park station, he told her. Robbie was reading a collection of Antipodean Children's stories. It was not to her usual tastes, but she was curious because the collection had received alarming reviews in the London press, warning parents that it was far too violent for children, but that it might do for the armchair traveller, since *The Antipodes* was impossible to get to otherwise, being closed to foreigners because its people were a suspicious lot. As the fellow sat down, Robbie had just set her sights on a story—which, as it happened, was of the boy who thought he was a local. She had read the tale as a child. And, of course, the analogy of the doughnut—with the disputed inland sea in the middle, or the void, as it was sometimes called—was a well-known trope in *The Antipodes*, with many a young rascal put to bed with a doughnut and a glass of milk and warned not to eat the middle where the bogeymen lived.

'This is it,' said Robbie to the young buccaneer. It was the most she had said to him in one go. Against his inclinations, he had begun reading over her shoulder and Robbie's speech had caught him by surprise. He leaned back and looked at her then, recognising the strains of something familiar. The book had been a bit of a giveaway.

'Green Park,' said Robbie.

'Thanks, matey,' the fellow said, grabbing his pack and heading for the exit.

Robbie had followed him with her eyes. She remembers him looking back at her as the train came to a stop and the doors opened. He had figured her out, she knew it—he had spotted her as one of his own.

It was only after the train was pulling out that she saw what he'd left behind. It must have fallen from his pack when he was looking for the A-Z.

To her eternal shame, the memory of the moment plays on a loop in her mind: She picks it up, thinks about handing it in at the next station but, on looking through the contents of the large travel wallet, and finding no identifying information, she places it in her handbag and continues on her journey instead.



Robbie reaches the old town and rounds a corner into a quaintly cobbled lane lined with café tables. On entering the tavern, she spots the fellow she's come to interview—or rather, he spots her, rising from his seat in the snug to greet her in smarmy tones that give her the creeps. He has what looks to be a cane knife, or a cutlass of that design, sheathed in ornate leather, hanging at his hip. Perhaps he has come from the cane fields up north, thinks Robbie, but the scabbard is odd. She has no idea when they harvest cane. Still, it is against the law to carry a weapon in the major cities, so this is obviously a prop.

Probably plastic, she thinks. He's part of the Lubber Day performance, most likely. She had enjoyed the spectacle as a child. Grown men playing at sword fights in the middle of busy streets—hailing each other in rain-sodden shirts, clapping some fellow in irons, then bringing him ale and taking turns at mounting the gibbet, which was carefully designed so as not to hurt anyone her father had told her when she began crying as a small girl, thinking the man hanging from it was dead.

She very nearly tears up now at the thought of the old salt—her dear old dad. He was this sort of fellow, in his way. Traditional. She had liked that about him, as a girl. It was fun, all right, once, that is. But, right now, the whole business seems childish and silly.

She hadn't seen her parents in all those thirty years abroad. She had sent postcards, right enough, and a year into her travels she tried calling her folks. Not direct. She had to call a neighbour. Not everyone had telephones in their homes in those days. Despite the larking about treasure chests and so on, most people in The Antipodes live week by week, pay cheque to pay cheque. Some hand to mouth.

She'd given her parents half her advance on signing the book deal. They were going to take a cruise. A year on, when she rang the neighbour, she heard, 'Your parents?' But there was a lot of disturbance on the line. All she could make out after that was 'buried at sea.' She had hung up thinking they were dead.

They were dead alright.

Now, that is.

But not then.

The fellow had been talking about her.



The tavern is old, dark and dingy. She can see a few young men dressed as cutthroats in the corner, and this fellow—a half-starved old fool, by the look of things. His hair is grey, and he wears the kit of a true sailor of the old days, with ringlets framing his long face—which is to say: he looks every bit the buccaneer.

Apologising profusely, Robbie peels off her coat, hangs it over the chair, and introduces herself.

‘Jason, is it?’

‘That be right, lass,’ he says.

‘So,’ she says, eyeing those ringlets and thinking he’d look a whole lot better without them, ‘when we spoke on the phone, you said that you had quite a lot to say about the inland sea.’ He’s not bad looking, really, she thinks, studying the fellow’s features. If he just got out from under that stupid hat.

‘You wanna talk about it here?’ he says. ‘Only, it’s a bit public, like.’

‘Well, there is a room that I can use—it’s private. I just have to have a word with the owner.’

‘Sure.’ He’s probably bald, she thinks, as she goes off to see the tavern owner about the private room. Bald, with fake ringlets and a pigtail. That puts her right off—if there was ever any doubt.

‘Right,’ she says coming back. ‘That’s all good. They’ll bring our drinks through. What can I get you?’

‘I’m alright. On the wagon. Me heart, ‘parently. So the doc says.’

‘Can I get you some water?’

‘Yeah, water’d be good. Thanks.’

‘Okay,’ she says, walking into the room ahead of him and placing her coat over the chair then sitting down. ‘So, as we discussed, I’m interested to hear stories about inland—whether an inland sea, a lake, or this story about the house. I think you mentioned the house on the phone. Or it may have been the inland sea—’

‘I can tell you ‘bout both.’

‘Great. Well, what can you tell me?’

‘You’re interested in myths, ain’t ye?’



‘Yes. In a way. I prefer to talk in terms of stories—the stories you might have heard growing up—stories that people may have made up, purported to know as fact—anything at all.’

‘It’s not myth.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘It’s not myth. It’s fact.’

‘Right. Um. So, you believe there’s a large body of water inland—in the centre?’

‘Was.’

‘Was?’

‘Not there now.’

‘Right. And so, is the house and the inland sea—I mean where the inland sea or lake, or whatever it was—are they in the same place?’

‘Well, the inland sea was fuckin’ big, you know. The house is big, but it’s not that big. It doesn’t cover the same area. But it’s in the place where the sea was, if that’s what ye mean—it’s not in the middle—more a little off-centre, actually.’

‘Well, maybe we should start with the sea, since it seems that came before the house—am I right?’

‘Yeah, well, kinda. The house was there for a while when the sea was. The house is why the sea’s no longer there. You get me?’

‘Not really. Are you able to explain that a little further, perhaps?’

‘People came, they crossed the sea, found an island. Then they built the house, which was a castle to begin with, but then a house—coz they built around the castle, they did. They were smart this lot. They figured out how to control the flow of the waters—because the sea was seasonal, see?’

‘No. Not quite. You mean the sea was only there in the wet season, maybe.’

‘Yeah. That’s it. Rest of the time it was mud. Swamp, like. Sometimes a bit dry—in high summer, that is. Then the rains came in autumn and the sea bubbled up from the ground and flooded the basin.’

‘The basin?’

‘The sea was on a low plateau. Before these people came, long before any animals came in fact, the plateau had once been the insides of a mountain.’



Robbie screws up her face at this. ‘So, this is a plateau that sits inside a mountain?’

‘Yeah. And this mountain, when it was a mountain many years before, was a volcano. One day, long before us lot came down from the trees—possibly even before we heaved our slimy bodies from the sea—this mountain, which was a volcano, like, erupted, leaving a fuckin’ big hole where the crown had been.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yeah.’

‘So, the sea was on the plateau. I’m a little confused. Wouldn’t the sea run down the side of the plateau?’

‘First of all, the sea was shallow. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘And then, there was a rim around it, about so high—’

‘So, a little higher than this table?’

‘Yeah. And that rim was made of igneous rock, masses of it. This was a fuckin’ big volcano.’

Robbie stops taking notes at this point. She smiles, but her expression is otherwise vague. She’s heard some tall tales before and knows how to be diplomatic. How this fellow happens to know what took place before the dawn of time... Well, it’s neither here nor there, really.

She shakes her head without thinking and resumes writing. Though she’s recording the conversation, she likes to look the part. It comes in handy now, because this fellow is staring. She can feel his eyes on her even now.

He can see who she is all right. Even under that layer of fat.

‘What?’ says Robbie. She hadn’t quite caught that last bit.

‘Like I said,’ the fellow continues, ‘thousands and thousands of years after this volcano blew its top, the dust and the earth gathered around the core of the mountain—around the bit what was made of the molten lava, and like, only it had cooled and by then was just a lump of rock. At the same time, the earth, well it gathers around the rest of the volcano—further out, like, doesn’t it? You know, forming this island continent over many, many years—more than you can imagine.’



‘Yes,’ says Robbie. ‘I am finding that a challenge, I must admit.’ She leans back in her chair to look at him but, feeling uneasy, picks up her pen and looks down at her notebook again, indicating with a brief and insincere smile that he should continue.

‘Water collected. And there was an underground river, running right underneath the volcano, and that water poured into the basin.’

‘Why do you call it a sea? It sounds more like a lake to me.’

‘You can call it a lake if you want.’

A nasty smirk comes across his face and he lets out a short laugh. He stares at her for a good while, then continues: ‘It was salty. Not as salty as the ocean round abouts, but saltier than river water.’

‘That seems very strange,’ says Robbie, gathering her attention to the moment at hand. She is beginning to feel very uncomfortable. ‘I’m just wondering—’

The fellow stands up then and she is reminded of his height.

‘You said you’d be paying for stories, right?’

‘If I use them. Tell me, how do you know about all this? I mean, where did the story come from?’

‘From an old friend. Though I don’t think he’d call me friend no more.’

‘So, you haven’t been there yourself?’

‘I h’aint bin there, no, but this friend—this fella I knew once, his pa has. Was born there ‘parently.’

Robbie fiddles with her drink. The fellow is devious, to be sure, but also a little pathetic. Too much booze, no doubt. He seems familiar somehow—but in the way that most of these old blokes are familiar, being cut from the same cloth: a greasy bit of canvas died indigo or black—though probably only a little older than Robbie herself. She really ought to cut back.

She is thinking this when the fellow leans down, bringing his face close to hers—so close that she catches the sickly, sweet stench of his breath.

‘Give it back,’ he whispers through his teeth.

‘What?’

‘You know what. Don’t think I don’t remember. It took me a while to figure it out, but I ain’t stupid.’



‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘The key. The map. Me bleedin’ money!’ And with that he draws his cutlass. Robbie, leans back, letting out a faint cry.

‘Don’t worry,’ he says, snarling. ‘I won’t kill ya. Just mean to cut ya up a bit.’

At this, she attempts to stand. She’s not sure of herself, but not totally unsure either. Neither is she thinking. She simply moves—but too quickly, because she loses her footing, stumbles, lands on her knees, then falls, spread-eagled, to the floor. She can hear him panting hard as she rolls over onto her back. On seeing the cutlass above his head, grasped as it is in both hands, she screams.

His wide mouth is straining at the edges. ‘Give it back,’ he hisses.

She rolls to her left. The blade swooshes past her ears and she hears a loud crack.

‘I don’t have it—not here,’ she says as she gets to her knees. It was the truth. She had begun leaving her little ‘talisman’ at home ever since she’d caught Breitling with his hand in her purse.

The old buccaneer is holding the blade high above his head once more. His eyes are fierce, but then the expression folds, his face crumples, and he suddenly turns white. His hands fall to his sides just as the tavern owner comes running in, another man behind him.

They were ready to wrestle the fellow to the ground, but he has already let go of the blade. Robbie sees that his face has turned ashen, while the two men, stopping at the sight of the cutlass dropping to the floor, observe how he seems to teeter on his long spindly legs.

He hits the deck with a mighty thud, cutting the air between the pair, who look down at the man’s prostrate form and then over at Robbie on her knees.

There is a moment of silence.

‘He’s dead,’ says the first man, leaning over the body. Robbie recognises him as the man she’d seen about the room.

‘Stone dead all right,’ says the other man.

‘He came at me,’ she says to the tavern owner. ‘I—I—’

‘I thought he looked shifty when I laid eyes on him,’ the taverner says. ‘So that’s



why he wanted a private room. He had it in for you, he did.'

'We'd better call the police.' It was the right thing to do and she knew it. 'I'll have to tell the Dean,' she mutters to herself, worrying about the ethics clearance.

'Hang on,' says the second man—a waiter by trade, judging by the neat black apron he is wearing with a clean white tea towel tucked into one side. 'I know you. Look here,' he says turning to his boss, giving him a nudge and moving his arms on one side as though he were trying to punt his way across the floor.

The fellow takes a moment to catch on, then he twigs. 'Lor, you're right. Not much like your photo, are you?' he says to Robbie.

'What?'

'You're Roberta Glenda, aren't ya?' says the waiter. 'The Dead Darling of The Antipodes.'

'Not so dead, actually. Still very much alive, in fact,' says Robbie, smiling weakly.

'I saw you on the telly the other week,' says the tavern owner, recollecting now. 'You're at Brewers, aren't you?'

'Yes, that's right. I was interviewing this fellow for a project—'

'We do a good trade in their spiced rum. Their ale's not too shabby, mind. Popular with the ladies, it is.'

Robbie looks at him. Her expression is blank, and he thinks he has confused her a little, though, in truth, she's simply starting to feel the shock of the event. It runs through the middle of her body, then starts needling her skin. She feels cold and then hot. A dark feeling gathers about her temples.

'Yes. Indeed,' he continues. 'I saw you on television a week or two back,' he says, scratching his head. 'Wouldn't have known you otherwise,' he adds, looking her up and down.

'We studied you in school,' says the waiter, all smiles. 'Me and me mates built a raft and sailed it all the way to the sewerage works,' he adds with a laugh.

'Bloody hell. Roberta-bloody-Glenda. Who'd have thought it,' says the taverner. 'In my establishment, of all places.'

There's a cry from the barroom—someone wanting a pint. It brings the fellow to his senses.



‘Here, you’d best get along, then, hadn’t you?’ says the taverner.

‘What?’

‘We’ll take care o’ this. We can’t have The Darling of The Antipodes caught up in a mucky business like this, can we now?’

‘Really?’

‘Sure, luv,’ says the waiter. ‘Folks like him hit the deck quite regularly really. Cops won’t bat an eyelid.’

‘If you’re sure,’ says Robbie, looking from one man to the other—though she’s not too sure about it all at this point.

‘Cast iron,’ says the tavern owner.

‘Too right,’ adds the other man.

‘Thank you,’ says Robbie. And she begins gathering her things, then hesitates.

‘Go on, luv. Really. The cops won’t fuss if it’s just us. But if they see you, well, they might drag it out, and that’s not good for business—Right, Captain?’ says the waiter to his boss.

‘Right, you are Trentino,’ the other man replies, and turning to Robbie, he adds, ‘These old salts fall like flies around here, honest to goodness. Don’t you worry your dear heart about it.’

She is out in an instant, stepping over the dead pirate as she hurries from the room. Outside, the shock of the moment hits her more fully, and she has to hug the wall as she winds her way through the cobbled streets and alleyways of the old town. As she nears the university, Brewers’ flagship looms before her. She feels relief at the sight of it—yet it is an unhappy attachment. She’s arranged to meet Jack Breitling for drinks.

But, before she races to The Lab, she tells herself sternly, she’ll have to sign and submit those bloody forms.

Back in her office, as she rifles through the papers on her desk, Robbie hears a knock at the door. She looks up and sees a young woman with a neat pageboy bob standing a few paces into the room.

‘Yes, Angelina?’ says Robbie.

‘Dr Glenda...?’



‘Hmm?’

‘I just wanted to check that you got that transcript I put on your desk earlier.’

‘Yes, I did, thank you.’

‘Only, I wanted to explain...’ says Angelina stepping forward, collecting the document from the floor and placing it on the desk.

‘Yes?’

‘The email ended up in my junk box for some reason. I only found it this morning. That’s why it’s so late.’

‘I hadn’t even noticed,’ says Robbie beaming at the girl—woman. It’s so easy to fall into these ways of thinking, she realises.

‘Just so you know,’ says Angelina, returning the smile.

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘Thank you, Dr Glenda.’

‘Not at all.’

The girl is still standing there. Woman. Why is she still standing there? thinks Robbie pretending to look over a document.

‘Dr Glenda?’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s such a privilege—I’m just so glad you’re here. I really loved your book.’

‘Thank you, Angelina. That means a lot.’

The young woman steps forward. (‘Young woman’ is an improvement, isn’t it? I mean, she not old. She’s young and naïve and rather timid, thinks Robbie.)

‘I just wanted to say that.’

‘Thank you.’

‘And to let you know—if there’s anything I can do—’

‘Well, actually,’ says Robbie letting out a long sigh, ‘you can help me with these forms.’

‘Which ones are they?’ says Angelina coming to the desk with a determined stride.

‘These,’ says Robbie, holding up the ethics clearance forms.



‘Oh,’ says Angelina looking them over. ‘These should have been filled out weeks ago. When did you start interviewing? March, weren’t it?’

‘March, yes. I think.’

‘Well, don’t worry. I know someone in admin. We’ll get it backdated for you.’

Robbie exhales in relief. ‘Thank you. Thank you. Really, Angelina, thank you so much. You’re a lifesaver.’

‘You just need to sign here and here. I’ll type up the name of the project and the description—we’ve got that on file. I’ll need Professor Breitling’s signature...’

‘Will that be a problem? Do you need me to get it?’

Angelina looks at Robbie with a firm but not unkind expression. She holds the older woman’s gaze for a moment, then looks down at the form, frowning. ‘No. I can do that. He never reads anything he signs anyway.’

‘He doesn’t?’

‘Probably shouldn’t have said that,’ says Angelina smiling shyly. She’s meek again. But Robbie has seen too much of her clever, neat manner to fall into the trap of underestimating her. She smiles at the young woman with deeper regard.

‘If you don’t mind me asking...’ says Angelina catching that look.

‘Anything—you’re my lifesaver, remember?’ says Robbie grinning—she’s on the verge of laughing, feeling at last that she’s not quite so alone.

‘Only, Professor Breitling—’

‘Yes?’

‘You and he—?’

‘Yes?’

‘Well. He’s one to look out for, that’s all.’

‘He is?’ says Robbie looking down at her desk again.

‘Yes, he’s—well, my mother always says to look out for the eyes. And he has a particularly prominent set of eyebrows on him. Neat, mind. But I reckon he has them waxed.’

Oh dear, thinks Robbie. She goes in for that physiognomy crap. The Antipodeans had picked up the practice of reading faces when a diaspora of cutthroats



arrived from Europe in the eighteenth century. Unlike the rest of the world, which has long discredited the practice, they've never let it drop.

'I'll bear that in mind,' says Robbie diplomatically.

'It isn't really about the eyebrows, though,' Angelina says playfully. 'But I reckon you get my meaning?'

She did. Unfortunately. She had ended up in bed with Jack Breitling on more than a few occasions. The first time, sex was definitely involved; but after that, she couldn't be sure. She'd passed out on each occasion thereafter. Probably the booze. But she did wonder if he'd spiked her drink.

'Angelina,' says Robbie. 'As a friend—'

The girl's face lights up—sorry, woman.

'Yes?'

'That stuff about the eyebrows—'

'Yes?'

'It's, well—it just makes you sound like you come from some backwater.'

'I know. I surf the net, Dr Glenda,' says Angelina with a broad smile. 'But. As they say: "When in Rome," you know?'

Angelina, as she says this, turns slightly to-and-fro, pivoting, like she's about to do a little pirouette. She stops and explains, 'I wasn't sure how you'd take my advice. I mean, I know he's a dish an' all. That's where the danger lies, really. It's easy to downplay your gut instinct when a bloke looks like Professor Breitling does.'

'Right,' says Robbie, perturbed. Got it in one, she thinks. Wise beyond her years—or I'm just a stupid, lonely, desperate—

'Is that all?' says Angelina.

'Ah, yes—well, actually, no.'

Angelina steps forward, her expression a little troubled.

'See here, in this transcript?' says Robbie holding a piece of paper she's just picked up from her desk.

Angelina leans forward to look at the document.

'You don't need to type it out in the vernacular.'

'Vernacular?'



‘See here where you have “nuffin”?’

‘Yes.’

‘You can just type it as “nothing”.’

‘Oh.’

Oh dear, thinks Robbie, she looks a little crestfallen. ‘It’s not a criticism.’

‘No?’

‘I just think—well, it’ll look more professional if we spell it out properly.’

‘But what about words like, “Avast!” and “shiver me timbers”?’

‘If they actually say that. Yes. You can type that out.’ She has forgotten how rustic the old folk can be—nay, even her generation.

‘You don’t talk like them, Dr Glenda,’ says Angelina admiringly. ‘Like the old folk do, I mean. Is that because you’ve seen a bit of life—been abroad and like?’

‘Probably,’ says Robbie, a little taken aback.

‘And you don’t even have an accent.’

‘Don’t I?’

‘I’d like to travel someday,’ says Angelina, priming herself for a pirouette once more. (The truth is, Angelina wanted to write, and she took these transcriptions as practice for a future career in film and television.)

‘I hope you do,’ says Robbie. ‘I really do.’ She has forgiven Angelina for suggesting that she is old. Probably no worse than calling a grown woman a girl.

Angelina, sensing her job is done, turns to leave.

‘Before you go—’

‘Yes?’

‘I’m bringing forward my regional research phase.’ (Jack has been breathing down her neck a tad, of late.)

‘Yes—oh,’ says Angelina, understanding her meaning. ‘You’ll be wanting a fuel card and a line of credit too—against the grant, I mean. I can get that for you tomorrow. It’s a bit late now.’

‘Of course.’

‘You can use the line of credit for accommodation and meals, and such. But not for big ticket items. You’ll need Professor Breitling’s okay for that.’



‘Right. Thank you, Angelina. You’ve been a big help.’

‘Anytime, Dr Glenda.’

Bloody hell, thinks Robbie, falling into her chair. Out of the mouths of babes.





Two: Dystopia





Chapter Three

Six months on, and well into the regional phase of her research, Robbie finds herself peering at an oversized man through a galley window. The window connects the Ladies Lounge to the public bar of a small-town hotel. She had stepped up to the window and, forgetting to introduce herself, began by explaining that she was gathering stories about life inland.

She's lucky he didn't bite her head off.

Likes the look of her, he does. All that flesh, and the wide skirts and snugly laced bodice of the old ways. But she talks kinda funny, like she's having a lend of a bloke, which ain't right.

'Here,' the publican says, 'Ye be looking every bit a buccaneer's daughter, me lass, but ye talk kinda strange, to me ears, like.'

'Arrgh,' says his wife, coming out from the kitchens with a plate of food in hand, 'Tis wot's called an ed-gee-kate-ed accent, y'old fool.' She slams the plate down before an old buccaneer seated at the bar.

'Ed-gee-kate-ed?' he says to his wife's departing figure. 'Here, I knows ed-gee-kate-ed, when I hear it. This is summin else. Where ye from, lass?'

'Oh,' says Robbie. 'I'm Antipodean, all right. Been abroad, that's all.' He looks troubled, still—there are plenty of old salts who travel the waves and return unaltered by their time rubbing shoulders with the rest of the world. 'From the time I was quite young, really,' she adds. She'd taken elocution lessons in London. The rolling intonation and harsh burr had been hard to break. 'That's why I lost my accent.'



This seems to satisfy the fellow, who has plenty to tell her about inland—no sea, as such, he explains. But as he relaxes, he gets into the details of an old trick used to keep the locals from stealing.

‘Ye tie a bunch o’ puppies in a bag,’ he says, ‘then get a local to beat ‘em with a stick. When the landowner releases ‘em, the first face they sees is his been-eve-violent mug.’

Robbie’s expression is blank. He thinks he’s lost her. Or maybe she’s just not too bright despite the educated accent. ‘Makes ‘em loyal to the landowner, see?’ he explains.

‘Benevolent. Right,’ says Robbie, nodding.

He can see that she’s confused still. ‘They can tell the difference,’ he adds.

‘They can?’

‘It’s the smell. Dogs ‘av got sensitive noses. We smell different from ‘em. Different from locals, wot wiv them being teetotallers. You wouldn’t know, me girl, being from the city.’

Robbie, as he will tell his customers in the months ahead, standing as she is now on the other side of the galley window, does not look like a city wench at all—not like they are on the telly, at least, in their two-piece suits and worldly ways—but like ‘one of them ladies from the old days, hangin’ on the wall of a grand-ee-ose house.’

‘And the locals were compliant?’ she asks him now. ‘It seems a bit odd that they would agree to do this.’

‘Well, no. They worked for the landowner see—they had to do what they was told, matey, heh?’

Robbie nods, and then turns around to look over the Ladies Lounge. She finds it hard to imagine that anyone could bring themselves to do such a thing.

‘I knows what ye be thinking, lass,’ says the publican over her shoulder.

Robbie spins around to face him.

‘Ye be thinking, “There be no such thing as a local,” heh?’

‘Well...’

‘I can read ye like a book, lass,’ and he winks at her, leading Robbie to assume that he knows who she is, though he doesn’t.



'I knows what ye city folk say. The country 'twas uninhabited when the first pirate ships arrived in the middle ages and buried their treasure. But it weren't. No. It weren't empty, even when our ancestors turned lubber in fifteen-nineteen, like they says—why them locals were out there, hiding in the desert, the sneaky sods—only, afore it were desert.'

'Before it was desert?'

'The land on the other side of them ranges, why, it were beautiful green pastureland, lass. Only, see, our ancestors didn't care for that sort of thing, did they, now? No. They came round, a course, mind. They had to. But, not in the beginning. That's why them locals was able to hide for so long.'

'They hid from the buccaneers?'

'They tried. But theys was found in the end.'

'Right.'

'Some got away. Some didn't.'

'They were murdered?'

'Nooo! Who told ye that? They was put to work, was all. Like I told ye. They worked for the landowners. But they was a thieving lot. Ye couldna trust 'em.'

'I'd always understood that the whole island continent was empty,' says Robbie looking about the place. 'A pirate's paradise. The locals were myth—bogeymen made up to scare children at bedtime.'

'It was a pirate's paradise, all right. Hidden away from the rest o' the world, like. Why do ye think it took them Merry Cans lookin' down from outaspace to find us? Heh? What wiv Bermuda triangles and demons and sea monsters and the like, no one ventured here excepting our brave and hardy forebears, lass.'

'But we're in the Pacific.'

'Wot?'

'The Bermuda Triangle is north of the Caribbean Sea, in the Atlantic.'

The publican's expression is blank for a moment. His mouth is open, arrested at the point of speech, but he soon collects himself by ignoring what Robbie has just said:

'Anyways, when they turned lubber, the locals came in handy, see?'



‘Handy?’

‘They knows the land. Knows how to manage it, like.’

‘And they liked beating puppies?’

‘Arrgh, no. Not really. Theys was made to do it. The pirate folk knew their thievin’ ways. And them locals understood that them dogs would be their sworn enemies for life and that would thwart any thieving the blaggards had in mind—which was par for the course, a course. Hence, well, the landowner had to take them drastic measures, like.’

Robbie gives him a faintly scathing look, catching hold of herself before it manifests into a scowl. She looks down at the menu.

‘What’ll it be, lass?’

‘Fish and chips, please. And a pint of stout.’

She is still standing in the lounge and looking into the public bar from the galley window as the publican goes to the far end of the bar to pour her stout. From here she can see two old salts downing their grog in the other room. They are sweaty and dirty looking and dressed in a mishmash of modern and traditional clothes. One wears a tricorn hat and the other is sporting a cutlass that he uses as a walking stick as he shuffles from the bar to the gents in the far corner. The barman himself is even more shabbily dressed. He wears a blue singlet and skimpy white shorts, dating to the seventies, by the look of things. It is so hot out here this time of year, few people dress in the national attire of boots and leggings with open waistcoats over billowing shirts. Instead, they seem to have adopted the habit of wearing their underwear in public—or so Robbie thinks, imperious.

She herself is sweltering in a blousy ensemble with a red velvet vest. The colour clashes with her henna-dyed hair and accentuates the ruddiness of her cheeks where tiny capillaries have burst, making it look like she’s gone a bit heavy-handed on the rouge. The publican doesn’t mind. He’s a vain man, which means that he rarely wears his glasses, so Robbie’s complexion looks doll-like and the sight of her heaving bosom (she is panting from the heat), trussed up as it is in a peasant blouse under a tightly strapped bodice (she had mistakenly thought that the people inland would be more



traditional in their ways and has gone the whole hog), is a sight for sore eyes—and he told her so when she walked through the door.

‘I’m tired of looking at these hairy old bastards,’ he had said, gesturing, with a nod, to the two old men in the corner of the barroom.

Robbie had been asking about the house and the inland sea up and down the country—or rather, round and round like a drunken fool stuck on a roundabout, only, in ever decreasing circles as she moved inland by degrees from her nation’s coastal perimeter. Here, in this dusty old town, she has met someone who not only believes that the place exists, he seems to think that the mythical locals are real.

‘Ye look trustworthy enough, me lass,’ the publican says when comes back with her stout. ‘But what do ye want out there? Tis abandoned. Empty. There be no one left to claim it. They be long dead. Last man—why ‘e perished on the edge o’ the desert here, more ‘an seventy year back. Tis been abandoned these many years since.’

The town looks like it might have been nice once, but these days—what with the dilapidated shops and the mismatched signage—it seems lonely. Robbie had counted three cars on the main street, including her own. She enquires after a room and is told that she might get a place at the other end of the street with Maudie.

‘She runs a guest house,’ one of the men at the bar splatters, leaving specks of salted peanut in his beard.

‘Does quite well, ‘parently,’ says the other.

‘Yeah,’ says the publican coming back and mopping up his spills, ‘she’ll see ye right, lass. Just tell her I be sending ye.’

Maudie’s place is a rambling misshapen old house, made by joining two houses together. The consolation is that Maudie herself takes quite a shine to Robbie—or so Robbie thinks—because, out of kindness, the old woman makes the strange flame-haired lady a light supper and brings out a bottle of port for afters because this lot like their tippie and she knows it.

The town, Maudie explains, as she sets down the tray, was once double its current footprint and had ten times as many inhabitants during the gold rush, which was more an archaeological enterprise than a matter of mining, since it involved digging



for pieces of eight and the derivative holey dollar.

‘The whole town was a network of alleyways and ramshackle dwellings like the old brothel still here in town. It’s had several uses over the years—from saddlery to wine merchants—even a lending library. But not such now.

‘Forty-eight hotels in its heyday. No more, though,’ says Maudie. ‘All those people, digging for treasure, all gone now.’

‘I wonder where they went,’ says Robbie talking to herself out loud.

Maudie turns around on hearing this. She was about to exit the rooms by the street door—the house, being two buildings joined together, has two front doors and Robbie’s rooms are in the oldest part. She stops on the threshold instead. ‘You’re young,’ she says. ‘You’ve got your whole life ahead of you.’

Robbie is flattered by the first comment and pleased with the remark overall, taking it as a sign that all is not lost. She still stands a chance of making of go of things, even after thirty years of wasted time.

Then Maudie pulls the street door closed and, because the lock to the door is broken and stuck in the deadlock function, she unwittingly locks her guest in (having forgotten to give her the key), thereby undoing the spell of optimism her prophecy had cast.

Robbie’s hopes may be somewhat deflated, but she still has to get her luggage from the car, and so she climbs out the window and into the street.

The evening is clear, with twilight now in earnest. Night is fast descending, and Robbie soon settles in her room, watching reality TV and quaffing port as she goes over her notes. She’s done quite a bit of research to get herself to this point, pilfering books from the special collections of libraries. As she flips through the pages of one particularly old tome, she finds explicit reference to the house itself—some story that seems to describe the ideogram or map that she had acquired from her compatriot all those years ago. At once, her interest in Jack’s seemingly futile project is astir.

The books are spread before her on the bed. There are some strange and unsettling photographs and illustrations amongst them, which Robbie glances at only in passing, history not being her bent.



The next day, over a hearty breakfast in her room, Robbie confides to Maudie her interest in going inland.

‘It’s desert, my dear,’ says Maudie, alarmed. ‘You’ll meet your death out there.’

‘I’ll be all right,’ says Robbie, as she chews on a pork chop.

‘Well, you can’t go in that thing you’ve parked out front,’ says Maudie, peering through the window. Robbie has hired a little run-around. It’s good enough on bitumen, and very fuel efficient—or so Angelina explained when she made the booking for her.

‘You’ll need to be well kitted out.’

‘Of course,’ says Robbie.

‘If you’re determined to go that is.’

‘That I am,’ she assures the other woman.

‘Then, my dear, the best person to see is the old man they call the hermit.’

‘The hermit?’

‘That’s what they call him, yes. You go down to the pub and ask for him there.’

‘And he’ll help me?’

‘Yes,’ says Maudie, rather amused. ‘That’s what hermits do, isn’t it?’

Robbie goes back to the pub that very morning. The two old men are there—though it’s only just gone eleven.

‘Ya want Hermit the bloody hermit, for Christ’s sake?’ says one.

‘What do ye want with the old blaggard?’ says the publican.

‘Here, lass, have a drink with us instead,’ says the old salt with the cutlass.

‘It’s too hot to be hunting hermits tadaay,’ laughs the old buccaneer in the tricorn.

‘Hehe,’ rasps the other man.

‘Let her be,’ says the publican’s wife coming in from the back room. ‘Who ye after, lovey?’

‘The hermit,’ says Robbie.

‘Well, now. Ye go up the road yonder—’

‘Where I’d like to take ye, me lass!’ says the old bloke in the three-corner. He’s



pushing his hat back on his head right this minute to take a better look at her.

‘Shut yer trap,’ says the publican’s wife, who is also co-licensee and has every right to speak to old blaggards as she sees fit—or so she thinks.

‘You’re no fun, Lizzy,’ says the other old pirate with his hand on his cutlass. He has no intention of waving his old sword around but is off to the gents again.

Robbie can hear the strange thud as the cutlass hits the floorboards. Her attention so caught, her eyes involuntarily follow him as he leaves the room.

She hears someone muttering.

‘Do ye want to know where ‘e is or nowt?’

‘Oh, sorry,’ says Robbie turning back to the woman.

‘Ye go out this door. I assume ye be drivin’, like?’

‘Yes,’ says Robbie.

‘Right then. About a mile and a half down the road, he is,’ continues Lizzy. ‘On the left, just outta town. Ye can’t miss it.’

The hermit, when she finds him, is standing in his yard before an old truck that seems to have organically recalled where metal comes from. Having lost any protective layer of paint it once had, it has taken on a nice ruddy colour and looks like a warty old rock that someone has attempted to turn into a piece of sculpture.

There are two other vehicles either side of it in much better condition—a two-toned flat-nosed thing, and a bright red jalopy, which Robbie finds rather appealing. She thinks to herself that the red one would look good on the cover of her book, but the two-tone is probably the more practical.

‘Yes,’ says the hermit by way of greeting.

‘I’ve come about a truck,’ says Robbie.

‘Maudie send you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, take your pick,’ says the hermit standing back.

‘Which is the best?’ says Robbie, looking back and forth between the two with paint.

‘Much of a muchness, I guess. They’re all trucks.’



‘They look different to me,’ says Robbie observing the paint work.

‘Don’t discount this one, mind,’ he explains tapping the bonnet of the rust heap he’s now leaning on.

‘Really. They’re all very... old, by the look of things.’ The nice little red truck looks like it dates to the nineteen-twenties. But it’s probably a fibre-glass body over a modern engine, she reasons.

‘Old. True. That they are.’

‘They work all right?’

‘Depends. Choose carefully. The right choice will depend on what you want it for.’

‘I need to carry provisions.’

‘Yes?’

‘I’m going out of town.’

‘I figured that.’

‘Inland.’

‘Figured that too.’

‘Maudie said you had what I need.’

‘Perhaps I do. But it’s up to you.’

‘Up to me?’

‘You choose. One will get you around town, but no further. One will take you as far as the ranges but stall as soon as you take the road that goes up over the hills and along the ridge. And one will do the job. You choose.’

‘Can’t you just tell me?’

‘No.’

‘Is this some sort of test?’ says Robbie, her eyes widening.

‘Maybe.’

‘Oh well, in that case...’ and she begins to recite an old nursery rhyme to help her make her choice, randomly, that is.

She breaks off suddenly. The hermit is looking at her. She feels a little disconcerted. The expression around his eyes is kind of sad.

And then he looks blank, likes his engine has stalled, or something.



Robbie feels like she's stepped outside of herself and into the place from which he sees her and, having done this, she gets a glimpse of herself on his terms. It's a fuzzy kind of vision. Perhaps he needs glasses, this gnarly old man. He sees the henna-coloured hair (she can't get her colour here in The Antipodes and she is well aware that the regrowth is a dull orange that merges into deeper tones of red, but what can you do?) then there's the double chin, alas.

Suddenly, she feels an uncomfortable tightening in her chest and turns away.

'This one,' she says at last choosing the two-toned cab with shiny chrome edging.

'Not that one,' he says, stroking the bonnet of the roughest and oldest-looking vehicle, 'you need this one. Don't judge a book by its cover. This is the best of them.'

'Did I pass the test?' says Robbie, surprised.

'In a fashion.'

'I don't want to be stranded in the foothills.'

'You won't. This'll get you there, and it'll get you across the creek. You have to build your own bridge, see?' And suddenly the fellow is claiming to know where the house is, giving her instructions and pointing into the distance. She has the parchment with her and the strange puzzle of it is still an enigma to her mind. As the hermit is going on about right turns and left turns and making little sense, Robbie whisks it from her pocket and shows it to the old man.

'Where did you get this?' he says.

'That's my business,' says Robbie.

'Only, see, it was stolen.'

'Stolen?'

'Yes. My lad, when he was a boy, before he grew up and went away, had a mate round. My boy Ian, he was showing off, you see. Told his mate about the house and that he had a key and directions. They came to me from my mother, after she died.'

'I see.'

'But this lad, this mate of my son's, he wasn't a mate in any real sense, coz he stole it.'

'He stole it?'



‘Yes. Jason was his name. If I ever see the blighter again—’

She tells him then how she came across it.

‘I’ve felt so guilty,’ she says. ‘I didn’t know what it was. It must have rung a bell somewhere in my memory... this stuff about the sea, and I guess I must have put it together with the house and—I suppose the doughnut, that was part of it.’

‘The doughnut?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And you feel guilty about it?’

‘Yeah.’

‘For stealing from a thief?’

‘Yeah. Only, I didn’t know that, did I?’

‘You know it now. You stole this here map from a lowdown dirty rotten thief.’

‘Yes. But part of me wonders, *Was it really theft?* I mean, I had no way of returning it.’

‘You might have handed it in.’

‘Then you would never have got it back.’

‘Very likely. Though, I still haven’t “got it back,” have I?’

‘It’s yours by rights,’ says Robbie, handing him the key. ‘And that as well,’ she adds, nodding at the parchment in the old man’s hands. She sighs her relief and regret in one long breath. The tightness in her chest lessens a little as she frees herself of her guilty burden. Of course, it will mean giving up on the expedition, but she is prepared to do that. Yes, she is. It’s the right thing to do. She’s not a treasure hunter, after all. She’s a writer. It was never her goal to begin with. It was Jack who set her off down that path. Jack and the bloody Dean.

‘I’d been wondering what the point of it all was,’ says Robbie, more relaxed now, ‘and then I read something about the house in a book and these words here—’ and she points at the parchment where the words ‘Find the forkin doughnut’ are written at the edge of a circle, with a smaller circle inside that, and inside that, the icon of a house drawn off-centre.

‘And what exactly did you find in the book?’ says the hermit as he looks at the parchment.



‘The book said that there was a house that was lost to history, but the story went that if you found the doughnut, you would find the way to untold riches.’

The hermit eyes Robbie for a moment.

‘I’m not a fortune hunter,’ she says in a rush.

‘No, I don’t think you are.’

She is relieved that he believes her, though she isn’t too sure of herself. The lightness she felt but a moment before has gone and she is feeling her interest in the hunt rising once more. ‘I don’t know what it is,’ she says of the ideogram—curiosity getting the better of her, ‘but it’s something to do with it, with the house.’

‘It’s a map,’ he tells her, ‘but not a map, as such—more a compass.’ And then he laughs and says, ‘An emotional compass.’

He is studying the drawing and turning the scrap of vellum around, apparently to read the words, which follow the circular shape drawn on it. Robbie looks at his rough old hands. He’s an old man; she can see that well enough. They all called him Hermit. He’s obviously so used to the abuse that he’s adopted that title, using it instead of his name. It’s affected him. She can see that very clearly—the house, like a chicken shed, or some such thing, the junk in the yard. He seems to live in squalid isolation, probably buying takeaways at the pub and leaving the bar to the old men she had met there.

‘Like I said,’ he says at last, returning the parchment and the key to her hands, ‘you need this truck. And you need these here sleepers,’ he adds, going over to a pile of lumber. ‘I’ll throw them in with the truck.’

She looks at him, confused.

‘You know,’ he says, his voice soft and his expression like a benevolent old pater, ‘that key and that map, or whatever it is, it’s been stolen more times than you know. How do you think my mother got hold of it?’

‘She stole it?’

‘Well, that’s a harsh word for it. She took the key out of kindness, when she left the house, and the map, she took that just in case she needed to send help, one day, for the lady she had served but left behind—or so I’ve been told. She died along the way, my mother did, and the key and the map came to me from my uncle, who kept her



things for me, and raised me as his son.’

‘Your mother was a lady’s maid?’

‘That she was, yes.’

‘Where was your father?’

‘He stayed behind.’

‘So, you’re from the house inland?’

‘No. Not from there. Not really. From roundabouts, but not there.’

She thinks of the books she’s smuggled from all those libraries—now back in her room at Maudie’s.

A gust of wind stirs in the air, then gathers speed. It picks up the dust from the ground and sends sheets of it across the old man’s compound. Robbie cops a face full before the hermit ushers her downwind, behind the truck.

‘Look,’ says the hermit, ‘you take these things. You might as well make use of them. I’m not going anywhere and I’m certainly not looking for buried treasure.’

Robbie says nothing. She is feeling the sting of the sand in her eyes.

‘So, like I said, you’ll need those sleepers to build the bridge.’

‘How am I supposed to load sleepers on the truck—and get them off it at the other end?’ she says, wiping her eyes.

‘Firstly,’ says the hermit, ‘there’s a crane on the back of the truck, see?’

This she can see, now that she’s walked around to the side of the vehicle and has a clearer view.

‘And second, the sleepers won’t span the river.’

‘I thought you said it was a creek?’

‘River, creek. Doesn’t matter. It’s dry, anyway. What matters is there’s only one spot where the bank’s low enough for you to lay those sleepers down and drive over the creek to the other side. You gotta look out for a tree with a fork in it.’

Robbie is caught by this last point. She has it in mind that most trees have forks in them.

‘Nah,’ says the hermit with a wide toothy grin. ‘I mean a fork, fork. The kind you eat with. That should read, “Find the fork in doughnut,” not “Find the forkin’ doughnut.” It’s a scrivographical error, which is like a typographical error, only before



typewriters.'

'You made that bit up,' says Robbie some time later. They are seated in the old man's kitchen, sharing tea and biscuits.

'Nah, it says it here,' he explains, picking up the parchment from the table. 'See—find the fork. I made up the bit about scrivography,' he smiles, 'but I'm dead serious on the fork.'

'And what about the doughnut?' asks Robbie before biting into a venetian cookie.

'That's just the cartographer's idea of the thing. Our country, you know, it's shaped like a doughnut.'

'Cartographer? You serious? Surely, no one would be so stupid—'

'Not stupid. Not really. The author of those words was writing in code.'

'It's stupid, if you ask me,' says she, brushing the crumbs from the table and into the palm of her hand.

'Well, it had you fooled, didn't it? You'd have been looking for a doughnut instead of a fork if I hadn't set you straight. That's what you've got to look for. A fork. Not a forkin' doughnut.'

'Alright, alright,' says Robbie going over to empty her hands of crumbs in the sink. 'But how am I supposed to see that?' she says.

'If you go at the right time of day, the sun hits it and it shines like a diamond. You can't miss it.'



Chapter Four

On the phone with Jack Breitling, Robbie artfully dodges his questions, gives him directions to Maudie's, and tells him to get a move on.

Not surprisingly, when he pulls up outside Maudie's, Jack is expecting to see Robbie, impatient but eager to get going. Instead he is met by Maudie, who stands on the porch with a cardigan wrapped around her like it's freezing, though the sweltering heat has yet to subside into evening.

Lenny, his doctoral student, is about to open his mouth and ask after Dr Glenda, but Jack cuts him off quick-smart. Robbie has told him about the hermit, and Jack is less interested in finding Robbie than he is in seeing the old fella who solved the riddle of the house's location.

'Well, you might find him at the hotel. That's where all the old men are this time of day,' says Maudie. It's a ruse, of course. Robbie had figured it out after she and the hermit had been chewing the fat a while in the old man's kitchen.

'She's my cousin,' said the hermit when Robbie guessed at the connection. 'A good woman, Maudie is.'

'Aye, she is at that, but tell me: Why'd she send me to the pub when she knows you live here?'

The hermit had smiled—knowing, like.

'Right,' said Robbie getting wise.

'Most don't make it. They get drunk and forget.'

'I wouldn't have thought you'd get too many visitors.'

'You'd reckon. But people think a hermit knows stuff.'

'And he does,' said Robbie, smiling and bowing her head in acknowledgement.



‘Yeah. Right enough. But there’s no point telling all and sundry, is there now?’

‘I guess not.’

‘I’d be sending men to their deaths, otherwise. You have to be selective.’

‘Why thank you,’ Robbie had said in earnest, ‘for your trust—for putting your faith in me.’

‘I like you too much to kill you,’ was his response to that remark.

But Jack is smart. Has what he calls his sixth sense. ‘I don’t mind, if that’s where he is,’ he says to Maudie.’ That’d be a charming arrangement m’dear. He’s expecting us, though. We’re colleagues of Dr Roberta Glenda. I believe she’s staying with you. She booked our rooms, I’m told.’

‘No need to book. Yes, she mentioned someone would be coming for her. In that case, you’d be best to take the north road outta town—past the pub. You’ll find him two ks out on the left. Can’t miss the place.’

‘And Dr Glenda?’

‘Oh, she’s long gone. You’ve missed her by two days, at least. But she said you’re to wait here for her. She’ll be back, right enough.’

‘Ha,’ says Jack as he pulls in at the hermit’s, ‘the old girl said we couldn’t miss the place, and she was right. Quite a set-up you have here.’ He’s leaning out the driver’s window as he speaks, an arm hugging the door and an attitude of belonging anywhere and everywhere about him.

‘Old girl?’ says the hermit.

‘Ah, the woman at the guest house.’

‘Maudie, you mean, then?’

‘That’s right. She sent us here. We’re colleagues of Dr Glenda.’

‘That Robbie?’

‘Yes. I believe you have a truck for us?’ but all Jack can see is the frame of what appears to be the truck’s canopy. The hermit was working on it when they pulled up; it is to go on the flat bed of the truck when Robbie returns. The hermit turns back to it now and begins packing up equipment. He’s just welded the frame together and, when



the men pulled up, was busy measuring for the canvas that is to go on the outside. He will not assemble it just yet, though. The plan is to do this when Robbie returns. He'll have to work through the night, but they should be able to set off at dawn the day following.

'Yes,' says the hermit, with his back to them. 'She's got the truck with her.'

'I suppose she's off getting supplies,' says Jack getting out of the car. Lenny joins him, and the two men stand flanking the old man, watching his every action.

'Ah, no. She left that job for you. I've got a list here,' says the hermit, pulling a scrap of paper from his trouser pocket. 'Here,' he says handing the paper to Jack. 'You'll have to go to the town you passed through a ways back. We don't stock much of the stuff here, I'm afraid.'

Jack takes the paper and hands it to Lenny, saying to the hermit: 'I'm just a little confused. We are supposed to meet Roberta Glenda.'

'Like I said, you've missed her. Be two days now, getting on for three. She's making the first run to set up base and get a feel for what might be needed. That sorta thing.'

'Right.'

'I tell you what. It's too late in the day for you to get anything on that list. Why don't we all meet back at Maudie's in an hour, say. I'll call ahead and we'll sort out dinner for you. And we can discuss that list. You might have some of the stuff already. You know your academic needs better than I do. I've just put together the essentials, like.'

'That's very generous of you,' says Jack, smiling through his teeth.

Instead of heading back to Maudie's, Jack and Lenny drive into town. There they stop off at the pub to 'get the lie of the land,' and sample the local beverages. Lenny, an international student who was studying in Australia before coming to The Antipodes, stands out somewhat on account of his Canadian accent.

'Who are ye, when y'are at home, me boy?' asks an old buccaneer, looking the lad up and down. 'That's not a southern accent I hears, is it, now?'

'No,' says Lenny a little nervous. The fellow looks rough and appears to be



scowling. Quite menacing, really, what with the scar running from beneath his left eye to the other side of his chin.

‘An interloper!’ the cutthroat roars.

‘Leave my lad alone,’ says Jack, quick as can be. ‘He’s here legitimate like.’

‘How be that then, Capt’in?’

‘He’s my student. And I vouch for him.’

‘Arrgh. Be that so, matey?’

‘That’s right,’ says Lenny. ‘I’m an international student.’

‘Ow—,’ says Jack in a whisper. ‘Too much information, me boy.’

‘Inter-bloody-national, is ‘e!’

‘What?’ comes a voice from the other end of the bar, ‘What’s that, Capt’in?’

‘E’s an inter-bloody-national, he is.’

‘It’s not what you think it is,’ says Jack.

‘What does he think it is?’ says Lenny. And what’s wrong with being international, anyway?

‘He’s an honorary Antipodean, mate,’ says Jack, ‘Comes via Australia. All above board, my friends. And would you like a chaser with that?’

‘Well, now, that’s right companionable of ye,’ says the buccaneer.

‘Barman,’ says Jack, ‘Brewers Finest, if you please—for my friend here, and—what the heck, let’s shout the bar, shall we Len, my man?’

‘Do you think that’s wise, Professor?’ says Lenny.

‘I’m saving yer arse here, Len.’

‘Oh right.’

‘Professor? Be ye an ed-gee-kate-ed chap?’ says the publican, pouring out shots. ‘We had one like that earlier, we did. Only a fair wench it was.’

‘A fair wench,’ says Jack, sniggering. ‘Would that be Roberta Glenda, by any chance?’

‘Roberta Glenda?’ says the publican. ‘Nay, matey, not The Dead Darling of The Antipodes! She be fish bait thirty year gone.’

‘She’s not dead, my friend, I assure you.’

‘No?’



‘You obviously don’t follow the news out here.’

‘Nay. They be a week outta date by the time they reach us out ‘ere, matey,’ says the publican. ‘And we turn the sound down on the telly,’ he adds, nodding at the screen above the bar. ‘Can’t hear yerself think, otherwise.’

They arrive at Maudie’s just as dinner is ready. The four of them sit together in the kitchen. Maudie is not overly generous with the drink during dinner, so Jack pulls a flask from his pocket to ‘take the edge off all this cosiness.’

‘I find cosy to be an odd term,’ he opines. ‘What do you say, Leonard, my man?’

‘I prefer “snug,” to cosy,’ the lad says. He ought to know better.

‘Oh, how very Shakespearean,’ says Jack. ‘He’s an educated chap, this one,’ he adds turning to Maudie and the hermit.

‘I thought you were all educated,’ says Maudie. ‘Professor, doctor, I don’t know what he is—’

‘He,’ says Jack, ‘is a junior scholar.’

‘I’m still a student,’ says Lenny.

‘A snug student,’ says Jack.

‘In a cosy kitchen,’ adds Lenny.

‘As smug as a tug on a lug,’ says Jack laughing and slamming the flask down on the table.

‘Hey now. Watch the table,’ says Maudie somewhat taken aback.

‘That was a bit, you know,’ says Lenny to Jack, but quietly.

‘Have I shocked you?’ says Jack, uproarious. ‘Have I shocked you?’ he asks, turning to the hermit, and then to Maudie.

‘I’m not that easily shocked,’ says Maudie.

‘Me neither,’ says Jack. ‘I’m often surprised by what people do, but I’m never shocked. Do you know why that is Hermit?’

‘Herman,’ whispers Lenny, leaning in towards Jack’s shoulder. He’s a good listener and had picked up the name from Maudie.

Herman says nothing, but Jack isn’t troubled by this and simply explains, ‘Because shock and surprise are two different things entirely.’



‘Shock is when you don’t see it coming,’ says Lenny fondling his ear.

‘That’s right,’ says Jack. ‘Like you didn’t see that coming,’ he adds, turning his head sideways in a mock display of sympathy. The sutures were long gone, but the scar running from behind Lenny’s right ear and down along the jawline is still rather prominent.

‘But me, I wasn’t surprised,’ says Jack sitting up again. ‘It was an accident waiting to happen.’

‘You might have warned me.’

‘Mate, I’d have to warn the whole fucking university in that case: Steer clear of the Dean once he’s had a few.’ And then he laughs. ‘No, I wasn’t shocked by that. And I’m not surprised to learn that Dr Glenda has hightailed it to the treasure afore us! Not surprised at all. Because you know what a surprise is, don’t you Lenny?’

‘It’s when you think that you didn’t see it coming, but you kinda did?’ says Lenny, a little troubled by those piratical overtones.

‘That’s right. I’m only annoyed with myself for not acting on my own inclinations!’

‘Now, now,’ says Herman at last. ‘There’s no need to worry. She’ll be back. She had to go or there’s no way you lot could get ready for a three-month stint. That’s what you’re planning, isn’t it? She said you need to catalogue and itemise and all that guff.’

‘She’s coming back, you say?’ says Jack, his blue eyes bright and wide and seeming larger than they were—large enough to stare a man down.

‘Yes. Of course,’ says Herman, holding his ground.

‘What’s to say that she won’t stay there for three months herself, and then take all the glory?’

‘Glory? Huh. There’s no glory to be found out there,’ says Maudie.

Jack eyes her carefully. ‘I thought you said your mother was Spanish.’

Maudie, who had slumped in her chair now sits up straight and gives Jack a look as if to say, WHAT OF IT? From the corner of her eye she marks Herman’s weary expression; the old man says nothing.

‘What do you know of it?’ says Maudie, at last. ‘I thought this was a discovery to you lot. Hmm?’



‘Discovery. Yes, but not in the way you mean it, Maudie,’ says Herman. He’s been eyeing Jack carefully all evening. ‘Breitling’s your name, isn’t it?’

‘That’s right,’ says Jack, and he waves his arms expansively. ‘A good piratical name if ever there was one. My ancestor was a true Goth. One of the first to come to this country in the middle ages.’

‘That so?’ says Maudie, scathing.

‘As I recall, there was a family called Breitling, lived out this way thirty year ago,’ says Herman.

‘You’re right,’ says Maudie. ‘They moved after the eldest boy went missing. Some say he dug up the treasure his old man had been searching for, oh, for nigh on twenty years, it was. Took off with it too. The father went after him, and the mother followed. There was a small boy, as I recall. His hair was as black as black can be. Like yours,’ she says to Jack. ‘You look like the lad. The one who took off. Doesn’t he, Herman?’

Jack scowls. ‘That’d be me older brother, Jason. He took off with the loot all right. Left us destitute.’

‘He took off with more than that,’ says Herman. ‘He stole the map from my son Ian.’

‘I thought you said it wasn’t a map?’ says Maudie.

‘What do you know of it?’ says Jack.

‘This is getting interesting,’ says Lenny.

‘I know that Robbie has it in her possession, even now,’ answers Maudie.

‘I thought as much. She shows you lot, but she never let me see it.’ Not once in their brief but drunken romance, did he manage to get into her place to search for it as he had planned to do. She was always making excuses. ‘I grew up dreaming of the place,’ says Jack. ‘Me brother, he told me he’d come back one day, and we’d go in search of the place and split the loot between us. How did Robbie get hold of the parchment then?’

‘She told me some story, but I don’t believe a word of it,’ says Herman. He does, only he’s not prepared to discuss the subject. ‘It hardly matters now.’

‘Why did you let her roam the country for nearly half a year, if you knew we



needed to come here?’ says Lenny to Jack.

‘Because,’ says Herman to Lenny, ‘the professor here thought the lovely Dr Glenda might find his brother, Jason, I suspect. That is, if she looked long and hard enough,’ he adds looking at Jack. ‘I suppose you thought that he had come back without you, years back, when you were a lad. Thought he’d made off with the prize, secretive, like he did before. But he didn’t. He couldn’t find it. It’s not a map he had. It’s useless without local knowledge.’

‘But wasn’t he a local?’ asks Lenny. ‘I thought you said—’

‘For fuck’s sake!’ says Jack. ‘He means local, local. You get me?’

‘Oh, right. I thought that was just stuff you people made up—’

‘She probably stole it,’ says Jack, pondering. And then something occurs to him. ‘I suppose you and that boy of yours have been there already and looted the best of the treasure.’ He’s leaning forward as he says this, stabbing the air above the table with his fist curled around the glass flask and his index finger in a peculiar posture—not quite pointing, not quite holding onto the bottle he’s grasping.

‘No. I wouldn’t go near the place,’ says Herman. ‘I’ve been to the plateau. Me and Maudie went there forty years back to pay our respects.’

Maudie looks alarmed at this remark.

‘You two,’ says Jack, waving his finger back and forth between them. Lenny watches the liquid at the halfway mark roil all the way to the neck of the flask.

‘Boyfriend and girlfriend?’ But as Lenny says this, he’s thinking about that liquid rising and falling. His own juices are roiling inside him as he imagines his companion gathering his forces for what could be a fraught and possibly dangerous exchange. Poor Lenny, he feels terribly stuck but is nonetheless drawn to Jack despite his ugly manners. He wants to soothe away the sentiments that he sees brewing, having learned from experience these last twelve months that Jack can be more than difficult when he’s drunk. He brooks no opposition and any man or woman who fails to comprehend this sometimes lands in hot water.

‘Don’t be daft. They’re brother and sister, or cousins or something,’ spits Jack, a jolting sense of laughter in his tone. ‘Yes. I know you lot. I may have been only nine when we left, but I could tell you lot apart.’



‘What?’ says Lenny. ‘What lot?’

‘You’re not from here,’ says Jack to the lad. ‘Keep your head in the sand a while longer won’tcha. It’ll do ye no good to get wise on the point.’

Lenny sits back, having done his best.

‘So, you’ve not been to the house then?’ asks Jack. His attitude has become ingratiating. Smarmy-like. Lenny feels suddenly ill. Something disgusting—lumpy and only partially digested—rises in his throat, but he manages to swallow it down.

‘I was born there—on the plateau,’ says Herman. ‘Maudie was born here.’

‘My father was a station owner,’ Maudie interrupts. ‘He didn’t go in for all this treasure stuff. He was a good man. Not like your lot.’

‘My lot? I don’t know what you’re on about.’

‘She just means her pa wasn’t piratical, like the Breitlings,’ says Herman.

‘Right. He wasn’t too particular either, I judge,’ says Jack.

‘Cripes,’ says Lenny. ‘Gee Jack, that’s a bit harsh. Sorry Mam. He gets a bit nasty when he’s had too many.’

‘Mam?’ Jack swings around on his chair and stares at the lad. ‘I’ll give you nasty, me boy.’

‘I forgot your name, sorry,’ he says to Maudie, and to Jack, he explains, “‘Miss” didn’t seem right, that’s all. And Professor—’

‘Because she’s an old hag, you mean?’

‘Lord save us,’ says Maudie. ‘I’ll not have you under my roof a minute longer. Get out!’

Lenny’s face pales and he leans back in his chair, as though to escape the imagined onslaught of blows or blood or venom. He has often felt the vigour of Jack Breitling’s anger, but is too easily won round and ends up playing the fool to his madness, time and time again. He looks across the table and sees the expression on Maudie’s face. She is holding her ground. A strong woman, no doubt. But he can see she is afraid. The old man, Herman, is sitting straighter than he’d seen him stand.

They were both as still as can be. An age seemed to pass.

‘With pleasure,’ says Jack, at last. ‘I’d rather sleep in the car than under the roof of a a—’ but he says nothing more, just grabs his swag from beneath the table and



stalks out to sleep in his car.

‘You can stay,’ Maudie says to Lenny. Her tone is firm, but he takes it as kindly.

‘Thanks. I guess I’ll turn in. I’m sorry about all that.’

‘It’s all right, lad,’ says Herman. ‘Can’t be helped. Best you get a good night’s rest. I imagine you’ll be doing a fair bit of the lugging and carrying, like.’

Lenny looks at him, confused, before he understands. ‘Oh yes, right. I imagine we’ve got quite a bit of kit to get together. Thank you, Herman—and thank you Maudie. That was a delicious—’ and he stifles the rising tide once more, ‘dinner.’



It stays light until quite late at these latitudes and, right now, Robbie, having circled the plateau before ascending on the eastern side, is driving with one hand on the wheel and the other shielding her eyes from the sun. If she does not see the house soon, she will have to turn around and try again tomorrow. It would not do to be out here, in this grey void, with only a tent for shelter.

But then the sun’s rays, refracted in the dusty afternoon light, illuminate the horizon ahead of her. They bounce around the cabin, warming the skin beneath her chin before revealing, in silhouette, the outline of a dwelling in the distance.

A strange aura surrounds the silhouette, as though the sun is setting in two or more places at once.

As she drives from the lower desert and over the sandy shoreline, Robbie loses sight of the house briefly when the road inclines upwards, forming the rise of the island on dry land. The hermit said that the house would appear and disappear like a mirage. And it does. But she soon enough finds herself approaching a high wall of handmade bricks, like those she had seen in Italy many years before. A wide opening in the wall, where the remnants of a portcullis lie to one side, leads into what had once been a vast and elegant garden. The ruins of a great fountain stand before the house, with statuary marking the junctures of the tidy brick paths that run across the dry earth either side of the road.



The house itself is not like a house as she understands a house to be. It is palatial, and though the entrance has the appearance of an elegant old farmhouse, Robbie can see wings extending east and west built in a much grander style. She had seen towers in the distance too, but up close, the farmhouse obscures the structures that are behind and around it.

Robbie feels lonely suddenly and thinks of the hermit's reluctance to travel with her. The place is an anathema to him. 'It's something you have to see,' he told her, 'I don't need to see it.' And he hasn't—hasn't seen it with his own eyes but through the eyes of his ancestors.

His mother had been a lady's maid. And his aunt had worked in the kitchens. The sea, he said, was beautiful, but what had replaced it was not. Robbie was surprised by this, since he had then gone on to describe the elegance of the upper rooms—the palatial corridors that were wider than a peasant's house and which were warmed by fireplaces on either side, every twenty feet, so that the family would not suffer from the cold. They had cleared the forests of the land beneath the plateau, and then the island on which the house sat. And they had drained the sea, centuries back, and turned it into pasture lands that thrived and then died like the settlers of the plateau had done.

Having pulled up at the end of the old road, Robbie parks the truck in the shadow of the building. She is alone now but, in a few days, she will return with Jack and Lenny.

Three months in this place with Jack Breitling. It doesn't bear thinking about. But the house is big enough to keep a thousand souls in peace and quiet, without bumping into each other. She will be busy writing her book, and Jack and his assistant will be cataloguing and packing what they can. Surely, that will keep everyone busy enough for three months, without treading on each other's toes.

Months back, the prospect of being alone with Jack would have been appealing. But she has seen enough of him now to know that it would mean a fair bit of dancing around his ego. The man is easily offended and verging on paranoid. His saving grace being that he is devilishly good looking. Easy on the eye, as they say. Lenny might make things easier, or more difficult, it's hard to say. She'd met him in Jack's office a few times over the last year. He seems nice enough, if too much in the thrall of his



supervisor. She figures three months out here with Jack for a drinking partner ought to cure the poor kid of his misconceptions; though, truth be told, it took Robbie six.

As she steps down from the cab of the truck, the long months ahead are soon beyond her reckoning. She has, now, only to contend with the strange sensation she feels in her body as all her misgivings and doubts are swept away as she stands before the house.

The sun will soon be sinking beneath the horizon. She is tired and very much aware that the day is fading. The house itself has, too, reached an end of sorts. It seems sturdy enough, but the dry air has made the paint on its window frames crack and peel, and dust has gathered in the ornate crevices of the architraves and the doors, imitating shadows that are not there.

She takes the key from her pocket and walks up the steps to the veranda. A giant key and wholly obsolete. The door is not locked and, if it had been, its aperture is at least half the size needed for this huge key. Robbie can see no other place that it might fit, so she tries the door. Seizing the large round knob, she turns it one way then the next. She feels it twisting in her hand, and then she is inside, and standing in a large hall.

Though the doorway is elaborate, the hall imitates the entrance of a traditional farmhouse, only the proportions are much more substantial. There is nothing pretentious in its styling, however. It earns its opulence through practicality and the beautiful balance of everything in the room. The hall contains the usual furniture and ornaments belonging to a grand yet comfortable household of its heyday, including: three lamps on a large credenza and umbrellas and all-weather coats on the hall stand. Down the centre is a large oriental rug, and a sturdy, round table is at its heart. There is an ornate birdcage resting on a marble plinth in the middle of it.

At the end of the hall, some twenty or thirty paces on, is a wide staircase leading to the upper levels.

Robbie walks up to the birdcage and peers within. There is, of course, no bird inside. The table and entryway would have made a poor home for it. It is too tidy and neat for a living thing. She imagines, instead, a mechanical bird, and her mind shifts to the walls and the ceiling by association—as if she expected to find emperors or kings



up there, staring down at her solemnly from their small, stone, patchwork existence. But the walls are painted plaster, not mosaic. Pictures hang on them above a dark-stained wooden dado. The ceiling is high, but it only implies a cathedral and stays below the heights that might have had Robbie thinking these thoughts for longer. Had she arrived at a different hour, Robbie might well have been tempted to look at those paintings, but the dimming of the light urges her onward. She now means, with some urgency, to locate the heart of the house before crawling off to bed in one of the rooms upstairs.

Presuming the kitchen to be at the rear of the house, somewhere behind the staircase, she walks the length of the hall intending to bypass the upper levels for now. But then the stairway draws her attention. She sees a long brown face from the corner of her eye. Mahogany balustrades fan out from the wide opening, and the handrail curves around and down, scrolling outwards, to the sides, before sliding down to where the staircase is at its widest. There, before her, stretching out from the top rail to the floor, elongated and seeming to rear up, two dragons stand either side of the stairs. Each dragon looks back towards the upper reaches of the house. Their heads coming out of the scrollwork that serves as the handrail's point of termination, they stretch their necks along its line and stand with chests stuck out in a curvaceous kind of arrogance, with rounded breasts, polished bright and smooth, as though too-frequently caressed by prurient hands.

It strikes Robbie that she might make something of this. Children, not men, had handled the wood here, and there, on the other side. Small hands grasping and faces laughing cheekily—perhaps from a natural longing, triggered by the promise of milk in those pert breasts. She sees in her mind's eye, a small child, mouthing the wood, and pulls a notebook from her waistcoat pocket to jot down the thought, only to cross it out, thinking it unlikely small children would have been allowed to roam freely like that in such a place as this.

If the stories were accurate, the family had stopped venturing out some time after the Second World War. That's how the rumours had started—that there was treasure in the house on the plateau looted from the galleries and the homes of wealthy Europeans. They were opportunists and had been doing this sort of thing for centuries,



apparently—never mind the war. Filching treasure was in their blood, as it is in the blood of everyone, Robbie suspects. Isn't that something her country still celebrates? There are plenty of wild and fanciful stories about such exploits. Some, so-called history, but mostly, just folktale or the kind of narrative that sits behind the silly games that children play. They were no different to the Americans with their cowboys and Indians—except here it was buccaneers and, sometimes, the mythical locals.

Fanciful, or not, it was delightful, surely—even if the world mocked them. It was all senseless fun and games. Robbie had enjoyed such play as a youngster. She remembered playing fish and walk-the-plank. Keelhauling was a particular favourite, since it meant running the gauntlet of all those feet under the table. As a small child, she had often played the game, which was performed in her family as a mock form of punishment—especially for staying up past bedtime and refusing to go off to bed when there were visitors. Family and friends would take off their shoes and tickle you with their 'barnacled' toes as you crawled along the floorboards for the length of the table.

When she was finally hauled up from the 'depths' beneath the table, she would be giggling so hard she could barely speak. Then her father would say,

'Now, matey, will you go to bed?'

And she would shake her head, then squeal with delight as she was passed beneath the table for a second time.

*

Meanwhile, in town, Maudie is disgusted. She's heard from, Lizzy, the publican's wife, cook, and co-licensee, that Jack has established himself at the bar and is winning the admiration of all and sundry—the foolish old sots who seem to have nowhere else to go, and the blow-ins and the regulars of Friday and Saturday evenings. Jack is now shouting the bar, having everyone spill their guts about any old nonsense they have heard of the house, the plateau, the locals.

These tales, Maudie well knows, are mostly the expression of old longing and obscure wrongdoings, buried deep in the hazy belief that the past is a vague affair and nothing persists but the memory of success, hard won, and the trials of living off the



land—digging, of course—though none of the men who frequent the pub have ever held a shovel in their lives, Lord save us. What they live on and why they are here, Maudie isn't too sure. She figures that some could be farmers, others are miners, and then there are the truckers and the ne'er do wells.

She's long believed that those who pull in at her guesthouse are simply moving goods across the country—from the west, where the resources are richest, to the manufacturing centres of the east. Some make use of the stockyards at the edge of town, droving cattle to slaughter, or moving them from seasonal drought to the other side of the ranges, avoiding the mountains themselves and going over the low hills that are to the south. They all ascribe to the belief that the country is empty at heart, and they follow the roads that wind their way north and south to go east or west.

Jack's talk of driving right through the middle is a horrifying thought to many. But the sweet taste of spiced rum and old-style madeira has them relaxing their minds to the prospect. They have never been inland themselves, but now everyone who stands at the bar and partakes of Brewers' generosity has a tale to tell—a toast goes up 'to the University!', which is paying for this information, according to Jack, and 'to Professor Breitling!'—a man of honour and wisdom and nothing like the toffy nosed snots who usually inhabit such places. Ah, but Brewers is different, ain't it? They do a nice drop, one and all agree. Even the publican is charmed; but, of course, his interest in the whole business is entirely professional.

Jack is angling, of course—looking for information he hasn't a hope of wangling out of Herman who seems unaccountably loyal to Robbie. He plays a dangerous game, questioning the hermit's origins, asking about the fellow's family, his history. No one seems to recall that Breitlings had lived here once, and Jack isn't about to remind them.

The publican scratches his head, saying the name is familiar. 'Hang on,' he says, as the memory dawns in the narrow confines of his mind. 'There were Bright Things—that's what we called 'em. Lived out by the diggings, they did, this side of the stockyards. Ye ain't related to them, now, Capt'in?'

'Of course not,' says Jack. 'I'm a city boy, me lads, but don't hold that against me.' And with that he orders drinks all round.



‘Bright Things—Yes,’ comes a voice from the back of the room once everyone has settled and there is the familiar hush of folk imbibing thoughtfully and musing on the essentials of life. ‘Bright Things,’ the voice utters again. ‘We called ‘em that because they thought they was better than us.’

‘No, it were their name,’ says another.

‘They put on hairs ‘n’ braces, didn’t they?’ says a voice from out of nowhere.

‘It weren’t their name, just sounded like it,’ the first speaker protests.

‘I don’t know about bright, but they was sharp,’ says another.

‘Sharper than you lot,’ mumbles a modern-day pirate in a suit and tie. He is speaking to himself and does not scream this insight to the room but mutters it into his ale because he’s just made a killing in town selling green budgies as baby parrots and is ruminating on this more than the subject of conversation.

‘Sharp or bright, he left without paying his tab,’ says the publican.

‘She owed me a pretty penny,’ says the shopkeeper in tones that suggest she feels the injury still, thirty years on.

‘Those kids were little bastards,’ says the schoolteacher, now retired. But all kids are little bastards to his mind, at least now that he is no longer thus encumbered and feels himself free to air his thoughts.

‘I don’t believe that the presence or absence of legal union is necessarily a key determinant in the character of any offspring,’ says an old woman peering into her glass. But she is ignored, as usual, and the conversation devolves into accounts of just how bastardly the Bright Things really were.

Jack intervenes at this point by asking the publican to open his finest (and strongest) drop of Brewers Aged Spice, and a bottle of gin for the ladies. There are cheers all round.

The pub is now doing a roaring trade every night of the week. In the six or seven days since the professor came to town, word has spread wide and far that he is shouting the bar in return for stories about the fabled house.

People come from miles around. The quiet, dusty town is now swarming with out-of-towners, truckers, and blow-ins of all descriptions. Many have the wild eyes and



bearing of someone lying low for longer than is good for them. They are misanthropes, by the look of them, at least to Lenny's mind: all ill-tempered and eager for a drink.

Jack is right at home with this lot—he likes the power his generosity gives him. He proves himself fleet of foot and charismatic, running from one patron to another, exhorting them to sing and be merry. Once everyone is drunk enough to be loose with the truth and careless of secrets, he takes to the snug in the corner. One by one, they visit the prof in his office, as they call it, tricorns in hand, to tell him what they know—with Lenny, there beside the professor, taking notes. Each man or woman is courteously thanked for the information they bring—though most drivel their way through tales of common lore, variously repeated in alterations of colour and tone, told flatly or excitedly, in trepidation or delight. Jack's attention is tuned to anything they might tell him about the house and its whereabouts. He is not interested in stories of the inland sea, and he will make this clear if the speaker wanders into narratives of ships being dragged across the desert and over the ranges. He does not care to imagine the peculiarity of a flat-bottomed galleon sailing the shallow waters on moonlit nights, or of ships being towed by sailors knee-deep in water. Such romantic tales are of no interest to him, unless they involve the mention of treasure. He is even less enamoured of stories that touch upon the existence of locals. Indeed, he is inclined to flare up at the mention of such individuals and, drawing his sword, has been known to pounce upon the bar and lay down the law to one and all:

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A LOCAL!

Of course, he knows different, like. They all know he does, but they tip their hats with a nod and wink, just the same.

Late one night, after such endeavours, Jack finds himself standing in the street before Maudie's.

The town is in darkness, apart from the streetlights, which do little to alleviate the gloom that describes the dead of night. Though he can't remember doing so, he has walked here from the pub, following those streetlights, stopping to pee into the gutter, before finding himself at Maudie's guest house.

Lenny, lying in bed in a room at the front of the house, is woken by the sing-



song voice of his supervisor calling his name:

‘Lenny, my boy. Ahoy!’

The lad gets up, goes over to the window and peers outside. What he sees first of all is the professor standing in the street, looking left and right, like a man crossing a busy road.

Lenny is tired. The lad has spent his days ordering and gathering supplies and his nights taking down the bizarre tales told to Jack in the snug. He feels marooned in this desert town. His fascination for the professor’s bad boy charm and what he had supposed was a towering intellect, is beginning to wane. He is still novice enough not to question Jack’s knowledge of the history of this nation and the artefacts it is supposed to harbour—it makes sense to him that all these lost treasures must be somewhere, but he is beginning to see The Antipodes more as a great sinkhole of viciousness and stupidity, and less as the repository of all that had been great in Europe in days long gone.

He had been so enthusiastic at the outset. But now he feels like a different man—indeed he has the impression of growing from the lad that everyone seems to think he is still, and into a kind of maturity that has yet to fully express itself. Everyone wanted to come here. To travel to The Antipodes is like stepping back in time—or so everyone who has never been here thinks. But Lenny now understands that there is no glorious past of adventure and discovery here, just the dregs of what got left behind in the striving. Everywhere else, they have papered over this stuff, or dressed it in the mystique that antiquity confers. Out here, he feels like he’s landed in the thick of a pantomime that is dangerously real. Jack is unleashing the worst of himself and Lenny has got sucked into the cycle of drinking too.

He hears Jack call his name once more. ‘Lenny, my boy. Hoy!’ And reluctantly, he goes out.

‘You left me all alone,’ says Jack as Lenny walks towards him.

‘It’s the middle of the night.’

‘The pub’s shut,’ the professor laments. He has a glass flask in his hand.

Lenny notices it is three-quarters empty. ‘Haven’t you had enough?’ he says. He has never seen Jack Breitling so drunk so often. He’d sometimes go drinking with his



supervisor at the University, but there the professor had been canny enough to negotiate the revelry. Handsome devil that he is, Jack is a bit of a star and has a retinue of postgrads and undergrads who hang around him. Somehow, he always managed to get himself home as far as Lenny could tell. Probably with the aid of one of his students, he now realises. Once Lenny had accepted a lift home, but never again. Jack had decided on a detour down to the pier and they'd sat there talking nonsense—Jack saying that his people were like the Eskimos, 'We have twenty, thirty, fifty names for the sea—for the waves and the like, you know?' he was very drunk and had fallen sideways towards Lenny as he spoke, pulling himself up like a child fighting sleep. They had sat there until the sun rose above the ocean, which was when Jack at last started the car and Lenny had hopes of making it home. But then the drunken fool stalled the engine in the middle of the empty carpark. Lenny offered to drive, but when he got around to the driver's side and opened the door, he found Jack Breitling snoring and belligerent when he tried to budge him.

Lenny had managed to push the car into a parking bay, before walking home in the early hours. Five hours later, he came across Jack at University, chatting to some undergraduates and looking as bright as a pin.

Now, out on the street in the middle of this quaintly dusty old town, longing for sleep and itching from the heat, Lenny tries reasoning with Jack to go back to bed.

'Bed? I'm sleeping in my car, Len.'

He looks so incredibly sad. Lenny is tempted to steal him into Maudie's, but he says, 'I don't think I can let you in—you know, Maudie—'

'The old cow,' says Jack.

'Shhh,' says Lenny. 'Why don't I walk you back to your car?'

'Okay,' says Jack, suddenly easy and compliant. 'You do that.' And they set off.

As they are walking along, Jack suddenly laughs and, stopping to make a show of looking Lenny up and down, says, 'You're wearing pyjamas.'

'Yeah,' says Lenny.

'Who wears fuckin' pyjamas?'

'Well, I wouldn't at home, but you know, when you're travelling—'

'Yikes,' says Jack. 'I'm always travelling. I still don't wear pyjamas.' He laughs



again, and then raises his flask, 'I keep a traveller with me, though. That's my pyjamas.'

They reach the car where it is parked outside the pub. Jack, taking a swig of rum, shuffles into position against the sedan, facing the hotel.

'The pub's shut,' he says, staring at the darkened building. 'They kicked me out.'

'It's way past business hours,' Lenny replies.

'Business? Huh. They take my business and then they kick me out.'

'It's a pub,' says Lenny. 'It's just the way it is. Closing time is closing time.'

'No,' says Jack. 'It just means they can't keep selling liquor.'

'Well, yes, but the publican has to sleep. They have to tidy up and get ready for the next day.'

'They kicked me out,' says Jack again.

'I know,' says Lenny opening the car door. He ushers the professor towards the back seat. 'You need to rest.'

'Okay,' says Jack.

Lenny, half in and half out as he wrestles Jack into the back seat of the car, looks about the cabin. It is a mess of crushed bourbon cans and take-away food cartons. He makes a mental note to bring a flagon of water. It will be intolerably hot in the morning. He will need the car to get supplies, but this time he'll probably have to take Jack with him. Up 'til now, the professor has been able to rest up in the snug whenever Lenny takes the car for errands during the day. Lenny has made a point of setting out late for this very reason, waiting until eleven, when the pub opens its doors. He's even seen Jack welcomed inside ahead of time, but that was earlier in the week, when they first arrived in town. Now he suspects that things have changed. Last night he heard the publican say to his wife that he really hoped 'she did come back for 'em.' He had meant Robbie, of course.

Lenny hopes so too—he's worried for her. Yet, the idea of this expedition makes him uneasy. It would be good to get out of town—to get off this merry-go-round, for sure. Only, he isn't too confident that what lies ahead will be any kind of improvement.



Chapter Five

Time had seemed, to Robbie's mind, to rush ahead and stop, and now she has forgotten what it was that she saw in those moments, or even what she thought. She can remember only that she had been standing before the curvaceous railing of a staircase, and now she finds herself on those very stairs. She can see what she thinks is a balustrade above her on either side, but as she draws nearer, she realises that there is only a wall, expertly painted in *trompe l'oeil*. It depicts an ornate railing, carved in a strange vegetal pattern and trailing and winding its way over the plump columns of the balustrade. Behind this there appears to be a wide landing with three arches opening onto three long corridors. But when she reaches the wall, she finds that the landing is narrow and dark, and she is soon walking through a short corridor instead of the lengthy one depicted on the painted wall.

When the corridor ends abruptly, she finds herself suspended in the air and standing above a cavernous place that might have been built to hold a galleon but which is all but completely empty—there are no doorways or windows that she can see, no paintings hanging on the walls, no furniture—just long planks of timber in one corner, and what appears to be the rudiments of a carpenter's forge.

Robbie is about to turn back, but when she looks behind her, the stairway is shrouded in darkness whereas the way ahead offers light.

She walks slowly—her eyes raised to the heights she is climbing, her hand on the railing to her left. The width of the stair narrows like a road tapers to the eye when you look ahead into the distance. It has become so narrow that she thinks she must be nearing the top. And, sure enough, the final step deposits her upon a tiny landing, and then the staircase turns, leading to a small narrow doorway made of wood that looks as



though it has seen the underside of a ship. Tar and horsehair still fill the cracks, though it is no longer watertight, of course, and has no need to be. A simple thumb latch secures the door. She depresses it and enters a circular room with walls of glass. Each pane of glass is framed in lead. There are larger panes amidst the small diamond shapes that enable the curvature of the room, and the wood panelling—such as there is—is of old timber like the door.

She walks up to the window seeming most central to the scheme of things owing to the presence of three small wooden steps. These enable a slightly more elevated view and she finds herself standing on something that resembles a lectern, or the forecastle on a ship—there being a curved railing around it on three sides. All in all, the room gives the impression of being an elaborate crow's nest. It looks out across the plateau.

The house, the hermit had explained, stands upon a raised mound of earth about ten miles long and five mile wide. This island of earth is located, not at the centre as stories would have it, but towards the southern edge of the plateau where a great wall of igneous rock runs the length of the island. This was the reason the land had amassed at this end. It is also the reason the house has lain undiscovered, as this great stone wall arches up and over the island like a giant petrified wave, shielding it from the elements and from discovery. Robbie realises this much as she steps down from the small deck and looks through the windows on the other side. Beyond the rooflines of the house—which from this vantage seem more a collection of grand and ramshackle buildings of various styles and ages across Europe—she can see a black wall, so smooth and shiny that, illuminated by the setting sun, it brightens the dusky air, seemingly extending the last rays of the day.

The realisation that night is falling reminds her that she must hurry. On the other side of the room, a set of stairs lead her down to the rooms where the family must have lived. The light is fast fading, and in some places, where the corridors travel at length, she can hardly make out the shape of things—but descries, nearer to hand, exquisite furniture and artworks, which she imagines continuing all the way down those wide halls.

She has no intention of exploring these dark places now but takes her rest in the first chamber that she finds, pulling back the dusty old coverlet to reveal a bed that



looks, in that shadowy light, to be newly made. She runs her hands across the sheet, checking for vermin, but there is nothing—neither the moist pellets of their droppings, nor the grittiness of their desiccated bodies. The hermit had told her it would be so. Every living thing had died there in the final decades when the plains dried out and the plants withered and failed. All dead—by the middle of the last century, he said, save the people themselves, and their small retinue of servants, taken from the local population. She wasn't entirely sure if that was what he meant. It seemed strange, since it would mean—No. Did he mean to say that his mother was a local? Surely not. The hermit is too even keeled to buy into to fairy tales like that.

As she settles beneath the covers, Robbie tries to make sense of it all. The servants, the hermit explained, had packed up their meagre belongings and left their masters to their own devices. There were but two left behind—a brother and a sister, descendants of a man called Rightleg. Rightleg himself had left the plateau generations before. He took what gold and riches the family had amassed and made his way in the world, settling in the capital city of this nation, where he married and began spreading his seed across the land. He had been married on the plateau. But he left his wife and his children to founder and die. They had no wealth to employ tradesmen or with which to trade, and so they made do with what they had. The household had survived in this way, living on what it had, for another century at least, before crumbling completely.

The hermit's mother and aunt knew all this by rumour only. It was the world they had been born into. It was what was discussed in the kitchens and the laundry rooms.

In the morning, Robbie decides to seek out the kitchen and locate the central courtyard. She means to find the pump room and the way to it is somewhere between the two.

To her delight, when she finds the courtyard, she discovers an oasis of sorts. The hermit was wrong. Not everything is dead here. Sheltered from the worst of the weather and benefitting from a small leak in the plumbing that controls the flow of the underground spring that had supplied the house and its farmlands, the garden has grown almost to the height of the building. The whole place is bathed in an enchanted light that accentuates the forms of everything in it. Vines as thick as her forearms twist



and climb their way up and over the balconies. Standing in that grand square, ringed by verandas all round, Robbie's gaze traces the route taken by of the tallest of these, and she sees to her astonishment that the courtyard is enclosed under a glass roof suspended by a structure of the most ornate iron and fretwork.

She wades further into the yard. There is a pretty flowering weed running across the flagstones, stopping short of the massive tree that stands at the centre on an island of dirt in the middle of a fountain. Each step she takes is cushioned by a carpet of greenery that, though soft and lush, is made up of a network of canes that threaten to trip her up with every step.

She has come into the courtyard early in the morning, and the air is already is humid and warm. Robbie takes off her boots and steps into the water. As she wades across to the tree, hitching her skirts, in her laced bodice, barefoot, and with her long hair down, she looks like a woman from two or three centuries back about to take her bath.

Had the house a mind or a memory, it might rejoice at the sight of her traipsing through the water like this. And, if Robbie were to venture further, she might see, along a corridor on the first floor, the painting of a woman very like herself. Though much younger, the maid in the painting is pleasingly plump, like Robbie who, with the coming of middle age, has rounded out her angularities and acquired somewhat more of herself. It is prescient, perhaps—the painting, that is. Prescient of this very moment—as though, Robbie is expected, somehow—or perhaps it is merely that time stands still here, and the painting simply depicts a woman whose bearing is representative of the people of her nation.

Robbie is a maid no longer, alas. She has roamed the world and seen many of its treasures. She ought to be wiser now than she was in adolescence—that's what she hopes. Wise or not, she now knows more about the world, at any rate. She has seen the best that the finest cultures have to offer. Some might say she is more knowledgeable on these matters than her colleague, Jack Breitling. But history is not her bent. Besides, Jack will be joining her soon enough. Let him sort out the technicalities of all this—she hates the idea of documenting what she has found. The demands of her calling are quite different, and she is glad of that. It will allow her to wander about the house and



focus instead on the feelings that are stirred up by the sight of some ornament, by the angle of light as it enters a room for the first time in a hundred years.

After wading through the courtyard, Robbie returns to the kitchen. She holds the large key in one hand as she looks about for somewhere that might suit it. Beside the kitchen is a butler's pantry, with a bare wooden floor and a large round latch recessed into the wood. It had been perfectly designed by its maker, for the latch pops open when Robbie depresses a small lever.

She pulls the hatch up and back to reveal seventeen stone steps. Each step is worn in the middle from the passage of so many feet up and down from larder to basement. At the last of these steps there is a large flat stone that has the appearance of a porch. It is the entryway to the cellar. A door conceals the way beyond this. Robbie observes the sturdiness of it and the large keyhole, wanting a key.

Down she goes, key in hand, looking for spiders and other enemies to adventure. When she gets to the door, she inserts the key. The lock is stiff, but the key seems to function more like a doorknob: one small quarter turn, and it's open. The key will not stay put, however, and falls from the lock. Just as well, she thinks, picking it up.

It is dark inside, and the door is on a spring that wants to be shut. She puts her hand out to steady it as she peers within. There is the smell of dust, and the darkness scintillates—caught now in the slim line of daylight that she has introduced to its hidden spaces. She sees rows upon rows of wine racks, full of dusty bottles, and kegs of liquor along one wall. To her right is a darkened space—a recess of some sort. She shines her torch and sees that it is a tunnel. Stepping inside, the door behind her creaks and then swings closed. The place is suddenly much darker, as her torch illuminates only a few paces ahead.

The torchlight flickers. It dims and fails, and she is in total darkness. How glad she is that the hermit has given her matches and a lighter. She had needed these to light a fire at night on her travels overland. The matches are in the truck, but she finds the lighter in her skirt pocket. She had spotted a lantern on an old bench against the far wall, and she soon finds it. The light it emits is not as bright or as focused as the torch, but she can see her way clearly enough.



The tunnel is ramped and angled down. It takes her deeper underground and into darkness. The light of her lantern reveals old brickwork, covered in moss, and ancient arched caverns where supplies had no doubt been stored at one time. These places are empty now, but for a few broken barrels and the strange, sweet stench of what she assumes to be left over from animal fodder. She passes through three of these caverns—the last of which, like the cellar itself, is full of wine racks and ancient kegs and bottles.

At last she comes to a large round room. At the centre of this room is an enormous structure with many cogs and wheels and twisting pipes. She can see it only in part—it is so huge and the light from her lantern so small. So strange is this great mass of metal, she finds herself stepping around it and holding her light up to examine its convolutions and the shape of the space that it occupies. The ceiling is high—at least thirty feet. As cleverly constructed as anything she's seen overseas, it reminds her of a domed cathedral rather than a pump room. In those houses of worship, everything was all light and bright—or else decorated to convey the impression of light. But here, this elaborate dome houses only machinery, and the place feels heavy and dank.

The machinery fills the space, but there is room enough for a person to walk around the thing and, as she walks and looks about her, Robbie sees that there are other corridors opening onto the room. These entries or exits—whatever they are—occupy the round wall, evenly placed, like the spokes of a large wheel—each slotting neatly into the domed structure so that the brickwork from these archways form part of the pattern that decorates the ceiling. It seems to Robbie, as she looks up, that there must be a hundred arches forming the foundation of the many spokes making up the dome. Robbie brings the light up to several of these openings and peers down long tunnels. She sees that they are like the one that she has come in by: ramped upwards and lined in moss-covered bricks that appear to have been handmade. They seem to go on forever.

She walks about the place, attempting to count the number of passages opening onto the room and wondering where they lead, losing count at around thirty.

Remembering that she is here for the pump and that these mysteries must wait, she turns her attention to the great machine before her. There are levers and cranks



and other devices. She comes across a large wheel, and beside it a sledgehammer and pike. This is what she's been looking for.

The hermit had been vague on the point—largely because he was passing on another's memories of the place, second-or third-hand—but he was certain that the hydraulics were designed to make use of the pressure from the water underground, and that a quarter turn of the wheel would be sufficient to get the water running to the house once more.

Robbie grasps the wheel and tries to turn it to her left, but it doesn't budge. Doubting herself, she tries pushing and pulling to the right. The pump must be under great pressure, she thinks, since it is there to seal off the underground reservoir of water that, before the folk who built it arrived, supplied the seasonal waters of the plateau. The hermit told her that this people's ingenuity had been their downfall in the end. As their empire grew, they became lazy and left the running of the machinery to their servants. Generations on, with the family's numbers dwindling, the men and women who had waited on them, tended the fields, cared for the livestock and the children, came to outnumber their overlords by tenfold.

They did not revolt, the hermit explained to Robbie on the eve of her departure inland, but simply up and left in the night, leaving the family to fend for themselves. The pump, which had been closed off for repair works at the time, effectively sealed off their access to the water. This was just after the second war in Europe, he told her. Though no one intended it, those left behind must have perished from thirst.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Robbie cannot budge the large wheel by the use of her bare hands. When she tries turning it to the right, there is a slight movement, but that is all. Indeed, she feels the mechanism slip into a settled place. It must have been open a fraction, she thinks, and now she has closed it. She tries turning it to the left once more and feels a movement suggestive of some internal clockworks shifting into gear. It budes a little more, but she has reached the limit of her strength. And so, she picks up the pike and slots it between the spokes of the wheel, then she takes up the sledgehammer and wields an almighty blow.

The wheel shifts—she is not sure how far—but it is far enough to initiate some movement in the hydraulics. She hears the pump kick into action and then the whining



of water meeting air in the pipes. Cogs begin spinning and pistons start going up and down. Everything gathers in speed. The noise quickly rises in volume and pitch. Robbie picks up the lantern and dashes around the machine meaning to head back up, but when she has gone but a little way, she realises that she is lost. There are too many options before her. As she shines her light around the room, the corridors flicker before her, each identical to the ones beside it.

The noise is becoming so loud that she can hardly think. She tries to recall the appearance of the machine on first seeing it—its shape, its features. At last she comes to a place she thinks she recognises, but there are at least three corridors that enter at this point and she cannot be certain which of these is the one she had taken. She decides on the middle opening. If this proves the wrong route, she will simply go back and try the opening to the left or right.

After several minutes walking uphill through dark caverns, past many barrels and racks, she is relieved to find herself once more in the kitchen. But she has rushed up these stairs and not noticed that the arrangement is different—that the door opens into a slightly larger larder and pantry—that there is no hatch here. Indeed, she is in such a hurry on scenting the fresh air and on seeing natural light, that she stumbles from the rear of the house, out into the hall and then onto the wide porch.

As she comes out into the full light of day, something makes her take fright and she dashes down the stairs and out onto the dusty path that rings the house.

She looks about her. Her hands rise up to her face.

It was here. The truck. She left it here yesterday.

It takes her but a moment to realise that the truck has not disappeared. She has simply come out on the wrong side. When she turns back towards the house, she finds that the entrance is different. This time, the dragons sit on the external surrounds of the large double doors, which are now open wide, so that she can see the stairway, which seems smaller, and with no trickery about it.

Robbie steps back away from the house as far as she can in the hope of seeing the truck. The landscape is quite different to the wide flat parterre she discovered the day before. She wonders that she did not realise this straight away on stepping outside, and in truth she had—for it was the sight of trees where there ought to be a truck that



had alarmed her. She had walked out and down the steps to the edge of a very different garden.

It is terraced here and has the appearance of an arena. What was once an elaborate formal garden is comprised now of only dead, tortured-looking trees. At the centre—some distance away—is a large ornate fountain, brought to life with water dancing and spluttering from apertures at the top and sides in the form of cherubim spitting and urinating into the repository at its base.

She walks towards the fountain.

Looking into the water, Robbie sees the strange swirling shapes of snakestones lining the bottom of the fountain. Cut in half, so that she can see the segments coiling round and round, in tones made pretty by the water, the snakestones are arranged in a spiral pattern that Robbie finds mesmerising.

She reaches down into the water to touch them.

When she was a child, that was what they were called, and sometimes sea ram's horns or dragon's eggs. But more often, fossilised snakes. The idea had travelled with her people all the way from medieval Europe and stuck in the hearts and minds of this nation's inhabitants as stubbornly as everything else from the past. Never mind that there were individuals who, like herself had travelled the world and discovered what they really were. Not snakes at all. Just molluscs. Just weird little creatures of the sea, not the petrified bodies of snakes or dragon spawn, nor the horns of the sea rams they imagined swam the oceans like seahorses do.

*The Sea Ram swims the deep—
Beware its forked tongue.
It bites you fast to sleep,
And bids you soon to drown.*

She had grown up on nursery rhymes full of such stuff. Though tongues don't bite—or so a serious young man had told her when she first travelled abroad and, spurred on by drink, began reciting her country's songs and rhymes in taverns and pubs.

She and her compatriots never question the meanings behind it all because no one really believes. The half-hearted stuff of childish play and drunken revelry—all



original sense having been lost in a past that is so poorly documented much of it is probably made up, her older, wiser self presumes.

But, as a child, she had listened, wide-eyed, to the young men who travelled the high seas—those who, dressed up on Lubber Day, would recite their adventures in verse from the stocks—or while hanging from gibbets.

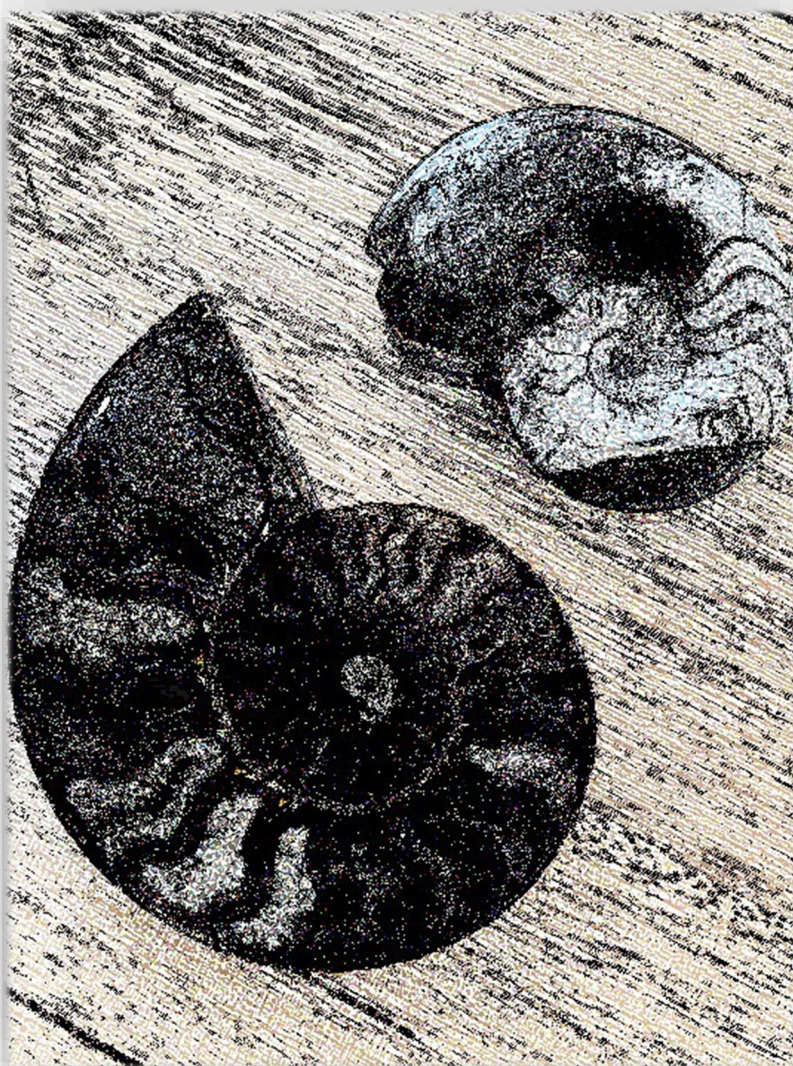
They had two horns, these beasts. A face like a ram. They grew much larger than seahorses, and possessed four limbs, which allowed them to crawl out from the surf and onto dry land.

Coming to her senses, Robbie decides to follow the perimeter of the building, heading west. That ought to bring her back to the place where she had arrived the day before; and sure enough, after a few minutes walking in the hot midday sun, she finds the truck where she had left it.

She will be back in town within a week. But for some reason, her memory of the place will become clouded. She will tell them she did not find the pump room, and so they will waste a good deal of space on the truck making room for water.

Robbie will feel things to be different from the first moment she returns with Jack and Lenny. They will enter a large hall just as she has done this time. And, indeed, when they arrive, it will appear almost exactly as it does now. Yet the staircase will terminate at the landing, and the trompe l'oeil will be gone—in its place a real landing, real bannisters, and a long wide hall extending either side of the stairs. There will be no staircase beyond this, and no way to access the crow's nest, or any sign that one ever existed.





Three: Sea Rams and Snakestones





Chapter Six

As Robbie drives across the plains for the second time the house seems, from a distance, to be the great sprawling thing she understands it to be. But as they pass the outer perimeter and drive through the gate, there are remnants of an old iron gate—not a portcullis. This troubles her a little, but she dismisses her concern, thinking that she had perhaps imagined the device, that, in the heat of the moment, with her emotions heightened and her ambitions about to be realised, she must have seen things very differently on that first occasion. The absence of the crow's nest strikes her as odd. But then she forgets, becoming distracted by the work of unpacking and getting settled. When the memory surfaces, she sets it aside as a dream. Though it had felt so real.

Everything else is more or less as she remembers it. The courtyard is where she expects to find it, though it is now no longer green, but rather desolate. Such anomalies are strange, but then strangeness seems the order of the day. She is very tired on their arrival. And in the days after, everything seems to collapse into a repeating pattern, which Robbie intuits, rather than observes. It is, to her mind, as though the house is a duplicate of the original, which is now beyond their reach. Indeed, it sometimes seems that there is more than one copy.

They settle down. Work progresses. Though, they will make their way around the house without ever reaching its limits. A strange familiarity descends, and they sometimes forget that they are visitors here. The house seems to alter in ways that are impossible to pinpoint, except that sometimes it seems to be facing north, then east and sometimes, west. The cliff face is always to the south, but otherwise the place appears to turn through revolutions that never quite reach the centre. They navigate



their way according to the courtyard and the view they have from the windows that look down onto it.

Six weeks in, Robbie makes the mistake of wandering into a section of the house where Jack is working. Truth be told, she is lonely, to a small degree, and craves company. Lenny understands this and often leaves his post in a room where Jack has him cataloguing items, in order to seek her out.

This day, she finds the two men in a study-cum-sitting room. Robbie, thinking out loud, supposes the room once belonged to a woman.

'I don't think so,' says Jack, as he rummages through wide, deep drawers made to hold ink and watercolour studies. He pulls out a large folio containing loose sketches of what is described as 'The Flora of the Wetlands and the Plains' and begins issuing instructions for Lenny to 'go through these drawers and document the subject matter and the number of sheets in each case.' Lenny goes over and starts going through the drawers. Robbie, standing in the sitting area, where there is an oval mahogany table beside an oak settle, is looking at the objects on the table. It is obvious that Jack has yet to examine the pieces as there is a neat layer of dust over everything.

This room, and the wing in which it stands, is clearly of the Victorian era, thinks Robbie, as she looks up at the ceiling and sees the decorative plasterwork, the architraves, the detail around the fireplace. And yet someone had placed the old settle, rustic and medieval in its bearing and tones, beside this table. It is highbacked, with wings that rise above the functional proportions of a chair. A simple beaded carving decorates the edge above the area where the head should rest. Somehow, it does not seem out of place to Robbie—in fact, she finds the effect rather charming.

The narrow settle, Robbie realises, is much like the ornaments on the table in that someone collected these things. Many of the smaller items are older than the old oak chair. These are the geological specimens. There are some ornate boxes, as well, and other trinkets of tarnished silver. Nothing stands out as otherwise special.

She begins absent-mindedly selecting items, turning each over in her hand, taking care not to disturb the mantle of dust as she returns each to its place. Indeed, she is making a game of placing everything back in exactly the same position in which



she has found it—not because she is frightened of Jack—but out of some desire to preserve the past, in the past, for a moment longer.

But when her hands take up a small green bowl which, coated in the grime of centuries, appears lacklustre and plain, she cannot resist running her fingers over the thing to get a better glimpse of the colour. It is a fine shade of green, so exquisite in tone that it excites her imagination, and she finds herself polishing the dish by blowing on it and then rubbing it in her skirts when she notices traces of muck still.

She had felt a charge of something when she picked up that small green bowl. The more she clears away the dust and the grime, the stronger the sensation becomes, until it explodes in her mind as a scene, which she presumes to have taken place a long time ago. What she sees is the bowl, held by two hands and passed to another set of hands that linger in the warmth of a coal-burning censer.

The censer is ovoid in shape and suspended from a tripod. The room in which these two people stand is neat and tidy. Robbie sees a wooden stool in a corner, but her vision otherwise stays around the glow of the censer and she cannot see the faces or much more of the bodies belonging to those two sets of hands. Nonetheless, she feels as though she is there with them. She can feel the chill at her back and the warmth given out by the burning coal—a deep brown warmth, like the colour of the table before which she now stands.

Then she is suddenly seated. Robbie is in the oak settle now and looking down at her lap; but instead of the rough cotton skirt that she is wearing, she sees the thick folds of deep blue fabric running over the form of a woman, slighter than herself. The woman holds the bowl in her hands and is turning it over. Her fingers are slender, as Robbie's had once been, and the bowl is as fresh and lustrous as it had appeared by the glowing censer.

She could not explain how or why she knows this, but Robbie understands that a great distance in time and place lies between the fireside scene and this moment, glimpsed in daylight, of a woman sitting in a carved wooden chair.

'It's Ming,' she says out loud, but she was really talking to herself.

'What?' says Jack

'It's Ming Dynasty. This little bowl.'



‘What the fuck are you doing? Put it back. And get out of that chair. It’s an antique, for Christ’s sake.’

Robbie stands up and places the bowl carefully on the table, lining it up with the shape it had left in the dust. ‘One very like this went for forty million a few years back,’ she says as she does so.

Lenny stops what he is doing and comes over. Jack snatches it up. ‘How do you know it’s Ming?’

‘I don’t know how I know, exactly. I just know it. I just had this feeling. And then I remembered about the sale of the other one. It broke all records. A plain little thing, just like this one. But a lovely shade of green.’

‘Well,’ says Jack, ‘leave the discoveries to me in future.’

Lenny huffs, without meaning to express himself so audibly.

‘What the fuck do you reckon, eh?’ says Jack turning around.

The lad simply shakes his head and shrugs.

‘Smart arse,’ says Jack, ‘the two of you. You,’ he says pointing a fist at Lenny, ‘get back to work. And you,’ he adds, turning to Robbie, ‘haven’t you got somewhere else you can be? The house is big enough without us having to step on each other’s toes.’

‘I didn’t mean to step on your toes, Jack.’ That sounded haughty, but it wasn’t what she meant. She didn’t want to get up close to him like that. Poor Lenny, she thinks.

She goes out and downstairs where she finds an enormous library on the ground floor and a seemingly endless corridor. No, she doesn’t need to run up against Jack like that. It is enough that they see each other in the evenings. She is beginning to feel that that is more than enough.

The next day, Robbie is more than astounded to see Jack using the little green bowl as an ashtray. She has already attempted to pull him up on his smoking, saying, ‘Should you really be doing that in here? With all this stuff?’ But he ignored her and then laughed, turning to her and saying, ‘I shouldn’t be letting you roam around, touching everything with your fat, greasy fingers, but I figure I owe you that much, at least.’

‘That much?’



‘Besides,’ he said, ‘these people would’ve smoked like chimneys; and there’s the smoke from the fire.’

This time, she chooses to mention it to Lenny instead.

‘Ming?’ says Lenny.

‘Yes, the Ming bowl we found yesterday. He’s using it as an ashtray.’

‘We found it yesterday?’

‘Yes. In that room where you were cataloguing the drawings.’

‘Oh. To be honest,’ says Lenny, ‘I’m losing track of where I’ve been and what we’ve found. He thinks there’s a room full of Titians, but I’m not so sure. It’s not my area of expertise, but there’s something odd about them.’

‘What is your area of expertise?’

‘Architecture. But he won’t let me loose on the house. I’m on a tight rein. I need to get outside to look at the overall structure, but he’s got me running after him writing notes. He’s all over the place, too. There’s no sense or order. He should pick a wing and work his way through it, but he’s hopping about like an idiot.’

‘Why don’t you say something?’

‘Look, I’ll mention the ashtray thing. But I don’t want to poke the hornet’s nest, if you get what I mean. He’s always had a—a certain side to him.’

‘Tetchy, arrogant, know-it-all?’

‘Yeah. I half suspect he chose me to come here because art history isn’t my thing. If he’d brought a student with any kind of knowledge on the subject, I suspect—well, I don’t think Jack would stand for it. Blood would be spilled.’

‘What’s wrong with the Titians?’

Lenny shows her through the house to the room that is meant to house them, but when they get there, she sees works that look like they come from the nineteenth century.

‘Ah,’ says Lenny. ‘It’s in the other room like this. On the other side. This place is a rabbit warren.’

‘It is indeed,’ says Robbie walking into the room and looking about her.

‘It has its benefits, I guess. Serves as my excuse when I want to skive off. I just tell him I was lost.’



Robbie walks up to one of the paintings. It looks like a Van Gogh to her mind. In fact, yes, there is the man himself, sitting in a provincial room beside a wooden table with a plate of something before him. She looks at the dish and sees an ear swimming in what appears to be gravy, with a napkin and spoon on the side.

‘Someone’s idea of a joke,’ she says.

‘Yes. They’re all like that. Everyone is kind of mocking the artist or the subject matter in some way. I can’t figure it out. They look authentic, in the way they’re painted but I seriously doubt that they are. They’re pastiches, rather than forgeries. But Jack can’t see it. I’ve given up pointing things out to him. He just looks at me and says, “What are you going on about?” Like I’m talking gibberish. It took me ages to explain the issue with this one to him. He says that’s not an ear. It’s a lamb chop or something, I don’t know. Then he tells me that it’s a specialist cut of meat dating to the nineteenth century. He starts making shit up. There’s something very wrong about Professor Breitling.’

‘Could he be having a breakdown?’

‘He seems himself—so much so that I’m beginning to doubt myself. I’m glad you don’t think I’m crazy.’

‘You should get some fresh air. Go outside and take a look at the architecture. But don’t get lost.’

‘You could come with me.’

‘Sure,’ says Robbie, ‘but let’s get something to eat first.’

They find Jack in the kitchen. He has already opened a bottle of red and now begins pouring glasses for the other two.

‘Not for me,’ says Lenny.

‘Come on,’ says Jack. ‘All work and no play—’

‘I’ll join you,’ says Robbie grabbing the bread board.

‘There, you go,’ says Jack. ‘Robbie here knows how to be sociable. It’s the way it is here. You’re either with us, or ag’in us. What say you, Len?’

‘All right. I’ll have a glass.’

‘What’s for lunch, m’dear?’



Robbie picks up the knife from the breadboard. Lenny and Jack are sitting at the table behind her. She has one hand on the bread and the serrated knife in the other. A ringlet of hair that has strayed from the disorganised knot of her unruly bun, tickles her brow. The softness of it is distracting. She feels like she is someone else entirely—not herself any longer. But who was that? Who was Robbie Glenda when she was at home?

A man had said those words—only, in her skull. She knows that Jack and Lenny are busy discussing other things.

Jack has found another courtyard and Lenny, apparently interested, is asking if he should check it out. ‘You do that, Len,’ says Jack, and he blows a smoke ring that hovers in the air above the table. None of this can Robbie see—she imagines it only. She has eyes in the back of her head, and she is seeing through someone else’s brain. She is not herself as she stands there cutting the bread.

She had made the loaf in the morning and it is still warm to the touch. Glancing behind her, she sees the men seated at the table, just as she imagined them. She turns back. And then she looks, from the corner of her eye, at a shirtsleeve, rolled up, and a dark toned arm that is moving up and down the edge of the table, tapping a cigarette into a green bowl, snorting at some inconvenience—just the inarticulate quality of generalised annoyance.

She gets the picture. They shouldn’t be drinking with him. But, hey, what the fuck.

The serrated knife scores the crust. Lenny burps in the background and Jack sniffs in sympathy. She saws, finally, making her way through the thick crust. The knife slides across the board as she shoves the sliced bread onto a chipped plate, decorated in the geometry of the twenties. Where did this come from? she wonders. At the centre of that plate, is a tiny geometrical mandala that reproduces the pattern on its border.

Robbie spreads butter over each slice.

Lenny’s lips smack. A jokingly genuine expression of hunger. Jack gets up. His steps can be heard on their descent into the cellar.

She has lost track of herself again. This isn’t the first time. But it is happening more and more often, she thinks. Like the rolling waves. Back and forth. Easing, then



rushing forward impulsively, without thought.

She hears Lenny say 'no', pause, then add 'thanks.'

'Yes, God yes!' says Robbie, turning away from the bench and towards the fellas at the table. She chuckles. The wine floods the view the two men have of her face as she upends her glass.

After the third bottle, she staggers as she gets up to cut more bread, righting herself and smiling at each man by turn, with the red angel wings of the glass on either side of her mouth. That stray tress of hair obscures the error somewhat so that it looks like a lopsided grin. Lenny thinks she is beautiful, and Robbie is suddenly aware of the whiskers on his face and that Jack is a leery bastard with a broken tooth and a flatness about the eyes.

The next morning, Lenny's head is pounding. He needs a drink. Hair of the dog. Find the cellar, he thinks. The key is on a hook in the kitchen, it is. He'll go there first. Get something to eat, maybe. Then a drink and he'll feel better.

He finds the breadboard in the kitchen, but no bread, and there is something different about the place this time. The larder is empty. No hook. No key.

It is early morning. The light has not yet filtered to this side of the house. The lamps are out. He is wandering in bare feet and hankering for that drink. But he can't think straight. Or perhaps his mind has just wandered somewhere remote. Maybe he passed out. Time keeps ebbing and flowing like that. He feels like consciousness is constantly stalling in him, and every time he gets it up and running again, there is so much lost ground to make up.

He finds himself standing in front of the kitchen sink. Above the sink the large arched window is illuminated by an escalating daylight. This window is fifteen feet high, at the very least—well above its size as he recalls it.

The window looks out onto the courtyard, which he remembers as a desolate, neglected place. But this morning, where there was once a pile of dislodged pavers, a dead, bare tree, and dry dirt, a living specimen rises above the window's now elaborate height. Dappled light shines through its leaves into the garden beneath its wide canopy.

The tree itself, though heartbreakingly beautiful with its wide skirts and its soft



grey trunk, is enchained. Or rather, chains have been fixed to its trunk. Beneath these rusty remnants of a past that, according to Jack, is not to be discussed, there are manacles, scattered between the flowers and the weeds.

Looking at the tree and the delicate flowers poking their heads above the blades of grass, Lenny feels terribly sad.

He will tell Robbie. She will understand what it is about this place. Jack doesn't care. He is deaf to anything but the discovery of masterpieces or the value of this or that trinket.

Up in her room, Robbie is peering into a shady corner, watching shapes form in and out of the darkness. At one point, the hermit emerges then dissolves into the shadows. Another time his face is there in the pattern of the wallpaper, and she sees his cheeky grin in the cracks that are on the ceiling.

Jack seems different to Lenny when he finally finds him in a downstairs hallway. He has lost the aura of the impossibly good looking and appears faded and tired. Too much drinking, even for him.

To Robbie, Jack's eyes seem less bright, his hair matted and no longer shiny. She passes the two men this morning as she is coming down and they are going up to resume their cataloguing. Jack is saying that they should wait until they have a clear picture of what is of most value—this they will load in the truck at the end of their three-month stay.

Robbie looks at Jack as he explains this to Lenny. To her mind his complexion seems swarthy, then pale. When he's at the bottom of the staircase, he looks like a Moor in one of those old paintings. He once spent a good deal of time explaining the imagery to Robbie, who knows more than he does on the subject—enough to recognise that he lacks critical perspective and has become what he sees.

She sees the painting before her: the earring, the lascivious glint in the eyes. It was there when Jack spoke about the value of things. It is there now. Or it was.

A few steps down, and now he looks like a Spanish conquistador. And when he grabs hold of the railing to cough and pull himself up, he is as pasty-faced as an English



parson, with bulging eyes and a flatulent baggy-arsed behind, which she observes as the pair go by.

Lenny seems his usual self. But Jack. He was Darcy, then Mr. Collins. An arrogant buffoon, then tragically asthmatic (wheezing perhaps) and vulnerable, because he smokes too much.

The charm has worn off, she reasons, but though that might account for the slight changes, still she cannot comprehend why some days he seems shorter than others.

She mentions this to Lenny, and he reminds her that Jack sometimes wears two-inch heels. And, of course, he tramps around the place in them, reminding everyone of his superiority. But that doesn't explain why he veers so wildly from being young and brash to decrepit and old.

Having noticed this about Jack, Robbie begins to pay closer attention to herself. She is older than him, after all—perhaps by as much as ten years, she can't be sure.

Sometimes she is reminded of her status—she is just a fat, middle-aged woman, as Jack had spat one night in a drunken rage. At other times she sees resemblances between herself and others. Then differences. She thinks that she has found her likeness in several of the paintings—and Jack's too. Occasionally Lenny peers out at her from the roots of a tree, or amongst the Rousseau-esque reeds and grasses. This troubles her greatly, but she has no control of her thoughts or her own imagination and it is only when something truly unsettling comes to mind that she begins to take it apart and wonder about what has just happened.

She remembers, some days, the idle years of her youth. She has forgotten to bring hair dye and the regrowth at the crown of her head is sad and pathetic at times, at others it seems majestic, like the crown of a wiser self is breaking through. But even then, the dyed portion of her mane can sometimes seem so wretched and tangled; at other times, it is sleek and straight, the curl having fallen out entirely.

After a bath, if she washes her hair, it will bounce into those curls, provided she stays inside and allows it to dry throughout the day. But if she goes out in the evening, before sundown, and stands on the veranda or, wanders forth to check the truck out of some unnamed anxiety, early in the morning, when pools of icy water are beginning



to crack and sing, then her hair tends to lengthen and lose its wave, and she has to tie it up because it is forever getting caught under her armpits and in her mouth.

What is it about memory? she wonders. Having searched high and low, still she cannot find the place as it was to her in its original form—the place as she encountered it on that first day, or even as it appeared to her the following morning, when she fled the tortured garden for the parterre and the truck.

This time, the kitchen cellar has no corridor leading down to a subterranean place. She has mentioned this to Lenny and even to Jack. Yet neither seemed perturbed or concerned. And when she expresses her confusion about where the water is coming from, or jokingly takes credit for setting the plumbing to rights on that first trip inland, they look at her vaguely and say, what first trip?

But then Lenny will sometimes contradict this by telling Robbie about Jack's escapades in town. The last night that he and Jack spent in town had been the worst of it, and he had to get Herman and one of his mates to rescue the professor.

'Jack was at the pub, as usual,' says Lenny, explaining the escapade to her. 'He spent the whole time there, as a matter of fact. They were sick of the sight of his sorry arse by the end of it all.'

'I can imagine,' says Robbie. 'What happened that was different? They seemed like his sort of people, as far as I could tell.'

'I don't think anyone is Jack's sort of person, not once he goes on a real bender. I'd never seen anything like this before. I mean, he used to get pissed at Uni, but this was something else. Anyway, this time, I didn't go to the pub. He'd stopped paying for information and I was sick of the place. So, he telephones me at about seven o'clock. I could tell he was pissed and there was a lot of noise in the background. People sounded pretty worked up about something. The thing is, he told them about this place.'

'He told them?'

'Yeah, well, they kinda knew already, only they didn't place much store in it, if you get what I'm saying.'

'Hmm' says Robbie in a quiet voice, 'I guess I was the same, once.'

'Right. But with him being a professor, they started to believe in it. Especially



the stuff about there being treasure here. Mention money and gold and stuff to that lot and they start turning green and frothing at the mouth. It's disgusting.'

'So, what happened?'

'Well, he calls me up. Says they're gonna keel-haul him for real.'

'Huh, like where? There's no water for miles around.'

'I know, but he was pretty desperate, and he is my supervisor.'

'Yeah. How's that working out?'

'Not so good. Nice rhetorical question.'

'Thanks. I make it a specialty.'

'Yeah, I bet you do.'

'Cheeky.'

'Anyway, he's desperate and it sounds like the whole pub is out to get him—between you and me I think it's because he ran out of dosh and stopped the tab.'

'Right. That'll do it.'

'So, I went round to Herman's. He was entertaining.'

'Entertaining?'

'Yeah, he had a bunch of mates round and he was cooking up a storm. There were kids and—well, it looked quite nice actually. I felt bad about disturbing the party.'

Robbie has kicked off her shoes and settled on the steps where she now sits listening to Lenny. She is suddenly back at the hermit's dusty domain, remembering his lackadaisical hospitality and that friendly grin. The house, which appears to be a dump from the outside, is neat and welcoming inside. There is a lovely garden at the rear, too, behind all the junk that obscures the house from the road.

She imagines Lenny, when he sees the crowd of people through the open door, saying to Herman, 'I thought you were a hermit.'

'Nah, yeah, nah,' said Herman. 'That's just to keep the likes of Jack Breitling off my back.'

'I get it,' said Lenny. 'You're gonna hate me for asking but—'

'Jack's got himself in a bit of a mess, has he?'

'You guessed it.'



‘Where is he? The pub?’

‘You guessed it, again.’

‘Hey fellas,’ said Herman turning around and handing the barbecue tongues to another bloke, ‘I gotta head out for a bit and rescue that fella I told you about.’

‘What the hell are you worrying about him for?’ came Maudie’s voice. But as she drew nearer and saw Lenny, she said, ‘Oh right. You’re too good to that old sot, dear.’

‘He’s in a spot of bother, Maudie. I can’t let him down.’

‘Just don’t get caught up in the mess. That lot are pretty feral when they’ve got a few in ‘em.’

‘Too right,’ came a voice from around the corner. ‘I’ll give you a hand, Herman. You don’t want to go into the lion’s den alone.’

‘Right then,’ said Herman. ‘We’ll be back anon, with one drunk professor in tow.’

‘I’ll make up a bed in the spare room,’ said Maudie sighing.

They got to the pub. Jack was unconscious in the middle of the barroom floor with the whole crowd standing around him, beers in hand, imaginary cutlasses at the ready. But, miraculously, the crowd parted when they saw Herman and his mate Fernando enter the room, followed by Lenny. The three men bent down and scooped up the professor. But no sooner had they raised him up than a brawl broke out in a corner of the room. Lenny dropped Jack’s feet in horror. Herman told him to get going and he and his mate Fernando dragged Jack Breitling out of the pub and onto the street.

They set him down in the spare room at Herman’s and he slept what must have been the best night’s sleep he’d had since taking to his car—not that he was in any ways conscious of this.

‘You’re welcome to join us,’ Herman said. ‘There’s plenty of food.’

‘Thank you,’ the lad replied, and he went outside and took a seat in the circle of people.

‘What happened?’ asked Maudie of their rescue mission.

‘Ah,’ said Herman. ‘Some joker claimed another fella stole his parrot. We got



caught up in the midst of it. The professor here was comatose but somehow in the middle of it all.'

They are sitting in the sun on the steps outside and, as she listens to his story, Robbie thinks that she can make out the faint outline of the tortured garden to her left, where she had found herself after leaving the pump room. She had told Lenny about the garden, the sense of it being arranged around a tiny arena, and of the fountain with its dancing waters.

'The tortured garden?' says Lenny. 'How delightful.' But though he screws up his eyes to see into the distance, he cannot make it out. 'Is it far away?'

'No. It was right here. It should be closer. It's funny. I can't seem to see it now.'

'A mirage, perhaps,' says Lenny. All he can see is a few tree stumps and an area of ground that seems to fall away. 'Is that the amphitheatre you mean,' he asks, pointing to the ridge where the ground slopes downwards to the left.

'No. It wasn't like that at all. It was like a little arena. With these twisted trees, bare and dead by the look of things, lined up around the circular terrace like an audience.'

'And what was the performance these trees had come to see?' He is smiling at her. It's a soft smile. He's a sweet fellow, she thinks, and she squeezes his knee and then slides down to the step below. 'You're making fun.'

'Maybe,' he laughs. 'But I am interested. You have a vivid imagination and I like the way you describe things. This place seems so very different through your eyes.'

'I don't know. You might be right. Perhaps the trees were looking at something—who knows what a tree sees or feels. I assumed that they were dead, but I guess I thought that because the whole place is so dry, and the trees had no leaves on them.'

'They might be deciduous.'

'Yes. But they were twisted, and in unnatural ways. Distraught, I felt. I felt their distress. It was very affecting. I felt like I was looking at their suffering—that they had died like this.'

'And the fountain?'



'I can't see it now, but I can hear it. Can't you?' Now there is only the ghostly outline of what may or may not be trees in the distance.

'A mirage, I'd say,' says Lenny. 'You were seeing things. But I can hear water, yes. I've been hearing it these last few days. I just assumed it was the reservoir.'

'What reservoir?'

'Well there must be water somewhere. I just guessed that it was under the house and that's what I was hearing. But I can't hear it here, outside.'

'Oh,' says Robbie.

Lenny places his hands upon his knees, as though rising will require a great effort, but he remains where he is, sitting on the steps beside Robbie. Now on the step below him, she is leaning with her elbows at the level where Lenny's feet are. 'I'd better go,' he says at last. 'Before Lord Jack comes looking for me. Then I'll be in the shit.' But still he does not budge.

'You liked him once, I think,' says Robbie turning around to look at him. She is grinning, but with a look about her eyes that suggests she understands.

'You did too,' he answers.

Robbie laughs. 'I had no choice. It seemed the way things were supposed to go. I don't think I thought about it all that much.'

'Oh, come on. Yes, you did. He's a dish. Face it. Own up.'

'All right, all right. I'll admit it. I'm superficial. I confess.'

'Oh, me too. The only thing that's saved me is that bony arse. I like a little more of a handful.'

Robbie chuckles, 'That plus, I'm sorry, but you're not his type.'

'Hmm. I don't think Jack has a type.'

'What are you saying?' says Robbie slapping his leg. 'That he's not fussy?'

'I just meant that he's, you know?'

'No, I don't know.'

Lenny squeals: 'God, I'm such a tart.'

'You mean he's out for what he can get?'

'I guess so.'

They are both quiet for a time, then Lenny, staring blankly at the ground says,



‘He’ll be pissed whether I go now or later.’

‘It’s funny,’ says Robbie. ‘I feel like there’s more to me now.’ Lenny raises an eyebrow but remains mute.

‘I mean. I know that what I said just now was, you know, superficial.’

‘Too right,’ says Lenny. ‘You’ve no substance whatsoever.’

‘But—’ and she laughs, because she gets what he’s just said, but belatedly, ‘I know, but, you see, that’s what I mean. I feel as though I’m becoming more rounded. It’s as though I was superficial and thin-skinned and careless before—when I was younger—’

‘And not so young, perhaps?’

‘And not so young, granted,’ she says, thinking of her recent fascination for Jack. ‘But it’s like I’m thinking more seriously now—more seriously than I ever have in my life. I mean, I think—I know, that I was serious once, when I wrote my novella, years back. I must have been. I can remember being moody and you know. But I was frivolous too. I know I was. And even if I was more serious than silly, I can’t recall doing or saying anything important. I think I just glided by, laughing at the world, doubting myself, pointing the finger at others.’

‘I know what you mean. It’s this place. You wise up in it. There’s something about it.’

‘Yes. It’s this place. Everything feels so—I don’t know, it’s a precarious life we have here. I mean, we’re out here, all alone.’

‘All alone with a fucking maniac.’

‘He’s not that bad.’

‘Hmm. He can be. How the hell does he hold down a job? I’d like to know.’

‘They’re not all that fussy. The University, it’s—’

‘Yeah, I figured that out,’ says Lenny as he leans down and begins wiping his thumb over the toe of his right shoe. He licks his fingers and begins rubbing at a shadow of grime.

‘Speaking of maniacs—’ says Robbie.

‘God, he’s not here, is he?’ says Lenny sitting up.

‘No. I was thinking about how—well, I was walking down Idler’s Lane—you



know that area in the old town, near the University?’

‘Yes,’ says Lenny. ‘It’s very quaint. Cobbled streets. Dark alleyways...’

‘Well, there’s this woman that works in the science department and she drives through the old town to get to and from Uni.’

‘Can you drive down there? Those streets are pretty narrow.’

‘You can at certain times. It’s closed to traffic on the weekends and for much of the day, but it’s open early in the mornings for deliveries and some people sneak through in the afternoon between three and four when the loading times kick in again for the taverns and restaurants. That’s what this woman does. Anyway, she was driving down Idler’s Lane when I was walking to Uni one afternoon. She’s come across me at this spot before and she can, you know, be quite aggressive. It’s like she speeds up when she sees me.’

‘Right. You’re not her favourite person, then?’

‘I don’t think it’s personal. I’ve only seen her in passing on campus. Someone had warned me to steer clear of her—said she’s nuts or something. I felt a bit sorry for her, to tell you the truth. But, anyway, she was in a hurry one day and wanted me out of the way— “Get out the way, ya stupid cow,” she says. I was shocked, to say the least.’

‘The world is full of arseholes.’

‘Yes. And that’s the point. Before she did this—because it got me angry, it did. I said to her, “What? Are you gonna run me over now?” Because, well, this wasn’t exactly the first time. She’d been working her way up to this—driving at me and looking wild-eyed because I’d dared to walk down a bloody lane. This time, there was no doubt. She was trying to bully me out of the way, and I wasn’t having it. Of course, I saw sense as soon as the words were out of my mouth. I stepped aside and let her go by—that’s when she shouted her abuse. Called me all sorts of names. I was more shocked than anything. It was only after that I started to feel angry.’

‘Well, now you know you’re a freeze kinda gal.’

‘A what?’

‘Freeze, Flight, or Fight.’

‘Oh. I don’t think we’re one or the other. I suspect all three possibilities are



there. It depends on the situation.'

'You could be right.'

'Well, to get back to this stupid bitch—and, as you can tell, I'm angry still.'

'I'm not surprised. You were in fear for your life.'

'Yes. I was. I realised afterwards that she seemed quite capable of losing control of herself one day and really going for it—she could run someone over. And I decided, it wouldn't be me.'

'Smart.'

'But I'm still angry about it. And now, because of that, she's not a person anymore. I feel this rage that obliterates her as a person. It's like all my morals go out the window and, in my anger, I want to crush her.'

'Whoa. Who's the crazy bitch here?'

'Stop it,' says Robbie laughing. 'I'm trying to make a point.'

'And that is?'

'That, before this, this altercation, I was prepared to see her as a person. I remember wondering what it was that made her present as a mad woman to the people who warned me about her. It seemed superficial, to just label a person and use that label to deal with them. You're never going to give her room to be anything but a nut job if she's a bit touchy and everyone around her is treating her in a particular way. I mean, people pick up on the vibe, don't they?'

'They certainly do.'

'But now—well, now I don't want to know what made her that way. I don't care. To me she's just a nut job. And that's the limit of my understanding and my compassion. I haven't got space in my heart to think any more on it. I mean, I can't fill in the picture anymore and see her as a person with feelings and experiences beyond this mad, angry moment. Seeing her as a mad woman who needs to be steered clear of makes sense to me, and I'm happy to leave it at that.'

'Well, I can't see a problem with that.'

'Can't you? It's just that—if that's all I do, what does that make me? If I am prepared to treat this woman this way, how can I be sure that I'm not doing it at other times? Maybe—I don't know. I didn't care about these things so much once. But now



I'm ashamed. The idea of thinking in such superficial terms—'

'Ah,' says Lenny. 'I get you now. Yeah. It's hard, you know. We all have to navigate these things. It's a bit like going to the supermarket and feeling overwhelmed by too much choice. You can't hold onto the detail that is every human being. You have to make choices...'

'About who you care about? Who you respect—who to treat well, or not?'

'No. I just mean that sometimes when we're angry or frightened, we have to sum people up like that. Right now, Jack's an asshole because it does me no good to waste my compassion and understanding on him. I need to save it all for myself—and some for you too, sweetness.'

'Thank you,' says Robbie, feeling well-rounded again, less superficial and more herself. 'I've got your back too, you know.'





Chapter Seven

The house, though vast, is now very different from what she remembers of it from her first visit. The problem of familiarity, she thinks. Sometimes she forgets her earlier experiences, and that it was she who found the pump room. She can hear the water at night—oceans of it—and the air groaning in the pipes, and now and then a faint cry, like someone calling for help. And in those muted cries she hears something unintelligible—gets a sense of there being something that cannot be deciphered—something that cannot be matched to a word or a meaning, something that is neither a cry of pain nor the elongated groans of pleasure. At such times she thinks that she hears the lives that have been lived in this place, and those that have ended. Some in their beds, but others in out of the way places. Perhaps there is innocence here. Perhaps there is suffering. It frightens her to think about it because then she would have to hear it the world over. The innocence, the cruelty, the kindness, the confusion.

Lying in bed, she thinks Jack is a paper doll and vows to look behind him for the tell-tale tabs, folded behind his back. He is hiding something. And he is not. He is happy enough being who he is because he cannot hear this, she thinks.

Everything is tangled up with something and she can't figure it out. This is history, she thinks. This is what it is.

Robbie turns over in a sweat. Her head is throbbing. She is thinking that she is somewhere else, and then she remembers. She was on the stairs. And then she was in an old schoolroom, peering out of a window and looking down into the courtyard.

She had reached the upper rooms, had found a high window and a stool and, balancing herself on her toes, had peered into the courtyard. There was the tree, just as



Lenny had described it. She could see from the window, its wide shimmering canopy. A green bird flitted amongst its leaves.

The stool had slipped from under her, tossed aside by the uneven distribution of her weight as she planted one foot firmly down after the other.

Her feet, she knows to be large and milky white, but the heels have the crustiness and yellowing of age, and now, as she dreams, her hair is swamped by silver strands, entwined amongst the red-dyed curls. It gives her crowning glory an icy shimmer, quite different from the gentler tones of her younger days.

Turning away from the high window, Robbie sees herself as a young woman—almost a girl, with rosy cheeks and strawberry blonde hair.

She starts back, surprised. The vision fades, only to re-emerge on the other side of the room, near the door. It speaks softly and enchantingly: ‘Come,’ it says, ‘I’ll show you the way. You saw it, I know you did. Isn’t it the most beautiful and loveliest of things?’

Robbie moves then hesitates.

‘Come with me,’ the girl says. ‘You will hear its song. You must hear its song!’

Robbie follows her younger self. The girl darts through the doorway and down stairs that are only half familiar. They seem to take a corner and reach a landing she does not recognise, but each time that Robbie hesitates, the girl looks back at her sweetly and says: ‘Hurry! You must see it. You must hear its song. It is the most beautiful song imaginable.’

They go on and Robbie finds herself before a large pair of wooden doors that are latched with a long broad beam resting in the stays on either door.

‘Please,’ says the girl. ‘You must open it.’ And she looks at Robbie in a helpless beseeching way. Robbie smiles and sets to lifting the heavy beam. It takes all her strength, and she can feel her plump arms wobbling against her bosom as she angles the beam up and then down. With a push, they are in the courtyard—the bright light of the moon peering through the branches of the tree. A sweet and melancholy air plays briefly as the doors opening and then closing behind her cause its leaves to stir. Its pitch seems almost human. Robbie finds herself close to tears.

‘Is this the singing tree?’ she asks.



The girl nods. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

It is a tree, and yet it is not. It stands, solid and tall, the spread of its branches filling the courtyard, magnificent and gleaming in the moonlight. But, as large as it is—for it reaches almost to the height of the atrium—it is not real, not in the sense that a tree is ordinarily considered to be real. This tree is made of precious metals and other valuable things.

It stands at the centre of the courtyard, mounted upon a mound of earth draped in green velvet. Robbie sees what she assumes to be the stylized depiction of its roots fanning out across the velvet. The tree is on its island of green velvet in the middle of a large pool of water, raised above the flat paving stones that ring it, and forming the reservoir of a great fountain. Cherubim and strange sea creatures decorate the outer perimeter of the reservoir. Robbie can hear the piddling of the water as it pours forth from gaping mouths in a thin stream of liquid.

'Listen,' says the girl, and she claps her hands. The tree begins to turn on its little island and the leaves, which are made of gold, copper, tin, brass, platinum and even silver, shimmer and shake themselves into song. Their rustling produces the sweetest tinkling that rises and then ebbs with the uneven turning of that tiny island.

The girl smiles at Robbie, inviting some expression of admiration from her older doppelganger, but Robbie is no longer entranced. She is standing before the shimmering spectacle with her mouth agape like the cherubim before her because, when the girl clapped her hands, Robbie saw what she had imagined in the darkness to be the roots of the tree, begin to writhe, and she soon saw, not gnarled wood, but the figures of men and women. Wrested from sleep, these women and men had stepped into the icy water of the fountain. There, they had reached down and lifted up the yokes that bore that tiny island on its journey, turning the tree with their steps and creating the most beautiful sound.

Robbie had begun by listening to the sweet melody, but now she hears something else—it is the sound of footsteps stirring the water as the men and women walk round and round.

The girl claps her hands once more—two sharp slaps to indicate a change in tempo—and the people begin to move faster. They are shivering from the cold, but



round and round they go, each bowed by the weight of the yoke upon their shoulders so that Robbie cannot meet their eyes. 'Stop,' she cries.

The girl claps her hands once more and the tree tinkles to a standstill. The men and women drop their yokes and climb up on the island where they lie down upon the velvet, their teeth chattering.

The girl cries 'Silence!' and immediately all is quiet.

Standing in Herman's yard, she had recited a silly rhyme without thinking. Why had she done that? It was deplorable. Unforgivable, she tells herself, lying there in bed, dreaming still.

Something interrupts her thoughts, and she forgets them immediately. There is just the discomfort in her chest and in her gut—the pain of remembering without the memory itself.

It is the sound of a sash window opening, and the shape of the darkness, that arrests her thoughts—and then, gradually there emerges in the faint moonlight, the image of herself as a young woman, leaning on the sill.

Robbie feels the night air caress the fine hairs on her cheek and neck like a lover's breath and, opening her eyes, sees the curtain billowing.

No one stands in the window.

The place is empty.

She can no longer see herself as she had once been.

She had been anxious about something, she remembers that. And worried about herself and what she thought and what she had said and done in her life. Something of the person she has become takes over now that she is awake, and she feels a tenderness for herself that has been a long time coming—some compassion at last for the young woman she had been. So foolish at times and desperate for something—she can't remember what that was, now that she is lying here all tangled up in the sheets and weighed down by the flesh of her own body. Once it was easy, to roll over. Once she was all spirit. Now she is too much body.

She feels lost. A little sad, perhaps. She isn't sure what else. She might be able



to describe the mood of it were she to grab her notebook, which is beside the bed, but she does not. Instead, she gets up on one elbow and checks her phone on the table beside her. A foolish habit she has yet to conquer. The battery ran down long ago, wasting itself on the search for a signal in the early days of their arrival.

They have been here two months already. Possibly more. Or maybe only a month and a half, she can't quite remember. Every day that she rises from her bed, she tries to gather her thoughts and recall the day. If she forgets to do this first thing, then, when she is walking down to the kitchen, or otherwise outside, wandering about, she will say to herself, it's Saturday—or Thursday or Friday, whatever it happens to be. But she has lost track and is confused. She ought to have kept a journal. What kind of a writer is she?

She is postponing the task—telling herself that it would be foolish to put pen to paper prematurely, like taking photographs instead of admiring the view, or celebrating whatever it was you were trying to capture and freeze into a single image, and then missing the moment entirely. She doesn't want to be out of frame.

Once again, she picks up her phone—foolishly, optimistically—then gets up and walks over to the window. There is the dead tree in the middle of the courtyard. Encircling it is the raised fountain. It takes up a third of the courtyard's area.

Her phone is useless out here, but she'd paid a pretty penny for it. She doesn't want to forget it. So, she goes out downstairs and places it in the truck. She locks the doors and stows the keys in her pocket of the skirt. She doesn't trust Jack.

She and Lenny have agreed to go out and explore the architecture of the house. They plan to travel as far as the rockface and then make their way down to the dry shoreline of the island. Robbie has it in mind to follow the perimeter of the island in search of the portcullis. They might pick up the road and locate that section of the house she has unaccountably lost.

Lenny is amused by the idea but also pleased to be getting out—to have the chance to step back from the house and inspect its roofline and its features. And so, they pack a bag with provisions, leave a note for Jack in the kitchen, and set off.

Greatness, Robbie muses as they walk about the place, is a masculine quality,



unless you are overweight, and then it is feminine, as well she knows. This house is worse than overweight, she tells Lenny. It is obese. It is so eclectic in its style that it reminds Robbie of a woman who, having travelled through the years as a follower of fashion, and dressed and adorned herself with everything in vogue, decides to mix and match her wardrobe.

Lenny is kinder in his exploration of the analogy. For sure, the house has its nether regions, its heart, its liver and other innards, as he understands it—they have been living in it for nearly twelve weeks now and he can attest to its intestinal fortitude, he says.

Robbie laughs. And he takes the opportunity to tell her that she ought to be kinder to herself and that just because Jack is a pig of a man, it doesn't mean she has to follow his lead and be a pig to herself.

They stop for lunch, and Robbie finds herself admiring the architecture of the place, having moved through phases that are Victorian, Georgian, Elizabethan and now onto what must be early medieval.

Now that they are outside, and have seen its elegant crown and capacious brow, dressed rather charmingly in Italianate wrought iron lacework that runs across the eaves of the verandas and around the central wing, they can acknowledge that it is both monstrous and beautiful.

They set off again after lunch, making their way to the rockface. Robbie had been so afraid of becoming lost out here, so discouraged by the dusty rocky ground, where nothing lives and where there are only dead trees and strange disquieting sculptures of hybrid beasts, she has stayed holed up in the place, and lost sight of the world around her. Sure, it is a dry and barren world, but it had once been glorious. But then Lenny tells her what he has found. These people enslaved the local population, as it turns out. They weren't servants, he says. Not really. They were and they weren't. He has discovered this much in the books that he has catalogued for Jack.

Robbie remembers her dream and feels ashamed. She had been wondering about Herman—why he helped her. And why Maudie was so kind. She has it in mind that they are decent people at heart, but still she thinks that some misunderstanding has



occurred between them—that Herman thinks her other than she is.

She was such a haughty teenager. She remembers having her photograph taken and insisting that it be done in black and white because it was more artistic. In her photograph she was neither one thing nor the other—just a beautiful young woman with her whole life ahead of her.

Herman saw that. And if he had read her novella, he may have thought her to be kinder and more decent than she really is. Because his people had been here. They had not been chased into oblivion at the heart of the continent, but are here still—not in this place, but everywhere, living amongst her sort and their rough and ready ways.

She wishes things had been different. She wishes that she had really seen these things back then, and that her book had been about this, and not some futile self-indulgent adolescent rant, which is what she now understands it to be. And if her countryfolk have identified with the story and its heroine's plight it is because they as a people are, still, very much self-indulgent. They have yet to grow up.

She tells Lenny these things. She describes her dream, and he says that he has been having similar experiences and it is probably because the evidence is all around them, hiding in plain sight—for her, in her culture, in the folktales and the dances on Lubber Day; for him, 'because it's the same everywhere, Robbie. We are all to blame.'

They walk along the island, keeping the rockface in sight and to their right, and speaking of these things and stopping now and then to look at the earth, which shows signs of life out here—small green shoots are coming up out of the ground and Robbie thinks she sees an insect or small crustacean, but it darts away and back into the earth before she can show Lenny.

They reach the edge of the island and begin walking along the dry shoreline as planned before coming upon a boathouse. They go inside, losing themselves in there for hours—it is a fascinating place. For a boathouse, it is large. Big enough to launch a galleon—a flat-bottomed galleon, says Robbie. There are gondolas and punts, too. And fishing nets and lobster traps and poles and even a sea captain's quarters, tacked onto the side of the building—a quaint stone cottage furnished for a family. In one room they find children's toys and other playthings. There are storybooks and nursery rhymes that confirm their belief about this place.



It is the concentrated effort of everything that has been forgotten.

Robbie, looking through a book of children's nursery rhymes, shudders at the memory of having innocently chanted these same verses—lines in which the truth was always on display but seemed hidden at the same time. She is keen to leave the place. But Lenny finds a box of ingenious creations, chief among these, a green parrot—it is like those baby dolls that cry 'Mama' when you turn them over, only the bird of course says something else.

They go outside at last, intending to go back, but the afternoon has worn on and the daylight is fading. An icy wind comes at their backs and Lenny suggests they turn back and stay overnight in the captain's quarters. It will be better to face Jack when he is sober, he says. And Robbie agrees.

The next morning, they set off. Lenny stows the mechanical bird in his pack, thinking that Jack might find it interesting. 'It will appease the beast,' he says, laughing.

As they walk, they notice small rivulets of water running across the dry earth. When they draw near to the house, they see a ribbon of smoke wending its way to the sky, and hurry to it.

They reach the place, and find Jack tossing old photographs and glass plates onto a large bonfire.

'Should you be doing that?' says Lenny.

'I'll do as I please, thank you very much. What's it to you, anyway? Hmm. You two take off. Leave me a note. I have to get my own meal.'

'Yeah, right, you had to open your own can,' says Robbie.

Lenny pulls the automaton from his pack. 'Hey, look what I found,' he says to Jack, holding it out.

'A birdie,' says Jack in a silly high-pitched voice.

'It's a parrot,' says Lenny. 'And it talks.'

'A talking parrot,' says Jack. But he isn't interested. He's mocking, Robbie can see. 'What does it say?' he asks in a flat tone.

Lenny upends the bird and sets it down on the ground. 'Pieces of Eight,' it says. 'Pieces of Eight. Pieces of Eight.'

Jack, having finished with the glass plates, is now throwing books onto the fire.



Robbie picks up the remnants of a daguerreotype print from the edge of the pyre. Jack snatches it from her, but she has seen enough to confirm her suspicions about the place. Indeed, she's seen the image before. It comes to mind then that she has seen more besides. She had rifled through the special collections of more than one university library and found similar images of men in chains, of women nursing babes, and of men and women with dour expressions, dressed in workday clothes and tilling the land.

Remembering, and feeling both numb and surprised by it all—that she could so wilfully forget these things, and not even question them—Robbie is at first oblivious to the water that is pooling on the ground, running either side of the bonfire.

She looks up towards the house. They are some way from the entrance to that part they have called home these past weeks, but here, too, there is an entrance almost identical and just as grand—if not grander. The water appears to be coming from here, seeping out from under the large wooden doors and running down the steps.

'Look,' says Robbie to Lenny, and together they rush up the steps, pushing their way in as they head towards the kitchen, past the long staircase where two nubile dragons sport themselves upon the handrail.

The kitchen here is different, and yet the same. Lenny looks at the large arched window and says, 'I've been here before.'

Robbie, in the meantime, has waded into the pantry. The steps down to the cellar, and no doubt the tunnels that lead to the pump room, are completely submerged. 'We've got to go,' she says, recalling those caverns, so deep underground. 'It's the pump. It must have blown. The water is coming from there. If it floods the plains, the truck will be useless in the mud.'

'We have to tell Jack,' says Lenny.

They rush outside. The bonfire is still blazing but Jack has gone. They see his muddy tracks where he has made his way to the front of the house. The truck is still parked there, but Robbie checks her pocket just in case. She hands Lenny the keys. 'Get going,' she says. 'I'll get Jack.'

'Not without you. I'll wait here.'

'No. The island will be navigable for a while yet, but the plateau will turn into a boggy mess as soon as the water hits it. The truck won't make it. Our best bet is for



you to take the truck and get it down and off the plateau now if we're to make it across the lower desert.'

'But the road down, won't the water—it'll be a quagmire too.'

'No, you should be right, the plateau is like a basin. Once you're up over the rim, the road should be dry.'

'But how will you get down?'

'I'll get Jack and we'll head to the boathouse. One of those gondolas looked to be in good enough shape. It should float at least.'

'Okay,' says Lenny at last. 'I'll wait for you down below.'

'Don't wait too long. If we're not back by midday, you head for help.'

'But I don't know the way.'

'Look,' says Robbie, taking the keys from Lenny and going to the truck. She opens the driver's door and jumps up into the cab. 'Here's my phone, in the glove box, see. And a charger. It fits the cigarette lighter. Once you're off the plateau and on the plains, you should be able to get a signal. You can't telephone, but the GPS might work. See, here,' she says pulling out the parchment with the ideographic map. I've marked out the stages. It's easier going back than coming. Those are the coordinates. Herman does it old school, but I jotted these down on the first run. How do you think I got back so quickly?'

'Okay,' says Lenny, helping her down and then jumping up himself. 'But don't risk your life for him,' he says as he drives off.

Robbie looks up at the house. She can smell smoke—perhaps from the bonfire, but then she notices a haze of dirty air drifting high into the sky on the other side. She steps back and sees water pouring forth from the downstairs windows of the east and west wings, but here, where there is no access to those underground caverns beneath the house, it merely trickles down the steps. Still, she reasons, it won't be long before the water reaches the plains, and the plateau is turned to mud. She and Jack will be stranded in that case. She doesn't fancy wading through that.

She runs inside and up the stairs calling Jack's name and stopping now and then to listen. She thinks she can hear him laughing in a room somewhere deep within the



west wing of the house, and sure enough Robbie finds him there in an old library very like the one they had catalogued early in their stay.

A pile of books and other paraphernalia are in the centre of the room. Jack has bottles of paraffin oil stacked in one corner and is tossing the greasy liquid over everything.

‘Jack,’ says Robbie. ‘We’ve got to go. The whole place is flooding.’ He looks up at her with wild eyes. ‘What are you doing here? We need to go,’ she says, walking into the room. She feels a splash of something wet and oily on her skin.

‘What the fuck!’ says Robbie, stepping back. Jack moves towards her. She stumbles backwards. ‘Jack,’ she says, ‘for Christ’s sake!’

He pulls a lighter from his pocket.

On the mantelpiece, to her right, is a gilt sculpture of a sea ram with ammonites for horns. Grabbing it by the neck, Robbie strikes out with the thing, hitting Jack square in the nose. He staggers back and she runs from the room and along the lengthy corridor, hurtling downstairs. Water is pouring forth from the courtyard now. A cherub’s head sails past her as she wades through the wide entryway and out onto the steps.

Once outside she races around the house as fast as she can. She is coughing and spluttering as she goes. She has to get to the rockface and then follow it down to the shore. From there, she might find the boathouse. It is her only chance.

Water is running all over the land now. It is shallow, still. But the dry earth is slow to soak it up and it quickly turns slippery underfoot. In the last mad dash, Robbie sees the roofline of the boat shed where it sits close to the shoreline and slips and slides her way down to it.

Opening the wide doors, she finds the gondola and drags it down the ramp and onto the now mushy ground of the plateau. She places the oar in the forcola and then stops. The water beneath her is not deep enough. She sits down in the listing gondola unable to move forward or back. She will have to wait for the water to rise, then she might stand a chance.

Robbie looks back at the house. It is now ablaze—with water pouring out from below and fire raging from above. Jack comes into view running along the rooftops;



then she sees him clinging to a chimney with one arm, grasping what appears to be a flagon in the other hand. A funnel of water shoots into the air behind him—somewhere at the centre of the house. She hears a deep rumbling and feels the earth shudder and then an enormous wave of what looks like water and dirt comes rushing towards her.

Swept along on a sheet of muddy water, off the island and onto the plains, the gondola becomes caught up a thicket of dead trees. Wedged there, rocking back and forth on the dissipating swells, helpless—having lost the oar, Robbie sits there in that thicket of sun-bleached branches, watching as the house disintegrates into the mud.

At one point, she hears a loud cackle of laughter and, looking back, sees the house sink into itself and then into the earth. In the midst of the uproar, as objects crash against each other, she hears Jack's plaintive cries and watches in horror as he scoots across the sinking roof after the flagon.

He reaches it, drawing it to his lips, even as he sinks into the mud.

Stuck there, sitting amongst the dead trees, Robbie recalls the day she met Herman, standing in his yard, leaning on the old truck, with her, mindlessly reciting that rhyme:

*Eeney, meeney, miney, mo,
Catch a local by the toe—*

In the United States, where she lived for a year, Robbie heard a different version of the rhyme—one that had shocked her. But there was nothing off about the Utopian version as she understood it. Her people, she had always known, were rough heads and fools—she'd been told that often enough during her more recent years in Australia where they tell it like it is. Rough heads and fools, but that was all, or so she thought in days gone by. 'A bunch of drunkards and no hopers is what I've heard,' one fellow had told her. 'That,' Robbie had said at the time, 'is the pot calling the kettle black.' His response had been to hit her. The blow had come as a complete shock. She hadn't seen it coming, had never been hit in the face, and now she had. It was a reckoning of sorts. It sent her scurrying home at last.

She has always known her people weren't perfect. They had founded this country on thievery and rum. But she had always thought them innocents, in their ways—a bunch of harmless schoolboys (she never included herself in the picture). They



were just larrikins and louts, out for a bit of merriment and glee—a shipless bunch of fools who could be, by turns, annoying and fun. But when, in the yard at Herman’s, she recounted that childhood rhyme without a thought, she had seen something she wasn’t expecting in the look that was on his face. It had caused her to stop that childish cant. She had felt ashamed, by degrees. Comprehension had not rushed upon her, but came slowly like a wave of blood, building from a long way out, until it filled her veins and welled up—as embarrassment, for the most part, then shame.

That was why Herman had helped her. Out of kindness—like his mother, who had made off with the key to the cellar and its barrels of rum, all those years before. But you can’t save an alcoholic from himself just by locking the cupboard. You have to make him see.

She had needed to come here. She had needed to see all this; she knew that now. Herman knew it. She had to see it with her own eyes and feel it too. Because to feel is to understand.

A calmness descends upon the plateau. The afternoon is long and still. At one point, Robbie tries paddling by hand, but her efforts are ineffectual, and she only manages to push herself around the copse of dead trees. Much later, when the sun is hanging low in the sky, with the house completely buried under water and earth so that there is nothing left of it—not a chimney pot, not a gargoyle—she watches as a plume of pure clear water rises up from the centre, high into the air.

It starts, like a fountain, in small spurts at first, that fall and then splutter, before bursting forth as a tower of roaring water.

The geyser sends debris hurtling across the plateau. A strange lumpish green form flies overhead, crying ‘pieces of eight,’ and other debris rains down upon her. She is very nearly impaled by a long piece of pipe, no doubt part of the plumbing underground. It misses Robbie narrowly and lands in a tree behind her. She seizes it up and, with the ingenuity of all her imagination, swears off the forcola and begins punting instead, out across the newly formed lake of the plateau.

The waters are still bursting forth from the centre of the island, which is now more or less a mound of mud. Torrents of muddy water push Robbie along in her



gondola, and she, aided by the momentum of the rippling liquid beneath her, is pricking the gondola along from the stern and travelling at speed. The boat skips over the viscous liquid with grace and ease, with Robbie at the stern, her long mane of henna-coloured hair, rising in tangles and billowing in the air as she rushes along the thickening surface of the water.

She has thrown off her boots and the rough skin of her feet keeps her secure in her task as she runs along the treads of the gondola and digs deeper into the bed of the lake. Night is coming fast upon her and, as she nears the rim of the plateau, an intestinal rumbling murmurs deep underground. It soon becomes a seismic belch beyond imaginable proportion, sending forth a wall of mud, and propelling Robbie and her gondola over the ridge and out into the air.

The massive explosion exerts its force upon the earth and the atmosphere, causing the plateau to collapse in upon itself, pushing Robbie through the skies that hang over the lower plains where Lenny is now hurtling along in the truck.

In town, out in his yard, Herman feels the movement of the earth and sees a speck of something, which his mind forms into a strange crescent shape—like a little moon, darkened and askew—moving through the sky. He watches the tiny form disappear below the lower ranges, where it lands on the canopy of the truck as it makes its way through the foothills on the other side.

Hurtling through the air, her punting pole abandoned, Robbie has flung herself down into the body of the gondola. She rolls over on her back so that she can brace herself for the fall when it comes. But when it does, she feels something crumple beneath her like cardboard.

As the canvas collapses, Lenny is pushing on, struggling to keep ahead of the rising water, and thinking that a piece of the house must have landed on the truck. He has no idea that Robbie has hitched a ride and assumes that she and Jack are likely goners. He does not know that, to the east, on the other side of what had been a vast desert, there is an old sinkhole in the lower ranges where a network of underground rivers and streams flow inland.

The sinkhole puckers and plops. It gives off a baby's fart, experiences a bit of



indigestion, as the ground beneath it churns, pushing out a soggy, bedraggled figure of a man in two-inch heels. Jack gets to his feet, pats himself down and retrieves from his waistcoat pocket the broken neck of a hip flask.

At home, in his yard, Herman turns to watch Maudie as she pulls up in her van. She has a casserole dish on the front passenger seat and, as she comes around to get it, the ground beneath her trembles.

‘What the hell was that?’ she asks.

‘Dunno,’ says Herman. ‘Can’t be sure. But I have a feeling.’

‘You and your feelings,’ says Maudie, laughing, as she takes up the dish and Herman shuts the van door.

Lenny, in meantime, has reached the summit of the low ranges and is now driving along the ridge. Robbie, having escaped from her canvas crib, looks out across the sodden plains from the rear of the truck. There is no sign of the plateau, but in the distance, she can see an island, much larger than the one they have escaped. It is wide and flat, formed from the disintegrated rock and dirt of the plateau, with large black boulders embedded in the deep-brown earth.

Lenny stops the truck on the ridge. The vision of another world shimmers before his eyes as Robbie, to his indescribable joy, joins him in the cabin.

By this time, Jack has made his way to high ground, where he finds the flagon. But the sight before his eyes pulls him up, and he tosses it aside without thinking.

Lenny and Robbie, meanwhile, like Jack, have turned their attention inland. And so, with Jack facing west, and Robbie and Lenny, east, the three scholars look out upon the junk of centuries tossed on the waves, as the setting sun casts its light across the wide and seemingly endless surface of the inland sea.

*

‘This is history,’ thinks Robbie, as she puts down her pen. ‘This is what it is.’

‘Excuse me, Dr Glenda.’

‘Yes, Angelina?’



‘That fellow. He’s still waiting, like.’

‘Oh. Really? How stoical of him.’

‘Beggars belief, I should think.’

‘Perhaps. But not to worry. Send him in now, please.’

The End



The Mystery of Emotion and Creative Praxis

Introduction: Exploring the Mystery of Emotion through Creative Fiction

In this thesis I argue that the use of different subject positions and demarcations of voice in a work of creative fiction creates opportunities for layered perspective-taking by the reader, and that this is conducive to the experience of emotion. My thesis is that the mystery of emotion—the experience of having been affected by reading (in ways that cannot always be defined by emotion terms)—arises when the reader becomes involved in creating mental simulations of the narrative. The mystery of how or why reading becomes an affective experience, one that entangles the reader in the illusions generated through reading (Iser “The Reading Process” 295-96), is resolved when we appreciate the role of cognitive processes in establishing empathy (Keen 213). I argue that perspective-taking is an important aspect of reading pleasure because it involves the reader in constructing simulations from diverse stances, with the effort this involves contributing to the wellbeing of the human organism (Damasio 25) through the social benefits that such acts bestow, particularly with respect to evaluative attitudes like fairness and responsibility (Tomasello 305). Perspective-taking is understood to be the means by which we anticipate the feelings of others and construct generalised cultural perspectives, which are sometimes viewed as objective (305). My argument links empathy with the imagination that reading stimulates and follows approaches taken by reception theorists like Wolfgang Iser, Paul B. Armstrong and others working in the field of cognitive literary studies by focussing on readers and the experience of reading (Willis 4, 6, Elfenbein 12, Armstrong 26, 70).

With the object of inviting settler Australians to perform perspective-taking through their imaginative engagement with Robbie’s quest, my focus from the point of



view of creative praxis has always centred on questions of reader engagement and the formation of meaning (Pearce 28-30, 37; Willis 101, 103, 105), together with the possibility of reading involving emotional responses to the text (Keen 213). My motivation in writing the novella was to tackle the difficult task of facing up to the wrongs of Australia's colonial past—and, in particular, to signal the ongoing impact of those wrongs in shaping our social interactions. Growing up in the 1960s and 70s, I was caught up in a social world that was often expressly racist. When I encountered overt racism, I pushed back against it, even as a small child. But I was still implicated in racist practices and one particular experience at the age of twelve made me profoundly ashamed when I realised the meaning of my actions. That sense of shame caused me to turn away from the problem. I have long been aware of this and struggled to understand why this was until I realised that shame itself leads to the very turning away that I was trying to overcome. Believing there to be many others in positions similar to myself, experiencing the perplexing effects of shame in spite of themselves—a consequence of what Sue Kossew describes as “a past history of colonial violence in the ‘contact zone’ of settlement and a history that has deliberately been silenced in a national ‘cult of disremembering’” (8)—I strove to make an enjoyable narrative about shame while, at the same time, avoiding triggering shame and its attendant turning away (Nussbaum 173-175, 182-183). This was important because the aim of this novella is to promote the emotional conditions supportive of Reconciliation. It is hoped that, for some readers, being able to laugh at one's culture (via the comparison with pirates) might dissolve the shame enough to open the way to full-hearted understanding and social change.

The question that drove my praxis was necessarily, *how might I make such a novella enjoyable for readers who would otherwise avoid such difficult topics?* Robbie as a character, for example, under attack as she is for being old, overweight and irrelevant, is designed to invite the reader's sympathies through the use of humour. Her journey of facing up thus invites a compassionate response from the reader who might then think more compassionately of themselves and their own failings. The same approach is taken towards identity groups like those typically defined through ethnicity or in racial terms. Colonialism characterised as piracy (in the same terms that popular culture romanticises



it), was one way of answering my research question through praxis because it renders the charge of piracy humorous even as it unpacks the horrible realities.

Understanding how we become involved in reading (Iser “The Reading Process” 281, 283) was pivotal to addressing this question from a theoretical perspective and, in a specific and limited respect, the matter of narrative emotion warranted exploration. In arguing that perspective-taking is involved in the formation of emotion, I am uniting arguments made by a number of scholars in the fields of cognitive and comparative psychology, linguistics, literature, and neuroscience. My argument for perspective-taking as the seat of emotion has not been made elsewhere—although the basis for it can be found in the theories I discuss in this thesis. What is original in my approach is that I bring the scholarship on feeling, emotion, and perspective-taking into constructive relationship within the context of narrative empathy. With “Inland by Sea” I have chosen to explore multiple instances of perspective-taking via a range of strategies as an exercise in creative praxis; these include head-hopping, retrospection (or perspective-taking on the past in a manner akin to that described by Iser of the reading experience [“The Reading Process” 284-285]), shifts in point of view, and stylings of voice or heteroglossia (Bakhtin 291-331).

My thesis, which relies on developments in cognitive cultural studies—chiefly with respect to the work of Antonio Damasio, Lisa Feldman Barrett, and Michael Tomasello—explores the effects of simulation on reading, arguing that the discrepancy between sensory feedback and the anticipated action of the text makes for a pleasurable experience along the lines that Roland Barthes broadly identified in *The Pleasure of the Text* (Barthes 17; Elfenbein 58; Iser “The Reading Process” 282). The term simulation describes the representation in our minds of what is happening or has happened or might happen. Images are the representations we understand as sights, scents, sounds, tastes, and sensations of touch, as well as internal sensations (Damasio 151). Simulations are formed by combining images in the coherent depiction of immediate experience, recollection, or acts of imagination (Feldman Barrett 29). The simulation of strawberry ice-cream, for example (29), involves images potentially resulting from the senses of taste, touch, and vision. We each bring to the experience of strawberry



ice-cream past simulations that enable us to anticipate features such as texture and flavour—even if we have never tasted strawberry ice-cream before.

The scholarship in this field—most notably the work of Damasio, Feldman Barrett and Tomasello—reveals that intensifications experienced through perspective-taking supply the pathway to emotional experience. Yet, whether emotion or intensified feeling (i.e., feeling that falls short of an identifiable emotion) develops through the effects of perspective-taking on homeostatic measures, fictional works have the potential to provide readers with nuanced and empathetic engagements with a narrative’s privileged subject positions. This happens as readers align their perspective-taking with the multiple views on offer by drawing on personal experience in simulating the narrative (Armstrong 113-16; and Elfenbein 103), with these simulations formed out of a “kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections” (Iser “The Reading Process” 284).

European Traditions and Constructed Settler and Subaltern Positions

“Inland by Sea!” is unique in its appropriation of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516)—specifically in its application to Australian settler mythology (Milner and Burgmann 200). Imagining a fantasy world in which the original inhabitants of Thomas More’s Antipodes have been overrun by pirates (“Inland by Sea!” 9), with these pirates seemingly straight out of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), the novella offers a perspective formed from my own position as the descendent of settlers who arrived in Australia in the 1800s. That said, I want to stress from the outset that, though they stand in the position of colonised peoples as descendants of More’s Utopians, Herman and Maudie are not Indigenous Australians and neither are the pirates Australian settlers. The identity groups of pirate settlers and locals stand at the extremes of a pattern of relationship recognisable as coloniser and colonised subject, respectively.

Similarly, readers will note geological and other correspondences with Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006). This occurs because my novella uses myths of Australian settlement and exploration, chiefly that of the inland sea. My approach to the landscape



is rooted in European traditions which, in Australia's case, were most likely informed by Indigenous culture. The European tradition itself is rooted in deeper cultural narratives of flood and the cleansing capacities of water and these correspondences and my reading of the Australian landscape as concealing underground rivers and seas represents the blending of cultural myths—Indigenous and settler—which has taken place over almost two hundred-and-fifty years, and which now informs the wider understanding of Australia's landscape.

Given its allegorical focus, the question of why I have written this novella and who its audience might be is relevant, as Anita Heiss, canvassing a number of Indigenous Australian scholars and writers, conveys (203). The novella is written from the position of the settler who, born into a culture that has not fully reconciled itself with the past, finds herself in a world that leaves room for bigotry and injustice to flourish. The novella's audience is broad enough to include settler Australians and Indigenous Australians seeking a perspective on settler culture, but invites settler Australians, in particular, to empathetically engage with Robbie's awakening to the patterns of bigotry and injustice operating in her society today, acknowledging that the cultivation of compassion and forgiveness is necessary to "combat fear, distrust, disgust, and other negative emotions that stigmatize others and undermine concern for their well-being" (Fischer 441).

In focusing on the resolution of settler shame and denial in this way, I do not mean to downplay the injustices of the colonial legacy which, in this country, are profoundly greatest in respect to Indigenous Australians (McGrath 5). A realist narrative that fails to acknowledge the extent of this injustice would certainly be operating in service to the colonial enterprise by obscuring its impact. But my use of allegory and intertextuality in the creation of a piratical "storyworld" calls attention to its own unreality, breaching "the principle of minimal departure" (Palmer 179, 181) and limiting comparisons. "Inland by Sea" aims for partial correspondences only. This is because I cannot speak for Indigenous Australians (Heiss 197), or the wider population, for that matter. More importantly, I want to avoid participating in the kind of paternalism that characterises a "top-down" approach (Page 186; Heiss 200) and the institutionalised whiteness that Sara Ahmed identifies ("Whiteness and the General



Will” 1-2), which I would be doing were I to attempt to address, characterise, or explain an Indigenous Australian perspective from the vantage point of someone who has never directly experienced the impact of racism and stands in the socially and economically privileged position of the settler Australian.

It is for this reason, to avoid crossing such boundaries (Heiss 200), that the story is set in an already fictional space (More’s Utopia)—albeit one I have transformed by supplying resonant features of our continent and the myth of the inland sea. Despite this, Indigenous Australian readers may find aspects of the narrative distressing since I draw on features of Australian settler history and culture that some readers may recognise as part of that culture’s racist past and ongoing racist discourses. The publican’s story of the puppies supplies one such example—one that I modify by turning the common racist slur relating to smell back upon the pirate settlers as a marker of their alcoholism (42). This modification forms part of a wider strategy of table-turning that humorously re-directs these insults to their source in an effort to “overcome estrangement” through the camaraderie afforded by laughter (Fischer 441). This aspect of the narrative also signals Robbie’s dawning awareness of her complicity in her culture’s bigotry—an awareness I mean to inculcate in settler Australian readers through empathetic identification with Robbie’s journey (Fischer 439-442; Keen 214).

For Iser, “Culture develops by adjusting future projections to past performances” (Iser “Context-Sensitivity” 25). Thus, “Inland by Sea!” projects a cultural awakening to the harmful effects of bigotry in its handling of subject positions like those occupied by Maudie and Herman and in the way it undermines the supremacy of the settler pirates. Maudie and Herman are not constructed as characters wanting sympathy (Keen 208) but are instead depicted as individuals leading full and courageous lives (Heiss 198-99). Although their voices open the narrative (as Robbie writes it) by establishing an expression of regret at what has happened to Utopia (9), the undoing of that loss is not the object here. Indeed, the return (and enlargement) of the inland sea at the end of the novella brings with it, via the food motifs used throughout (24-25, 47, 51-52, 54, 92-94, 121), an acknowledgement that the cycle of exploitation has not necessarily ended—the nation, shaped like a doughnut, now has a giant chocolate chip cookie at its centre (121), suggesting that new resources have been opened up for



exploitation. Nothing, in socio-cultural terms, has radically changed after all. Instead, the transformation that takes place goes to the character of Robbie and her view of herself in relation to her culture (112-115, 118-119).

The focus here is on the transformation of character through enhancements in perspective-taking. What “Inland by Sea!” makes room for in terms of empathy is directed at the subject position of someone caught between nostalgic longing and revulsion for the past (23-27, 83-84). Robbie, as a young woman, is so fearful of drowning in drunkenness and piracy, she flees her homeland after writing a narrative of a young woman drowning in a maelstrom at the heart of the country (“Inland by Sea!” 10-16). By his actions in assisting Robbie to find the house, Herman demonstrates his comprehension of this aspect of her struggle, with his awareness hinted at when he remarks, rather drolly, that he likes Robbie “too much to kill” her (56). With her childhood inextricably tangled up in the repeating patterns of cruelty evidenced in her people’s piratical anachronism, Robbie herself has become stuck: she has turned away from the truth of her nation’s settlement because it would mean tainting memories that she holds dear. Her fondness for the emotional furniture of her childhood—for the joys she experienced and the love she has for her parents—supplies a motivating force in her turning away from the reality of her nation’s history by denying the existence of locals.

The novella, as well as taking up More’s narrative, is constructed to fit within the European tradition of the folk or fairy tale—in particular, “The Fine Green Bird” (Calvino 315-322), which tells of a young princess who sends her brothers to collect the objects she covets from a palace on a high plateau, frozen in time. That narrative, bearing some resemblance to the project of colonial acquisition addressed in my novella, provides the underlying structure for the allegorical nature of its narrative. Robbie is the “rosy-cheeked, golden-haired” princess in the fairy tale (Calvino 317)—albeit, now much older, and with dyed red hair; Herman occupies the position of the hermit (Calvino 319); and Maudie is a well-meaning version of the old woman who guides the princess in the initial stages by referring her and her brothers to the hermit (Calvino 318). The novella makes use of some, but not all, of the key features of “The Fine Green Bird”: the plateau, the palace (now a house), the singing tree, the dancing



waters, and the talking bird (Calvino 319-321). The story is further transformed in the novella: the lions (Calvino 319) become dragons (“Inland by Sea!” 67, 82, 115), for example, and the helpers (Maudie and Herman) take a less passive role than traditionally given in such tales. And whereas the folktale unproblematically serves up a narrative of enrichment by theft (the princess procures the three coveted items of the dancing waters, the singing tree, and the talking bird [Calvino 319, 320, 321]), “Inland by Sea!” is deeply concerned with elaborating the problems of a society taking such an acquisitive approach.

In constructing the character of the hermit/Herman, I have been careful to represent this subject position in terms that demonstrate respect within the context of overarching disregard by the piratical culture (Heiss 202-03; Fischer 439). To avoid perpetuating the racist discourse tied up with the colonial subaltern identity, contemporary Utopians, both local and piratical, are not represented in racialized terms. The difference between locals and piratical settlers, in this novella, stands upon their manners, with the locals demonstrating normatively balanced behaviour (59-64) in contrast to the colonising pirates (27-31)—particularly when these are represented at the extreme end of anachronism (23-24, 41-45). This strategy of representation stands against the patronising strategies involved in depictions of Indigenous Australians (Heiss 201-203), by effectively turning the tables and applying essentialist methodologies in the depiction of settler characters. These exaggerations of piratical anachronism are also designed to focus the reader’s attention on the allure of nostalgia before getting to the heart of what that nostalgia obscures.

By occupying the subject position of the hermit-helper, Herman is acting generously for Robbie’s sake when she reveals that she is still caught within the culture of denial (Gershevitch 229). In reciting “Eeney-Meeney-Miney-Mo,” Robbie is mindlessly performing her culture’s bigoted construction of the locals (50, 56, 118). In aiding Robbie in her discovery of the house, Herman is thus helping her to undertake a personal reckoning. In this way, the figure of the hermit, a helper in the folktale tradition, is given a role of far greater significance than aiding in the discovery of treasures, which is the colonial project after all. This is important because it relates to broader patterns of perspective-taking outside the novella, where the perspectives of



once subaltern identities influence the viewpoints of others to effect change in the cultural common ground (Čerče 57-58; Hazel 61). Thus, Herman, aware that the house has been emptied of its gold by Rightleg (77), is not aiding in treasure-hunting. He is helping Robbie to see herself and her culture from another perspective.

Understanding Perspective-taking in Narrative through Cognitive Cultural Studies

The field of cognitive cultural studies is broad-ranging, and a considerable degree of “fuzziness” describes the discipline and its boundaries (Zunshine “What Is Cognitive Cultural Studies?” 3). My position on emotion accords with contemporary views in neuroscience and psychology (for example, Feldman Barrett) that regard emotion as a socially constructed category of feeling. However, it must be noted here that emotion is not always explicitly defined as feeling in the scholarship that I survey. I take a specific stance on the use of emotion terms by viewing feelings as internal measures and messages about the state of our organism (Damasio 15), affect as the experience and expression of those feelings (Forgas 11), and emotion as the meaning attributed to a recognisable intensification of feeling (that is, feeling that calls attention to itself) (Feldman Barrett 94-104). Emotion, I argue, is the meaning that we give to intensifications of feeling developed through perspective-taking. Emotion, in other words, is feeling that is brought to mind upon reflection. But this is a process of reflection that happens rapidly and automatically. Perspective-taking is so strongly rooted in language and human sociality that it goes largely unnoticed (Tomasello 66).

Emotion, as a product of recursive thought and perspective-taking, arises in the simplest sense, when we bring our attention to our internal states, because in doing so we are taking a perspective on ourselves. With perspective-taking, we are able to apprehend the significance of certain feelings beyond immediate sensation (by projecting the effects into the future, for example, or by contemplating how others might react to the expression of our feelings through affect). Recursivity is fundamentally an effect of perspective-taking (Tomasello 165). This layered apprehension (of how I feel about how I am feeling—as in ‘I feel bad about feeling



bad,’ or ‘I feel bad about feeling good’) represents an intensification or complication of the initial feeling state. Recursive feeling—feelings about feelings—potentially intensifies feelings of goodness or badness (valence) by becoming multilayered and multifaceted. Thus, if I feel good about feeling good, I might nonetheless come to feel bad about feeling good that I feel good. For this to happen, I will need to involve myself in perspective-taking: if, for example, I apprehend that another might view my feeling good about feeling good as smugness, then I might start to feel bad about it.

I follow Armstrong and Feldman Barrett, in contrast to those approaches influenced by early theories of emotion as based on the work of Silvan Tomkins (Leys 195-96, 2; Gibbs 187-88; see, for example, Martha Nussbaum’s *Hiding from Humanity* [2004], Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* [2007] and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* [2003]). Thus, I regard emotion as a semantic category rather than something that happens in a specific region of the brain. It is an interpretive stance taken towards bodily feelings and thoughts, within a given context (Feldman Barrett 42-55). Forming a semiotic system based on embodied experiences and their contexts, emotions are the first stage in processes of expression and communication through what comparative psychologist and linguist Michael Tomasello calls protoconversations (54-55). Shaped by cultural values, emotions are the means by which we select and organise a range of internal feelings and sensations into states of being within a range of contexts. Emotion becomes recognisable in, and via, others through perspective-taking, which enables the interpretation of bodily and mental experience in environmental and social contexts (Feldman Barrett 72, 32-41; Solomon 11).

The reader, oscillating between a range of simulated stances with reference to recalled experience, constructs the simulations necessary for the imaginative process of comprehending the narrative. The same processes are involved in imagining positions outside our immediate purview. Tomasello explores “the unique forms of sociocultural activity in which individuals engage over the life course,” arguing that evolutionary, biological adaptations have “facilitated social and mental coordination” largely through perspective-taking (304). These adaptations enable the social skills of “joint attention, collaboration, and cooperative communication” (Tomasello 304). With these skills



directed towards joint and collectively configured intentions, our species has developed sociality to a high degree through our capacity to position ourselves from different standpoints and anticipate the views of others. “Joint Intentionality” involves “taking the perspective of others, including recursively ..., and relating to others second-personally as equals.” “Collective Intentionality” involves “the cognitive capacity to form a group-minded ‘we’ and so to participate in conventions, norms, and institutions, and to view things from ‘objective’ and normative perspectives” (305).

Paul B. Armstrong applies this kind of reasoning to literature when he observes that “The comprehension of a story requires active participation by the recipient, who must project relations between the parts that are told and their probable configuration in the whole that seems to be forming” (116). It is an oscillating, to-and-fro process whereby readers come to identify with aspects of the narrative—sometimes with specific characters—with these identifications forming the details of the simulation (the imagined scene, for example) and the source of our involvement with the text (Iser “The Reading Process” 296-97). John Frow describes identification with character “as an effect of desire, understood not as ‘someone’s’ desire but as a structure forming the imaginary unity of subjects in their relation to the imaginary unity of objects.” Identification thus involves the reader in the formation of character through the recognition of aspects of self. Literary character might be understood to be, in this sense at least, “an effect of the ‘self-recognition’ of a subject in its dispersal through the multiple positions offered to it by a text” (Frow *Character and Person* 53-54).

The cultural satisfactions of perspective-taking are fundamental to critical analyses of literary reception like Lisa Zunshine’s approach to theory of mind (Willis 6, 30; Zunshine), and pivotal to the critical accounts of the potentially polarising nature of cultural perspective or “emotionology” (Herman 169) identified by theorists like Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). Literary works supply a means to probe the seemingly common ground of culture (Willis 69). In this respect, my novella’s intertextual elements, which include Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), Italo Calvino’s retelling of the folktale “The Fine Green Bird” (1956) and Patrick White’s *Voss* (1957) (via the repetition of the first line to that novel [“Inland by Sea!” 7]), function as mediating templates for perspectives on



culture (38). Mieke Bal, writing on aesthetic perspective, notes “how perspective ... is a discourse: it can be intertextually signified without being obeyed yet it will be read” (Bal 498). I suggest that such intertextual reading—where it sits outside the conventions of verisimilitude—functions thematically in the literary work in ways that defer identification with distressing features during “online” reading (Elfenbein 83-110, 119; Frye 202-03). As Iser expresses it, “the semantic possibilities of the text will always remain far richer than any configurative meaning formed while reading” since “the memory of the text is its intertextuality”—the impact and significance of a literary work is to be found in its capacity to project and shape culture through its discursive relationship with the textual manifestations of the culture in which it emerges (“The Reading Process” 290; “Context-Sensitivity” 26). Literature “enacts the operations” of cultural memory “through [the] multifarious interrelations” defined by Iser as intertextuality (“Context-Sensitivity” 26), and by Alan Palmer as intersubjectivity or intermental processes (185), with these processes also identifiable as acts of perspective-taking.

Armstrong notes that as “we read or listen to stories, the ability to fluently construct consistent patterns fosters the building of illusions” (139). We might say that it is the element of indeterminacy in a text that provides scope for the reader’s imagination (Iser “The Reading Process” 288). Yet, our experience of the phenomenal world has an illusory quality even when grounded in the present because these simulations reflect our anticipation of the world, informed by the senses and based on past simulations. This very quality of perception—of looking forward and back—makes our reception of fictional works possible (Armstrong 119; Iser Context-Sensitivity” 26-27, “The Reading Process” 287). To look forward or back is to take on another perspective on oneself or others. Narratives strengthen the mental habit of perspective-taking by this means and through the constructed positions of characters and narrator. As readers encounter opportunities for empathy within the very processes of comprehending the text, they “expand ... awareness of other points of view” and thereby become “more responsive to the rights and needs of others” (Fischer 439).

Readers may of course experience an adverse reaction where traumatic experiences are evoked through the literary text. It is thus important to limit the



likelihood of triggering traumatic feelings, without avoiding difficult subject matter. As someone who cannot write from the position of suffering as a colonial subject or descendent of enslaved peoples, sensitivity to the horrors of slavery and its traumatic impact on the generations that follow is necessary. I aim to write sensitively on these terms by avoiding explicit or protracted correspondence with actual identifiable traumatic experiences like those endured by colonised peoples. It is for this reason that slavery is depicted in the novel in highly stylised terms through Robbie's dream of the singing tree in the courtyard (107-111). The haunting image of men and women turning the massive ornament for the pleasure of Robbie and her young doppelgänger, though likely to be distressing to some readers, is designed to succinctly convey the cruelty of luxury economies like those that fuelled colonial enterprise.

The humour and indulgent descriptions of piratical play aims to make the difficult subject of facing up to the horrors of the past as enjoyable as possible for settler readers. Yet there are features of the literary text that drive reading enjoyment in ways that go beyond subject matter. Such pleasures go to the heart of my argument about the role that feeling plays in reader involvement (Iser "The Reading Process" 280). Here I refer to the impact that imagining has on feeling from the perspective of cognitive science—where feeling is identified as an informant of the body's regulation system in measuring wellbeing or homeostasis (Damasio 25). With the simulations of a narrative oriented with respect to a range of perspectives (Iser "The Reading Process" 282), usually organised around characters, protagonists, and narrators, which are nested, one within the other—often looking back and forth from one stance to another—perspective-taking has the potential to intensify the feeling of positive homeostasis (Damasio 6) sometimes leading to emotional responses. Such intensifications, I argue, arise through the work of construing diverse perspectives in filling out the simulation ("a narrative may mention a glance that perceives another glance," for example [Genette *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 76]), with the 'work' of perspective-taking going to wellbeing (Damasio 3-5, 8, 11, 17, 25).

What we recognise as we read derives, I argue, not so much from seeing aspects of ourselves—though this is possible—as identifying perspectives on ourselves and others. Characters occupying recognisable subject positions (via point of view or



description) performing identifiable roles (waiter, taverner, publican, husband, wife, student, etc.), undertaking familiar activities (driving, eating, drinking, and walking), take shape in the reader's simulations of narrative through assemblages of perspective: we imagine characters from a repertoire of past simulations of experience largely formed through perspective-taking. Importantly, perspective-taking does not parachute the thinker/reader into the minds of others, as Robbie's failures of perspective on meeting Herman (as the hermit) demonstrate (50). This is also evident in the way that Robbie's point of view drives the description of the hermit and his property. Whereas the property is described in more neutral terms from the point of view of Lenny, whose perspective is focalised (Genette *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 73; Palmer 183) when he and Jack Breitling arrive at Herman's workplace ('Inland by Sea' 56-57), Robbie reads the cluster of sheds and old vehicles (common enough in rural Australia) as signs of dereliction (52).

Rather than infiltrating another's mind (as focalisation does via the narrative voice [Genette *Narrative Discourse* 31; *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 73]), constructions of character perspective-taking position the perspective-taker in the subject position. Thus, when Robbie attempts to see herself through the hermit's eyes, she is mistaken in what he sees because the perspective she takes becomes flooded with personal concerns that are egregiously transplanted into her construction of his consciousness. Nonetheless, for characters like Robbie, the duality of seeing as themselves and as another opens up opportunities for recursive thought and feeling on the given object or situation being perceived. Although she misreads Herman's view on her, Robbie is still taking a perspective on herself. As the narrative later reveals, this ungenerous view of her physical appearance represents her perceptions of Jack Breitling's perspective-taking on her (as articulated later in the narrative [90]), and the perspectives of men more generally, with the Dean instancing this generalised cultural view (15-16). Robbie, in other words, adopts a cultural perspective on herself and the hermit. With the flaws in this perspective exposed in her conversations with Lenny later in the narrative (100-05), Robbie comes to understand the collective and intersubjective nature of cultural perspective as something variable rather than objective.

Once she understands that Herman does not see her on Jack's and the Dean's



terms (and neither does Lenny for that matter), she is able to adopt a more compassionate stance towards herself—with this new stance corresponding to, as much as it enables, a new perspective on her own culture and the consequences of her entanglement within it (Iser “The Reading Process” 295-96). This awakening enables her to break free of erroneous perspectives, symbolised by her successfully punting across the inland sea (in contrast to Berta’s demise in punting her way into the maelstrom). The novella thus positions the anachronism of the piratical settlers as indicative of the limited perspective of a culture that looks upon itself with such focused attention that it excludes the taking of other perspectives. In this respect, the narrative posits that looking out (and back again) is the means by which societies might avoid falling into the abyss of one-eyed perspectivism. The novella, in thus problematising the cultural common ground, invites readers to see cultural beliefs and practices as mutable and open to negotiation through processes of perspective-taking that look out and back again.

Common ground, of course, functions as a unifying perspective because it supplies conventions. The effects of perspective-taking are thus both stabilising and disruptive. Yet, the process of unsettling beliefs and assumptions can be pleasurable rather than distressing, as literary works so often demonstrate. Literary critic Vera Tobin argues that readers and film audiences begin by comprehending the narrative in conventional ways that translate to Tomasello’s common ground (and in a manner consistent with Iser’s description of reading involving projecting consistency onto what we read). This consistency or common ground functions as a pattern or gestalt that, for Iser, unites comprehension with reading expectations (Iser “The Reading Process” 289). As Tobin describes the process, in the first instance, the reader assumes the most likely meaning or outcome (56-87). Surprises work by relying on this tendency to assume the obvious (based on prior knowledge), and by unsettling these assumptions (35-36). We might say that all narratives rely on surprise to some degree by forestalling outcomes in terms of the events of the story and the meaning of these events, which will include the emotional and moral values attributed to outcomes. It stands to reason, then, that readers will not initially interrogate the normative values on display in a narrative but will assume that these apply unproblematically in respect to the story as



part of the social order (Tobin 4, 5, 15, 16, 20).

“Inland by Sea!” begins in humorous tones that invite the reader to become involved in the rough play of a piratical Utopia. It moves, by degrees, through a range of perspectives designed to unsettle any assumptions about the unproblematic nature of such a society. By the time we meet the publican (41), the unsavoury aspects of an entrenched sense of entitlement, defended by violent acts, is becoming apparent. The disturbing contradictions of the publican’s speech—where he reveals his culture’s complete lack of insight in construing the locals as thieves (let us recall, the publican is descended from professional thieves who took to colonial conquest upon landing in the Utopian Antipodes)—lay the ground for the unsettling of this society’s normative values as unproblematic in both Robbie’s and the reader’s mind (42-44). Readers may begin the narrative believing they are indulging in something light, but these strategic revelations are designed to invite readers to reflect on Robbie’s experience and reach a point of consonance through the mystery of emotion. By involving fragments of personal experience, where, for example, the reader has found herself to have acted in ignorance because she accepted a faulty aspect of the common ground of culture, the narrative supplies a mediating lens for the reader’s revised perspective-taking on herself.

Importantly, this strategy does not call for the total upending of cultural perspective in the reader; it serves as a reminder that cultural perspective is not objective and that even after the faulty common ground has shifted, memories of the old ways persist in individual histories. Nostalgia, on these terms, can become distressing as we take a view of our past selves from a more enlightened position. With the constructed norms of the piratical society of “Inland by Sea!” being largely what is at stake here, constructions of character and event emerge in ways that push against the smoothness of the story’s social world. Robbie begins the narrative as someone who buys into this convenient discourse of the locals being mythological beings. As Tobin explains, for surprise to work, alternative explanations, scenarios, or meanings need to be in play without being obvious to the reader (the locals are mythical beings [“Inland by Sea!” 24]; the locals are historical figures [42]; the locals are living amongst the settler pirates [62, 113]). The reader will accept the reappraisal (that is, be satisfied with and persuaded by it) and the overturning of their assumptions, if the new interpretation is based on



meanings that can be read back across the text as it stands—that is, without any startlingly new information contradicting formerly defined circumstances (Tobin 35-36). In other words, the reader needs to have enough information to hand to reach the new interpretation of events on her own terms, once that new interpretation has been flagged.

In supplying renditions of feeling, affect, and emotion outside the reader's immediate personal experience, fiction offers readers new ways of seeing as they formulate the simulations of the narrative from past experience and according to the underlying perspectival patterning of the text. Importantly, past experience may include other simulations formed when reading or otherwise engaging with other fictional texts. We do not need direct experience with the depicted events in order to imagine them. Further, language is not essential for perspective-taking (Tomasello 46-49; 50-53). Following the gaze of another may support comprehension through a comparison with one's memories of similar states.

With the novella's conclusion and Robbie's personal reckoning hinging on her perspective-taking on Herman's perspective-taking on her (119), "Inland by Sea!" requires the skills of "facilitated social and mental coordination" identified by Tomasello (304). To prime the reader for such complexity in perspective-taking, the novella begins with overtly drawn instances of perspective-taking via the crude reckoning of the Dean as he takes in the figure of Robbie, who sees him doing so, with the Dean in turn seeing that she's seen (17). It then moves into a structured dialogue between Robbie and Angelina (34-38), which takes the reader through the humorously figured instance of an older woman grappling with the ageism and sexism organising her thinking and, finally, gestures towards a reading of Angelina's perspective-taking in similar terms through the younger woman's quaintly drawn patronising stance on Robbie's age and sexual naivete. With the dialogue involving the reader in oscillations between the two women and a wider cultural perspective—figured in the narrative voice—the sensation may arise of something like actual movement (at least, this scene has been designed with this in mind). These, and other instances of overtly drawn perspective-taking in the novella, offer the reader warm-up exercises in the form of signposted head-hopping in terms that invoke a sense of to-and-fro movement with



reference to the gaze or stance of the characters. The deployment of this strategy is not done to instruct but to remind the reader of skills she already possesses and prime her for the mental involvement of head-hopping and, less problematically, retrospections of self and longer shifts in point of view (as occur, for example, when the narrative moves into Maudie and Lenny's summary views on the events [68, 71]).

The narrative, in this way, alerts the reader to the work she must do in order to comprehend the story. Jumping in and out of Robbie's and the Dean's heads, then into Robbie's and Angelina's, requires a degree of mental agility, with the rewards of perspective-taking supplied in the humour of these scenes, which are intended to make the reading experience enjoyable as readers oscillate "between involvement in and observation of the illusion" (Iser "The Reading Process" 291). Interstitial humour, for example, operates in the dialogue between Robbie and Angelina where Robbie's questioning of herself as potentially "stupid, lonely, desperate—" appears to be answered by Angelina's "Is that all?" (36). The humour works if the reader, on taking Robbie's perspective and then Angelina's, briefly and erroneously identifies Robbie's thoughts as the context for Angelina's question (Willis 118; Elfenbein 58). This error is made possible by the broader demands of the text involving the reader in the perspective offered via the narrative voice and operates as an instance of intermental thought (Palmer 185).

If perspective-taking is involved in intensifications of feeling, as I suggest, then creative narratives that construct instances of perspective-taking by reproducing basic patterns of sociality are more likely to involve the reader in the emotional material of the story. Tomasello identifies "emotional attunement" arising in infant interactions with adults through the matching of interest and expression (307). Given that reading provides opportunities for the experience of emotional attunement by involving the reader in emotional responses to texts through "the concrete images we experience when engaging in ... simulation[s]" of character affect and context, and given, too, that this potentially involves "the emotional memories that are activated during simulation" (Hogan 246), emotional attunement would appear to be a key element in the reader's response to reading fiction.



Readers bring “background knowledge, inferences, emotional reactions, autobiographical links, evaluations, and much else” to their comprehension of a story (Elfenbein 103). As Armstrong explains, “understanding actions entails configuring movements *as* something according to our past experiences and future expectations about their purpose, shape, and direction” (109; see also Feldman Barrett 73). We use past experience and the recognition of patterns in striving to understand and forecast the events of daily life; so too, when reading. It is because thought processes enable the dismantling and reassembling of unities in abstract (semantic) terms, whereby thought separates parts from wholes, and unites these with other parts from different wholes (Armstrong 108), that it becomes possible to connect aspects of a former experience with aspects of a simulated experience in a text. In simple terms, we build our simulations of story out of the memories of earlier simulations of experience.

In Iser’s phenomenological approach, “the virtual realities issuing from the imagination come to life through participation.” Referring to the “ongoing activities of calling into existence and mapping something hitherto non-existent” (“Context-Sensitivity” 26), Iser’s phenomenology of reading pre-emptively describes Feldman Barrett’s and Damasio’s accounts of the brain’s continual processes of projection and confirmation through simulation and sensorial feedback. Reading, involving simulations based on our personal experiences, results, through entanglements of experience and simulations of text (Iser “The Reading Process” 295-96), in the species of emotional attunement that I call the mystery of emotion—the experience of becoming involved in the story through the effect of correspondences being achieved between text and reader experience. In reading “Inland by Sea!” the reader will draw upon recollected simulations, which he or she may have made when reading a text like Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, and from watching or hearing about a range of pirate films, as well as other descriptions of piracy. These intertextual features are united with those aspects of personal experience that enable the reader to imagine the characters moving through space in the various manners described in the story. Thus, a reader might imagine what it looks or feels like to use a cutlass as a walking stick (44, 48), or to dodge one while scrambling on the floor (31), all without ever having had such experiences. In these examples, emotions are not necessarily involved but feeling



or affect is (Feldman Barrett 72). In making these connections—in using aspects of personal experience to build the simulations framed by another through storytelling—the reader becomes involved in processes that not only stand upon the effectiveness of these simulations but involve, as well, re-cognitions of experience in novel ways.

The literary text, in which multiple perspectives are embedded, not only offers scope for rehearsals of perspective-taking, it stands upon the patterns that perspective-taking provides. “Words embed perspectives on things,” Tomasello argues, with the result that grammatical constructions are thoroughly perspectival (66). Grammatical mood offers insights into wider understandings of mood in psychological (Forgas 6) and socio-cultural terms (Ahmed “Not in the Mood,” 13). As Gérard Genette explains, grammatical mood refers to the alignment of the tenses of a given statement to the perspective or position of the speaker: “‘Distance’ and ‘perspective’ ... are the two chief modalities of that *regulation of narrative information* that is mood” (Genette *Narrative Discourse* 161-62). Multiple perspectives are thus entangled in all speech. When we paraphrase or quote another individual, we generally signify this in ways that make other perspectives clear to our listeners and readers. Literary works, however, do not always use clear markers to indicate shifts in perspective when deploying the strategies of focalisation and free indirect discourse, for example (Miller 42).

David Herman observes that the “positioning” of subjects within a discourse determines “the storylines” that “provide context in terms of which speech acts can be assigned as having a position-assigning force” in terms of identifying an individual as “powerful or powerless, admirable or blameworthy, and so forth” (162). Reading “Inland by Sea!” involves the reader in recognising the positions occupied by its characters. The conventions of the novel genre mean that most readers will quickly identify Robbie as the central figure and protagonist as they observe her negotiating her way through her experiences and occupying different positions (Woloch 13). On observing the power of Robbie’s status as an academic, followed by the powerlessness she begins to feel and eventually realises in the presence of Jason (27-31), readers will be familiar with the positioning evident in such exchanges—how the dialogue and descriptions of expression demonstrate shifts in power. They will recognise too, the instability of such positions, often evident in character thought which is sometimes at



odds with projected behaviour—as happens when Robbie appraises Jason in sexual terms while performing her authority as academic interviewer (27). With her thoughts undermining the stability of her performance at such times, the reader is, in a sense, primed for the collapsing of that authority and the turning of tables that result once Jason rises and challenges Robbie (30). In a sense, such reversals are built into narrative through the conventions of speech that enable the recognition of character as “both an agent and an object of discourse” (Frow 149). Narratives utilise structural and linguistic features to position characters in this way. Yet we recognise the subjects and objects of a discourse because such positioning applies to us in discursive terms and because, in recognising our feelings as our own (Damasio 148, 151), with individual perspective established through the apprehension of information supplied by sensory portals (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin) directed towards external contexts (149), we are subjects aware of objects. The apprehension of how we feel in our bodies, and the information supplied to us via the senses, enables our perception of ourselves as embodied beings that experience an array of mental images or simulations of the world around us.

The Role of Homeostatic Regulation in Reading Enjoyment

A strong motivation for reading, I argue, is to enrich the repertoire of mental images available to us, because this satisfies the homeostatic imperative as it is realised through flourishing (Damasio 12-13, 25). Antonio Damasio explains that feelings are the internal bodily and mental expression of the homeostatic imperative: “the powerful, unthought, unspoken imperative, whose discharge implies, for every living organism, small or large, nothing less than enduring and prevailing” (25). Feelings “are the result of a cooperative partnership of body and brain” (12); crucial to survival and to flourishing, “feelings of pain and feelings of pleasure, from degrees of well-being to malaise and sickness, would have been catalysts for the processes of questioning, understanding, and problem solving that most profoundly distinguish human minds from the minds of other living species” (13). Feelings, for Damasio, supply motivations for personal and cultural endeavour, and monitor the success or failure of such (15).



The homeostatic imperative, according to Damasio, extends beyond the body to what he refers to as “cultural minds” (165), which describes the way we measure our actions in a social world. Our species’ cultural minds, formed through intersubjectivity or intermental thought (Palmer 184), have developed through our capacity for consciousness and shared intentionality (Tomasello 305; Damasio 30), which is dependent upon feeling and perspective in the building of subjectivity (Damasio 148-153). Our sense of ourselves is important in measuring our cultural credit, as much as it functions in appraisals of what Lisa Feldman Barrett terms our “body budget” (82). Am I in the black or in the red? My body informs me through feelings associated with wellbeing or malaise; while any sense of inadequacy or elevated status that I might derive from my cultural capital is arguably experienced in terms of shame or pride (formed via perspective-taking). A work of literature, as a cultural product, would in Damasio’s view become successful or otherwise according to its impact on homeostasis in personal terms, and its value as mediated through culture. For example, I might gain a positive feeling from knowing that I have read James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) because it has high status and contributes to my cultural capital. Provided I found reading the novel pleasurable on the whole, I may have measured the positive effects of reading as a sense of ‘flow,’ where all one’s resources are concentrated in a single activity, successfully executed (Tobin 119).

Feldman Barrett, who like Damasio, identifies feeling with interoception, notes that the “brain is always predicting.” Feeling, she explains, represents the apprehension of the state of our organism in terms of its internal “movement,” with the brain involved in the task of “represent[ing] the sensations that result from this inner motion” (66). This movement is the ongoing ceaseless activity that defines a living body, but we are seldom aware of it (67). Taking in information from the nervous system via the “networks for vision, hearing, and other senses,” the brain, through the interoceptive process, “issues predictions about your body, and updates your brain’s model of your body in the world” (67). Importantly, the networks supplying this information have “two general parts with distinct roles”:

One part is a set of brain regions that send predictions to the body to control its internal environment; speed up the heart, slow down breathing, release more cortisol,



metabolize more glucose, and so on. We'll call them your *body-budgeting regions*. The second part is a region that represents sensations inside your body, called your *primary interoceptive cortex*.

The two parts of your interoceptive network participate in a prediction loop. Each time your body-budgeting regions predict a motor change, like speeding up the heart, they also predict the sensory consequences of that change, like a pounding feeling in your chest. (67-69)

It is worth pausing here to reflect upon our bodily experiences of remembering and imagining, which develop their simulations with respect to past experience (vicarious or actual), often broken down into discrete images that are combined in new ways in the processes of recollection and imagination. The diversity of experiences and perspectives potentially on offer are significant for creative praxis, as writers seek to engage their readers by offering them access to simulations of experience that go beyond personal encounters in life. In doing so, we (as readers) form images in our mind that simulate activities and states of being that are likely to be discrepant with the images of our organism at the moment of remembering or imagining. In other words, the recollection of experience or the simulation of an imagined occurrence (whether partial or whole) may sometimes supply contradictory information in the determination of feeling. Reading “Inland by Sea!” for example, will involve us as readers in simulations of Robbie sailing forth across the inland sea on waves of muddy water (118). Yet, as we read, we are probably sitting comfortably. Nothing about our environment is likely to correspond to the energy needed to navigate the rapid re-emergence of an inland sea.

In linguistic terms, words achieve their effects through the strength of the associations that are called to mind—through their meanings as realised in embodied terms (Willingham 91; Herman 165). The waters of the inland sea take shape in our simulations in ways that include predicted actions. Feldman Barrett makes a case for emotions functioning in similar terms—as meanings that organise and give shape to our experiences (see Feldman Barrett 84-87, 182; see also Ahmed *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 1-16). Arguably, what we experience with words when they stimulate our neural pathways into anticipations of sensation, is an outcome of processes of simulation: we understand verbs like ‘sailing’ or ‘punting,’ for example, with respect specific embodied actions. In anticipating the internal features of each action, our



simulation has affected us in that it has generated a predictive interoceptive response that anticipates the impact on the body of marshalling itself into the described activity (Feldman Barrett 66-69).

Reading becomes affecting on these terms. But reading impacts us on its own terms at the same time. We are, after all, engaging our senses in the act of reading and drawing on specific skills as we do so. Andrew Elfenbein describes three modes of processing in reading: nonautomatic processing (attentive and effortful reading); bottom-up automatic processing (“unconscious, fast, passive”); and top-down automatic processing (as with the development of skills through practice) (19). Since reading is not a hard-wired skill (16), but is acquired through learning, bottom-up automatic processing must refer to something other than what we typically think of as reading. Following Tomasello, I posit that we include perspective-taking as formed from features of bottom-up automatic processing combined with developmental (top-down) achievements (16, 17, 65, 90, 132, 165, 304). Automatic and non-automatic processes are thus involved in filling out the story through the reader’s simulations of the narrative.

There are conceptual gaps (Willis 6, 118; Iser “The Reading Process” 285) in every text—fictional and nonfictional—and this is a necessary feature of any work that seeks to engage readers: “some readers can experience a text as too coherent” for example, and “this excess causes readers ... to lose interest” (Elfenbein 43-44). Armstrong, following the reader response criticism of Wolfgang Iser, references these “gaps and indeterminacies” as crucial to reading involvement. For Armstrong, figurative patterns or *gestalts* supply a model for cognition (17; see also Iser “The Reading Process” 285), whereby “gaps and indeterminacies,” a “familiar feature of perceptual experience” (Armstrong 139), are resolved by the reader of narrative “by the intertwining of different modalities”—different *gestalts* or patterns of experience (133). This process creates “an illusion of presence and facilitate[s] immersion in a fictional world” (138; see also Iser “The Reading Process” 290). This is because interpretation, involving the reading of signs, finds its “neurobiological basis” in “the reactivations of simulation” in terms that are “partial and [which] can be configured in different ways” (Armstrong 120).



Perspective-taking arguably supplies one such gestalt or pattern, in that it is a pattern that is figured into language through features such as grammatical mood (Genette *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 73, 76). Our memory of an event, for example, is in part organised according to a remembered pattern or gestalt, rather than the precise replaying of the occurrence, and this applies to our memory of stories, or the stages of a narrative we retain in our memory in order to make sense of what follows from what we have just read. Elfenbein calls this the “gist” of reading. The term gist is generally understood to refer to the core feature of an idea or experience (13). Readers, who will invariably forget much of the detail of a story, “remember a simplified version of what they read, which psychologists call a gist representation.” A gist in reading is “a situation model”:

A situation model differs from the textbase because it contains a reader’s background knowledge, inferences, emotional reactions, autobiographical links, evaluations, and much else ... What readers’ memories retain may have only the faintest relationship to what they read ... (103)

The gist represents those features that might stand alone, without recourse to the detail. In the same way that we understand emotion-concepts like anger, sadness, joy, and love independently of examples of such, the gist of something, in lay terms, would appear to refer to those features that might be reproduced across situations, contexts, and texts.

The gist is, in some respects, that which is intertextual (Iser “Context-Sensitivity” 26). The reproducibility of experience outlined by Elfenbein in his discussion of gist, which is emphasised by Armstrong in his application of gestalt theory, provides the theoretical framework for my thesis: that we draw on diverse examples in imagining a story when reading and these partial correspondences result in feelings organised according to the recursive instances of perspective-taking on offer in the text. The reader, by involving himself in the perspective-taking instanced in the head-hopping between Robbie and the Dean and Robbie and Angelina, has organised his experiences into these simulations of story. He has imagined, not only the different subject positions of these characters, but has involved himself in perspective-taking from these positions. The to-and-fro movement between the mental experiences of



these characters has potentially introduced new formulations of engagement through perspective-taking. Further, nested within his position as reader, the reader takes in the narrative voice mediating the subjectivities of these characters as they in turn imagine the perspective of their partner in dialogue.

The shaky ground of innumerable oscillations in recursive thought is figured in the narrative of “Inland by Sea!” through the representation of the house as history (87). Filtered through Robbie’s changed perception of the house inland, this aspect of the changeable nature of experience is highlighted as a precursor to the broader cultural processes involved in history-making. Being both enormous and changeable—like the past—the house, in this respect, stands for the effects of many perspectives, in the way that history, as a product of cultural memory, becomes (symbolically) massive and weighty and transformed over time. The same effects are in evidence in Robbie’s strange vision of Jack on the stair (95-96). Robbie sees Jack through a range of cultural perspectives: turning through simulations drawn from art (the Orientalist image of the Moor) and literature (the paper-doll effect taken from items of play and Jane Austen’s representations of English parsons). Her simulations of Jack—and we might assume, other features of her experience—are informed by the mutable nature of recollection, drawn as it is from parts rather than the whole memory, and reassembled as a new whole.

The experience of reading is also figured through Robbie’s reading of herself. Robbie’s reading of her past selves is represented in the narrative as retrospection when the narrative initiates a scene from the past in response to her focalised thoughts, which we might presume to be otherwise brief—or, at least, less detailed than the story as given to the reader (21, 25, 68, 96, 109, 110, 113, 118-19). Taking these instances into account across the narrative, we can see Robbie grappling with the dispersal of herself in ways that reflect Frow’s observations on identification in the construction of literary character (53-54), evident in her implied efforts at finding herself when talking to Lenny. Although Robbie is at times depicted in the act of remembering while engaged in activities requiring some exertion, and the narrative takes some time recounting remembered experience, I have constructed these moments as representative of internal processes that are subjectively understood to take shape in shorter



timeframes—sometimes a split second. Thus, it is that characters hesitate or seem to stall at moments of reckoning (17, 18, 33, 49, 94, 108, 149), since this is how such reckoning appears outside internal experience. Together, these longer passages of remembering, coupled with rapidly formed insights, are depicted in the narrative in positive terms in accordance with the novella's overall aim of supporting cultural change. Insights and epiphanies may appear awkward from the outside, but these reckonings represent moments of personal transformation, undertaken through perspectives on self.

To the pleasures of reading, then, we might add the satisfactions of identification and renewed understandings of self in the process of comprehending the text—what I have called, the mystery of emotion—when readers experience slight modifications and enrichments to their perspective-taking capacities. The realisation that *once I might have acted this way to this kind of situation*, for example, involves perspective-taking of oneself in ways that introduce seemingly objective appraisals—a kind of to-and-fro action from inside and outside subjectivity. This imaginative movement back and forth in time opens up opportunities for the balancing of feeling, as our neurobiological imperative to thrive is doing its work in making reading and reflection a pleasurable experience given that “the virtual realities issuing from imagination come to life through participation” thereby “calling into existence and mapping something hitherto non-existent” (Iser “Context-Sensitivity” 26). With our sensory portals indicating that there are no external challenges, and our visceral sensations in an equally relaxed state, the mental work of reviewing the past in partial terms will have involved re-envisioning past bodily actions and forming simulations based on these recollections in light of the descriptions of the text. In doing so, the mind is involved in constructed exertions while the body remains relaxed, and this disjunction results in a positive homeostatic inference, or a good feeling.

By constructions of characters remembering in ways that correspond to the experience of reading, I mean to suggest that facing up to the past need not be traumatic—particularly when the process allows that reconciliation might be achievable in the future, that this moment of facing up might one day be recalled, and the positive experience of that future instance of recollection will also be made available for future



recollections, and so on and so forth, each bearing the gifts of homeostatic efficiency and good feeling: “Culture develops by adjusting future projections to past performances ... Consequently, culture rests on and arises out of memory, which makes what has passed loop into culture’s continual emergence” (“Context-Sensitivity” 25). This constructive process of a character facing up through acts of reflection, thus accords with Iser’s position on cultural formation, where “Each text is a rewriting of other texts, which are incorporated and stored in the text concerned. Thus, the memory of the text is its intertextuality, which operates through multifarious interrelations” (26). Remembering a difficult situation in a state of ease makes such release from the past possible for the reader too, as “literature presents itself as a training ground for the workings of the imagination. Its flights of fancy allow us to conceive the unthinkable, and to chart the reverse side of a reality by which humans are hedged in” (27). Robbie’s recollections, synthesised through cultural equations or reckonings as she moves to distance herself from those aspects of her cultural identity that she finds repugnant, are key stages in the transformation of her character from avoidant to fully engaged. The alternative—denial or avoidance—is figured in the narrative as an unpleasant experience. This is flagged in performative terms by an instance of involuntary forgetting: when Robbie’s memory of a dream fails her (and she cannot engage in simulations of her past), she is left with “the pain of remembering without the memory itself” (110). She has, in other words, lost access to the benefits of what I term homeostatic efficiency.

We might thus identify the pleasures of reading as relating to basic reading competence (Elfenbein 169, 19) as well as the reader’s abilities in creative and critical thinking (Elfenbein 43-44). Yet, as I have argued, there is more to the pleasure of reading than the joys of achievement (Willis 30; Keen 209). As Barthes observes, “The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do” (Barthes 17). This pleasurable distinction, of there being a difference between what is experienced in the body through ideas, as opposed to what is performed by the body, is the experience of homeostatic efficiency, whereby the predicted exertions of the simulations of story are not borne out by the information supplied by the sensory portals (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin). Overall, we are likely to



feel a pleasantly positive, if mild, sensation when reading is within our competence. Indeed, we are likely to feel even better about it when it demands something more of us and we find ourselves up to the challenge; add to this, the pleasant feeling of homeostatic efficiency when the depicted action exceeds the demands of reading, and there is a strong likelihood that we will find reading enjoyable.

These qualities of reading experience are presumed to have been successfully managed by the close of “Inland by Sea!” when Robbie expresses unconcern at the prospect of having thrown the reader out of the story by begging belief when the narrative takes an improbable turn by returning to the moment of the story’s opening (122, 7). This is because, to Robbie’s mind (implicitly, at least), the narrative has done its work if the reader has reached this point. We might say that this implied reasoning has been confirmed by the “breaking of [our] illusions” (Iser “The Reading Process” 293) on reading the words “The End,” or perhaps earlier still, as we felt the pages of the manuscript thinning. The feelings involved in anticipating the end of any story thus originate in bodily sensation, united with the cognition that this is it—we have reached the end of the road, so to speak. Robbie, by her words, demonstrates her perspective-taking on reading—as someone who knows what it is to reach the end of a narrative, or to abandon one. Thus, the novella concludes on terms that take a perspective on the narrative itself, inviting the reader to do so, offline (Elfenbein 83-100, 117)—to contemplate the thematic material introduced through intertextuality.

Conclusion

Whether by imagining high-action sequences or through complex problem-solving, the demands of reading, when matched to ability-and-then-some (Damasio 12-13, 25; Elfenbein 169), provide readers with opportunities for imaginative achievements through perspective-taking, and for positive feelings brought on by the predicted physiological requirements of the described events exceeding those actually needed for reading. The positive imbalance, which I refer to as a sense homeostatic efficiency, creates pleasurable feelings of wellbeing. In addition to this, our perspective-taking, as readers, opens up opportunities for the intensification of feeling through recursive



processes of thought (thinking about thoughts), which centre on the meaning and relevance of our feelings in a socio-cultural context. Importantly, the capacity for perspective-taking is involved in feeling from the outset. It begins with interoception—whereby we perceive the state of our organism—and proceeds from there to take in our being in the world and the impact of other perspectives and their influence on perceptions of self.

“Inland by Sea!” explores the effects of turning away from uncomfortable truths by limiting one’s perspective. Culture “rests on and arises out of memory” and Robbie’s experience is that such forgetting has not served her (Iser “Context-Sensitivity” 25). Thus, her journey takes her from the circularity of one-eyed perspectivism—symbolised in the spiralling maelstrom and the ammonite-snakestones—to a three-dimensional roundness that reaches its peak as a “lesson in solitude” (Bachelard 233) while she waits in the murky waters of the plateau, before the waters of the inland sea emerge with revelatory force, pushing her off the plateau and to safety.



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