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He watched the Fairlane make its wide turn and head back the way it had come, the tail-lights glinting on the wet tar. Too late, then, to change his plans. He bent to put an arm through the strap of his backpack and shouldered its weight, went up the steps of the hotel. The lobby was high and narrow, less grand than the establishment's name might have suggested and possessed of an unnatural chill. A blue coin-operated phone in the corner was being used by a man with a ponytail, his voice echoing in the empty space. Kelvin pressed the small electric buzzer beside the office window which had attracted the sign, *Ring Bell*, but if doing so had any effect it was not immediately apparent, although the man using the phone stopped talking. The sound of men's voices emanated from behind a set of doors. When Kelvin looked across at the man he was holding the receiver against his chest.

The publican appeared in the office window, asking what he wanted.

‘A room.’

‘Come through then,’ he said, pointing to the doors.

Kelvin made to push through to the Lounge, pleased to be released from the gaze of the other man; except the swing doors caught his bag and held him there, half in, half out. He was obliged to stop and unhook the thing—all his worldly possessions—wrestling it through while the twenty or so men present, interrupted by the little drama, observed this young man whose face gave an appearance of turning in on itself; the confluence of eyebrows and eyes and nose being almost too intense, and this, when complimented by the mouth, with its full sharp-edged lips, making the whole appear overly sensitive, too feminine, too—a risky word here for a man—too beautiful. He gave a small self-deprecating laugh and made a little bow. The men, not given to acknowledging the humour of strangers, returned to their drinks.

The place had had a makeover. It was no longer the beer and tile trough it must have been in the sixties and early seventies. It had been carpeted, colonised by groups of round wooden tables and chunky chairs, the dark patterned walls decorated with a mixture of fishing and logging motifs—glass balls snared in old nets alongside rusty cross-cut saws, sepia photographs of stocky men next to trees of unlikely girth, of slim three-masted schooners out in the bay. All the history of the coastal town displayed, but as decoration: the picture of a killer whale breasting a wave no more significant than the plastic lobsters.

Kelvin doubted Nev would approve the chairs. His father had liked to stand to drink, the sloping lip of the glass held daintily between his thumb and forefinger, a cigarette cupped in the other hand with the lit end turned inwards, the way he’d learned on the boats, stabbing the air with the remaining three fingers to make a point.

‘You got a problem, mate?’ one of the men along the bar said.

‘Sorry mate,’ he said, ‘just dreaming.’

‘You’re not from around here, are you?’

The question indicating more than it might seem, for Eden was now primarily a logging town, not enamoured of the newcomers, those who had once been called hippies but were now referred to as greenies.

The men at the bar themselves bore scant resemblance to those depicted in the photographs on the wall; over the generations their upper bodies had become heavier at the expense of the lower. The mechanical nature of their work had done it, machine operating, truck driving, the relentless use of only the muscles of the arms and shoulders. It gave them the aspect of flightless birds, their swollen bellies perched on skinny legs.

The man who had spoken was wearing a blue singlet and shorts, thongs.

‘Just passing through,’ Kelvin said, adding, as a kind of bona fide, ‘looking for work.’

‘Right,’ the man said, but with justifiable disbelief, for Kelvin was there only for the night, and that by mistake.

Hitching out of Melbourne that morning, heading for Sydney, he’d taken the wrong road. The disaster with Shelley had so confused him he hadn’t noticed. The only thing he’d been sure of was that he was leaving. It wasn’t until he’d got a lift from an RAAF man going to Sale that he’d realised he was on the Coast Road, not the Hume, and even then he hadn’t considered he would have to go through Eden. It was only later, when he had passed Orbost, and then Cann River, when they came to the turn-

off to Malacoota, the Bellbird Hotel slipping by amongst the tall trees, that it came home to him.

He had refused the joints the man and woman in the Fairlane offered, it was too soon after Shelley for that, but the stuff must have seeped in anyway, disarming him. The driver was one of those men who think everyone should be excited about whatever it is that's got them going; raving on about some science fiction book he'd read, about modern music versus old, about the country back of Eden.

'People think they have to go overseas to find paradise,' he said. 'White people have been doing that ever since they came here. They just don't get it. They don't see *this* is the place. Paradise is right here, this is where it is.'

After a while he stopped talking and pushed a cassette into the deck. Johann Sebastian Bach. You had to give him that. And what with the old music winding up and up, and the tall trees and the talk of paradise, Kelvin had been taken by the desire to say that he knew what the bloke had meant. That this was, indeed, God's Own Country. That he'd grown up here. He couldn't ever remember wanting to say that. Perhaps that's what being away does to you: the body remembers the place and the mind forgets the pain. Eden had never been a place he wanted to lay claim to.

He said nothing. He looked out the window at the trees, more trees than you could ever imagine.

The men at the bar weren't finished with him.

'See that bloke over there,' another in the group said, pointing. 'The bloke in the denim shirt?'

'Yes.'

'If you're after work, he'll help you.'

‘Right,’ he said, turning back to the bar and the bottles behind it as a way of saying that the conversation was over, but, because of his lie (you would have thought he would have known better by now), was obliged sooner or later to approach the table where the man in the denim shirt, a rugged type, midthirties, was sitting with a noisy group of younger men.

He looked up at Kelvin, waiting for him to speak.

‘I was told you had work,’ he said, waving his hand in the direction of the men by the bar.

Denim Shirt looked past him. ‘That’s right. You plant trees?’

‘What sort of trees?’

‘Penis fucking radiata,’ a sandy-haired fellow said, and laughed, pleased with his joke, looking around to see how it was received.

‘Pine trees, seedlings,’ Denim Shirt said.

Kelvin stood on the edge of their circle, their little pine-planting clique. ‘I don’t know, how hard can it be?’

‘You haven’t fucking tried it,’ the same man said, and this time raised a laugh.

‘We leave from out the front at six. It’s five days on, two days off, flat rate, six-fifty an hour all up. You interested?’

Kelvin thus caught, having to decide. But then it was always like this, this was how it happened, he’d be going along and a door would open and he’d go in, or he wouldn’t, as the case might be. But mostly he would, if only because the door was there, for no other reason. This time, however, it was different. This time he was standing in the bar of the Australasia in Eden, the pub he’d sat outside as a child for more afternoons than he cared to remember, bribed by his father or mother into waiting with a lemon squash and a bag of chips.

'I'll give it a shot,' he said.

'We won't wait,' Denim Shirt replied. 'If you're there, you're there.'

two

At 6 am the air was cold enough to make the breath steam. He stomped his feet on the pavement, re-calculating the dollars for hours ratio for a week's work, stuffing his hands in his pockets, looking up and down the main street for the pick up. There was something strangely temporary about the town that could not be solely attributed to the great length of vacant spaces marked out for central parking. With the exception of the hotel every building was cheaper and tackier than the next; as if the occupants had originally intended to stay only for as long as the whales, or the fish, or the trees had lasted, and hadn't had much hope even for that.

The transport was a beaten Toyota troop carrier. The Denim Shirt, Al, was at the wheel. Kelvin pushed his bag under the feet of the men and climbed in the back.

They went South on the highway out of town, turning inland on an interminable dirt road, ascending and descending, winding and bumping past the shapes of dark-barked trees, the gears grinding, the men shaken against each other and the metal walls. Dust percolated throughout the cabin and collected on the outside of the back window so there was nothing to see except the chipped paint and the other men, their closed-eyed, unshaven faces thick with sleep.

Kelvin knew these men. Or if not them then others like them. He'd worked with them on fishing trawlers out of Darwin. Men called Stevo and Anthill, or Davo and Bill, strong men with few brains who yet—and this was the hard part—had lives just as rich as his own. This being the bit he always had difficulty with: the difference between the mass of humanity, even in the shape of a small town, and the individuals within it, each with their own story. He could smell the alcohol on them. After shore leave the men would return to the boats rancid and surly from the drinking, bragging and aggressive, taking days to sweat it out. Chances were, it had been on him too. He wasn't blind to the family connection in the work, but that was not why he'd chosen it; it had simply paid well, without demanding more than time and labour; because often enough he was as stupid as the rest of them.

The French girl, Yvette, was a case in point. She'd blown into Darwin as crew on a pleasure yacht and stayed. After they'd been going together a while they shared a flat for several weeks, and it had been Kelvin's first time like that with a woman. Domestic. Her idea had been to get work on boats up through the Pacific Islands, she'd almost talked him into leaving with her. She had wanted to take him around the world, to Paris, to her home in Lyons, and show him, her Australian boy, what it was

really like to be alive, and he might have gone, the passport issue aside, except that he had woken up next to her one morning, she had been really very pretty, small, a sweet face, her lips whitened by the sun, nice breasts, nice parts, a body so tight it felt as if her skin could hardly contain it, as if there was no room for anything more inside, he woke beside her and he ran his hand across that skin and she had been smooth and brown and hard, and he had thought, *it's over*, just like that. He was bored, nothing more to it. He was twenty-one years old working fishing trawlers in the Arafura Sea and fucking a pretty French girl and smoking Thai sticks and had a problem that sailing around the world would not have fixed.

He started hitching South. He'd been in Darwin long enough. He was not, generally, burdened by connection. He liked being able to move to new places, to make new friends, meet women, then move along. The only exception to this rule had been Shelley, and it had been too long since he had heard from her, he didn't even know where she was. Melbourne he'd guessed. He had imagined her in a penthouse, cocktail glasses on the bar, a beautiful long, shimmering dress, a view out over the glinting city.

It had taken three days to reach Tennant Creek and he spent two more there, standing beside the road. Every car that passed condemning him for leaving Yvette. So much so he might almost have turned back. Instead he paid out valuable currency for a bus ticket to Alice Springs, and then, suddenly urgent to keep going, paid out more to take the train the rest of the way south.

Except that the train had proved to be a line of flatbeds hauling trucks to Port Augusta with only one ancient passenger carriage tacked onto the end. Sometimes it hardly went faster than a walk. He smoked cigarettes on the little veranda at the front of the carriage. He'd never conceived there could be so little in a landscape, even less

than in the open sea. The brightness hurt his eyes. Part of him would have like to stay out there, without even the carriage window between him and the desert, but the loneliness was too much for him, the lack of anything except the splintery boards to push against too frightening. Out there, without another woman to take her place, he was unable to deny that he missed Yvette with a fierce pain. He had had to work hard to remember the claustrophobia her tight body had induced, to remember why it was he'd thought she was the stupid one.

When they came out of the forest the sun was up. Peering forward he caught glimpses of a wide green valley with fields that climbed to timber on the ridges, a broad sandy river, several isolated houses made from weatherwashed timber, a post-office store, corn growing on the flats. The remnants of a town.

'Coalwater,' the driver said and turned across the river on a rattling sleeper bridge.

The men stirred. They coughed and stretched and lit cigarettes. They swore and opened the small sliding windows and spat into the moving air.

An even smaller road followed the river for a while, rising slowly onto the ridge and into the trees. After a time it came out in another valley, into a broad stretch of cleared land. A creek was marked by a curving line of scrub. An old homestead had a driveway of ancient gums leading down.

'Here we are then,' Al said. 'Anthill, put the billy on will you mate.'

The work was dreadful. Heavy machinery had been over the ground, trailing a deep-ripping plough, and the trees were planted in the narrow bands of disturbed earth it had left behind.

The process was simple, take three paces, insert the spade, push with the boot, extract a seedling from the shoulder bag and free it from its little pot, place it in the ground and firm with the boot, take three paces... but the ground was broken and steep and the plough lines took no heed of topography, marching up and down the slope. The shoulder bag was heavy, swinging forward every time he bent with the spade or the tree, and there were flies, a small swarm of them that seemed to have worked out their own routine, most of them resting on his back, drinking his sweat, taking it in turns to be the two or three that bothered his eyes and nose. Over the next rise, or perhaps the next, was the end of the row, at which point it was time to stand up and stretch, to walk past the straggling group of men to an empty row and start back down again.

It was the sort of work that is designed to induce a hatred of the land and everything in it. And if hatred is too strong a word then it can be replaced with indifference, which in terms of land is just as dangerous. Yet every time Kelvin reached the far end—an elevated region with views out over the valley—a feeling of elation took hold. He stopped and breathed and looked out, searching for the landmarks that might place him. The property must once have been magnificent, with rolling paddocks and dark gullies bounded on three sides by forest. It sloped gently down to the distant Coalwater, rising, on the other side, to a grand bush-covered mountain one whole end of which was bare rock. It was the combination that did it to him, the fields *and* the trees, the broad sky overhead. He adjusted the strap on his shoulder, brushed the flies from his face, and began again.

They had been joined by some men from a neighbouring community which Stevo, the comedian, referred to as Hippiedom. At lunch they all sat together on the grass in the shade of the giant gums near the homestead. The hippies were thin and

tall and well-tanned, dressed in denim jeans or old army pants, just like the others, except they were bearded and long-haired and their shirts had once been fancy Indian things with embroidery at the collars. They spoke, too, in the same way as the men out of Eden, using the same coarse, cutting humour, except from their mouths it sounded strangely false. If the Eden men hadn't been there Kelvin would hardly have noticed, but beside them it appeared to be a kind of studied ignorance. As if the hippies thought putting on this vernacular granted them membership of the worker's club.

When they'd finished eating the hippies announced they were going for a walk. They went around the back of the homestead.

'A walk my arse,' said Anthill.

'Fucken drongos,' Stevo said. He mimed holding a joint to his mouth and sucked in loudly. He lay back on the grass, crossed his booted feet, and yawned. He put his hands behind his head, amongst the tousled mass of blonde hair, and closed his eyes. His face, vaguely familiar, was almost handsome in a larrikin way, except for, or perhaps because of, a certain cruelty.

Kelvin would have liked to go with the hippies, not because of any particular affinity with them, simply out of the desire for a joint. A smoke, never mind that he'd promised himself he'd give it away, would have helped this kind of work, easing the passage of the afternoon. He could have gone; he'd seen their invitation—the meeting of eyes and the slight tilt of the head—but he'd been too slow to move. It had felt like it would be premature to abandon the company of the Eden men.

Stevo stirred himself. He pointed towards the house,

'How come you put up with these cunts, Al?' he said.

Al was engaged in the process of extracting a packet of Winfield Blue from his shirt pocket.

‘Al?’

‘They do the work,’ he said, the cigarette between his lips.

‘You know what they’re doin’ don’t ya? It’s not like you need to stretch your fucken legs.’

‘It’s not exactly a workplace health and safety issue,’ Al said.

‘They’re all on the fucken dole, growing marijuana out there.’ He turned to Kelvin. ‘You watch out for them mate,’ he said. ‘They’ll be onto you.’

‘How come?’

‘Just watch it. They’re full of shit, mate.’

‘Look who’s talking,’ Al said.

‘I say what I think,’ Stevo said.

‘See the fucken wimmin,’ Anthill said. He was a small man, Stevo’s sidekick, narrow in the face, but also in his manner, it was unclear whether his nick-name derived from his christian name or his appearance.

‘What about the women, Anthill?’ Davo said, smirking. He cupped his hands over his chest, ‘Is it the tits you like, swinging free?’

Anthill grinned, showing his yellow teeth.

‘You fucking wish,’ Davo said.

When he saw they were laughing at him Anthill lowered his head.

‘Fucken greenies,’ Stevo said.

‘They’re just people,’ Al said.

‘Jackshit.’

‘I’m not going to argue with you.’

‘You’d waste your breath.’

Anthill kicked Stevo’s leg. The others had come out from behind the homestead. When they reached them they sat on the logs, smiling, as if sharing some secret joke, like a row of jackanapes. One of them, apropos of nothing, said,

‘Right.’

‘Yeah,’ another agreed.

‘Shall we then?’ Al said, standing.

The afternoon was harder than the morning. The swinging bag wore a strip of flesh off his shoulder and there were blisters on his hands. Every step involved placing his foot on broken ground, up or down, neither easier than the other.

Stevo came abreast of him, planting two trees for every one of his.

‘Buggered, mate?’

‘A bit,’ Kelvin said.

‘Thought you’d be. You don’t look like the type.’

Kelvin stopped, ‘What type is that?’

‘No offence, mate,’ Stevo said, ‘you don’t look like you done much of this shit.’

‘More’n you’d know,’ Kelvin said.

‘I reckon I seen your face somewhere,’ Stevo said.

That would have been eight, nine years ago in school, Kelvin thought, having placed him now, an older boy, a bully even then. ‘You been to Sydney?’ he said. ‘That’s where I come from,’ working the lie, watching it work.

‘Up the Smoke, eh? That’s what I meant. It’s not like this up there, is it? Not so hard.’

Stevo pulled out a packet of rollies and made a cigarette, offered the pack to Kelvin. 'I was up there once,' he said. 'Got some cousins who live in Strathfield. You know Strathfield?'

'Sydney's a big place.'

If he'd had more energy Kelvin would have mustered up some real dislike for the man, but he was too tired. He rolled a cigarette and lit it, then picked up his spade.

'I'm going slow,' he said, 'I better get back to it. Thanks for the smoke.'

Stevo watched, leaning on his tool.

'See that bag,' he said, 'you need to tie it back. Bastard the way it swings around. Use a bit of baling twine. Some in the truck.'