

Heirs to Ahmegodheho

By Garry Victor Hill

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For

Arthur Rees 1912-2013

Jack Grancharoff 1925-2016

Mac Gudgeon Senior 1914-2016

Mac Gudgeon Junior 1949-2023

And Ann

Prologue

Heirs  
March 1985

Book One  
Child  
February 1895

Book Two  
Adolescent  
November 1909

Book Three  
Soldier  
December 1914

Book Four  
Cavalryman  
February 1916

Book Five  
Warlord  
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Millionaire  
September 1921

Book Seven  
Upholder  
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Epilogue  
Heirs  
March 2005

Prologue

Heirs

March 1985

Alexander McPherson

Eloura 24<sup>th</sup> March 1985

It was all over. Whoever inherited would only inherit the wealth and the places and the places would be either museums or tombs, not living fortresses for a lord.

How had he managed to achieve this so late in history? Until late in the twentieth century he lived like a feudal warlord, not in the mountains of Afghanistan or the jungles of Columbia, but here in Australia. Even four years ago he could get away with a public whipping and threatening to have his son in law murdered if he did not redecorate at his demand - and he was not bluffing. He was born in 1890 when the now faded away British Empire was at his height and he was born into the aristocracy, but even then, the basically feudal way of life he embodied was under threat from technology, urbanisation and an ever increasingly pervasive, assertive democracy. Europe 1914 and then Russia 1917 and the mad 1960s definitely put more nails into that coffin. Yet he continued, fighting like a Medieval crusader in far off lands, returning rich with exotic plunder to our rural backwater where he did his best to make time stand still and rule like a lord - and remarkably, succeeded for over sixty years.

But what happens now?

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Book One

Child

February 1895

Ross Clarke

Clarkestead 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1895

“Today is a very important day for young Ross, isn’t it? Grandfather Clarke asked everybody in the parlour in a big loud voice like the travelling players on the stage in town. It was not really a question people were meant to answer, just like nobody was meant to interrupt the actors when they were meant to pay attention.

“Of course it is!” Grandmother Clarke spoke in the same way, but she had music in her voice and merry eyes and a nice smile. He had a big red nose with fine purple lines and long white hair high at the back so he looked like a circus clown. When saying that last week Mother gave me an extra Sabbath strapping. She did not like it when told that strapping was labour and should not be done on the Sabbath against the commandment, but she did not like anything much.

“Why is it such a big day young Ross?” Uncle Reg asked. He knew, but mother and father told me to always be polite and answer adults.

“Because it is my birthday, so I am five and when you are five you start school.”

“Too right! And you will do a good job of it!” Uncle Max beamed. He liked me, not many of the adults really did, but they pretended. Uncle Reg and Uncle Max were not brothers, but they married Aunt Mary and Aunt Zelda, my mother’s sisters. Aunt Edna who was not really an aunt but was nearly one: when she was my age she had come out from Scotland and had been their best friend since primary school and adopted sort of anyway by my mother's mother after her mother died when she was in primary school. She sat there with a big tummy from where the babies come. Her husband Reverend Ian McPherson was from Scotland to, but a different part and he was our Anglican minister. He sipped on tea and munched on biscuits when he did not wish to speak.

“Well young Ross, what are you going to be when you finish



school?" Aunt Zelda asked to be polite, she did not like me either. Grandmother did, she answered.

"He will be lord and master of Clarkestead."

"What!" Grandfather's eyes nearly popped out of his head and the rest of his face went as red as his nose. "Robert has primogeniture!"

"Last week you told Robert that he was going to be a colonel." Grandmother smiled.

"And so I did and so he will be, and he will also be a gentleman farmer. Back home many hold rank and tend estates simultaneously!"

When he said home in that very strong way he meant England, where the Clarkes came from, especially him. Robert would be seven in October so he was the eldest and therefore Grandfather's favourite. Grahame was three the day before yesterday so we shared a cake. He was grandmother's favourite. My sister Caroline was thirteen soon so she was too old to be anybody's favourite. Uncle Max added some words.

"Well perhaps Robert will find that putting down rebellions in the empire to be a very time-consuming business and that Ross will be invaluable for maintaining the estate and the family heritage."

"Perhaps." My mother did not speak very often but when she did it was in a voice as sharp as her face and people stopped smiling and listened. That is what Grandmother Clarke did, but for two seconds something went across her face like when kids dislike being ordered about.

They did not want to talk about us anymore, so Aunt Zelda asked Aunt Edna when the baby was due, even though everybody knew.

"Next week the doctor says. It feels like a girl and if so, she will be named Ruth, for the biblical Ruth showed fortitude in adversity and cleaved to her family."

Everybody knew that Aunt Edna McPherson wanted another girl for

she had three sons. Karl the eldest would be thirteen on Christmas Day and is going to be a doctor, Alex was three soon and he would be a lawyer, while Andrew, who all the aunt and uncles agreed was very nice and polite and never did anything wrong and laughed all the time, well he who would turn four on Empire Day in May and he would be an Anglican priest like his father and Meloni would be a minister's wife. The McPhersons always planned everything very far ahead and had a very neat house and knew what would happen next and nobody ever disagreed, but what would I be?

After saying goodnight and left my parents and grandparents in the parlour I realised the lead horse and the barn in the farm set given for my birthday were back in the parlour, but soon knew not to go in for Grandfather was not pretending anymore and had his real face on, serious and hard. They all looked serious and worried, but he spoke low.

“Son, if you make Ross your heir you will regret it; already he has a way of at best making himself disliked, at worst hated, so he will be ostracised - and this evident at five. Throughout his life making enemies will be his main talent. Oh, he has intelligence, but resolve this by following custom or their will be strife and my life's work here and my father's life work here, in making Clarkestead as good as an English estate, will be in ruins.”

“For once we are in agreement, although we should wait to see how Grahame turns out.”

That was my mother speaking. I waited for my father to say something, but Uncle Max spoke up for me, best to creep away.

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Ross Clarke

Clarkestead 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1897

It was very early in the morning, even before the sky was a little bit grey before the sun gets up. The big drought was over, at least for us. We

hadn't seen the sun for days and days because it rained drizzly or hard nine days nearly, autumn was early. All the animals were still in the barns or stables so they wouldn't sink in the mire and die or get rainy diseases and die that way, but they were all restless and made their noises in a sad way, like as if they knew it would not make any difference and it didn't. The ground was so soggy the buck board sank to the axles when Dad tried to ride it to town, but the rain had stopped last night just as the farewell party for Dad was ending. Grandmother was too sick to come anyway so Uncle Max and Aunt Zelda did not come either.

Uncle Reg said "it was a bit of a dampener of a party." Among the Eloura townies only Reverend and Edna McPherson with their boys, my classmates Karl, his younger brothers Alexander and Andrew (my best friends) their sisters big Meloni and little Ruth, two years old last month, and their parents got through the mire and so did close-by cousins, Alison, in her last school year, and her younger brothers, Murie, Douglas and Allen, children of Uncle Reg and Aunt Mary. Uncle Sean came to, well Sean was adopted actually, a foundling probably left by Irish itinerants as they wrote "Sean Protestant" an Irish name, on his toddler blanket, he worked regular on their farm. The Fishers were farmers despite their name and they lived not even a mile up the road.

Dad joked that the party still had lots of uneaten food left over from Christmas but no free space as few turned up for the feed, but those who did were all sleeping in the guest room and the parlour.

Everyone else was asleep, but the snores and my older brother Robert talking in his sleep were loud. I was pretending to be asleep but wasn't really. Last night Dad had said goodbye to the four of us, his kids and our friends and cousins here, and he said to me "Say your goodbyes now. You are not running round the house at four of the morning clock disturbing your mother and the guests." He smelled of wet horse,

antimacassar hair oil, beer and broughams that had feet in them too long. Best to watch, but not be found out. Dad was kind, but you never disobeyed. Mum and Dad and my sister Caroline were all moving about in that tense, cranky, rustley way people have when they don't want to wake up early but do and don't want to wake the lucky ones who can sleep in. Farmers always do that because except in rainy winter they are almost always up before dawn, Sabbath excepted.

Caroline could stay up because she was big, fifteen now. She went past our ajar door in her nightdress, dressing gown, slippers and shawl with her hair unplaited. She always unplaited her chestnut hair before she went to sleep and gave it eighty counted out brush strokes in front of her fancy mirror with all the gilt. She "loved herself to excess" Robert said and even Mother said twenty brush strokes was sufficient and the rest was worldly vanity.

We four, the three McPherson children, and the four Fisher cousins were all nicknamed the bunch of chestnuts in school and out, because we stuck close together like gum nuts on a branch and got hair that chestnutty colour, us from Mum, the McPhersons because there are many red-haired people in Scotland. Uncle Reg says with horses, cattle and people red and chestnut are the strongest colours and always dominate; Reverend Ian McPherson, Uncle Reg and Dad were all blondes of some shade, but none of their kids were. Everybody thought Mum and Aunt Edna were sisters because they had the same hair colour, and were close, but they were just old school-friends.

"Father" she called out. Here is your sash, ironed last night."

"Thank you Caroline, but keep your voice down now." Dad whispered back.

"Could you fold this carefully and place it atop my sabre case?" She went off down the hall carrying an oil lamp and soon came back.

“All’s nicely packed under oilskins so the rain won’t spoil.”

“Be a good girl while we are away. You’ll get some English dresses if all the money does not go on beer.” Father paused smiling, as if he had a sudden good idea. Perhaps a wedding dress?”

“There’s nobody. There’s no intention to find a suitor either.” She was not a good liar.

“Well perhaps not till we return in August?”

Dad was going all the way to London. Our Light Horse Militia had won prizes up in Sydney so they were going to be a platoon in the New South Wales colony contingent in the Queen’s Jubilee celebrations in London in June. The boat was fast, two months and a bit most times, but they needed long stopovers in Cairns, Singapore, Bombay, Aden, Suez and Gibraltar. Their horses can’t be cooped up too long, they need exercise and fresh fodder. Uncle Sean was going as well and lots of Eloura district men. Mother did not like that; bits of the arguments came through the wall late at night and Mother had a way of glaring with her lips tight and moving when she was angry and she was like that now and had been for ages and ages.

“Well Frank get going if you are going. The train won’t wait! Will it?”

“Not much of a summer, was it?”

“That will not be your concern for very much longer.”

“You’ll get sent any money I should come across.”

“Any money you should come across? Are you talking of gambling?”

“Gambling? No not at all.”

But he was. He sounded just a bit like we do when we lie to the teacher about mischief and everybody knows a kidding game starts. Mother sounded like a teacher should. She was one once, long ago before

Robert was born.

“Yes you were. Gambling will always be a sinful practice that tricksters use to fleece family men of their hard-earned wages. My parents warned me that you had a feckless side. At times you and Sean are still boys. That is why you are riding off – again.”

“The whole contingent won the competition. Everybody has to -”

“Reg got out of it.”

“Well, that’s Reg.”

Dad sounded a little bit cranky when he said that and that set Mother’s temper off, like we knew it would and Dad did not, even if my age is seven since the start of February, but people say 'Ross appears smart for his age' and our teacher Mister Kedda, who took special care of my English, because my abilities were so promising, put me up one grade.

“No! That is not Reg! That is common sense! The great drought and depression might be over here but... The farm must come first and every halfway decent farmer kn-“

“Rachel you are waking the household.”

Dad was right, People were astir and Uncles Reg and Sean starting to pack: not Robert though. Although he talked in his sleep, not much woke him. “Wake up boy! Yer snore like a herd of pigs when yer aren’t yakking on about how you must do better!” Uncle Reg said that as he was on his way to the outhouse. Asleep or awake Robert talked about doing better. “It is very early” he announced, in this loud, slightly cranky, polished voice he used with adults he thought were in the wrong, but he could not say so. Robert did not get on with anybody really. Alex and cousin Evelyn a bit, they went to the same boarding school and Caroline who was a bit fussy and fancy too, she fussed over him like a favourite doll. Grahame my younger brother was better; we shared a room and he

was Robert's opposite, always smiling and laughing and up to games and mischief, like Uncle Sean.

My parents had gone to the barn to argue, where the animals and the big thick door blocked the sound. I went down the corridor to get Uncle Sean and there was Caroline were standing in the arbour, talking softly with funny looks on their faces. She had on a dressing gown and over night clothes and so should not have been alone with a man dressed like that: everybody knows this. He reached across to put his hand over hers and she pulled it away, but her face looked like the faces of the field hands had at the races, when they don't know if they should bet all their wages on a horse or not. Her hand fluttered back and forth like a little animal she was trying to control and couldn't and then she stroked the top of his hand and put it on the back of her neck. His fingers were going through her hair, but when he leaned forward, she pulled back and her jaw and lips were set hard with her nostrils flaring like a horse's does and her eyes strange and her voice was hard too.

"It is against the laws of God and man and don't tell me you are not really just a field hand, for you feel like one to me."

"Really? Then why let me?"

"I only let you touch me, nothing more. You are too wild and... and... Well, how many women before me? Can you recall?"

Nobody should be hearing this and I was about to back away when toddler Murie tramping down the corridor, making for the outhouse now he was off potties probably. People said I was precious and sharp and quiet for my age but nobody ever said that about Murie, the chestnut class clown. He would make some funny comment about them in his big loud voice. Uncle Reg would be walking back from the outhouse and see them and that would be trouble so I marched on the spot, making it seem like I had just reached the back door and called out.

“Uncle Sean shouldn't your horse be saddled? It is nearly time.”

Yes, it really was.

Caroline heaved a sigh and spoke in her level voice. “Yes indeed, *Uncle Sean* is nearly ready.” Murie and backed off, past the others waking up and Mother and Dad were arguing at the front.

“Well Frank you must kick the traces and gallop off every so often and that's all there is to it, even if your mother-in-law ails. You looked like fools the last two times when you went on foreign voyages. First the Zulus surrendered before your transport even reached Africa and then you were turned away at Sydney docks because the boats were overloaded with patriotic volunteers for the Sudan, or were they just out for a lark with easy black women? There are men like that. Hopefully you will spend the jubilee in a Southampton quarantine station and don't come back with a disease.” Then Mother stamped off.

Dad just stood there in his uniform and oilskins, hat in one hand, reins in the other. He seemed sad and from the way he bit his lip and fumed, about to say something, as if he was changing his mind, but then Sean rode up. He was not really an Uncle any more after Caroline emphasised that word as if he was false. Suddenly he looked to me just as mother and her sisters had said, like a field hand who 'was getting above his station in life, advancing himself, handsome as the devil and maybe as much trouble.' Alison said that to Mum as well, saying that as his teacher she had educated him above his station, he now talked as good as a teacher and had not known what all them women meant but I understood now. He was a bad man. Dad rode off, very quietly, not jaunty like we all expected. We watched though the sky was grey now and the mist was too thick and could hear mother starting on the fire for breakfast, but she just broke up kindling making it sound cranky and then went off. Caroline stayed on the veranda, standing still as she absently fingered her hair,



looking over the fields waiting for the sound. We went back to bed and as it was quiet and still with no noises from animals, rain, wind, or people, so I could hear the sound, the dull rumble of the dawn train, faint off in the distance, taking Dad and our platoon contingent to Sydney, just as the sky went light grey with a weak sun the colour of wizening weak old lemons coming up, so I went to sleep.

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Ross Clarke

Clarkestead 24<sup>th</sup> July 1897

Dad sent us tons and tons of postcards and letters and press clippings and sometimes even presents as well. So did Uncle Max, he being the richest man in the district. He was also Sergeant-Major. We had a complete replica of the whole jubilee procession in lead figures with cardboard cut outs of the road and buildings as well. With the primary school for the chestnuts and now our neighbours the Caufields (blondes really, not related and not true chestnuts) and the itinerant kids being run in our kitchen the teacher Mister Kedda let us work on it at lunch times and if we were good. It was great fun for everybody and who really wanted to learn Latin or French? Only Robert.

The replica was fourteen feet long, so it was lucky we had school in our big kitchen. Squatocracy farms usually had a fireplace big enough to roast a beef carcass in, and we do that sometimes. We have a matching table that could sit twenty comfortably. Our school table was a bench actually, a big old cedar from the cedar clearing days here eighty years back. Grandfather had it cut right down the middle and the bark removed from the tree's half circle with that middle sanded, made level and polished up with under it lots of supports hammered in to steady it. The kitchen work benches matched in shape and were twenty feet long or thereabouts and a second fireplace, coppers for hot water, a big pantry, iceboxes, and stoves – and if you had style you did not crowd out the

kitchen with all that. Our kitchen took up one sixth of our big house and Uncle Reg said we had style.

When we finished installing Queen Victoria's Jubilee replica Uncle Reg, (acting mayor whenever Uncle Max was away) came and requested that we put it on display in his emporium in Eloura as the central piece in his patriotic Jubilee display. As Uncle Max had sent much of it we could hardly refuse. We got our picture in the paper, standing in a group "the Chestnut primary" and lots of people came to see the display.

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Grandmother Clarke, father's mother, lived with Uncle Max and Aunt Zelda in the big house in town after Grandfather Clarke died, but one day the housemaid found her on her back gurgling blood. The doctor came and said moving her to hospital could finish her off so they left her there with the Aunts Mary and Zelda, Mrs McPherson, Cousin Alison and mother taking turns at what they called the watch, but soon she was dead. She had been a nice person.

She was laid out in their parlour and as Grahame said, she looked like the wax clothing dummies in Uncle Max's emporium. My mother's mother spoiled the party because she had died on the Christmas Eve before I turned five, so we knew what to expect and did not like it one bit. We all had to dress in black suits or dresses and line up outside in the corridor and Alison, Murie, Douglas and Allen were behind Aunt Mary and Uncle Reg. Mother had us in line. Caroline, Robert, me and Grahame and Evelyn and Leo were behind Aunt Zelda. We children understood, well a bit. Grandmother's three daughters were lined up eldest to youngest, just like their children and they went in a group at a time. Alison and Douglas came out looking pale, angry and sick, Murie stank of vomit, and Uncle Reg held snarling, kicking, swearing little Allen by the neck. We could not believe how bad the words were. Aunt Mary was

in tears. We soon found out why when it was our turn.

There she was in her coffin and we were supposed to kiss her. My mother stood by with her hands clasped together in a ball and her hair pulled back tight in a bun and her face like one of the carvings of the Pharaohs in the books on Ancient Egypt we studied at school.

“Caroline.”

She stepped forward, kissed Grandmother as expected and walked back in line.

“Robert.” He did the same but he was smiling.

“Ross.”

“Will not.”

“Ross!”

I talked like Evelyn did under the Christmas mistletoe: “The only women I want to kiss are pretty young ones!”

Mother’s mouth dropped open and Grahame and cousin Allen laughed. I knew to run out quick and so did Grahame. In the corridor Evelyn saw us and followed.

“What’s up?”

Grahame told him as we ran.

“Jackson’s Island!”

That was code from *Tom Sawyer*. It meant to run off from adults.

“Follow me boys! To the stables first!” Evelyn called out jubilant. He was always ready for mischief.

With Grahame on back we rode all the way to Roydtown, where Evelyn used his pocket money to buy supplies and he had a cave in the purple mountains west of there. It was more like a humpy, bark sheets across big rocks and Grahame saw a snake, it rained that night, the humpy leaked, there were flies and no toilet paper and not much to do, so we rode back in time to attend the funeral and sat in church. Even Alison

who was never angry before and always kind, well she was angry now and Mother worse than that, but they said nothing. Robert did not run with us and so was chosen to lead the funeral procession. He got to wear all black, even a little waistcoat and a black top hat with something like a grey cummerbund wrapped around it and flowing in two bands off the brim and down his back. Everything and everyone was in black, even the horses wore black feathers and the black procession moved up the street to the cemetery.

“It looks like the black snake we saw.” Grahame said in a loud voice that everyone else heard. Evelyn and I looked at each other and knew that was worth another ten strap blows.

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Rachel Clarke

Clarkestead 27<sup>th</sup> July 1897

Everything after the biblically allotted three score and ten is a sign of God’s grace. My mother-in-law was given seven more, perhaps the last grace anyone would give to this family. Her funeral was bad enough and an indication. Long before then it was regrettably clear how the boys would develop. People say that parents shape character, but only a little. Grahame had inherited his father’s feckless streak and got more from somewhere else. Sean was clearly a bad influence. Frank could usually reluctantly see the value of hard work, manners, thrift and the necessity for seriousness in serious situations, but Grahame gave no indication of ever being like that. Everything was pleasure now with that one. He was too much like my nephews, Evelyn, Max’s eldest and Reginald’s youngest Allen. Wastrels those three would be. Nobody could say Robert was not serious enough. He rarely smiled and had this way of always talking as if he was giving a valedictory speech in which every sentence began with I. We had let my aristocratic, somewhat pompous father-in-law have too much influence over him. Grahame was too young, but the

others absorbed it. He would sit there in the parlour with his stories and genealogy documents, his medals and books, telling them about their noble ancestry traceable back to 1223, knights, lords, castles, barons, bishops and brigadiers, infusing them with a sense of being aristocrats.

He must have been busy with his wars in the Crimea and then India in the 1850s, the latter being when and where Frank was born, for Frank was always the most unpretentious, affable and homely of men; people assumed from his accent, clothes and manner that he was a poor struggling Australian farmer, not the British born and educated master of four thousand acres of prime dairy and orchid land and a fine twelve room stone house. We had a proper carriage, and a phaeton and a herd of twelve thoroughbreds, not inclusive of our Clydesdales for work.

Caroline and Ross seemed to absorb some of their grandfather's attitudes, but Robert was the one who took in every word and wanted more. Assiduously studying Burke's peerage and heraldry while learning fencing, falconry, aristocratic English customs, French and Latin from grandfather, who told him these were the accomplishments of a gentleman. Fortunately, he died suddenly late last year before he could start the course in turning a ten- year- old into a card playing wine connoisseur. Frank delaying us meeting Franklin senior until we were virtually engaged.

After asking if I took sugar in my tea he says "Ancestry?" as if proffering a cake he had taste for and hoped we shared it. After being told we were free settlers who had arrived in Sydney in 1808 and opened the Eloura district a decade later he should be impressed. "Three generations, is that all?" In attempting to cover my error I made a worse one, telling him that in our family bible the first known forebear was a colour sergeant in Cromwell's New Model Army. His mouth dropped before he started off.

“The Clarkes were the King’s right hand in the West Country! And when it was apparent that with Cromwell’s victory at Worcester 1651 our cause was lost, did we retreat? The leader of the Clarkes refused and said ‘All who prefer an honourable death to living in this godless, kingless Gomorrah follow me!’ And they did, charging down from the hill into that last meleé.....”

He stopped absolutely motionless, mouth and eyes wide and he apparently had apoplexy, but no. Then he did something extraordinary. In a calm, polite voice he asked “Cromwellian. Well you possibly can’t be a Catholic. Are you dissenter or chapel or a weird cultist by any chance?”

My head shaking gained his sigh of relief.

“Anglican?” His voice had a tremor of hope.

“Yes, but low church evangelical. Good enough for Antrim Ladies Anglican, where your wife Celia née Hill, was also educated. My father Cedric was a Hill, a third cousin to your Celia, so by paternal descent, I am also a descendant of the High Constables of Ulster, but later. We migrated to Ulster after Cromwell. A cousin married a cousin.” The proffered genealogies descent lines fascinated.

“Well!” It was all he could say, so he said it again. His eyes gleamed. Suddenly we were old pals. He nodded in relief and got on to land values and the weather and stayed there while I wondered if silliness, stupidity and near madness were heredity. They were.

Robert was born like him. His very proper accent and grammar, ability to recall facts, always be immaculate and recite concealed stupidity, just as parrots can seem intelligent to the unknowing. Both Robert and his grandfather began nearly every sentence with “I” and just could not understand why people were not entranced with tales of Clarkes at Waterloo, Clarke speeches in the House of Lords and their genealogy. Their habit of calling others “my good fellow” or “dear lady” was one

aspect of the patronising ways that made an enemy of almost everyone they met. They never seemed to realise that Australia was not quite England and that the many dispossessed Scottish highlanders, cockneys and lower-class Britons were glad it was not. Add to these at least a third of the population were Irish Catholics or their progeny and racial inter-breeds, so clearly upper-class English ways should be used only in some circles.

There were many like my father in law. Idiots releasing pestilential rabbits and foxes on this landscape. Instead of seeing that, Grandfather Clarke started a fox hunting club with red coats and all the traditional accoutrements and rules. Even the Chapmans smiled at that and after he died it disintegrated and only Robert could not understand why. Even when the pair of them pranced the horses round the farmhouse, Robert with the ritual fox blood streaked on his face as his initiation and him or the silly old duffer holding aloft the remnants of a fox's carcass shouting "a kill, a kill!" they never knew that people were laughing at them, let alone understanding why. Robert probably never would wake up. And there was something else, the too-neat appearance. The too-handsome face and those curling lips, almost girlish, but with a cruelty to them...

Ross was different, puzzling, most definitely a conundrum. So quiet, with eyes that saw too much for a child. Far too quiet. The others would take their strappings with cries or crying until it was instilled in them that it was unmanly. No need to instil that on that one: he would not even blink. Just study my face most assiduously – and not apologise. "What is wrong with going to our pool when the milking girls are there?" Once again, the unblinking stare, genuinely puzzled. "Well if they don't want to be seen without clothes why take them off?"

"Every Wednesday morning the girls go to the pool and males don't and that rule should suffice!"

He could not understand and we all knew that belting was no cure or even a preventative. Beneath the habitual stillness there was a wildness to him, beneath the immaculate manners something else - ruthlessness. Robert was the one who talked about being a soldier, but Ross was the one without fear, the one who tried sneaking off to fight bush fires year before last and he attacked and killed a charging black snake last month. Grahame was another of my odd little boys, yet different again to his older brothers: feckless, reckless, never serious and never understanding, just fun, fun, fun.

Thank God for my daughter Caroline, so Godly, righteous and usually level headed, but from what appears evident of her involvement with false Uncle Sean, she remains unwise in the ways of the world and the sooner we marry her to a decent man the better. She seemed to like the schoolteacher Master Kedda, his hairline was receding at not yet thirty: yet he seemed over fifty. He had little imagination and he was a townie, from Stirling in Scotland originally. But like most Scots, thrifty, hardworking, level-headed and without whimsy. Even better he was Anglican and nobody's cousin here, there was too much of that in Eloura.

\*

Ross Clarke

Clarkestead 28<sup>th</sup> October 1897

Dad came back. He looked happy when he poked his head out of the train carriage waving and he had dresses for Mother and Caroline, just like he promised he would. With the militia returning we had a parade and speeches, music and stalls at the Eloura Commemorative Park. We already had a statue of Queen Victoria there for the 1887 jubilee, so we could hardly put up another one, so Uncle Max put a second brass plaque on the base mentioning the militia going to London.

Everybody was happy, except Robert and we rode home fast. Robert was getting stranger; boarding school was probably not a good place. He



just sat totally still, not appearing to be thinking, but he was, staring at the sky with the crows overhead and he says to himself “It would be wonderful to be a raven, just hovering, floating above all this.....”

Then he drifted off, going absolutely motionless. Uncles Max and Reg came over to say hello and they joked that Robert was a wax copy of himself made to fit tailor-made clothes. It was hard to blame them. When he didn't respond they just stood motionless to, mouths open for a little while and then they went back to talking to our parents, in that false easy way, with their smiles that don't move and dull eyes. When some people pretend nothing is unusual, but something is, they go like that.

We went off, not smiling so much now with Dad looking at Mother in the way we knew meant a big talk later. While we rode through town Robert sat, stiff and upright in the back seat like a statue we bought. The wind ruffled his hair, but he did not notice and it made it seem odder with his wide-open eyes that did not see anything we saw, but just stared up at the overcast sun. People watched as they swept porches or bought from stores, but pretended not to watch us. He was preferable like that to what he had been like at home these school holidays. He yelled in his sleep more than ever and if Grahame or I walked into the bathroom while he had his back turned, he would jump or shriek. He watched Caroline all the time and then imitated the way she smiled and spoke and even moved, even the way she combed her hair and when Mother strapped him for it nightly, he just kept on doing it until even she gave up. He had this new habit of lighting fires at odd times and places, lucky it was a wet spring.

When Robert, Grahame, Alex, Evelyn, Leo, Douglas, Allen, Murie, Tom and me went rabbit shooting and one got a leg shot and it crawled off. Allen was going to butt it, but Robert kicked the rifle butt away from its head.

“It's just a poor little rabbit, it did nothing to you.” He kept yelling

about it being just a rabbit and when Allen behind me laughed, he picked up a rock the size of two bricks and hurled it and if I hadn't swung my head quick it would have hit me. It grazed Murie's arm, bringing up red scratches and Murie just stood there screwing up his face in puzzlement while Tom mumbled about Robert being a mad bastard and the others just stared, while Evelyn and Alex looked at each other, calmer than everybody, as if they knew something. He stood there with these blazing eyes, flushed face and panting, going on about the poor little rabbit as if we hadn't heard him scream it out the first ten times. He gave up on that and then cuddled the thing like a woman cuddles a baby and talking about what a poor little fella it was. None of us existed for him. We just stared silent for a while as he wandered out of earshot.

"My arm really hurts." Murie grizzled as he clasped his scratches, bleeding now they were.

"Come on," Leo said in a false cheery way, and Douglas, quietest of the quiet kids added "Aunt Rachel has some iodine."

So with Murie, they walked off back to our farm as well, but by a different way to Robert. Chubby boys all three, they were more like triplets than best friends, so they looked after each other. Tom just repeated mad bastard over again.

"Know what a nancy boy is you two Clarkies?" Allen had a nasty smile on his face and a glitter in his eyes. Many of us did not like Allen, he was a cruel kid when hunting, deliberately shooting game in the testicles and standing over them with a grin and bashing itinerant's younger kids around town. He knew they didn't have much clout in Eloura. The policeman was Uncle Reg's best friend. Grahame was young enough to answer and say no. Allen just smiled for a long while.

"Then somebody had best buy you a dictionary for Christmas." He looked around expected laughs, but only Tom did and not for long.

“Put it this way” Allen persisted. “We're glad he's not my brother and I'd be happier if he's not my cousin and don't ask me to share a bed with him. Ya wanna fight over it? Say ya brother's a bloody nancy boy and yer aren't gunna bloody do anything!”

Allen smiled that thin snakey smile of his and spat, smiling up at the sun like it was his personal mirror, a bit like Robert did.

“Yer Clarke's are bloody shit crazy and sissy and gutless and I'm not gunna go ter yer silly bloody school anymore! I'm not gunna be bloody bugged!”

He sauntered off and Tom, his quieter mate, went with him. We knew what Allen had used Robert's behaviour for. Although he was nearly ten, he could not read much at all and truanted and bullied to cover that up. Robert's behaviour was a good excuse.

Alex spoke first. “Our boarding school is a bad place for some. Robert should not be there.”

Evelyn, who was fourteen, and very tough if handsome and skinny had long curly hair he wouldn't cut either, spoke up. “Alex and myself, we'll have to speak to your father. We can fight and told them to bugged off with their English fagging rubbish, but Robert shouldn't be there.”

At home Robert had a splint and bandage on the rabbit's shot leg and he nursed it before the fire every night for two weeks and amazingly the rabbit began to recover, hopping about in a crippled way to Robert's delight, but the night before Dad came home, he sat there stroking it and feeding it lettuce with an odd look on his face and a cage nearby.

“Look he trusts me!” He said in this false happy voice and put it in the cage and then went out the back. He had this timber pile ready, put the cage on top and lit it, giggling. There seemed to be time to jump on the pile and save the silly rabbit, but Robert had soaked much of the pile with kerosene and the fire went whoosh! Just like that and the hairs on

my arms and neck curled up and the burns were not really bad, but my skin felt like sunburn. I kicked the rabbit's cage away and then rushed to open it because Robert was rushing to it as well, shrieking "Let him burn, let him burn! Let him!" while scratching me and grabbing at the rabbit box, but I was too clever for him, ripping the catch off and the poor half-mad rabbit, with its fur singed in parts, took off as fast as it could with a crook leg.

"Everything I try to do you wreck!" His fist was clenched, his face was all twisted up and red and he had tears running down his cheeks. "You spoil everything!" He picked up a burning stick and threw it at me then stormed off up the back veranda steps, almost straight into Mother, who stood there motionless and expressionless, watching.

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Rachel Clarke

Clarkestead 28<sup>th</sup> November 1897

After the incident with the attempted burning of the rabbit we arranged for Robert's fellow boarders, Alex and Evelyn, to pick up him up for a school study group after lunch at Clarkestead. He would spend much of the remaining school holidays at the Chapman's house.

Mercifully the fate of that rabbit quietened him, even if his quiet was somewhat alarming. Frank and the others should have a pleasant family gathering, we would deal with this later.

As soon as we saw Frank at the train station it was evident that he had not been with other women; the broad smile, the gleam in the eyes, the rib-crushing clasp all recalled his other returns from other military roamings. Last time, that being the Sudan War, he was so urgent that he took my finest dress off so quickly that the back buttons and their eye holes were torn. The seed stain washed out easily enough and I sewed the buttons back on, but sharp eyes could tell where the factory girl's stitching ended and mine began and fabric strains around the eye holes so

it was given to charity, anonymously of course. That was the last dress he would ruin that way, nor would he make an embarrassing racket tonight. After dinner he was told to leave the carriage horses in harness as he should see what had changed around the farm. After changing into thick homespun without underwear and at our railway platform produce storage shed I made a new mattress ready. Sometimes the field hands would have to stay all night to load the dawn freight train, so the mattress being where it was nothing unusual.

“Well here we are.” I spoke tensely among the piled grain sacks, timber and barrels, my outstretched hand pointing toward the mattress, but the light had gone out of his eyes and he was pensive.

“What is wrong with Robert?”

“He goes back to school in a day or two and is gone now. He will stay with Max until then. He has said hello.”

“And that is all that he said. My eldest son hasn’t seen me for months and-”

“Robert is going his own way – as all children must eventually.”

“He is nine years old.”

“He has nothing in common with us. Your father saw to that. Now we must let him go into the world of toffs and aristocrats he loves so much. He does not belong on a farm, surely you can see that.”

“I wonder where he belongs.”

Better not to say that he was one of those cursed by God, an abomination to the church and a disgrace to the family and that Frank with his ridiculous glory-seeking absences had much to do with the way he turned out; but that would only lead away from where we should be going.

“We have three other children and four would be better. I have child-bearing years left and am ready to do my wifely duties.” I stared

and he looked around.

“Why here?”

“Your racket when our house should be so quiet.... When nobody comes around in the daylight, but not at night.”

He just returned my stare. For once it was difficult to tell what he was thinking. Wifely duties are not enjoyable, only slatterns do enjoy what must be done, but distaste faded years ago into indifference and it was the cost of another daughter.

On the way back I went as far as possible. “It is not easy running a farm and family with just Caroline to help month after month. This boyish rubbish where you Max and Sean just go off on military adventures appears tiresome. It’s pleasure for you, not patriotism... You just want to evade responsibility and have adventures...drink and gambling definitely, perhaps loose women....”

“Not one, a man needs a break now and then. Hard work! I’ve done it since toddler days and the worry of farming! The sheer bloody monotony of worry, I wanted to enjoy life while there's still some youth about me.”

“You use the past tense, is it over?”

“Suppose so. London may be the capital of the Empire and the most important city on earth, but it’s a freezing, miserable, dirty place once you’re away from the fine hotels, rich villas, monuments and the famous places.” He paused his face looking sad, “Nah, we are happy to be back home and the whole troop have been homesick for the last month or more.” He looked at me directly without wavering.

“Tired of wandering off.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Eloura 28<sup>th</sup> November 1899

“Here they come now, they’re coming now, and can you hear them!

Murie yelled, as if nobody else could hear or see a big Scotch band with ten bagpipers and five drummers in tartan kilts, red jackets and big bearskin headgear from twenty yards off. Murie was always like that, saying the obvious like a silly person, even aged six, he should have more sense. The Roydtown Miners Band was at the back. As many of them were Irish, labour voters or even socialists, they refused to take part in the war effort against the Boers in South Africa, so the band was smaller and tinnier-sounding than usual. We got our little union jacks out ready to wave for when the militia rode by. The commander was out in front with three flag bearers. Uncle Max held the British flag and Dad our colony's flag while Evelyn, who was sixteen now, was allowed to be flag bearer for the militia flag because he had just enlisted as bugler last year. The troopers looked very manly with their ostrich plumed slouch hats, tan patent leather boots, pistol holsters and bandoleers. They carried polished swords held at the shoulder. Their uniforms were white jodhpurs and navy-blue tunics, both with scarlet for trim and hat-bands. Braid, escutcheons and rank stripes were gold. Seeing them look so fine, suddenly made our toy soldiers seemed pallid and well just toys. Dad and Uncle Max said that these would soon be only ceremonial uniforms, since the Boer snipers found that bluecoats and redcoats made easy targets, everybody on campaign would soon be wearing khaki issue uniforms like those long since worn in India. Everybody was cheering, except for Mum. Her sisters Mary and Zelda were all happy, as if she was not there, but then Caroline tried to cheer her up.

“Father won't be gone long.”

“Knowing the kind of African war your father feels inclined to, we must doubt that he will be gone at all. It will be amazing if he even sees Africa's wild shores.” Among all the cheering people, happy Scotch bagpipe and fife music, the cheering and punting and little firecrackers

Mum had her mouth hard-set, and eyes that were angry-hot and glittery. Mister Kedda and Caroline, who often stood together at events, exchanged warning looks and just moved away, but Grahame, put his foot in it, pointing excitedly

“Look there’s Daddy. Look-”

“Yes young Grahame we know where your father rides.”

Sean and Tom Caufield were with him. Tom was fourteen now, but looked grown and was already shaving. He left the chestnut school last year and you were supposed to be twenty-one to go and fight, but nobody here followed rules, just common sense. Robert was five years younger than Evelyn and tried, but everybody told him he was too young and he blurted “Then what about Evelyn? He’s only a little bit older.” But he bit his lip and glared, all hurt. We seldom saw him now, boarding school and holidays with his toff friends took his time. Murie, Allen, Alex, Grahame and I tried to go as buglers too, but Uncle Max just laughed, we were too young even for that and he knew we couldn’t play two notes between us.

We thought Caroline was weepy because she liked one of the men riding off to war. Grahame, Murie, Allen and I teased her a bit about which one it was and called her old maid and spinny for spinster and she didn’t like it one little bit and could not tell we were only joking. Aunt Zelda started paying attention to us and came over.

“These naughty boys are making a joke, they shouldn’t.”

“Aunt they are making half a joke.”

Mum barged in, very cranky. “If we want to hear a joke halved or otherwise, I will go to the circus!”

“Is there a circus to?” Grahame was all excitement, taking Mum literally.

“No young Grahame this is the circus! Now watch!”

My three aunts, and their boys all sighed or bit their lips or ironed



expressions off their faces, some pretended to smile, but they were glittery false smiles like bad actors give or when people act happy when they are not. At least Mum did not act and looked stony while all the happy bagpipe music, cheering people sparklers and bunting were there.

\*

Sean Fisher

Eloura 28<sup>th</sup> November 1899

Didn't think she would turn up, let alone, but she did. She probably thought that as the riverbank was part of the park and it was broad daylight with the patriotic crowd listening nearby, I would not try anything. Her face was puzzled and wary and something else, a hidden smile at the back of the eyes as she looked me up and down and did that slight squatocracy nod that they always used with inferiors.

“You wished to see me on a matter of urgency.”

“Yes, I'm urgent alright”

Before she could work that out I had my hands around her and my mouth on hers and it felt fine. Her mouth opened in amazement, rather than clenched tight with anger and revulsion. That her silence and the sudden glimmer of surprised delight coming into the eyes and the fact she was seventeen was enough for me. I got my tongue against her teeth and into her mouth and then arms that had come up in anger now stayed where they were for a minute or two, bent at the elbow at forty-five-degree angles with clenched fists that splayed out. Pretty quick she clutched my arms while my tongue had gone all around her mouth and was as near to her throat as we could get it. Another minute and we were clutched so tight her corset was hurting her chest and mine. I took her hand; it was hovering near my belt and put it down my trousers. She did not know what to do, but she tried, better to guide her. Those long nails were painful. While she did that my leg went between hers and rubbing started. She panted at first but then when that turned to ecstatic cries I

cradled her face into my shoulder so she couldn't be heard and she took the hint, biting into my shoulder and panting softly and salivating. We were like that a long time and then she subsided and gently pushed me away, smiling with that beautiful hair of hers twirling down her front and those merry eyes and her wide straw hat askew. I knew then that she was the one.

“Marry me Caroline.”

Her smile deepened and widened and I could see that she was considering it, but she was taking too long.

“There is a flat dry clearing in the rushes. We can finish what we started.”

I pointed and when I did her jaw dropped and she laughed nervously.

“Are you totally mad? My family, who incidentally normally watch you like a fox trying to get into the chicken shed, are two hundred yards away and when the speeches end, then they will look around...”

“Reg will thunder on about patriotism and duty to the empire for another hour, we only need forty minutes and half that can go if you keep all those laced undergarments on.”

“Well! You are so romantic! Such a subtle seducer! You must know how wonderful it feels to exchange giving virginities. You are a roué, no, you are too uncultured for that. You are... uneducated,.. without breeding, tactless, homeless, penniless, godless,.. morales... does such a word exist?

“Better ask your grammarian, after you tell him what you think I am *not* lacking hey?”

That was the wrong thing to say. Straight away the light, well most of it, went out of her eyes and she buttoned up her top and straightened it, trying to subdue the panting. I moved towards her to apologise and hold

her, but she held her hand up and her face was resolute, suddenly too much like her mother's.

“You have had your way with me without objection, at the back of my mind, perhaps I knew why you asked me here. I am not totally ruined yet, nor do I wish to be...”

“I was serious about the proposal.”

“I know, and thank you. Can we assume that it was not based in guilt?”

“What's there to feel guilty about? You smiled, you wanted to put my hand there, but were too nervy. Seventeen and no sex, you must be frustrated to hell. One look at dry as dust, balding, decent and nearing thirty Kedda who gets excited over past tense forms and not much else and anybody knows why. This is all the sexual excitement you will ever have. Picture yourself as a cranky gran, singing psalms every Sunday in the year nineteen sixty.”

“Perhaps then we will see you on the receiving side when our church issues free soup among the homeless.”

She stared and then we could both hear the applause and the singing of 'God save the Queen.' My seed was on her hands, wrists and lace cuffs and it smelt. Her face was too flushed, her dress bark stained from the tree with ruffled lines that would only iron out and she would look like she had rushed to clean up. Reputation was everything to her.

“Now you get a favour. Stay in until somebody rescues you.”

I pushed her in the slow, silty river, so shallow it wouldn't drown a cat, then ran back to my horse, mounted and doubled back over the granite, wheeled, waited until she saw me and yelled for help, a bit stagy, but passable. Kedda, her father and relatives heard and ran to rescue her and then, the cavalier hero appeared, galloping towards her on the mud bank and rescued her, spluttering water and holding my shoulders with

that cute hat askew again. Frank Clarke and my old compatriots in sin, Reg, Allen, Evelyn and Alison were not fooled, sharp little Ross sensed something and the moralists Reverend Ian McPherson, his equally dour sons, Alex and Andrew, little Leo and Murie the dope, Tom Caufield and Kedda were much too taken with the way Caroline's shapely form was revealed by wet garments to latch on. Her mother, sharpest of the sharp, arrived, gave me a look which meant that perhaps South Africa was not far enough away if I wanted to live a long life. I took a picnic blanket Reg proffered and rode her over to the doctors to say what had to be said out of everybody's hearing, but all she would say was no, it was better go to South Africa to fight for our Queen or there would be big trouble. I felt like asking if she meant her mother or bloody Victoria, but Caroline did not want a shotgun marriage and I had only done what she wanted; but rich landowners' daughters do not marry illegitimate field hands who frequent bars, brothels and gaming houses, so goodbye.

\*

Ross Clarke

Eloura 28<sup>th</sup> November 1899

Dad sent Kedda over to see how Caroline was. We stood near where Caroline said she slipped but she didn't really slip. Her heels were dug in deep at the back as if she had been pushed and there were no slippage marks, just a cavalryman's boots facing hers but deep in the mud bank as if he lifted a heavy weight. There were more marks near a Norfolk pine, but the pine's needles had softened edges the boot marks made, so it was hard to tell what happened, a scuffle between the cavalryman and Caroline while they had heavy weights? It did not make any sense. For a second I thought it could have been Sean spooning and mucking around, but he had ridden up and the tracks proved it. I showed Dad and expected he could explain but all he said was "You're a good scout Ross." As if to shut me up in front of everybody else, but Evelyn piped up.

“Perhaps we could take Ross as a tracker to find the Boers”

“Perhaps we could,” Uncle Max added softly as Aunt Zelda, his wife, came up. All the men were looking at each other as if they all knew something while they rolled or cut tobacco, or put their hands in their pockets and Allen had his smirk on while Tom and Uncle Reg scraped the mud of their boots with bits of flaked bark, right under the pine where the tracks were. Douglas and I were about to tell them they were ruining tracks, but Evelyn put his finger to his lips for me. Leo and Murie could not work it out either. Aunt Edna, Mother and Alison had expressionless faces that disapproved of something serious, Alison’s nostrils were flaring.

“I wish to go to Sydney to see off the contingent. Perhaps father and Caroline should come also.”

They seem puzzled but nobody objected. Dad spoke too calmly.

“Reg was wondering if Alison would like to be the new chestnut teacher. Being on the board I’ll be paying her wages. The Eloura principal retires next Easter and Kedda seems honourable, level headed and able. It’s a pain to advertise and interview and with this war Max and I might not be back in time for all that anyway.”

They all agreed and Mother said “Excuse me I will see to my daughter’s medical examination.” Then all the adults looked at each other stunned. I excused myself and Leo and Murie were glad to hurry after.

\*

Frank Clarke

Clarkestead 28<sup>th</sup> November 1899

Rachel told me first off what the doctor said and then what incorrect town gossip believed and it was not as bad as expected, but we agreed that the sooner she married Kedda the better. Everybody noticed the easy, happy way they stood together and spoke to each other when they talked. He was Sean’s opposite, thank God for that.

“I wouldn’t go off to this war, but for being pledged to the unit. And Reg and I are going to deal with Sean, we took him in like a stray pup but he turned out a right wolf. Try to get her engaged. Not too brief a one, then married before next Christmas, we are sure to be back before then.”

“Can we assume Sean will not return?”

“That's about it.”

“It is either you or Reginald who has the right. Alison has been sick in the mornings and he knew for weeks, she says. She warned Caroline.”

My jaw dropped. He was even more the blackguard than we thought.

“The trip to Sydney... Alison will return to the district?”

“I believe so, we had best not ostracise either of them as doing so will start the gossip that may not yet exist.”

On the train up to Sydney nobody said a word to him. He tried his hail-fellow-well-met guff and then smiling offered me a swig of Johnny Walker but all that got was stares.

“What's in that? Snake oil?” Max said. Then we stared out the window until Central Station. Getting off there he still had this baffled smile on his face until Alison walked past and spat in it. She walked on while Reg waited until she was out of earshot.

“We treated you like a son, gave you a name, home, education. Damned if I give you my girl.” Then Reg punched him so hard in the guts he jack-knifed and fell to his knees groaning and clutching.

“Frank you comin’ back from bloody South Africa?”

“Unless there’s a bullet with my name on it.”

“Mate and brother-in-law or not; that bullet waits for you back at Eloura if you came back accompanied by this villain.” He turned to Sean trying to rise. “And the second and third in that same rifle pouch have Sean Protestant on them. One for each overused testicle. Max you keep

the militia records. Can you get him to change his name? Protestant sounds good... anything but Fisher.”

As Reg was about to go Tom tenderly helped Sean to his feet and then asked him if he was fine in a matey voice. Sean nodded, they had been mates for a while. “Good,” Tom said then he went at him with fists like charging Clydesdales. The first knocked him five bloody feet back onto the carriage door and the next bounced him back and then Tom pinned him there by the throat and pummelled him while he tried to fight back. He made sure he fell face first onto the sharp edge of a carriage wheel and then held him up for us to see.

“Now he won’t have such an easy time with the ladies.”

Reg nodded and took his leave just as the police came up, but they could see a contingent of armed troopers, not one of whom was helping a fight loser so they let us go and Sean came: he knew what would bloody happen if he did not.

The troopship had nurses and a medical section and we had a long voyage. By the time we left Perth he could stand at the railing. He gave a start when he saw me beside him.

“Take a good long look. That’s your last sight of Australia unless you want to jump and swim for five shark infested miles with the tide against you. With a face like that the best you can hope for is a mining job and maybe a Kaffir wife.”

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Sean Fisher

Eland’s River. South Africa April 28<sup>th</sup> 1900

With the two black scouts sick yesterday Max acted as scout and was not as good at it as he had boasted. The ambushers killed his horse with head shots and the smile was still on his face as it crashed into the bank pinning him. Six feet back and the lapping river would have drowned him, even so. he couldn’t get his back up or use his carbine. I

like him, all of us do, but it was Evelyn, Tom, Frank, me and five of his stockmen who made the dash while the others gave covering fire. In the high grassy veldt with gullies covering fire was useless for anything but finding out how many Boers were there. This time there were a lot. Tom and one other went down fast with gut shot horses as we made the river. They had a clear field and a wounded stockman was dragging himself back into the cover of the high grass with bullets nipping all around him and some hitting. One blasted his heel off and another smashed his hip. Frank Clarke's horse was wallowing in its blood and he was tangled in his stirrup and maybe wounded. The current took them out of sight among rocks. Another of ours floated past face up in a crucifixion position, eyes wide and unseeing. The others, being on wounded horses and perhaps wounded themselves, turned back.

Only Evelyn, Tom and I made it to Max and we paid for it. Bullets had taken the tips of my index finger, my ear lobe and maybe some hearing. Evelyn had a bullet in the shoulder and two wounds on his left wrist and arm, they had ploughed along, lifting all the skin wrist to elbow. Both our horses were dying, so we positioned them and put them out of their misery. We three at least had a position now, even if we were only able to hide behind bloating horses with flies crawling and buzzing everywhere. Because the bank was sandy and wet, Max had not broken his leg and we could get him out. The cover of our dead horses meant that the Boers could also use it, as it blocked line of fire from us. While we didn't watch two Boer boys snaked up and one put his pistol around the forelegs firing blind – into my hip. As he did Tom shot him dead. Oddly, the bullet in the hip was less painful than Tom's punches last year, but not by much. Evelyn wrestled the other Boer into a hold, then held him up. That stopped their firing and we could hear them arguing. They often rode in family groups and would not kill their own kin. Soon we heard



them ride off.

The hospital at Cape Town was something Evelyn, myself and our other wounded horseman looked forward to, so clean, so quiet, so sanitised and apparently so safe. Only apparently. The bloody veldt was safer. Bloody Boers were a danger, but one soldiers could see and plan for. My bullet wounds were healing, but in the hospitals enteric fever, cholera, typhoid, pneumonia, diarrhoea, and influenza spread. People could be cured of one, then get the next or they would be recurrent, gradually whittling away the strength and the will, until once strong young men like me died of diseases that aged grannies survived back home. In Eloura militia we lost five out of a hundred and fourteen so far and three were by disease.

Most nurses were moral police types with silly old Florence Nightingale as a model. The chief matron was famous for being one of her originals and was known as the Angel of Scutari. She still corresponded with her, reading her letters aloud to all at Sunday services. One way to make your authority unquestionable. Too bloody late I was waking up to women's bullshit. I got bashed for using them, but beneath all the morality maybe they used me for their gratification. Since the Sydney scarring the old tricks failed. After a few attempts at my previous jauntiness, they sneered. At first it was bloody painful, but it did not worry me now that they did not look at me anymore. My face had been changed right quick, but the cocky Casanova confidence it gave me was slower to change, but the revulsion on young nurse's faces was helping me adjust. Now I saw other things here that the young and handsome and romantic never see, the bossiness, the 'everything must be my way'... the contempt and moodiness. Ragtime? Maybe it is just nurses.

Evelyn was there and being so young, saw things differently. As the hospital bugler here had gone, they kept him as a replacement. At

seventeen he was developing into a strange young man. When the officers came to give him the medal they found him sleeping naked with an English aide twice his age. She was an officer's wife and he was behind the general, tugging at his sleeve to get away. Mouth open, facial colour draining away.

“What is the meaning of this?” a choleric English colonel shrieked.

“Finding sensual pleasure in a dreary world.”

“Sir you are preposterous!”

“Obviously.”

Apparently, the silence was so silent they could hear the waves from the Cape Town beaches half a mile off. They put the medal on his tallboy and walked out. He seemed to be running a competition to outdo himself in outrageous behaviour. If you put a teenager in a war, enforce discipline or get him out: instead, he was encouraged.

His arm wound developed into two long raised scars that looked artificial and raised so many questions that when the flesh healed he covered the scar with this preposterous large brass bracelet decorated with two elongated figures, a Zulu on one side and a naked pagan priestess on the other and between them, stones. Each one was the size and shape of a halved chicken's egg. He wore emerald, ruby, jade jet, opal, turquoise and lapis-lazuli. Most of them were too large to be genuine, but they looked it. The stories he would fabricate about that. It was a Matabele wedding ring reserved for marriage to princesses. He had been awarded this by a secret lost race in Abyssinia for killing a tiger with his bare hands. That brought laughter from the South Africans, for tigers are only found in Asia. The ring was matched by his waistcoats, ruby red, purple and emerald all set off by gold filigree. People took one look at him talking with me in clothes like that, saw the hair past the collar and that androgynous face and assumed he was my bloody

catamite, avoiding me.

The capricious nature of female authority also deserves a mention. Everybody was expecting the strict Angel of Scutari to go berserk when she saw how absurdly Evelyn dressed, spoke and behaved, but to everybody's amazement her face went into a delightful smile as she exclaimed "An artist! And in the Pre-Raphaelite mould!" Excited she scanned through his paintings, highly pleased. "Young man you are a genius in the making! Artists should do what they please, staff, give this boy considerable leeway!"

He took that leeway. When he wasn't spending his days making love he read all the Rider Haggard he could get his hands on and then it was pagan mythology and history, likewise ancient Greek and then anarchism and William Morris, Pater, Ruskin, all that weird mix of radicalism and paganism which he would spout forth. He had always been artistic, but now he did quite fine ink or pencil portraits of the hospital people and landscapes. He would give the portraits to the sitter, no charge. We began to see the sense in letting him get away with it, for the patients were too busy sitting for him, arguing with him or gossiping about his eccentricities to worry themselves literally sicker with petty arguments over a war few supported once they were in it. Evelyn seemed to sense that.

"You know this war is sanctimonious bullshit don't you? The English here and in Whitehall don't care about the empire's citizens' rights. They are just land grabbing, for diamonds, gold, farmland... whatever. The Boers aren't heroes either. They are sanctimonious too, God didn't give them their land, and their grandfathers grabbed it from the Zulu and Xhosa whose grandfathers grabbed from other Bantu, whose great-grandfathers drove the Bushmen into the desert... And year eight fags are year ten bullies, look at Cousin Robert. People are tiresome. Oh!

I hate morality and war and pecking orders and religions not based in worshipping nature. You can always tell the more pantheistic ones because they emphasise mating rituals...”

“Evelyn what on earth will become of you? Whatever you do, don’t wear purple while holding a yellow daffodil. Look how much trouble Oscar Wilde got for himself and he can’t escape it.”

“There are limits. It’s as much as I can manage to talk to most men let alone even think of sexually serving one. War bores. A discharge for me would be wise.”

“Generals will cheer.”

“I will, having found in my time here how much I like art and dislike regimentation, boarding school was bad enough, but warfare... I’m writing to Dad and will go home to a Sydney artist’s studio.”

*And what will you do for me, you brave, selfish bastard, while I lie here half dead literally pissing my life away with dysentery?”* Better to not say it. He was the last one not to see me as scum to be destroyed, so I just stayed silent while he prattled on with his silly theories.

In a week he was gone and I was alone among two thousand others. The smile on the face of the Angel of Scutari vanished with Evelyn and she was back to snarls and snapped orders. I tried to think of Caroline with the bright blue sky behind her and those twinkling eyes and her holding the hat askew and then Alison with hay all through her hair laughing as she fed me orange pieces, but those thoughts could not get through the stench of hospital soap, the clatter of bedpans and the groans of the dying.

\*

Ross Clarke

Clarkestead 8<sup>th</sup> July 1900

The story fronted the local paper. The heading was “Which is Kitch?” and there was our Max standing beside his twin, a great Empire

hero, Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, now Chief of Staff to the Empire's armies in the South African War.

We thought Mother would like to read it, but the way she was churning the butter warned: she churned hard, hard, hard. It was a signal to stay away and we all knew how it would go soon. Grahame looked at me and raised his eyebrows. Caroline had already saddled her horse for town and left to get some tinned food and bakery things. Mother came stamping up the stairs.

“Ross! Get me salt! The butter appears nearly ready for it!”

The salt was in easy reach of where she stood, but she just wanted to disrupt me reading the paper and teach me who was boss. I sighed and straight away got a head clout for that sigh.

“Do what I say immediately! God hates disobedience! And obey without that resentment which goes against all biblical teaching! Now get the salt!” I passed her the salt and walked out. “And you can take a turn on the churn! I've had it with doing everything in this house!”

She even forgot to pass me the salt, it was all just an excuse. Soon enough she hurled herself down the stairs fast, eyes blazing muttering to herself and snarling. “I said to churn the butter not attack it!” Her hands fluttered as she hesitated, then picked it up and wasn't watching but I felt the crooked stinging blow on the forehead and there were no more thoughts, just a sharp pain giving away to a numbing one and dizziness as I tried to keep on my feet. I didn't and she yelled “Watch that butter churn!” I put my hand on its rim to steady myself, instead doing so wobbled it and the churn and I went over, some of the butter spilling. “Three hours' work down the drain! You stupid stupid boy!”

I did what I had done before, got to the barn, saddled a horse, loaded a fishing line, matches, some tinned stuff in case I didn't have any luck, a blanket, rifle and ammunition and took off. Mum stood at the door yelling

“That’s it ride off! Ride off! That’s all you Clarke men are good for!” It was always me who copped it worst. Caroline was her favourite, Grahame next and Robert was seldom there. No one else ever got all the bashings and strappings that she gave to me. If it hadn’t been winter, I would have gone to the beach, two days ride off.

Three nights later I had a fire for warmth and cooking, two small caught mullet tonight with the last tinned apricots, not very filling and it was another bloody cold night and when Douglas came riding over, he was a welcome sight, but with my expressionless face he would not know it. He looked scared and his eyes kept going over to the stretched-out ghost gums, it was a bit creepy, with the wind rustling through them on a black night, but when the wind stopped the stillness was even creepier. He was more relieved to see me than I was to see him.

”Not scared of ghosts are you?” That was said with a smile and a joking tone, but he missed them.

“Course not.” His face was too serious and defensive and it hit me that he was scared of them; fear was in his voice as well. “I would like to stay, but Dad says not to, best get yer.”

He took off scared. Douglas did not like the forest. He was scared in it and the mountains made him uneasy to. He was bewildered and restless in Sydney and sullen in school until my sister managed to find an angle that she could tie into farming. Once caroline found that angle off he went to success. Kedda looked at his accounting work and said he had a career as a professional accountant if he wanted it, “No sir, it is just that farmers must keep accounts.” He was the same with osmosis and photosynthesis as soon as he realised their potential effects on his plants. Minerals in soils fascinated him, but not geology - until Leo told him that minerals could be leached down into his soil with the silt from the mountains, then Caroline could not give him enough information fast enough. If

something could be made to fit farming, his type of dairy farming, he was the school genius, if it did not fit he was the dunce.

“Why should we learn Shakespeare and algorithms and Ottoman history? They will never come into my life!” Yet he might prosper; he had something else. When the great drought a few years back was at its worst and families who had been here for ninety years were selling up. Douglas came out with: “No matter how bad it gets never sell the land, prepare and you can hold on, for good times will always come again.” He had this stubborn man’s look on his eleven years old face and Uncle Reg and Aunt Mary looked into each other’s eyes with a slight smile and obviously he was most likely to inherit Fisher’s farm just as I would inherit Clarkestead. That would be good; apart from not liking guns and ghosts and the world outside the Eloura District, he was a good bloke.

Soon Uncle Reg came riding in alone. He said nothing about sending Douglas to their home. His wife, Aunt Mary and daughter Alison made fine soups and they had a warm comfy guest room. That soup’s aroma was near. He tethered his horse to a gum and then let off both barrels in the air, seconds apart. “That’ll get the boys home. Just an excuse to be out really, Alison’s upset and wants to be alone. Brought you an oilcloth in case it rains, a billy full of tea and sugar and this.”

He had another billy tin done up tight. He prised the lid off and steam from soup and the aroma came up. I got stuck into it and he just stared as if he had never seen me before and did not like me, so why bring me these good things?

“Aren’t you going to ask me what upset Alison?”

“Women upset too easy.”

“Your father and Evelyn and the others recovered from their injuries, but Sean did not recover: he died of illness in the South African hospital.” I nodded and kept on eating. If I had been six or seven I would

have cried, but since then he proved himself clearly a bad man and I said so.

“Yes young Ross he was, he was,”

He was looking into the flickering flames as the fire spluttered, the flames making a swirling darting orange pattern on his face, then he paused and looked me straight in the face with sad eyes

“But who amongst us can truly say that they are good?”

That seemed an odd thing to say but it stuck in my mind, especially as Uncle Reg said nothing more before he untethered his horse and rode away.

\*

Alison Fisher

Fisher's Farm 10<sup>th</sup> July 1900

Genuine trouble with Ross or not, it was best that Dad and my brothers were out. Since hospitalising Mum's work had just piled up. Men always boast about how independent and hardworking they are, so why are women left to wash dishes and clothes, sweep, cook, keep accounts and write letters, let alone teach?

Time to think, there never was any, except Sunday. Everyone always rushing me around so I could never think and on Sunday all they let you think about was churchy things. Well time to think was here. All the housework and all the other people's problems could damn well go while I made myself a cuppa and thought about my own problems, which were bloody considerable.

Poor bloody Sean. He should have had more sense. He was probably glad he was dead, being so vain and after what happened at Central Railway. Many would be glad we would never meet again, including me; for me he would always be the handsome boy in the hayloft that time that was right. He wouldn't have made anybody a good husband: whimsical, feckless and while he could work hard, it was never for long.



That type has ruined many a girl and many a farm. He wouldn't have survived the first drought or even the first shyster stock buyer. Ross would, but... God, he was a boy, eight years younger, and it would be an eight year wait – and for a first cousin. Tom Caufield also would prosper in life. Steady and hard as a rock, sometimes about as boring as one to, but he seems to understand when to leave a woman alone, what's a housekeeper's territory and he knows the worst; I could marry another and then they find out. He was still probably interested. I've seen the others waiting in that Sydney surgery, mostly ruined for life and many heading for a streetwalker's life.

One close run with scandal scares me off. Lesson learned, on with life.

I'll set up a situation whenever it is that Tom gets back, assuming he does.

\*

Ross Clarke

Clarkestead 27th January 1901

Much happened before spring harvest. Caroline and Mister Kedda came back from the long honeymoon and went to live in the principal's house in Eloura. Alison and mother, being once a teacher, took over. Being eleven in February and promoted, I would be in High School grades. The town had the biggest celebrations ever for the New Year, for it was two very big things at once: the start of the century and the end of Australia's time as separate colonies, for we became a nation on the same day. The fireworks went for an hour, the finest we ever saw: red, white and blue dazzlers that seemed to shower the town in the stars and the colour of the new flag and there was even wine in the town fountain, with Queen Victoria's statue decked in rose garlands. We looked up at that and thought it amazing she was still alive, even the statue of her as an old woman was looking old because it was worn, sun, pigeons and just being

bronze aged it. Three weeks later she was not alive, federating Australia was the last important thing she did.

The news was brought to us by the Van Groendhal twins, Jan and Hendrik. Dutch migrants who turned up two years back, their family ran the town bakery and they earned extra money working as delivery boys on ponies for the *Eloura District Weekly* next door to them. They rode up very fast, very sombre, even if they were only eight. Mum, Grahame and I were on the veranda, shelling peanuts.

“Boys,” Mum nodded, “Your looks suggest important news.”

She was hoping the South African War was over at last.

“The old Queen died a few days ago, it is too late for today’s issue, so we ride...” Jan took off his hat respectfully and couldn’t think of anything more.

“Queen Victoria! It doesn’t seem possible...”

“Mum’s face screwed up. Hendrik slipped into his news. “Reuters seems very reliable, yes? It will be in next week paper, yah?”

He stood around waiting to say something else. “The new young apprentice doctor ... Karl McPherson-”

“I know who my nephew is young Jan...”

“He says that the black fellows have another epi, epod-“

“Epidemic? What’s it this time?”

“Typhoid. He say your daughter must obey quarantine.”

Both Jan and Hendrik stood embarrassed. Much was being left unsaid and Mum was scanning their faces. Caroline did Anglican Church work among the Aborigines at Eloura Creek, four miles out of town. Last week Kedda told her to stop it, but she didn’t and they had their first argument after five months of marriage.

“I will speak to my daughter directly.”

They waited but they soon realised Mum had nothing more to say

and bowing, they left.

“Odd that Dutch children who could be in sympathy with the enemy brought us such sad news.” Mum commented and then went into prayer for the queen and like many, made black armbands and in the parlour, crepe went on the queen’s picture. The real sad news was not what we expected though and the prayers and crepe should have been for someone else.

If we had gone into town straight away maybe it would have made a difference, but we had ridden in for church yesterday, so Mum waited days till next town market shopping day but no presents for me or even a special cake with my eleventh birthday coming. Only Grahame noticed, although they got him a cake to celebrate his seventh, just days from mine. As soon as we saw Caroline we knew she had it – and just at the start. Her eyes were dull, her voice weak and standing up was an effort. Mum was cranky and something else we had never seen, scared.

“Sit down Caroline, girl show some sense.”

“Reverend Ian... we must continue to help the Aborigines... they are dying... they are dying...three yesterday...”

She was talking to clouds; no reverend was here today. Mum took her hand and elbow and sat her on the settee and we could both see she was nearly collapsing.

“Ross! Ride and get Karl immediately! He’s at that black’s camp. Do not accept no!”

I rode poor Cheesy until he lathered, but made it and found Karl, too young to be a full doctor yet, he was called an intern. His parents, both the other town doctors, and other whites nursing and tending, including Andrew and Alexander were sick, having almost greenish white faces. I could smell vomit when standing near Andrew. He winced with embarrassment. He nodded at the news, saying he thought so when she

was seedy at breakfast and I got his horse saddled while he cleaned up.

The blacks were lying on humpies or cast-off mattresses. They looked like they were dying. Two who weren't were Cyril Abaya and Clyde Whaley, young stockmen and pickers we employed in season. They had white mouth masks on and were carrying out another a woman with fixed eyes and spittle and flies over her face. I couldn't ride back with Cheesy the way he was played out, so I helped. They carried her to the dray and I realised she just wasn't sick, she was dead. She was only the third dead person I had ever seen. Grandfather Clarke at his funeral near to four years ago looked very different to this, neat and clean, like a wax dummy. Soon enough I saw lots of dead people, the dray was near full of them, white staring eyes and thin bare feet, white soles upwards, so many there that the end of the dray looked like it carried a load of cut and stacked pine wood. Cyril held his hat in his hands, like the better type of Aboriginal does when they ask something. He had tears in his eyes too.

"Mister Ross I'm not up to it. Four of me family in there." Cyril nodded towards the dray. "I can't toss earth on them." I nodded, and agreed, it felt horrible just standing round. It felt worse at their cemetery though. Somebody had dug the big grave and left an old holed tarpaulin, so after prayers for the thirteen dead, Reverend Ian, Andrew, Alexander and I tossed the earth in. Everybody wanted to get away so with several rests, I walked Cheesy back to town. Andrew and Alex followed in the wagon which had Caroline on a mattress.

By nighttime Caroline was raving. Grahame and I were supposed to keep our brother i-law company so we sat on the veranda pretending we could not hear. He would wince and little beads of sweat formed on his forehead and his little blue eyes looked so sad and defeated, like his hunched shoulders. Looking like that he reminded me of kids who always loose playground fights and know they won't ever win the next.

Caroline was loud and cranky and maybe a bit crazy. When she yelled “Why did I marry him?” we all knew what it meant, but some of it we could not follow. “I should have let him, oh I should have!” Among all the mumbles that one kept coming up and after a time, Mister Kedda began to bit his lip and some of the sadness went out of his eyes and he sat straighter. The only other time anybody else went like that was at school when Allen begged a pound off Karl, saying it was an emergency and then lied about ever saying it. After that Karl never spoke to Allen. I don’t know why.

With the worry time passed quick and we saw the sky grey, then as it lightened, she became quieter. By the time sunlight was on our skins there were no sounds. Karl came out tired in his white shirt and vest, neat yesterday but stinking of stale sweat now.

Mister Kedda looked up in enquiry.

“She’s so weak now she can’t speak above a murmur. You had all best sleep.”

Grahame and I turned our backs toward each other and stretched out on the wide veranda settee. Mister Kedda was in the couple’s swing and seemed to collapse into a ball to fit, but he slept almost immediately. Grahame watched him for a few seconds and then looked at Karl, knowing he didn’t have a lie in him.

“Is our sister going to die?”

“Yes.” He said it softly and perhaps without thinking. He hadn’t slept the night before and the night before either. Mum insisted on him because as a cousin he was bound by family loyalty and she knew that the typhoid made people rave.

People were putting on their lamps when we woke up. Karl slept on the cane chair, but our movements woke him.

“I’m terribly sorry.” He murmured. “Two hours sleep in the last

three nights means that a doctor becomes useless without rest.”

We nodded. Mum hearing us, came out slowly, moving like and looking like one of those Virgin Mary statues Catholics carry in their processions. Except for her eyes, glassy and bewildered, yet hard. Karl looked guilty.

“I’ll be in for my watch now....”

“No need... Boys, God has taken your sister ... and she will be judged.” Mum’s eyes went out of focus, she sighed. “Ross and Grahame you are not going to the town school next year. You stay at home...”

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Ross Clarke Saint Paul’s Anglican Church Cemetery 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1902

We would ride into town for service every Sunday and after service Mum would put flowers on Caroline’s headstone and just sit there staring at nothing. Grahame and I felt nervous about it and stayed at the gate. The second time Grahame got fidgety and swished paspalam stalks against the fence. Edna McPherson saw him from the rectory kitchen and got him to help make morning tea for the congregation. I understood it was my job to watch my mother, sometimes I saw Edna watching her from the rectory kitchen window, pretending to wash up, but stopping with a plate and saucer in her hand, just staring. For a year it had been that way.

It was my twelfth birthday, but only Grahame, and then Alex and Andrew at church remembered, well Mum did, sort of. At breakfast she had that sharp face on.

“Hopefully you are not expecting presents.” I knew better than to shrug my shoulders, that always set her right off. It was yes Mother or no Mother.

“It would be disrespectful to celebrate the anniversary of your sister’s death.” She just stared until the idea sunk in. “Therefore, we will not celebrate your birthday in future nor refer to it... We do not need

reminders. Is this clear?"

*Not really.* I thought, but had enough sense to keep that to myself. If we did not need reminders why must Grahame and I wear black armbands for a year? Why the photograph with the black crêpe border? Why was Mum still always wearing mourning black a year later? Edna and Reverend McPherson had lost a daughter to that typhoid outbreak as well, little Meloni, just eight, yet they did not mourn so long.

\*

Edna McPherson

Saint Paul's Rectory 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1902

This time, the first anniversary was the worst. She seemed out there by the Clarke family plot forever. The sudden death of a daughter hits a mother hard, as we, and many of the Aboriginal women of Eloura Creek now know. And yet, we were recovering, while my dear friend, always so tough and hard, was not, or not as far as any of us could see. Always taciturn, she had gone almost mute. Always heavily, almost fanatically involved in parish activities, we no longer saw her at the Mother's League or Bible study. She had been treasurer of our new church building society since it began and saw it through the big strikes of 1891, the recent depression and the subsequent drought, holding the group together and donating, when even Ian talked of making do with our dilapidated clap board building that looked like a Methodist shanty town chapel, not high church Anglican. When our new granite church was finally consecrated, two weeks after Caroline's funeral, she was not even there. She still came to Sunday service if nothing else, but the fire was out of her eyes, the intense interest in the sermons was gone: she would just sit there in black with that dead face and recite and sing in a monotone.

Our four surviving children and her sisters Mary and Zelda (both of whom had their own massive problems, with Mary's health weakening and Evelyn wild to madness while Max stayed at that never ending war)

would look at her and each other, thinking we knew what that meant. We had seen so many go down that backsliding path of fading belief and out of the church. John Kedda seemed fated that way, but no, she kept coming and we prayed for her – when God could hear and she could not.

\*

Rachel Clarke

Saint Paul's Rectory 2nd February 1902

Perhaps it was the first anniversary. Perhaps fifty-two Sundays, coming to offer flowers and prayers and hopes that could do nothing, Whatever the cause, the feeling was that we would not see each other again in heaven as she once was, at her best, before that dead villain made his advances and ruined her. The marriage was little if any help, she lost any respectability that marriage conferred in her last hours. Her delirious bellowing about matters most women would hesitate to whisper in discussions with a midwife, were heard in the street and must have been the subject of much gossip, not that any got back to me. Even before then they were heading for trouble. Two weeks after the honeymoon Frank and I thought it proper to visit and she was unsmiling, speaking to her husband like he was a high school boy she must teach; one with a great yet fraudulent reputation. There were arguments, that I do know.

Her delirious talk revealed what I had never suspected, despite everything we had done, a fine ancestral line and the teachings of the Anglican church, deep within her, so deep it took a delirious fever to reveal it, was an evil streak. There are many women, respectable before marriage, who leave that state for sinful lives. Perhaps the fever was a revelatory mercy from God, not a punishment. I had prayed that there would be no more disgrace or disappointment visited on my family. Prayer often becomes answered in ways that we do not anticipate. Best to remember the better years.

\*



Karl McPherson

Eloura Railway Station 4<sup>th</sup> August 1902

Our contingent came home the way they left: on a train to a festive town decorated with patriotic decorations with a cavalcade down the main street and the bands and firecrackers and cheering crowds. Yet if the outer appearance was the same the inner workings differed. The patriotic celebrations were also for King Edward's coronation in a few days and many could sense that a massive empire that took nearly three years of ruthless methods to defeat a small militia army was past its peak. The new king was popular, but with the popularity of a generous barman; he lacked his mother's authority and with his reputation for romance, respectability. Some in the crowd seemed to sense all this. Uncle Max, leading the cavalcade and smiling as if sunrise originated on his face, did not. Red-faced Tom Caufield also had other matters on his mind, namely our smiling cousin, Alison. She rode double and astride, dress pushed up above the knee, making an obvious claim and a statement, clearly at the cost of her reputation, doubtless one to be retrieved before the altar as many stared with stoney disapproval or gleeful yet guilty smiles. Equally obliviously cheerful were the cheering chestnuts from our old farm school; Murie, Douglas, Grahame and Leo, and God knows why, but Cyril Abaya and Clyde Whaley as well. Others were different, Kedda, Uncle Frank and my father could see it, and so could Ross and Evelyn. Alexander, Jan and Hendrik Van Groendhal, Allen and sad Aunt Rachel seemed to sense at least some of the suddenly fading empire in their different ways. The best advice from medical school came aptly to mind: "As a doctor you are trained to be observant, sharpen that skill, but keep it - and what you find that is not medical, to yourself." So I cheered and waved a little union jack with the others, but saw Uncle Reg, Allen, Evelyn, Ross and my own family looking at me knowingly and I was fooling nobody. Not even myself anymore and I felt ashamed and knew

that I had to be myself, or grow up into a coward, the rightly despised outsider in my home town.

\*

Grahame Clarke

Clarkestead 4<sup>th</sup> August 1902

When Dad came home we thought everything would be fun again but it wasn't. Dad tried smiling and being jolly but it was just an act. He looked so old now and he was, fifty, but that was not it. He had a bad limp now where being shot in the leg made him fall from Jacky-ja bolting and banging him into river rocks. Jacky-ja was always skittish and never well broken and not a war horse type.

Ross and me cleaned up the parlour, getting rid of dead flies, grime and cobwebs off the flags, books, pictures, swords, uniforms in glass cases, brass and Queen Victoria's jubilee model. We argued for hours about where to put the new portrait of King Edward. It took a week of our spare time, but we had the parlour all spick and span but when he saw it he just looked at it like we offered him a dead snake for dinner and he went for the armchair. When we showed him our new set of toy soldiers he looked at it, vexed.

"Now why do you want to kill people for? We just looked puzzled. "Now look what I got you." He pulled out a present from his kit bag. Unwrapped it was an English farm with lots and lots of lead figures animals mainly, but with barns, trees, ploughs, wagons and fences and a big house to build. Soon enough we were happy for a while, the three of us building it, but then it was tea-time and then we were supposed to be in bed, but I snuck out back to the parlour to do set building.

When my parents came in they shut the door, what were they doing here? They never did that; I crawled under the table.

"If they got the rest of the empire the way they got the Boer lands its all a lie. They were not pagan savages but Christian farmers, Protestants

even, hardworking people who just wanted to be left alone... The things we had to do... Burning farms just like here, rounding up families like us for worse than jail for not breaking any law except being Boer... And for what? Their land, gold and diamonds, that's why."

"If I wish to hear such talk I will walk into an Irish shanty town socialist meeting hall. I prefer not to hear it in my own parlour."

"But it is the truth. I was there."

"I am very much aware of where you have been these three years past. And what is true does not matter. We must maintain a respectable and wealthy position in this district. That is what matters and it seems that everyone else in this family but me says a good deal to destroy that respectability! Apart from a feckless husband I've had to endure a daughter dreaming of being a field hand's slut, a sodomite son, idiot Grahame and Ross! Ross! Now stop your whining and go about your business – or rather hobble to it and don't expect sympathy from because one of your gallivanting adventures went very wrong, and you can sleep alone and start work in the morning! It would be best if you just shut up about your injury and the war, thank you very much! Nobody likes malingerers, especially self-pitying, verbose ones."

Then she stomped out. Dad sighed to himself and looked around the room carefully, hobbling over to the cases he grew up with, staring at them like he was in a museum he did not know what to make of. He eased his boots off and went to sleep on the veranda settee, even though it was winter.

\*

Tom Caufield

Clarke's Creek 1st October 1903

Married a year back today and by now it was easy enough to work out; the trouble with marriage being that the good bits, well you get to take for granted after a few months, while them bad bits always bloody

goad. Sex almost all the time you wanted it, clothes washed, ironed and darned, a clean house and meals you don't have to cook and cooked better than men can manage and you don't have to be a wallflower at social events. She goes to church to be sociable, but does not shovel it. But holy Jesus, the other side! Can't even look at another woman. The menstrual bitching and screaming! Yer don't do nothing and still yer cop five days out of every month in a screaming bloody hell or sullen snarls. Them sweet love song and poetry making people never tell you that. The having to put up with being in continual battles over tiny little things; she was still the teacher. 'Don't climb the north fence, that's the third rip I've darned this month. Stop reading the newspaper at the breakfast table. Can't you find better friends than worthless Allen? He will never be anything but trouble and I hoped to see the last of him when I moved here. Murie and Douglas are better brothers in law to you, why not see more of them? Don't buy a second beer at the pub, one should be your limit. You talk too much when you are full and we don't have the money.'

Well, she had the last bit right and there was the second big thing I had worked out; the trouble with all them stories about good people getting ahead into a life of comfort through honest hard work was that it was mainly bloody bullshit.

I'm the fella that should know if anybody should. I'd been at it on this land since I could toddle, saw my grans wore out at that same idea - an on his deathbed old Gran said he saw his gran, the first Caufield out from England, work himself to an early grave trying to make something of this land. We should not make that mistake. We did though. Not hard to see why. Wade across eleven feet of creek water and you are on the start on the finest soil anybody could want. You are also on Clarke land. The Caufields got the rocks and the leeches out sandy saline stuff from where the beach was back when Adam and Eve were in a paradise

somewhere else and maybe that was under Clarkestead, but lava flows from the mountains stopped where the border creek now goes. Four generations of Caufields had stared at that bastard of a Clarkestead mirage that never vanished, thinking that maybe with hard work something like that could be theirs. Nah. Sandy washed out soil on this side.

Those that got ahead were of three types I reckon. First the pioneers who got the best first: say like them aristo toff Clarke bastards and them tyke Whaleys. Then came them almost pioneer bastards with a bit of bloody cash borrowed from somebody, them that owned slaves or close to it; convicts and the like, or paying abos sixpence a week and then saying what hard workers *they* were, like them Chapmans. Next came them that married into money, the Fishers and McPhersons fit that bill very nicely, then them not quite crooked characters, sharpers and chisellers moving in fast and loud and cheery on any opportunity and ripping off. Then there are the crooks and many of them have much to say about morality, donate to charity and listen to sermons on Sunday.

I was determined not to be a silly clod all my life so which was I going to be now? Obviously being a pioneer and marry into money alternatives were long gone out. Nobody in their right mind risks jail. There were hardly any abos left and slavery weren't legal any more. What did that leave?

So what opportunities were there? None I thought as I stared into the bloody water trickling over the rocks. The answer was staring me in the face. Move that little trickle over to the Clarke's bank. It would only be grains at first, but if I filled up the pool with slate and flat rocks those grains would build up in the sandy, ankle-deep shallows and the trickle would erode more and more until whole clumps came and when the heavy rains hit I could scoop it out by the bloody barrel and I know how

to use that soil. Damn erosion! Well, the lord helps those who help themselves!

It was a day's hard shit a brick work and I had to remove the big slate bits placed to stop any erosion, help nature take 'em like, so by twilight the first grains went my way. If only the pissweak silly bugger Clarke's stayed dumb.

They did not. Can't say when they woke up. The clumps had just been swept down for a few days in the heavy rain and nobody with sense would be out in such weather, yet there they were. Frank Clarke, Ross and Grahame, my father-in-law and, Leo, even Max. Even pissweak silly clods Douglas and Murie, my brothers-in-law. Lots of adult hired help too, all of them shitty, mud and rain splattered, huffing and puffing in the creek to put things back exactly as they were.

They all saw me within a minute or two and they all had these expressionless faces that focused on me for a few seconds and then ignored me, going on with their work. I knew better than to speak and just rode off.

Alison was in a mood, slicing carrots at the sink, like carrots were her worst enemy.

“Was it worth it?” She snapped, her mouth in a clenched sneer.

“What?”

“Making enemies, becoming a crook, losing a reputation for what? Twenty barrows of shit?”

“What I got out will improve the orchid.”

She sighed and walked outside. Staring at the rain.

“All the men and boys working in the rain are coming up here for hot baths and dinner. Could you invent an excuse to be away? There should not be punch ups in this house! While you were out Clyde Whaley was here trying to get you for a lumber cutter's foreman again. Three

weeks paid work down the coast. He will be on the way back to the Ocean Ridge Hotel. Pal's been saddled and made ready."

Normally I don't ride horses in the rain, but Pal was an old jade on the way for gelatine anyway and three week's wages comes to something and maybe Clyde would have a few at the pub and get talking with some fella who would get the job if was not fast. I was.

\*

Alison Caufield

Caufield's Farm 1st October 1903

Good Riddance. As the hoof beats diminished, I felt a sense of joy and relief. Soon the only sound was the welcome rain, heavy, steady and pervasive.

*Pervasive. One of them la de dah bloody fancy sissy words! Bloody doan like yer usen silly bloody Sheila. Ya not a bloody teacher nah bloody more, so bloody dontcha bung yer silly bloody shit on fer me.*

For the next three weeks I could use whatever words I chose. For three weeks at least I could read, sing, cook up la de dah recipes, have reveries of happier days and smile and laugh without his snarling face coming at me with clenched fists, he never hit, but the stance was enough.

Clearly, he was a big mistake, not even loyal or honest now and he was going to get worse. A conceited whiner who was boring and lousy even in bed. It was like wrestling with a pig. All he could ever love was himself, humiliating others and money, not that he ever enjoyed the things it bought, beer and tobacco excepted. He did not look after me. Everybody knew the conventions of leaving a woman alone in an isolated house, and how common attacks were. He was supposed to get male relatives in, but Dad had to organise that.

Knowing how the hard land and harder luck had conditioned him only worked for so long. I could not stand him anymore, but what was the alternative? Now I was pregnant with his child. Going home that way?

Taking to the road with four pounds stolen from our bank account?

Three weeks relief. I wanted the stench made of his tobacco, stale beer and sweat out of my home, my clothes, my hair, me. The rain was so calming, so beautiful. I walked out into it, rubbing it through my hair as it made it sleek, tilting my head toward it, mouth open, feeling the purity of it as it flowed down my mouth, down my skin, soaking my clothes, forming liquid crystal on my hands.

*I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love. I want love.*

I did not realise I was crying till I saw Ross motionless staring with a billy in each hand. They would want tea of course. My student still, the boy who was eight years too young. No four or five now, maybe less. Thirteen, nearly fourteen, on the edge.

“ Well, I needed to get the dirt off me and could not use up all the hot water with so many coming could I?”

It sounded lame, but he had the decency to agree and not stare at my sodden, now transparent top revealing my corset. We could pretend nothing was wrong. We rushed to boil some tea. After he was gone I sat by the fire to dry, staring at the pleasant rain, empty of any emotion, morality and anything else except purity. When they arrived they all seemed to sense that something was wrong and went out of the way to be cheery, flattering and helpful. Good friends in a good community; there was nowhere else and they made me glad.

\*



Book Two

Adolescent

November 1909

Ross Clarke          Clarke's Pool. Eloura Creek 12th November 1909

From here the creek was really a smooth flowing little river, thirty feet across, thrice times my height in places. Nearly a hundred years back Mum's grandfather found it at its mountain source so he thought that a creek was all it would be. Beautiful up there, it wasn't much in town where they used it as a weir, but a little above here and below, genuine creeks joined it and the water was so clean it looked like rain running over glass. You could see flecks on stones and the stems on leaves and their serrated edges five feet down and if you were still, sometimes a platypus wending its way along, but shy even than koalas, seeing them was rare. More common were speckled mullet, usually quietly nibbling on the green edges. In the water they were beautiful, the speckles formed golden decorative patterns, their white underbellies looked a rich cream, their backs jade-coloured and their movements adept and sleek. Catch one and they were slimy to touch, if not painful from sharp fins and they just looked a sickly white and dull black as they flopped about, as adept as silly bloody Murie trying to play sport. I only pretended to go fishing and preferred to watch them and swim, think or read or doze.

There was a hidden cave, found three years back, probably the same one our local bushranger gang hid out in the 1840s but never revealed and others had used it since then, timber steps led to a long-ago burnt-out fire and tins from the 1890s. They left no gold or plunder, but even so Aladdin would have been happy with this cave. The above water entrance initially looked like a wombat hole, now it was hidden by prickly bushes and a hefty slab of rock. The hole below water level became a channel. I tried it, once. Inside, the floor dropped a long way down and the top was high, it was, well cavernous and at the back was a dark pool, seemingly still. Some slight flow must have an outage, for it never stagnated. It was

so cold it was only good for swimming briefly on the hottest days and was better for keeping food chilled. we had brought a mattress, blankets, tinned food, Mother's fine missing cutlery and china that she left on the veranda to dry so those shifty blacks or Irish must have taken it, she said. Eventually I brought in books, towels and candles; even a table and chairs we assembled bit by bit. Not even Grahame, Alexander, Andrew or any cousins knew about it. I felt like telling Evelyn when he first came to paint, especially when he had to send Leo riding into town for fresh supplies or when his tent leaked, but no, a secret refuge lasts only as long as it is secret.

The creek formed a natural oval pool here among the rocks and the yellow sandy gravel made it perfect. The stones at the bottom were mainly yellow here as well, the blue pool was closer to home and more popular. The leaves were mainly yellow, a few browns or maroon, so the water was a yellow gold usually, just occasionally a reddish or maroon gold. Whatever colour, to jump into it was like leaping into heaven: no farm worries, screaming mother, sad father, preachy boring church, nothing - only pure sensation as the cold revitalising water hit into my body. On an early summer's morning like this with a sky so blue its brightness made the eyes blink and curlews and kookaburras sounded joyful. A touch of cool breeze came off the sea, it was so good to be alive.

After clambering up the rocks to the viewpoint and from there if you looked west, the mountains imposed twenty miles off, but were so high they seemed closer, maroon and purple and slate grey with stark outcrops, and at the base of their foothills, Eloura. Beyond it, further west, the last farmland before the mountains cliffs was owned by the Royds, and the Whaley's who got in early, as the first Whaley was an 1810 shipwrecked sailor who stayed to farm and hunt while the rest trudged up to Sydney.

Now his descendants, those great rarities, rich Irish Catholic graziers, would celebrate their centenary here next year and with their four healthy sons my great-grandkids would see them celebrate their second centenary. Even so, they were not as rich as they could have been.

Australia's population doubled between the first gold rush in 1851 and 1856, when in that latter year the local Catholics started on their Eloura church, which everyone called a cathedral and with reason. In that gold rush boom everybody had grandiose ideas and some people thought Eloura would be a new Chicago or Bombay and they built accordingly with granite and sandstone from the Roydtown quarry. They even hired sculptors to decorate the exterior with life size statues of saints that not even the priests new much about. The beautiful coloured lead light windows were three times a man's height and the spire rose over the town's tallest trees. Finished in 1889, all the local Catholics baulked at building anything at Roydtown. No wonder, even the richest families there had not caught up financially with Eloura's Catholics yet.

Roydtown Catholics came to Eloura for mass.

Hidden by a spur, was Roydtown, the coal mining centre. People new to the area would say it was a view that never changes, but it was always changing, everybody could see the effects of big government policies, even here. Two years back the governments here and in England did a migration pact and since then Australia was seeing the biggest annual migration rate since the gold rushes. It hit us here too. A whole new suburb, Roydtown Ridge, was full of new chum miners from some played out Cornish tin mines and big new industrial wharves were at Ocean Ridge. Four daily trains went there and to Roydtown and us now for the coalers, it used to be three a week. Even in Eloura a furniture making factory was beside Max's sawmill, so new housing blocks were

built for its workers and the town had grown by five per cent since the 1901 federation.

Since 1890, my birth year, the train line went along the coast, turned west after Ocean Ridge and went west beyond Roydtown, paralleling the muddy or dusty and often washed out Eloura Road put in seventy years earlier by convicts. Cobb and Co still survived on the road on reduced runs and more stops carrying mail, packages and passengers to individual farms and foresters' camps. Today their stagecoach with its six dappled greys came into sight, but for how many days longer? And what was happening to horses? Even from here it was obvious that on farm after farm, the big Clydesdales, a large minority still imported from England, were taking over from the sturdy Suffolk Punches, just as they took over from bullocks. And yet the Clydesdales might not rule the fields for long. Even from here the faint sound of Max's very loud mechanical tractor reached. He had it a week already on rented try-out and if the sheer snarly noise of the thing was what was most obvious about it, how dangerous it was came a close second; it nearly over tipped every few yards. Poor bloody Leo, trying to drive it because he could drive Max's new Rolls Royce silver ghost automobile, only stopped tipping over happening by swinging his body and a ready bag of cement over to the other extreme.

That Rolls Royce now also tilted in an unhealthy way, due to an Eloura Road pothole full of water, with Evelyn at the wheel, dressed up like a balloonist, in goggles, long white coat and spats. He was talking to Jan and Hendrik, out on horseback on the letter and paper run. People said the automobile would replace the horse, especially as Henry Ford was now producing his cheap cars so that they were no longer for the rich, but there were too many scenes happening like this one. Jan rode to Uncle Reg and Douglas and Uncle raise a fist in the air and throw his hat down and then stood like a man does when he swears, but nobody in the

country lets a call for help go unanswered, so the three of them unhitched the Clydesdales and soon Jan, Uncle Reg, Murie and Hendrik pushed while Evelyn steered and Allen guided the attached horses at the front. Despite Robert's assurances that they were wonderful, maybe when the first flying machines came it would be like that. Nobody had flown in Australia so far, but it was only eighteen months back since the Wright Brothers had finally proved they could do it, and factories were now producing their flyers as fast as they could, and maybe in ten years we would see one here.

To the east the land stayed level for a few miles, on the edge of town the Chapman estate, New Albion. Three white stucco stories high, marble steps led to eight Corinthian columns resting on a tessellated marble veranda, cedar doors near to twice a man's height. Fourteen terraces, twenty-six rooms, a hall a third the size of a football field with a marble floor. The rest can be imagined; the state governor was a frequent guest. Max's massive acreage, much larger than ours, was similar in set-up to our farm. We both had orchards, pastures for cattle, sheep and horses, and they were separated from each other and from our acreage for corn, lucerne and chickens by bits of forest, good for hunting and fuel. Our great-grandfather had preserved some cedars and jarrah and planted oaks, Brazilian jacarandas and Norfolk Pines on both properties. Many a big city park is smaller than Max's lawn. His roadway was made of English Oak. Farmers planted trees like that so that so people could find the road to their farms. Most used poplars because they grew so tall and straight and summer bright green leaves going gold in autumn were distinctive among the gums. The Whaley's were rich enough to use cypress trees for their long roadway, like the Chapmans, who also used oak as a border.

Our house was not as grand as the Chapman's, but was two stories with gables over every window and a red painted, corrugated iron roof.

Like Max, we had a gravel avenue edged with slate and marked by poplars and also cypresses for their bright cheery lime and lemon colours but only to mark the avenue's start and end. Everybody did that to make finding farms easier. Rows of poplars always stood out. My telescope made the carriage and Robert's valise on our veranda visible.

Swinging the scope closer to town, there was the Fishers, the place run down now, dirty and ramshackle since Alison married Tom and Aunt Mary died. With school finished and work started the cares of adulthood became clear to me, and also why Dad wanted to go off to the wars, more peace there than at home.

After us were a few other smaller, specialised orchard and dairy properties of the average farm size of around two hundred acres, and then Caufields, thrice that size, but much of it what the Americans called hardscrabble land, so bad that even a McCormick harvester could not really clear or harvest there. Tom and his help still had to scythe in open fields five years after every other local farmer had mechanised. If the house, main barn and the fences were all built of stone it was because they had to be to clear the land. Even so their land wasn't much, stone-cleared land seldom is, Dad and Uncles Max and Reg agreed on that. Tom would too probably.

After the Caufields the severe slopes began. The bracken and forest that had once covered most of everything from the mountains to the sea before whites came began again. It sloped out of sight and only tree tops stood out. Forest people lived there. Three generations back they had earned good money from harvesting the cedar, iron bark, jarrah and gum, but now only the last two were left and not in great marketable amounts. Many foresters went to the mines, or became seasonal pickers or went into domestic service. Those remaining foresters still used bullocks for their drays, a generation after we farmers and graziers imported Suffolk

Punches. They had little subsistence farms of aged tents or bark huts where they once had logger's camps and where grateful for seasonal work with us, or our relatives. There was nothing romantic about forest life. A tin of jam, soap, candles, ice cream or ham slices were incredible luxuries to them. Those people with their tattered, stained hand-me-downs, their festering cuts and boils, missing fingers and desperate looks stood out a mile and they could be smelt twenty yards off.

Yet the forest was beautiful, so lush with tree tops swaying in the breeze, watching them told what type of wind was blowing where before it reached us and my gaze went beyond that. Far off, so far that on a day like this the dark blue sky seemed to merge into it, was a ribbon of another blue on the horizon, the sea, and how I longed for it, the beach on a morning like this. By the sun it was close to eight, so time for the cave to wake the secret up. Helen's slept face downward, with a sheet and a rabbit fur bed cover over her, but tangled blonde hair was already moving and there came an irritated groan.

"Fire up the tea please darling."

"It's simmering."

"So are you, a safe bet."

"Of course..." I was about to suggest something obvious when she turned her still half-asleep face, tired, even after ten hours sleep.

"Time?"

"About eight."

"How does ham and eggs on toast sound?"

She smiled with that Cheshire cat smile and murmur and her light brown eyes started to get back some of their usual brightness as she stretched, her limbs and tossed away the coverings. We had been sexually involved two years now, but I never took her lithe, freckled body for granted. Helen Ryan was a year younger than me, Australian born,



orphaned, the last child of 1850s Irish child convicts, expelled from a Catholic convent school in Wollongong, she drifted here, staying when she took up with Evelyn - and after they split. "He's too, too.... Evelynish!" That was all she would say, brushing her hair as if he was a vexing pup. She worked as a barmaid and cook at Max's hotel and would start at eleven today. Cheesy was grazing nearby so we could ride her close to town.

I got the food out of the box in the pool and went to cook outside. Daylight smoke coming high out of the hollowed out log we used for a chimney would be a giveaway as obvious as a coloured omnibus sign. Two minutes into the cooking deliberately scattered branches lying across the path snapped, so loudly that clod Murie came to mind. There was just time to poke my head in and whisper a warning when Grahame appeared, smiling, then puzzled when he saw the large breakfast for two.

"You knew your younger brother was coming so you baked a cake!"

He laughed and sat. "Anybody around?" His voice was just a bit too casual, his face a little too assessing, but his eyes were amused.

"Can you see anybody?"

"No Ross, not yet" He just kept the stare up and looked around.

"The rocks are too steep to climb up quickly and the scrub wouldn't hide a wombat. That leaves the creek, the poor girl can't hold her breath much longer."

"What poor girl"

"The one you talk about in your sleep. The one half the town speculates on. Helen Ryan being the leading suspect...Helen! Surface before you drown."

"How can I drown..." She was behind me standing with her hands holding the fur near her neck and still more than half asleep, but awake enough to be puzzled. "Your voices sound so much alike, especially

while still coming out of sleep.” She looked at the creek, smiled, murmured, dropped the fur and dived in. Grahame sat, enlarged, stunned eyes going wherever her movements did. At fourteen he had just started spilling out a few months past

“She’s beautiful!” He actually panted.

“Yes I know.”

“Come on in, the pair of you, this waters only chilled. Grahame look, but don’t touch – and Ross, you get the same advice.”

She said it as a joke, but it would not be one if he chose to ignore it. So we frolicked, splashing and tossing a football. With Grahame red-faced embarrassment lasted maybe forty seconds, then he was happy. After a while we just floated about on timber, then Helen sighed.

“We had best eat. Work calls. Beautiful day for walking. Don’t ride me in today.”

We ate breakfast together, adding what Grahame bought in a hamper, lemonade, turkey wings and biting into luscious, still crunchy red apples to finish, then sanding the pan and plates. I could not warn her, but when she went into the cave Grahame’s jaw dropped and stayed that way when she emerged with her clothes and dressed in front of him with my help with the stays, which was always enjoyable. Helen insisted that Max’s barmaids have class and the uniform of white blouse, gray shallots and black boots looked stylish – and reduced the pestering. She waved goodbye and off she went, then Grahame went into the cave with his tongue nearly poking through his cheek.

“Aren’t you just a man of surprises? Getting your new home ready for when mother finds out about a seventeen-year-old Irish Catholic barmaid who just happens to be Evelyn’s cast off?” He shook his head. “Don’t misunderstand. She is a very nice person, very attractive, but if you marry her this cave will be your permanent home and your diet will

be creek mullet. You will be disinherited - Mum controls Dad. "If you don't marry her.....well it won't be good for either of you .... She could get pregnant...."

"No, contraceptives are in the cave. Why did you ride out to find me?"

"Our great one has returned in glory. Mum said we are to come home for lunch immediately."

"Then why bring the hamper?"

"That was the lunch. Bringing the eater to the food becomes exactly the same as bringing the food to the eater - well isn't it?"

"You are not as dopey as you pretend. You had better have a thieving blacks story ready."

"Worn thin and there's only about twenty left. Irish pickers are coming in with the season. They'll do."

"Irish *Catholic* pickers."

He laughed and nodded. "Can I borrow your cave sometimes? Not your girl, just the cave."

"You can't keep a secret and Allen is your mate but he's nothing but trouble. Murie's worse. Tell him and he might as well wear advertising boards up Main Street. "ROSS CLARKE SECRET CAVE GOLD POOL LEFT BANK."

"Yeah, in letters a foot high in luminous orange." He sighed. "Tom and Alison are coming round three. They want to buy a horse; you do it."

Grahame acted the dope, and in so many ways he was, especially anything beginning with s -sport, shooting, swimming, school work, shrewdness and sex and add economics, manners and tidiness. He was good at three things, mischief, dogs and horses. Nobody knew horses better and when he bet, locals watched tensely as odds dropped from twenty something to two to one. He loved horses too much, he could do

anything with them except break them, bridle them or sell them.

“Let’s swim, three’s a way off and he’s here till after Christmas.” He stood up, neighed and flashed a sly grin before he somersaulted into the water.

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“Come here you pair of idiots!” She was on the veranda, knitting while waiting.

“Ross wasn’t at our part of the creek.” When he was like this the mischief in his voice and gleaming eyes, gave him away, yet he never sensed it. He went for spinning stories so obvious that he wouldn’t even fool Murie. Sometimes he was really dopey, but maybe he just wanted to aggravate Mum. “After searched high and low, well hours it took, but eventually, ultimately, by good fortune...”

“Found him with who?”

“Allen, Andrew, Murie, the Groendhals-”

And Alex and Douglas.” Adding those quickly shut him up. Too many names and Mum would know one of them was elsewhere. And he might name Leo and Evelyn, who must be here to see Robert, their auto was in the stable. She just sat knitting and peering.

“Odd. Allen dropped by just at breakfast. He did not say anything about swimming.”

“Perhaps he did not think it worth mentioning.”

“Perhaps. While I was getting some preserving jars for Uncle Reg, Allen rode off with the hamper. Are you willing to swear that you did not see him with the hamper today?”

“Yes! On a bible and in those exact words. In fact nobody saw him anywhere today-”

Mum realised it before he did and stared, contemptuous with hard glittery eyes while he simpered.

“A fool like you should be totally honest, it only makes your idiocy and lack of character more obvious when you lie, that being bearing false witness.” The place seemed so quiet the only sound the knitting needles knocking together, sounded like clatter. “Tom and Alison came back from town shopping and guess who they saw walking along the creek in her work clothes, but with wet blonde hair?”

He blushed and gulped. Helen was probably the first naked woman he ever saw. Mum nodded in mistaken agreement with her now-confirmed suspicions.

“If you think that your name will not be scratched out of the family bible, and you will not go on a one-way train ticket to Sydney just watch when the public scandal breaks. Her sluttish Irish charm will fade very quickly when you are in some Sydney slum, surrounded by screaming babies, who will probably be Catholic.”

Grahame just stood there mouth agape. I had sense enough to keep an expressionless face, then realised that sense could be cowardly and was just about to speak when Mum started up again.

“Alison and Tom have waited through six cups of tea to buy a horse. Now show me you are not an idiot or a cheat; get a sensible price.”

Best to tell the truth as soon as they were gone, but with me being the eldest, Grahame stood little chance of inheriting as it was, and he was his own worst enemy. Things started out well enough. Alison and Tom were at the table impatient. After a miscarriage six years back, they had a healthy baby boy, Jack. Grahame just chattered aimlessly while Mum glared as she assessed. I had to drop hints to get him walking with us to the stables.

“We are well off enough to afford a new horse for Alison now. We want a filly, placid....”

Dad and Leo joined us and all five of us waited for him to say we had four weaned fillies. He just stood there grinning and puzzled. Tom and Alison went in to look for themselves and when they started to look at one he went “Oh no not Joxie, not her” and then with the next filly Grahame asked them “to wait while I get her opinion” and he just stood there hunched over making far too realistic horse noises with the filly. He was smiling to himself as if we were city people and couldn’t see he was pulling our legs and did not seem to know how much trouble he was in or that stony Tom was the last person to kid. Mum spoke in her iron hard voice.

“Pick whichever filly you wish Alison, twenty pounds for no accoutrements, twenty-six with and a fortnight to see if she’s the right horse for you.”

At dinner he only made it worse and Robert was a perfect butt. For starters he came to dinner dressed in the university regiment ceremonial uniform, complete with epaulettes, decorated stiff high collar, bright escutcheons, a red sash and spick and span knee-high patent leather cavalry boots. All this was worn inside the house. Evelyn, his old private school classmate, walked beside him, and what a contrast! Long hair to the shoulders parted to one side, plum smoking jacket, lemon yellow soft collar shirt, unbuttoned to the solar plexus, velour trousers and Turkish slippers. Their oddness came out of opposing corners, but when they sat on either side of ordinary solid Leo, if you had to guess who were the brothers at the table it would appear to be them. You would be wrong and wrong about who won a war medal and who the misogynist was and who the sissy was.

All of us just stared at each other. Tom was the worst possible guest to appear like that before. Nobody hated fancy bullshit more than Tom, Fortunately, he was too stunned to say much. Alison just sighed and

blinked and tended to sobbing little Jack more than needed. Leo had already seen them and was unsurprised. He was Evelyn's assistant and sometime model. Evelyn, who visited to paint our creek scenes and views, was at least quiet and polite. People knew he was a generous, harmlessly eccentric artistic type, but despite the clothes, no nancy boy, so they let him be. Robert could be counted on to aggravate and he did, every time he opened his mouth.

"I have joined the university regiment."

"Glad to hear it," Dad commented while rolling his tongue around his mouth to get imaginary wedged bits. "Because if you didn't you would look a right lunatic dressed this way."

"Where I have gained a commission, at university."

Dad sighed and spoke. "Yeh well, we all guessed that. Robert, well if that is how the rankers dress, what on earth would the officers wear? Sapphire studded Papal crowns?"

Robert had just enough sense to start eating, but seven other pairs of eyes were meeting and laughing at him. Grahame now knew he could get away with a fair bit.

"Robert, dearest brother, a question. Your gold embossed high collar... The one that stretches from your shoulders to your chin and looks so steely that it's like the ones used in hospitals for hard case broken necks. Well do they make them like that so mad Arabs break their swords when they try to cut off our empire troopers heads?"

Robert just stared and suddenly Grahame jumped up, eyes ablaze in mischief.

"Allah!" He shrieked so loud it upset the horses in the stable and Alison nearly dropped Jack. Mum swung back on her chair and over as he swung a knitting needle at Robert's high collar. The needle broke on the collar and Grahame looked at the half in his hand in mock amazement.

“Yep, reckon if that collar snaps a bone needle it just might stop a Sudanese scimitar. Or do they make the collars like that so the junior officers can’t shake their heads in disagreement?”

Everyone sat still. Alison murmured something to Mum so she whispered back “Of course, the parlour.” Alison left and Dad tried to get things back to normal.

“You mentioned having some news for us, something important you said.”

“My application for the Australian Military College which will open next year, near Canberra has been accepted”

*God is ultimately merciful.* That thought came to me and others seemed to have similar thoughts, even Leo gave the hint of a smile. Three Robert less years. Dad spoke.

“The empire is at peace now has been for seven years and no war clouds are on the horizon....”

“Oh there will always be a war...” Robert sounded like a salesman assuring children that there would always be a Santa Claus. He sat there smiling in his reverie, over conflicts to come, while Dad, Evelyn and Tom, disillusioned veterans, looked at each other sighing, then at him, but before they could say anything he was off and racing with his political monologue. If you knew the references, and you could get past the superciliousness and the not quite genuine posh accent and argot, amazingly much of what he said made sense.

“The scramble for colonies, resources and markets led to conflict and as almost all these had been taken and the remainder Abyssinia, Afghanistan and Tibet, had already proved themselves more trouble than their little economic worth, disputes over areas of control would arise. As the Ottomans, Russians, Spanish, Chinese and Austria-Hungarians are weak empires they were prey for those who were emerging powers. This



was what the Spanish-American War and the recent Boxer Rebellion and the Russian–Japanese war were about.”

“But they aren’t threats to our empire Officer Robert,” Tom commented. He never liked officers, know it alls or people who talked politics - and Robert was all three.

“When does an imperial power ever know when to stop?” Robert answered.

Dad grunted in assent and Evelyn muttered “True enough” We all knew they were thinking of the South African War. Tom was screwing up his face.

“War with America, over Tibet? You’re daft.”

“Not over Tibet, but perhaps the Pacific, or perhaps with Japan for the Pacific – or for China.”

Tom shook his head with a sour, knowing smile “Still daft. Seven years back Japan signed a twenty year-long military treaty with England. That means they are *allies*, not *enemies*, stupid. That’s true, read it in the paper.” He glared with his arms folded. Then Grahame went to the attack.

“Can you see Russians landing in Cooktown and Perth? We know they are coming because we started building fortifications fifty years back - never really stopped. Unless we have gallant officers like Robert defend us they will poison our waterholes and make us kiss the Czar’s ar-”

“Ahumm!” Dad stopped him.

“Yes Dad, the Czar’s arm. So you know of that old Russian custom. They kiss each other’s arrrrms.”

“Watch yourself young man.”

“But it is our coast we should watch. If the French come, they will be even more sus than Russians. They’ll poison Eloura Creek with champagne and they don’t kiss each other’s arms, men kiss each other’s

lips. It's no wonder they have a town called Nancy, so that's where nancy boys come from, well most of them anyway."

Nobody was taking the bait. The sight of Mum's face and whitening knuckles would have warned anybody else and did. Everybody but Grahame was eating with wary faces. Mum's slow level loud voice was like grating iron.

"Change the subject."

"Certainly! The worst of the lot will be the Italians, for studying too much drives them mad and thinking they are ancient Romans again expanding their empire, they will invade and Australians will have to kneel before the pope and kiss his ring-

Mum swung a wooden stew ladle at Grahame but his timing was perfect. He ducked, so the ladle missed and Robert, next to him, copped the blow on the ear. Bits of stew and gravy splattered everywhere and onto everyone but Evelyn, covered by Robert, who took more of it than anybody else. He was just sitting there wondering what he had done wrong while everybody else was gaping and Grahame was guffawing. Mum trying to clean up Robert, it was like watching a hasty store dresser with a mannequin.

"Grahame get out before I get your father's stock whip!"

"What did Robert do to deserve a tipping *and* a whipping? Can we watch? We have been studying the convicts and – Oh my gravy stains on Robert's nice new uniform, now he'll have to wear normal clothes, that way he will at least look normal..." Mum picked up the iron stew pot.

"I hereby vanish!" He gave three claps, somersaulted, landed on his feet, albeit unsteadily and then raced out the kitchen door, rapidly followed by a stew pot. That knocked splinters off the door frame and clanged down the stone steps. In a few seconds we heard two colts whinnying, as he galloped off west on the Eloura road.

It was Leo who made the funniest comment he ever made, not so funny if you weren't there, but it had us red faced, Mum and Robert excepted.

“That boy saw too many circuses when he was little and only one of those whinnying colts has four legs.”

Leo was wiser than he seemed, for Evelyn, Tom and Alison were our guests and they were looking at each other as if they should leave, but that was a major insult to the host, a way of saying they had failed and would become more distant. His joke turned the whole thing into Grahame being a scamp, a coltish kid who would grow out of it. Mum looked insane but everybody else was calmer.

“If he comes back bull whips won't be enough, a shotgun will.”

Everybody knew he would not be back before tomorrow's dinner, if then. We both were in the habit of going off for a day or two, and he would not be able to keep out of my cave, promises or not. The rest of the dinner went well enough, if fast.

\*

Helen Ryan

Regent Hotel, Eloura 24<sup>th</sup> November 1909

It was the time of day I liked best behind the bar, early. The sun streamed in from the massive stained glass edged windows, making pleasing, coloured patterns. Breakfast aromas lingered, there was time for tea or coffee, and a paper read when Jan or Hendrik, the flirting printer's devils, would bring me the local weekly and a few days old *Sydney Morning Herald* or *The Bulletin*. They were meant to be left around for drinkers who couldn't afford them, but could somehow afford another drink while they read, another of Max's good ideas which probably originated with his wife Zelda. In the morning the place was spick and span, quiet and there were usually breakfast people to chat to. Those who were rich enough and sober enough to eat breakfast were never a violent

problem, and few of them were whiney groaners or big schemers, the usual effects of alcohol; like most barmaids, I seldom drink.

Just about everybody knew about me and Evelyn. I did not really care, but it *was* wearying. They wanted a town slut to gossip about so they gave me the role – by women who seemed to have babies seven or eight months after quick marriages and men like Allen Fisher who often banged on my door late at night or tried looking down my blouse. In truth there was only Evelyn and Ross - and between them they were more than enough. Sexually they were both satisfying, but their effects on me emotionally – well they were both – well neither of them could get the full trust that should come with love.

Evelyn was difficult. In the year we were together it was dazzling at first, going from being a waif working hard so as to sleep in slummy rooms and live on porridge, to living on the wealth he had in his North Sydney beach house. The good manners, romantic outlook and the considerate introduction to sexuality where a welcome change to the usual leering drunks saying something like “hey sheila how about it? Gimme a go!” But even before finding out about the other women there were problems, the inattentive grunt if his work, was interrupted, the arty friends who were worse than the worst posers and bullshit artists in the Regent – and the way his friends treated me walking in when I was posing naked, getting an eyeful. Evelyn’s efforts to make me a lady through deportment, grammar and vocabulary improvement were wonderful at first, but he was patronising about it, trying to wipe out all traces of inherited Irishness. He also mixed that in with endless theories about life, art, politics and anything else that caught his hare-brained fancy. He and his friends were hard to follow and also seemed impractical.

Ross on the other hand was kind, loyal, unaffected and solid, but despite many hours alone, many of them in sexual coupling, there was no working him out, perhaps because we always saw each other alone, usually at his secret cave. Not being able to work someone out was a real problem and cause of unease for me as working as a picker and a barmaid and being educated in a convent full of bossy disciplinarians, religious fanatics and nutters, it was my most vital survival skill. At the back of my mind was the knowledge that he could not marry a working class, definitely non-virginal, Irish Catholic and keep his position and that was essential; there was much about him that alienated people. Without his property he would not survive; aristocrats never prosper in subordinate positions.

Also at the back of my mind was the fact that being born into a fixed role that precluded being aristocracy, squatocracy or anything high up, even if I ended up rich meant lapsed Catholic is still Catholic in everybody's eyes and Catholic meant poor or even if rich, not quite British. Now I had made that worse, excluding myself from the virtuous poor or respectability by posing naked for the paintings, not being the concealing hypocrite about Evelyn, these things would follow me all my life and give me the role of slattern. At seventeen I was, to use the genteel phrase, "a woman of dubious reputation and limited options."

When Evelyn came in yesterday, he paid me the most genuine compliment man gives woman, being unable to take his eyes away. Even better was his tongue-tied bashfulness. I helped him by cutting through his beating round the bush.

"You are not here to buy drinks, don't beat around the bush."

"I miss you and want you back."

"I don't indulge in orgies."

"You don't have to. I just thought-"

“I am with Ross.”

“Both his brothers are silly to the point of madness.”

“Isn’t Robert your friend?”

Evelyn winced a little, held it on his face but wouldn’t look at me directly, taking a drink as he whipped his long hair out of his eyes. “He’s a cousin, someone we went through school with and someone to feel sorry for.”

“Why?”

He ignored that, said he was in town for another week and left, talking briefly with Max as he came in. Max was almost always so bluff, so spontaneous, not today. Something was up. He was direct after pleasantries.

“The Clarkes are major trouble, you know that, don’t you?”

“The mother is a bit much.”

“She knows.”

He gave that a minute to sink in and poured himself a beer, sighing. “Every morning I thank God I married Zelda, the right Clarke sister, so cheerful, kind, and happy with life. Ian did well with their friend Edna too, but Rachel, well Rachel was always like this.”

“Like?”

“Like she was at seven this morning on my doorstep. If you don’t leave the district she will get you removed. Ostracism to start with; people either do business with her or with you and she has got the money. She implied that she would destroy your character though gossip and innuendo. If that does not work public denunciations - and if you still stay, arrest for harlotry.”

“But I have never-”

“We know that girl, everybody sensible knows that.” He sighed and fumed like a waiting dentist’s patient. “She does not bluff and she always gets what she wants and that’s just fine she says because it is God’s will.”

“You are supporting her, reluctantly, but you are, aren’t you?”

“How can this hotel survive if people think it’s a brothel – and what will happen to you if you have the reputation that she gives you? Many a person becomes what the community thinks they are.”

I nearly flared up, but tactless as it was, he was right, and how would I earn a living?

“There is a solution.”

“You have my attention.”

“In my Sydney Hotel the manager retires soon. Work there, study accountancy and then take over. You have done fine work here, repeat it up there.”

This could have easily led to saying a great deal about weak men being dominated by strong women and motivations based in guilt, but that would be dirtying my own nest.

“Does Evelyn have anything to do with this?”

“No. We wish you had just accepted him back and left together.”

“You think that might settle him down?”

“No. He’s a dyed in the wool Bohemian and we pity any staid woman who becomes his wife thinking they can settle him down! Cor!

“Better he rides with the wild one?”

He nodded slightly, not sensing me sensing an insult.

“Eldest or not, Evelyn’s not inheriting much. It’s no punishment. He has no business acumen, no aptitude and no desire. He told me he was happy painting. Leo will get all the business down this way. If you could work another month, up till Christmas holidays and break in a new girl, you’ll get triple wages.”

*And I will need them.*

Suddenly it was clear how I was being used, and why Max was the district's wealthiest man. I would be the money earner and carer. Used for my own good, given an opportunity few from the lower levels of society get, but used. Oh well our Robinson Crusoe and Girl Friday fantasy could not go on forever, goodbye cave and creek, goodbye childhood, I have a hotel and an aged boy to look after, Goodbye Ross.

\*

Ross Clarke

Clarkstead 27<sup>TH</sup> November 1909

Helen was not at the pool this morning as we had agreed, with overcast and a steady wind with rain approaching at harvest she must have sensed I could not be there long, but something felt wrong. After hard and fast harvest work today nobody wanted any trouble, even so trouble was there, it was in Dad's body stance at the railing from sixty yards away. The new hired help, the Dean brothers Rupert and Earl (farm boys from Staffordshire) and teenage new chums from Cornwall, the Moon brothers, Albert the eldest and his much younger simpleton brother Kenny, were with Cyril Abaya and Clyde Whaley. All six stood tensely concealed behind the barn. That was odd in itself for these six always stayed in their pairs, doing different tasks and barely understanding each other's form of English, let alone race, or their ways. Albert motioned me over as if it was a stage performance. The hat held in the hand was also a bit much, he must have worked in service, but it didn't escape my attention that Kenny, who would be smiling widely when caught outside in a thunderstorm, was glum.

“Cor governor watch every word today; your future may depend on it. There's no trouble as bad as that caused by skirt.” The others stared at the ground in the proper way for when such problems arose in public



concerning their betters. I nodded and walked around to the veranda, where Robert sat looking smug, formally attired, but not in that uniform.

Excepting Karl, all the McPherson's were there on the veranda, all in formal gear, everybody looking pensive, while Mrs McPherson fussed unnecessarily over Alexander, Ruth and Andrew, Reverend McPherson paced up and down with the bible in his hand. Aunt Zelda, looking vexed, maybe from the formal wear worn in the heat. She sat alone in her brougham, occasionally taping her fingers on the shiny black side. Tom, Alison and Jack sat together, crying little Jack picking up on his parent's unease. Her horses were also uneasy, pawing the dust and neighing now and then, but in a subdued, pensive way.

Uncles Reg and Max rode up at the head of a little cavalcade, so it wasn't till they fanned out at the fence that I saw who was there. Allen, Douglas, Leo and Murie. Evelyn and Helen came last. Taller than most men at nearly six foot, Helen appeared bold as brass and rode a fifteen hands high roan astride in jodhpurs and men's riding boots with her white staff shirt unbuttoned halfway to the solar plexus and her breasts sharply outlined by the breeze. Her long blonde hair was untrammelled and blown back as she defiantly undid it. She was smiling at others with a touch of contemptuous knowledge, but it was as if I did not exist. Aunts Zelda and Edna had simultaneous and identical reactions when they saw her. Their jaws dropped, they gave out tremendous sighs and stared at each other. Alison rolled her tongue around her mouth and shook her head, while even young Ruth knew enough about how women should appear to just stare motionless. All the men had the same expression that could best be described as subdued humorous lust, excepting Albert Moon, Clyde and Cyril, who knew to keep expressionless faces before their betters and be barely noticed in the background. Everybody else with her had that same embarrassed look as the others had before as they

tied their horses up and Cyril, Clyde, Kenny and Albert tended to the horses.

Alex walked over and whispered. "It's best if you are quiet and better if you forget her."

"Either somebody here likes staging high drama or something very important is happening."

"A bit of both."

"Here we go." Allen muttered.

Until she rang a bell for attention nobody had not noticed my mother, standing on the veranda motionless, like a high priestess at a temple step, staring at Helen.

"Even unto the red horse."

Mother said it levelly but loudly and absolutely everybody was puzzled. The farm help had the sense to tip their hats and go to their quarters. Helen screwed up her face and was not pretending.

"What?"

"Underlings who do not comprehend should say 'I beg your pardon; I do not understand; please explain what was just said to me.'"

Helen grinned as she dismounted, boldly walked up the stone pathway and curtsied smiling.

"I beg your pardon. I do not understand. Please explain what was just said to me – and how can anybody understand why a bunch of embarrassed, overworked farmers are standing around at harvest time listening to cryptic comments in Elizabethan English about my horse?"

"Even unto the horse. Revelation seventeen verse four 'I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet - coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy.'"

Everyone was puzzled, except Reverend McPherson, who sighed.

"And upon her forehead was a name written mystery Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and abomination of the earth."

Now it was Helen's turn to drop her jaw and join in the incredulous laughter. Soon tears ran down her cheeks and she was not the only one. Allen, Douglas, Leo, and Murie was bent over double with the giggles., Andrew, Tom and Allison were little better. Even the aunts and the reverend were barely able to keep straight faces and Max and Reg gave up the attempt. Only Ruth, Dad and Robert were not amused, while my mother coldly scanned the faces as if to remember who her enemies were. It took along while for the laughter to stop.

“So, in your frenzied imagination I am the great whore of Babylon.”

Helen waited for a reply but she should let it alone, know when to stop, but she did not. When my mother was clearly not going to respond Helen went into the attack.

“You have me and my horse wrong. He's a roan and roans are not scarlet. And I never charged your boy – or anybody else money.”

She waited, sensing that the mood was going against her, yet ignoring that or consequences, continued

“So somehow you get everybody in your family here for your dramatic expulsion of your son. Max tells me he is to be called into the parlour, have his name scratched out of the family bible, be given five hundred pounds and a saddled horse and everybody waves goodbye one last time. Because...”

“Drunkenness, disobedience, laziness, wilful stupidity, and finally adultery. Any adultery is sin, but with one of your kind...”

“Oh wasn't the great whore of Babylon was one of a kind? Do we run in packs, roaming the earth at night on our red horses, on the prowl for innocent Protestant farm boys to kidnap from their loving mothers?”

Uncle Reg, Andrew, Allen and Murie laughed openly at that and even iron Alex could just keep his tight lips straight. Even Max and Aunt

Zelda and Aunt Edna were smiling. Dad certainly wasn't: he tried to take control.

"That is enough from you, young lady. Please leave my property now." Dad then stood up, fuming and he just had control of his temper.

"No!" My mother snarled, "More must be said!"

That brought more dropped jaws and raised eyebrows. Max rolled his tongue around his mouth. Just as Helen's appearance and admission to sexual involvement went against all decorum and even common manners by openly shouting down the man in the family and taking control, my mother was also breaking social rules. Wives just did not do that, at least in public. Helen sighed.

"Then could you please say it? And please, no more Biblical quotes."

"You are never to set foot in this district again."

"Do you own the district? I will go where I like thank you very much."

And she did, wheeling her horse about, she had her head turned back from their faces and in that instant she gave me a wink and a sigh. Standing by the fence, Max, Evelyn, Leo, Alex, Andrew, Allen and Uncle Reg all saw it. As she rode off Evelyn looked at me and also sighed and nodded then turned around and spoke.

"Goodbye Aunt Rachel. Enjoy life in heaven, making sure God gets his judgements right." He was oblivious to her telling him he was no longer welcome as he rode off after Helen, then she scanned the faces while the clutter of hooves grew faint. Max and Leo got on their horses, but waited.

"We will now begin the ceremony." Everyone looked puzzled and vexed except Reverend and Mrs McPherson looking like they wanted to be anywhere else, but they walked in.

“What ceremony?” Tom snarled.

“Grahame waits inside, he will be read out of the family, the Bible, all wills, all mention of him in future. As a notorious-”

“Got the right son Aunt Rachel?” Alison nearly had her tongue through her cheek as she stared at Robert and then me. “So he boozed at the pub, made some ill-mannered innuendoes about Robert and stumbled upon Helen swimming, so?”

Mum stared, a wisp of uncertainty coming to her.

“He did more than that.”

“No, he did not.” I said it loud and embarrassed.

“How on earth would you know?” The words were no sooner out of my mouth than she began to realise. It would lose me the farm, but a good horse and five hundred pounds sounds better than the pennies and the nag Kidman started with and look at him today, controlling more land and money than many a King.

“All he did was turn up where we were. He did not even touch her.”

“It seems my children are something less than a blessing.” She paused and knew she had suffered a defeat. The thing to do was to retire gracefully and she did.

“It seems this matter must hold for further investigation. If everyone will excuse us, surely you all have work to do with harvest before the rain hits.”

Max just grunted assent and rode off with Leo, while Aunt Zelda got the coachman started and followed. Uncle Reg and his sons started saddling up. Tom behind him, snickering and muttering things we couldn't quite catch. Vexed Uncle Reg did the talking.

“Sister, when you call a family emergency in peak harvest time, insisting nothing could be more important, could you please get the situation correct?” Then he and Douglas galloped off before she could

respond, followed by Allen and Murie, the pair of them calling out “Unto the same horse! Unto the same horse!” as they rode off and that one would spread, as a warning call for bull or nuttiness. Reverend was looking through his bible, marking passages.

“Rachel perhaps we could use the parlour for a talk.”

They went inside. Excepting the McPhersons, everyone else rapidly started leaving, and Grahame the comedian emerged from the parlour like a recidivist criminal suddenly pardoned, asked “Why is everybody here, shouldn’t you be doing your farm work?”

Alex, Andrew and Alison laughed incredulously but not Tom, who came across, fists clenched and swearing. He swung one, Grahame ducked and Tom’s fist went into air tipping him over the veranda edge into mud while Grahame ran to his horse, calling out “Unto the horse!” and galloping off towards town. Dad gazed that way, initially after him, but soon enough he was gazing to the far horizon.

\*

Max Chapman

New Albion 26<sup>th</sup> December 1909

Boxing Day was losing a bit of the meaning it had in our childhood. Now many people never even knew why it was called that. It was the servant’s celebration, the day they got their presents and boxed ours. There had always been some griping from the miners and others, mainly hired help about our posh dances at New Albion – and they were posh. Zelda and I decided to do something to keep people happy, well if not blissful, at least with one less gripe, so we brought in the Boxing Day Ball for anybody who wanted to come - miners, railwaymen, factory folk, foresters, farmers, pickers and herders, graziers, townies, even fisher folk from Ocean Ridge – and their families of course. And come they did. Nobody thought it would be possible to crowd out New Albion’s great hall but eighteen hundred did. After the first such event, (that being one

year before last) we had the drink and food stands and eating benches on the lawns and started off children's entertainers, out there, and set up another dance area just on the terrace where French doors were open so the music could get through.

The more posh Christmas Ball was a week before and cost wise and pain-in-the-neck-wise we could get by – once a year. It was always the same; a small orchestra played prissy little continental minuets and the like. Waiters in silver service offered slivers of patè on tasteless little roundels - you were a boor if you call them biscuits. Champagne, that sour stuff that goes to the head too fast, was the only alcohol. Women wore corsets so tight their waists looked like nearly felled trees just before the axe strikes for the last time, their forced smiles as lifeless as carnival dummies, and if you let out a laugh they stared. Men were often prissier than women, just to add to the misery. So why put the damned thing on?

Women! Zelda, Edna and Rachel liked it, so did nephew Robert and niece Ruth. In fact, many a young lady liked it and so did the Governors-general, the visiting dignitaries and especially *their* wives.

Give me the Boxing Day Ball any time. I thought it would be fun. Colonial and Celtic music, now that stuff most certainly had life in it, sad life sometimes, and other times rhythms that took off like a racehorse bolting, but life. Beer came free at a glass per man; they got a stamp on the wrist with it so there were no seconds, a clever idea, thought it up myself. Fruit punch went on for those alcohol did not suit and you can say what you like and laugh and smile when you feel like it and that makes you part of the thing and a good fellow.

There was a bit more to it than fun, but it was not making money like the assorted Royd-town radicals claimed, it cost me near to two thousand pounds; free food, drink, music, lighting, tents, benches,

transportation and the staff to do all that ain't really free. First the poor bastards should get some fun in their short lives. Everybody knows about miners getting black lung while farmers, foresters and sea fishers might get fresh air, but accidents and foul weather take many before their time, and anybody on wages or the land always struggles. Second the radical agitators have half a point: those who create the wealth have a right to it. The half they miss being that we create much of the wealth, just as workers do. Yes! Certainly! Things should be evened out a bit for everybody's good, but no harm comes from dancing, a few babies maybe, but what is more harmless than a baby?

Harm comes from agitators. Best friend Reverend Ian, sister in law Rachel and many another might not agree about harmless babies, but cor, they would agree on that! Let the likes of young Donal Shaw, the Irish Republican expatriate socialist and Royd-town union leader, get hold of the money and it won't be spent on much to the public good. Funding firing squads at the barn wall maybe for everybody English or named Chapman, Clarke, McPherson or Fisher.

In all seriousness the world might well go that way. The property-less ones and silly liberals and do-gooders were getting stronger. Last year a federal labour government won Australia and while few could quarrel with pensions for old folk or a pure food act to stop disease and dirty or gross ingredients, there would be more to them than that. The importing of the American anarchy-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World here last year showed that. No other political party would have allowed that and in England the peerage and by implication our royalty, were under attack from Lloyd George, trying to limit our powers. It was a worry, but tonight enjoying a rum punch sip under the orange jack o lanterns strung out between cypresses under a starry sky on a balmy summer's night, watching a happy, beautiful wife who looked twenty



years younger than she was chatting with our two fine boys and their fine girls, life was bloody good, may God make it be so for everybody.

\*

Helen Ryan

New Albion 26<sup>th</sup> December 1909

I agreed to work it, staff were short and green, so after meeting Leo's intended, seventeen years old Marsha Trevelyan, the daughter of a Cornish deputy manager at Roydtown, she gave me the drink stalls. She was friendly, not knowing my situation yet. They would announce their engagement tonight. Evelyn was doing the law-and-order bit, keeping out the few drunken rowdies who turned up and making sure that those who had a beer, had only one by taking a rubber stamp on the wrist and they did so only after eating. "Never saw you as a rubber stamp bureaucrat!" his cousin Douglas joked and everybody laughed, including Evelyn himself. He did not look like a bureaucrat or like anything else but a dandy, but he was and that medal won years ago was no fluke. When his cousin Allen and his rowdy crew threatened him and called him a prissy sissy, he merely smiled and slapped a hung beef carcass behind him, leaning against it raffishly grinning.

"This was Caesar Cousin Allen, a mighty bull until his testicles dried up. No retirement homes for the likes of him."

"What's that got to do with any bloody thing? Are yer shit mad daft as well as a sissy?"

"I wanted to break his neck when his time was up, but Dad said no bull. So you know what happened?"

By now the rowdies were subdued in puzzlement and then alarmed by Evelyn's putting on the knuckledusters. He punched the carcass, once. For a second it was likely to break the wire it hung on, but it travelled fast on its hooks for about ten yards. "Push it back Jan!" One of the Dutch brothers tending the barbecue did so, smiling, no weakling, he had trouble

moving it. Allen and his mates just looked at each other and slunk off, waiting till they were almost out of hearing before exchanging stage whispers about another mental case. It could have been true if it had not been for the glimmer of humour in his eyes, mouth and inflection. Allen, who was humourless, rather stupid and many suspect a touch mad despite all his attempts to enforce bushie style normality, did not see it. Allen Fisher had the monotonous tone of the mad, and like them, was always seeing threats and challenges where none existed and responding with abuse and violence. Little better, if somewhat more polished, was his prissy cousin Robert, in his ridiculous dress uniform, making him like a vaudeville actor impersonating an officer. Both of them melted into the crowd and then Allen left. The crowd's quiet and gentle laughter after those two was like a breeze after a night soil wagon passes.

Soon the music started and it was kids first with sing-alongs. The two songs that attracted the most attention from adults were the one about the fox going out for a merry night:

Many of the males put on mock-foxy faces and indeed many had come long distances into town for hens, of a type.

The song about the 1876 Perth Regatta Day, when American Fenians sprang their jailed Australian counterparts and escaped to America, brought a curious response from the Irish, with Donal Shaw, and Evelyn's latest models, Jenny and Brionny singing the chorus with a smug, knowing gusto.

Those three were obviously trouble from the first seconds I saw them, but would be trouble in a different way if I followed tonight's clue. Being Irish descended meant being both sympathetic and cautious.

After a few adult dances Jan and Hendrik courteously volunteered to take over and Evelyn and I danced. Leo's girl had the satisfaction of announcing her engagement to everybody there but everybody there

could see that I was dancing with the handsomest man and the flashiest dancer there.

His grandmothers were Irish and Scots, so it was in the blood, that was the only explanation for it, for he had the steps right, the body movements, the way of whirling about, at one with the reels. He swirled me round so that everything else but his close face blurred. Had anybody there seen a more perfect dancer? He could play the violin too, a surprise he had up his sleeve. When Murie wanted to dance with Ruth, Evelyn took over his violin and Donal, who played second violin, looked wryly amused and the crowd listened in.

“You have a wide repertoire, but here’s one tune to bet a crown on that you don’t know how to play!” With a wickedly sly grin Evelyn played the first few cords of ‘God Save the King.’ Donal and his radical mates had the grace to laugh in surprise with everybody else and like every successful union official he was quick with a riposte.

“That’s why we have Murie, we wake him at twelve and that song puts everybody else to sleep.” That was also a shot at Max, insisting that the makeshift band would finish the evening with the national anthem.

When dancing was about to restart, Murie asked me for a polka and while agreeing, I saw by the program that it was rotation dances and there on the other side were Grahame with Brionny and Ross, him being enchanted with some pretty little thing far too young for him - and as if we had never existed as lovers. Partaking would mean having to dance turns with them, so it was the drink counter for me. I wished him well, but dancing with him here would only lead to more gossip, and gossip frequently leads to trouble. Even without me those pair were heading for it and maybe always would with a family like that. Suddenly being an orphan felt advantageous.

\*

Ross Clarke

New Albion 26<sup>th</sup> December 1909

Grahame and I were both uncertain about going to The Boxing Day Ball, being both unattached and the centre of gossip over Helen, with the crowd being massive, we did not stand out, we left that to Robert in his uniform.

We chatted with others while the kids had their entertainments on. The Moon brothers were a sight in pink and purple striped underwear covered with shorts and wearing size fourteen boots and bowler hats, singing a story about new chums chasing a kangaroo with their gold in its pouch. From somewhere somebody had got a real joey and they chased it prancing round the stage, to music hall jigs. When they sang the chorus they hugged and they would do what was known around Eloura as the half-moon grin. That meant that they made their top lip straight, but so wide it seemed to cut their faces in half while their jaws dropped low, making half circles. The audience loved it and soon the chant went up “Half-moon grin! Half-moon grin!” and they obliged. After a year here they were considered good sports and good sorts and I said as much to Karl. Like his parents and both his brothers, Karl he always measured his quiet words.

“That’s not so certain Ross. Kenny’s simple, look at him, he loves it more than the kids. Maybe he would stick loaded dynamite in a crowded bar if someone told him and then laugh at the fun – maybe not....”

“And Albert?”

“He looks after Kenny.”

“And...”

“And Albert is not so simple.”

Karl scrutinised my face and saw that I was not getting it.

“Ross, Albert does not prance around up there because he enjoys it. Two sovereigns each means much to working people.”

To change the topic I asked him when we were going to see his bride. Only his parents, Ruth and his brothers had gone to Brisbane for the wedding. She was now in Sydney, so he had been away until Christmas Eve. It must have come out the wrong way, for he excused himself, but then no he came back with two drinks, one for me.

“She has a nursing contract to finish, another week: then she arrives.”

“Looking forward to meeting her.”

“And you should be looking for some of these beautiful women here. Best opportunity all year to do some courting.”

He had a point: many had that idea. In the musical break my eyes scanned the crowd and the two new teenage Irish ostlers Max employed Brionny McNamara and Jenny Doyle, had gathered a crowd of eager boys round them. Sergeant Mcphee, Donal Shaw, Robert, Grahame, the Van Groendhals and Douglas among them. They were both extremely attractive women in their different ways. Willowy in her tall build, but sharp in her features, thin Brionny had straight dark hair parted in the middle which reached to her waist and dark brown eyes that gleamed with merriment. Jenny was a statuesque blond with teased curled hair piled high. Large eyes as clear as the palest blue diamonds were far apart and her face looked like she was normally a grinner. Grahame was going for Brionny, but all the others were around Jenny – until she guffawed and spoke. The laugh resembled an Irish imitation of an extremely large kookaburra and went right down to the other end of the hall. “Get away with ya!” She slapped Robert playfully, but with an enough force to make him stumble. “Am I Ascendency back home! Haw! Haw! It is just plain Jenny Doyle of Clontarf an’ lor’ but the only ascenden’ any Doyle we know of did was up the tenement backstairs when they’d been

burglarizing some ol' rich folk or shippen' out sly grog an' didn't want anybody to know!"

While Miss Jenny Doyle of Clontarf was laughing in peels the smiles went lifeless and faces went red and anybody else but her could see their desire to find a graceful way out.

"Perhaps you should meet the Whaley brothers, George junior..."

Then I saw her. She was one of the child minders, just older than them, about sixteen. I recognised some parents and kids in her group, local Methodists and with them their new Roydtown minister, Hawkins, a burly man approaching fifty with decency written all over him. She was almost certainly English, for she had that peaches-and-cream complexion with a slight red in the cheeks and the delicately creamy white skin so classically English. She must have been one of the new Cornish arrivals, for she had the curled raven black hair, dancing pale aqua blue eyes, regular but sensual mouth and regular features that so many Celtic descended people from Cornwall had. Everything about her from her graceful thin hands to the feet radiated a healthy delicacy. She was refined, good-humoured, and yet not sophisticated. Andrew, Alex, the Whaley brothers, about six young miners and Jan and Hendrik, the last two just off drink duty, crowded around, all of them entranced, while Aunt Zelda was instructing her on how to use her dance card – and a bit more.

"Now Miss Rosalind, in a situation like this, when so many men crowd around that a woman can hardly breathe, you give only one dance to each – and if a woman is wise, she does not fill the card totally, for she will very likely be danced to exhaustion if she dances to them all. She may tell a young man why she does not wish to dance with him, as for example, smelling too much of alcohol." Zelda smiled up at the disappointed Van Groendhal brothers. "Even if they are of respectful

repute and have been tending bar in a worthy cause, no lady can go home smelling of alcohol. It is also understood that a lady cannot be too forward when it comes to ladies' choice and that she saves the last dance for the man she finds most...most attractive."

Rosalind blushed, as did some of the boys, and then she started to laugh lightly, but she looked up directly into my face and held the smile as our eyes met and hers enlarged and she became motionless.

\*

Rosalind Jervis

New Albion 26<sup>th</sup> December 1909

While listening to Zelda Chapman's advice, my eyes went over the gathered smiling boys, a dozen of them, all handsome and respectable, all keen on me! Such a very flattering situation! And then I looked up and they did not exist and Mrs Chapman's voice just faded away for me while still vaguely aware that she was talking. Everything faded away but him, the handsomest man that anybody had ever seen in the entire world. It was more than his looks. Statues can be handsome: he had an appeal that was overpoweringly magnetic and I felt then *for the rest of my life there will never be any other man but him*. Then I rationalised that away, well I tried to, thinking to myself you are only a schoolgirl, fifteen. Stop being dramatic; but my pulse was beating like it had never beat that way before, affecting my throat so that I had to swallow and my head was oh so tizzy. And he was looking at me! Zelda smiled as she formally introduced us.

"Miss Rosalind Jervis, let me present my nephew Ross Clarke, second son of my sister Rachel and Frank, prominent landowners in Eloura district."

It was difficult to speak, so we nodded and he did the same.

"Dance with me."

"Oh but I don't know waltzes."

"It's the pride of Erin."

Not knowing what to do, I went with him. Six dances later seemed like three minutes and the realization that it was not only came when the music stopped. He had eyes a girl could drown in and then no sooner had that thought came than he said that about me, looking into my eyes and that was both delightful and somewhat fearful, to have someone read your mind. He noticed my dance card tied to my wrist with some silly little ribbon and he reached across and gently untied it.

“Yes?” He asked quite calmly.

“Yes.” I responded, slipping it in my cummerbund, then no, I ostentatiously held it aloft so everybody could see it and flicked it over to the used plates. The boys took it good humouredly: with tongues rolling round teeth and raised eyebrows. When the music stopped, he did not let go of my hand but gently led me out and down a hall into a shut room, my heart was thumping, being not game to look around and thought *this is wrong, against God’s laws*, but I did not stop. It was a studio of some kind, filled with packed artist’s things, paintings and ordinary portmanteaus. French windows took up a whole big wall and led to a half-walled portico and a double swing chair, with a divider, where he sat me down and sat himself, and it became clear why the divider was there.

“My cousin Evelyn’s studio. He will not mind.”

“You are very fast.”

“Your throat and chest are pulsating. Not with fear.”

“A little. I have never been unchaperoned.... never been alone in a room with a man before, being only fifteen.”

That was really saying much more than that and he understood, and he turned to me which made me more excited, making me lose what little self-control remained. When he moved his head in warm shudders thrilled through me and the first little kiss softly on the lips quickly turned to nibbles and soon his tongue was as deep in my mouth as was possible,



curled round my teeth, going up to the roof of my mouth, scouring it, scouring the back of my front teeth, reaching back, our mouths so tightly pressed together that lips were not existent, duelling his tongue with mine and I realised that he wanted me to do that to him, to be aggressive in his mouth and I was, but I felt that it was not me, just a game in a role.

“I like it best when you are deep in my mouth.” I could not believe that I said that and neither apparently could he. He stood up and stood me up and clenched me to him, to my delight, each of us clutching each others waist with one hand and shoulder with the other, gazing into each other’s eyes. Making me gasp with excitement as I could feel his organs enlarged when pressed against mine. As if it was a game my hands went there and to my alarm, he started taking off his shirt, doing that made me gulp.

“Best not...pregnancy.”

And yet I wanted more than to just stand there, my heart was fluttering, my chest heaving. I made up my mind to be bold, to put fear behind me and be my mother’s daughter and not deny what I was, thinking this is it, this is really happening, but I was also me and stopped, not having done anything; and gulping with nerves, we lay on the couch, the tingling going through his body, as the breath came into my lungs and subsided. We did not know how long we lay there, but after a time he placed his knee between my legs and started a gentle rhythmic stroking that slowly became quicker as I needed it. Clutching his shoulders tight, panting and yelping while cradling my head under his chin, my mouth stayed at the top of his chest. After climaxing and subsiding it was as if not enough air went into my lungs and then the excited tingling gave way to a soothing, exhausted, warm feeling flowing through me.

“You won’t laugh?”

“Of course not.”

“Before this evening I had not even kissed a boy.”

“Nothing wrong with moving fast if it’s the right person.” He tussled my hair.

“Coming to the New Year’s Eve concert with me?”

“Of course.” I looked straight into his face. “Ross, you seem to know exactly what to do with a woman. Are you married or engaged or involved?”

“No, we broke up weeks ago. We are attached? Yes.”

“Yes of course, after what we have just done that seemed obvious. I am... I am not, well, not loose. People say that men think women who-”

“Here is where we prove them wrong.”

He undid my buttons and corset top carefully and eased his head on my breast and then we heard a woman’s stagy voice from the grounds.

“Oh Cousin Ross, Rossie boy! Are you here?”

“Cousin Alison by the sound of it.”

Someone shouted “For God sake Ross, speak up.”

He did and had his trousers done up just as we heard the footsteps in the corridor and he tried to get my corset right but there was not enough time, even to call wait, the door opened as he called. There was just time to hold a bundle of my clothes up to my chest. Some other male relative by his looks was there, and behind him, a tall blonde woman a little older than me, very attractive. The man saw me and withdrew to the doorway, averting his eyes.

“My cousin Evelyn and Miss Helen Ryan, we were admiring your paintings.”

“Including the ones of me nude Ross?”

She was not joking; following her gaze to several portraits, they obviously were her. Others were of the ostler girls. The use of his name was just a little too familiar. Some of the luggage was a woman’s and

some a man's, an artist's luggage. He looked the artistic type. Suddenly I began to understand.

“You are obviously not here to see the paintings. Unless you decided to empathise with the nude topic matter. You have been gone two hours, your brothers and our cousins are trying to be discreet as they wander among trees investigating kissing couples; they are finding discretion in those circumstances rather difficult. Alison and Murie are not so discreet. Murie got Miss Rosalind Jervis's Sunday school to join that search. He did not mean any harm by it.”

Ross raised his eyes to heaven and sighed as Evelyn continued.

“Dearest cous, you are indeed not the slightest bit interested in the paintings, or you would not have made that excuse, as most works here are of Helen. You have merely been doing what perhaps an eighth of the guests here have done on this balmy moonlit night, but best back to the great hall before ‘God Save the King’ starts.”

We did return, While the adults and teenagers merely gave us waggy looks, my Sunday School class laughed loudly and many yelled 'Spooners!' and then adults, including Reverend Hawkins, Mrs Chapman and her husband also laughed. If only my father would when we were dropped off home, the remaining schoolgirl within me wanted to pretend it was just an innocent and pure start to a romance.

\*

Father, being the new methodist minister having just arrived on Christmas Eve, meant that we were busy, busy, busy. There was the unpacking at the new house, parishioners to meet and services to organise, so I was sure that being busy kept him away from the gossips. He had said nothing over the past four days, so I suggested that me being a help to Reverend Hawkins with looking after the youth group at the

New Year's Eve concert and fireworks in the park tonight and a look came over his face.

“Just like you looked after them at the Boxing Day event?”

“Wh-”

“They ended up looking for you. Searching among the flora where couples were-” He sighed.

“Kissing.”

“You swore to me that it was only a children's concert.” He rapped his fingers on the table. “A children's concert where alcohol was freely given away-”

“One glass to adults.”

“Alcohol is always alcohol and children see it drunk and follow by example. A children's concert where children watch grown adults idiotically prance around on stage in their underwear. Hardly a way to learn adults respect for adults, is it?”

“They wore long johns with boxer shorts outside.”

“At a children's concert where “dance!” was the order of the day.” He waited but I could not deny that.

“It was only dancing.”

“No it was not. Dancing is a form of contact which always leads to others-”

“Kissing.”

“And at fifteen you are old enough to know what that leads to.”

My blush showed, there was truth in what he was saying. He noticed the blush and became angry and embarrassed to be discussing such matters.

“By God's mercy all the details are known and we should be able to save your reputation. Your mother remains unknown here.”

*God's mercy or gossip?* Now it was clear that he was uncomfortable with the conversation.

“Sinners rarely jump fully and knowingly into the depths of evil that they ultimately reach. They are lured in on seemingly harmless attractions.”

“Just as dancing leads to kissing and kissing leads to cuddling and cuddling leads to—”

“Exactly, the classic example, not that the least leads to the worst, this being all disobedience and selfishness - and all are equally evil.” He missed the irony in my voice, just like he missed anything like that from others.

“Now listen to me, a woman's reputation resembles porcelain, so easily broken, but once broken never the same. Have you seen repaired porcelain? Or the intense long labour that goes into repairing it? And for what good? It looks like what it is, a remnant of something beautiful unable to return to its initial state.”

He was on a valid point, and saw it and my worry.

“By heaven's fortune Mrs Chapman and his cousin Alison Caufield, both respectable married women, saw you on the veranda and word has spread that nothing beyond, well beyond kissing occurred. Now we must talk of the young man involved. What do you know of him?”

“His name is Ross Clarke - he is Edna - Mrs Chapman's nephew—” I stopped, knowing more, but could not speak, and was suddenly embarrassed for it. He was studying my face very carefully and with a cold regretful anger.

“You clearly did not know that a few weeks ago his own mother nearly scratched his name out of their bible and sent him packing? That he kept a barmaid as a mistress, one he shares with his wastrel artistic

cousin? That this mistress jubilantly identifies herself in public as the great whore of Babylon?”

“Her name being Helen Ryan?”

“Yes. And did you know that he drinks and gambles on horses, and his own Reverend, the Anglican McPherson considers him to be a closet agnostic? And all this and he is not yet twenty.”

He had my attention, if not my sure support. “This is gossip.”

“Even though his mother is an Anglican, she is low church, closer to the evangelicals than the High Church which dominates here, they being halfway to papists. A Godlier woman you will never meet. She gave me all this and also says that he seems a curse on her from God and threatened to strike him out of the Bible for sure if there was a next time.”

“Is this woman married?”

The light left his eyes and he nodded, just the ghost of regret on his face. I felt like saying and while we are on morality maybe you should remember ‘Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbour’s Wife’ but we both learned long ago morality goes one way with my father. He stays the font from which all goodness flows.

“What sounds worse is that he has not been led into sin by bad example. His family remains one of the most respected in the district and his father seems a decent man. He seems to be just a bad seed, a black sheep.”

“There must be a cause.”

“Too much money? Not enough hard work? Too much in good looks leading to conceit? Too many servants to order about or seduce? Does all this sound familiar?”

It was as close as he could get to talking of Lord Bee and my mother. His loss of proportion was understandable.

“Rosylind, Reverend Hawkins is also of the opinion that you should meet with Mrs Clarke and discuss matters with her, tomorrow at eight. He has a dog cart ready.”

“Don’t these people have telephones?”

“Perhaps in a year.” Somehow Clarkstead, sounded something to dread, particularly meeting this woman in the flesh. And it turned out my dread came with extremely good reasons.

\*

Their farm Clarkestead, while smaller than the Chapmans, (New Albion would have been a great estate in Cornwall), would have been more than a decent farm but just slightly less than a manor back home. Arriving there, in welcome, (doffing their caps) were the Moon brothers among the servants, although we were told never to call those in service servants in Australia. Simple Kenny said a happy hello and talked of Cornish life as if it was the most unremarkable thing that we should meet on the other side of the world. Albert was more circumspect, however a glitter in his eyes started dislike, again and once again with very good reason, for even at twelve he had been or was one of Lord Bee’s toadies and watchers.

Ross’s tall, thin mother stood tensely on the steps, her tension obvious from her stance, but not from her expressionless face. The regular strong features, the hair and eye colour were his. She nodded slightly at Reverend Hawkins.

“You will join us for lunch at twelve.” It was said somewhat imperiously, but with little expression, and could have been a command, a question or a request. He nodded and her eyes went over me in the time it took him to flick the pony and wheel around. “Come in child.”

She led me into a parlour, one very different to any in my experience. Although twice the size of most, it was cluttered with all types of things that made it look like a museum to the Clarke family, who

I suddenly realised, were transplanted English aristocrats, not battling Aussies like in the Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson stories read on the boat out. She motioned me to sit and there was a samovar there with made tea and Arnott's biscuits.

"Milk? Sugar?" I asked for milk please.

"You can have Bushell's or Earl Grey, as you wish."

The first test was in that offer. Lord Bee and his aristocratic friends drank Earl Grey, common Australians drank Bushells. She was trying to determine my background.

"Serve me whatever you have already brewed, thank you." She nodded approvingly and poured, her eyes going down to my boots and hem, then to my hands; she was assessing my character and position by how I kept myself and my clothes. To this point she rated me financially poor, but careful and industrious and I could almost hear her brain categorise "*typical chapel lower middle class, but a little too well spoken and educated for that background, so where did the accent and syntax come from?*"

"You have met my son, forget him. Methodists should be with Methodists and Anglicans with Anglicans. No good ever comes out of religious mixing. It is not quite as bad as involvements with foreigners or racial intermixing, yet even so, it is on the way. These things always lead to problems."

"You see me as a foreigner?"

She frowned in puzzlement. "Of course not. We are not quite British now, but remain loyal and will always follow the British in many ways, although we are of different religions."

It seemed polite and wise not to interrupt, so we sipped tea. *This is some game and she has played it before, in the subservient role. Now she is gloating and does not even know it.* She watched me sip the last of the



tea down with this enigmatic look, as if tea was bait and I was some creature now turned into a farm animal, her farm animal.

“A pity.” Then she sighed. “Conversion to our church?” This time she bit her lip and assessed my face again. “No, we cannot be something we are not. So why does a poor minister’s daughter speak with the syntax, accent and grammar of the best English aristocrats?”

“My mother was an English teacher.”

“Clearly, she was good at her profession. Teaching aristocrats?”

I nodded, this was dangerous territory and she sensed it and Albert Moon, commonly compared to Uriah Heep for very good reasons, was a hundred yards off.

“You say was?”

I nodded again, beginning to sweat in this cold, dead, so orderly room.

“Well, is she dead?” The restraint was gone now she owned me: purchase price one cup of tea.

“It is painful for me to talk of such matters. My mother suffered much-”

“How?”

“What?”

“How did your mother suffer?”

“I just said it was painful to me.”

“Child, since the fall life has been painful.”

“I’m sorry for your accident but-”

“Child the reference was to the fall from the Garden of Eden. Coming out from England with the Reverend Hawkins means that you have been under his pastoral care for some time.”

“Nine years. Ten months at Roydtown. While my father was a missionary, first in China and then Arnhem Land. Out here Reverend and

Mrs Hawkins helped locate my father, which is why Father was given Eloura parish. He is Australian. He met my mother while doing his theological training in England. My mother rightly feared for her life and mine in China during the Boxer's rebellion and thinking my father killed, we returned to England."

"During which time you saw little of your father, a man whose biblical knowledge, appears as much more extensive than that of the Reverend Hawkins. Your father understands, as his compatriot does not, that only a small proportion of the bible concerns love. Much more describes the sinful nature of man and God's attempt to discipline humankind ..."

And so on. Over the hours she was like my father, a tedious wave eroding the rock of my religious belief. It was not yet quarter past eight when that monologue started and at far past noon there was a knock. A milkmaid stood there.

"Reverend Hawkins has been waiting these thirty minutes past Maam."

"Serve him whatever he wishes and tell him that he will be seen directly."

'Directly' evidently was at some time after three when the maid came again, saying he would have to leave soon. Mrs Rachel Clarke ignored her. She unintentionally convinced me that Lamentations was her favourite Biblical book

"We will discuss these matters further if you wish. But doubtless you think me arrogant, overbearing and ... Well, that may be, and I deserve my punishment, which is to be cursed with the children I have borne. And if you marry Ross or let him defile you or stain your reputation, which he will do, you will find yourself accursed. They are Godless boys."

“I see.”

“And you have not been honest with me. You are hiding something. It does not take nine years to find out that your father remains alive. Good day to you.”

“May I please use your lavatory, before my bladder bursts.”

The veranda was also a relief. It was clear why her boys were Godless; she had enlisted God in her control and obedience system and doubtless thought she had him under control too.

“Reverend just left, urgent business.”

Albert's words made me jump, suddenly sitting there smug and motionless and all too calm. He motioned to the window with a wink.

“Best wait over by the barn gate while I prepare their surrey, seeing as I drive the milk maids home, they be changing inside, a few minutes yet.”

Carefully I waited with my back to the outside. He kept his distance.

“She’s a sharp old bird, she will believe me; especially as the evidence goes my way. Do what I say or more than your reputation will be ruined. You will be in jail young Miss.”

“Did Lord Bee send you all this way?”

“Assuredly, but I wanted to go anyway.” He grinned, saddled the horses to the surrey and looked sideways to see if anyone was listening.

“How would you like it known that your mother was a whore for Lord Bee, and so were you. And you were illegitimate. Your real father was a corporal in our Lordship’s regiment. That silly duffer Jervis was lured in and fooled. The pair of you tried to thief five thousand of his Lordship’s pounds, she got caught with three, was tried and jailed and there is a warrant with your name on it back in Cornwall it awaits with reward posters decorated your pretty little face. Try to run and those

posters will be up on gum trees. You will not have an easy time of it even if you do escape. Imagine where you will end up, a servant at best.”

He produced both a warrant and the reward poster.

“This is a misunderstanding. What do you want?”

“You my love, you. And nine hundreds of those remaining pounds. Or if you prefer two thousand pounds and you keep your virtue – well sort of. Your mother was very fond of falling on her knees before nobility. You can do the same on a weekly basis for me for the next year, if you feel financially secure - and in the mood to keep your virtue. It amuses me no end that I get what Lord Bee couldn’t and how else can I get a pretty young girl like you? Jail or me – and jail is where the lesbians will train you to use your tongue on them, and at least with me you don’t get a bashing.”

“Jail or you. Embraces by a python is preferable, and there is the alternative of slitting my wrists after putting a note under the police door. A note blaming you and telling the truth.”

“No need.”

That was Ross speaking, coming from the back of the barn, an enraged look on his face which scared even me. Albert Moon was terrified to the extent that he wet his pants and screamed. The first punch jack-knifed him, the next were into his bent back until he lay on the ground, then the kicks in the face and sex organs started. The youngest brother Grahame was perhaps a mile away but heard the screeches so loud that he came riding, thinking it was a farm accident. Then Ross quite levelly picked up a pitchfork. I was going to say it but someone else did.

“Ross no!”

Turning around Helen Ryan came into view, half-naked, straw in her hair, leaning against a stall wall, but clutching her clothes. Ross pitched the fork so that it pinned his neck to the ground, and he pitched it deep.

He was calm, well sort of, but it was a calm that was scarier than the temper it replaced. The milkmaids, the officer at the dance and his mother did not come any closer than the veranda and they looked at Helen and misunderstood.

“You just finished tea?” Ross asked quite calmly and polite with bloodied Albert groaning. “One of you get the poker you stir the fire with. Make sure it is very, very hot.”

“Ross what is this?”

“Now he will be more careful with his suggestions.”

“I don’t want this! Enough! Let him go, he’s barely conscious.”

Helen responded quite calmly. “Ross is not a cruel person; this is not being done out of cruelty. You should see what happened to one of Uncle Reg’s hirelings a decade back. If he lets him off with just a few punches, people will think you led him on or that you are a slattern and there goes your reputation.”

“My reputation! My reputation! My reputation! A boy kissed me for the first time in my life and now that makes me your rival for the title of great whore of Babylon! I want to go home! I want to go home!”

When I burst into tears Ross helped me in the cart, the officer, his brother I think, murmured something to Ross who nodded and at the same time Helen put her dress on quickly and the three of us rode out with too many eyes following. After a little while riding Ross pulled out a letter and gave it to me.

Ross Clarke

27<sup>th</sup> December 1909

Clarkestead

Eloura District New South Wales

Sir,

Many reliable reports of your grossly improper behaviour with my daughter last night have reached me and you are not to come near her again or I will seek legal action. She does not wish to see you.

Reverend Hilton Jervis

“I never said any such thing! Is this why you two...This is bearing false witness!”

“Do you wish to tell us the truth behind what Moon said?”

“During the revolution in China nine years ago, my father – Reverend Jervis started to take us to the safety of the legations in Peking, but on the way a screaming mob nearly caught us. He stayed to talk them out of it, they encircled him. We assumed him to be murdered and then this dashing young cavalryman rode out and put us on his horse and with bullets and spears flying saved us. A real storybook hero – and he really was brave and protective. During the two months siege he was at his best and easily won her heart, talking to her of their life in England, he even promised her a home near her part of Cornwall. And he gave it as part of the deal, which was to teach his children on his Surrey estate during their holidays. He did not mention the unattractive heiress wife until we were introduced to her. As he so bluntly stated, she was paid eight hours for four hours teaching and four hours for pleasure. Not that what I saw was pleasurable, the starvation diets because he liked thin women, the panic over a line on the face, the spies...

One night just over a year ago he turned up at the cottage with the news that he had never had sex with a virgin and wanted to and that he agonised at the thought of me being raced off by some pimple faced boy...”

“This is best passed over.”

“He was getting drunk, so his judgement was blurred. He offered five thousand pounds in gold, for both of us. My mother told him to undress and she would go first after giving me some advice. I took some of it, namely to take some of the money on the table, and rush to Reverend Hawkins who was organising the migration of the local lay-offs to Australia and go with them to Plymouth tomorrow, paying passage.... So I did.”

“And your father?”

“Reverend Hawkins and his wife were happy to make me their ward, but legally they had to check to see that there were no living relatives. He was in Arnhem Land and as there was a vacancy at Eloura...”

“And Albert found out somehow, then followed.” Ross added.

“He was paid to stop you with any pimple faced boy.” Helen added.

“And to keep other men away from my mother. The gallant captain who charged perhaps a hundred Chinese alone to rescue us lived in mortal terror of catching syphilis.”

Helen thought aloud. “Make a deal through lawyers. Agree to send the money in return for clearing your name. He won’t go to trial. He probably did not really want you found. Not only would two witnesses make your mother’s defence stronger, but five minutes of you testifying would get him behind bars. If we both testify as to what his man Albert threatened today, he will be...”

“The aristocracy leave such bounders alone behind closed doors with a loaded pistol.” Ross was joking I thought, no he wasn’t.

“Or send them to a particularly remote colony.” Helen joined in.

“What will happen to Albert?” I asked.

“I’m surprised we did not hear the screams.” Ross spoke so calmly. Helen and I looked at each other, a fearful warning in her eyes.

“Could you drop me at the Hawkins home tonight? It’s fifteen miles on but...”

“Its fine, Ross, could we pick up Evelyn when we change horses in town? Rosalind, what you saw was a goodbye kiss that became something else, because we thought you were out of the situation.”

“Kissing leads to...”

We all smiled pensively. And there, standing outside the Methodist Church, was the man I never really felt was my father. As the surrey came closer to him, from his face, it seemed he did not see me as his daughter. What Albert said would travel faster than the wind. Did he know already? As always when there was trouble with Lord Bee or when other children called me whore child there was always the Hawkins to run to and sharing a bed with their daughter Jenny. Now only half of me wanted to go, the other half wanted to be with Ross, but not at Clarkestead, a deserted tropical island perhaps?

\*

Ross Clarke

Eloura 30<sup>th</sup> December 1909

It was twilight when we entered town and just as we stopped at the Methodist Church Grahame overtook us, galloping towards Karl’s surgery, raising his eyebrows as he pulled up.

“He will be, well it will be days before Moon can be put on the train out. You may have fractured his skull or maybe Robert did when he used the poker. He couldn’t scream because Robert started on his mouth first.”

It would be some time before Albert Moon would ever try anything with any woman again, if ever. Rosalind started going strange, shaking. Grahame rode off, intending to get Karl, who soon passing nearby in his sulky, stopped, as Reverend Jervis stopped near us

“Please father may I go-”

“Yes! You may go!”



I did not like the look of him even before speaking. At about five feet nothing he was one of those thin, dried-up little men who never really had any youth and have it in for anyone who had. Black suit clothes, probably a gift as they were too small and so old that the joints shone and most of the rest was threadbare, a white shirt and cracked, aged shoes. Unimpressively dressed, his body odour made first impressions worse. His hands had abnormally long fingers and he habitually held them wide apart, like some predator about to attack. A scrawny neck led to a long, elongated head with a jaw that you could crack nuts with, a lipless mouth and killer blue eyes so pale that they looked like glass. A high forehead was half-covered by thinning, receding, uncut prematurely grey hair, he was not even forty. Just a few words showed that he never knew how to use his voice subtly or softly or to do anything else but hector, interrogate or order. Rosalind's mother must have been desperate or masochistic to fake conception with this man. The thought hit me that unless he paid prostitutes that once was his one and only. He did not like me either as his first words showed.

“Well, my Lordship, if I was not a man of the cloth...”

“Father so much has happened to day...”

Just then Reverend Hawkins appeared and seeing the situation, spoke.

“Perhaps Rosalind should stay with my family for a time.”

Sympathetic he held up his hand and she took it, her back to us. I was thinking that *Now it is over* as she walked off, but then she paused, turned round and gave me this sad, pensive look that did not end until she vanished out of sight.

“You may parade your harlot around town, you may not do so before this house of God. Move now boy!”

I just looked at Helen, who was on the edge of her temper.

“Move now! Or I will have you arrested for lewd behaviour and for vicious assault!” He moved, putting his claw on the buck board “See how you like the inside of a jail, young cow cocky. Now move right now! Move!”

I resisted an urge to use the whip on his face, and then thought of something funny. I moved the surrey eight inches, right onto his toes. His mouth opened as far as possible. “What are you trying to tell me? What? What? Yes, it has moved! Just as you ordered. Ah your toes, do you want me to move further?”

With wild eyes he started screaming a great many biblical oaths that he would have liked to have been obscenities.

“If you weren’t a man of the cloth you might really take up swearing. Perhaps we should call the police, swearing in public is an offence. Now hands off my surrey.”

He just stood there clenching his teeth, breath escaping through his yellowed teeth while I glibly and with mock politeness asked him if he wanted me to move further, he must ask politely. Looking like he would bite me, with his eyes extraordinarily intense; he was just a cranky, celibate, little old man full of hate for a younger, taller one with a beautiful woman on his arm. We drove off. Helen sighed.

“What a day Ross, Well seeing what you are like outside the cave, makes a nice, quiet, painter seems wonderful. Marry her, even though you just made an enemy for life of your future father-in-law. She has nobody else.”

Then she hopped out into the hotel and was gone.

\*

The horses were too tired for a return trip and moonless nights were always bad for riding, so they stayed at the livery, for me a booked room at Max’s hotel, and then an appointment to see him at eight. As lights

were on at McPherson's rectory, I knocked, just to make an appointment for tomorrow, but Edna McPherson insisted on me coming in.

"Zounds Ross, you usually are calm. You need counsel with the reverend?"

"More in the legal line Aunt. I might be Alexander's first case."

"Oh, he's here, just on holiday from his first year legal studies. Alexander!"

He came out in spectacles already, nodding agreeably with white shirt sleeves rolled up and a book bigger than two shoe-shine boxes in one hand. With every Sunday chicken and its vegetables coming free off our farm there would be no charge.

"What's the case about?"

"Woman trouble."

He raises his eyebrows and took a seat motioning for me to do likewise. Those two words set off a code that worked the same wherever white people were on the globe. Nothing would be repeated, little would be asked and considerable help would be given – the first time. Aunt Edna and Ruth knew the rules about women hearing such things and left, taking their knitting, closing the parlour doors and putting on the phonograph.

"The lawyer always says tell me what happened." I started

After doing so, leaving out the more personal parts of Rosalind's life; he asked what I wanted to know.

"Can Rosalind be jailed?"

"Assuredly, although he would be unwise to prosecute. By the sound of it the village and half of Plymouth knew what he was doing – and by the weekend all Roydtown and – well the whole district will have at least a garbled version of events... we got one such. The milkmaids, some of them having their own horses, rode in, and went for drinks and spread the

gossip quick. In front of that font all trouble, Allen, who made sure that Jervis and passers-by in the street heard that she was not his daughter. Those who saw his face agree that there was no surprise.”

“What can be done?”

“We can remove his Lordship’s motivation. Wire back the money immediately.”

“That leaves Rosalind with nothing. Jervis has struck her out.”

“Support her-”

He stopped as a vehicle pulled up. Through the laced windows we could see that it was Karl.

“You are certainly keeping Doctor Karl busy Come in.”

“Certainly. Jervis had his feet on brick edging” Karl was flustered and did not exchange niceties.

. “Three toes were beyond help, four others may turn gangrenous. He is discussing you with the police, fortunately the constable having seen the earlier trouble with Allen, witnessed the whole thing.”

“Another one!” Alexander’s eyes enlarged dramatically. “Tell me this one in full Ross, it can be fatal to leave out tacky details.”

Karl also listened intently and gave the impression he never really liked me and it was turning to dislike, but then no, it must be wrong as he had known me all my life. Alexander answered.

“He does not have a case and soon you will not have a reputation, or rather one for trouble.”

“Will I be prosecuted over Albert Moon?”

“Not unless Moon wants five years for blackmail. And the police can be trusted to follow Max’s advice on women trouble cases.”

“Indeed.” Karl’s tone was sardonic. “I have something to add from the medical point if you are interested. Albert Moon survived, no fractured skull, so he will make the next train out. His penis and tongue

will probably not turn gangrenous.” He sighed “Ross wouldn't it have been easier to have just sacked him?”

“You weren't there.”

Karl took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. “I gave Miss Jervis a sedative. She will be on night watch with a nurse and will be going to Reverend Hawkins in the morning. I suggest you leave her alone.”

He then went to his room. Alexander just stared at me unblinking and I left. I was in woman trouble alright. There was more of it at the hotel in the morning. Douglas, Leo and Murie were all leaving with disgusted looks.

“They have Kenny and Eakins McKenzie, that burly Scottish blacksmith new to Eloura, he is looking for a fight.” Douglas muttered. There was Kenny babbling on to a crowd including Tom, Uncle Reg, and the Van Groendhal brothers, who usually scorned lounging about gossiping, not today. Allen was the leader in trouble as usual. Uncle Reg looked amused. It was little wonder that Allen was the arrogant troublemaker. As if Albert Moon and Jervis weren't enough, here was another aggressive little man. I was jack of the type and tried avoiding him while looking for Max, but I could hear.

“And then he did it.”

“Did what?” Allen asked, eyes aglitter.

“Put that poker where he should never.”

“Where is that, Kenny?”

Kenny pointed to his prick as if that was more polite than saying it and nodded his head for extra emphasis.

“Who did it Kenny?”

“One of them Clarkes Allen.”

“Which one Kenny?”

“I should not say. No, I should not say.”

“Was it Aunt Rachel, did she stick that poker where she should not?” Kenny just shook his head. “Was it Uncle Frank? Was he the bad man Kenny?”

“I know what you are trying to do Allen. You are going to guess through all them Clarkes until you get him.”

“He’s a bad man. Kenny. A very, very, bad man.”

Somebody had to step in, so I did.

“Kenny, take these five shillings; now go and get yourself a milkshake and the steak lunch. See Reverend McPherson or Reg here about work elsewhere. With Albert gone you cannot stay at Clarkestead.”

“But he wrote me a note saying he would be back to get me when he heals and how can-”

“He meant back in Eloura, not Clarkestead.”

“Oh.” He nodded to himself and left, while all the faces were elsewhere. Max was in the distance and he motioned me over to his table.

“To the point, young Ross.”

“Woman trouble.”

“The whole town knows this. You also have Eakins looking for you with fists clenched, he feels that no reverend should be harmed, no matter what and eccentric as he seems, he has a point. They cannot on principle strike back. I had to invent a blacksmithing emergency on the estate’s edge for gigantic Eakins. So, now to the woman trouble.”  
Just a few minutes ago I was angry at cranky little men, now I was being hunted by a mad giant. I repeated what had happened and what Alexander had said.

“So how much will cover it?”

“Two thousand, including compound interest.”

“Pounds, guineas, what man?”

“Pounds.”

He wrote out the promissory note without blinking, neatly sanding the ink as he spoke.

“Get Grahame to give me twenty winner’s names next races and nothing’s owed. But Ross, young fellas usually get away with women trouble just once. You have had Helen trouble, now this one.”

“She is nice.”

“I do not doubt it, but chapel by religion, illegitimate by birth, implicated in embezzlement, the mother a jailbird... breeding will out, a cliché assuredly, but the world has seen it in every species.”

It was not a polite situation to disagree.

“And we both know why I am not punching your head over the Helen aspect.”

He just stared until I asked why not.

“Because she came in here yesterday, earlier than she said and found him breaking the new barmaid in, so to speak. Then she went off and found you. In the hay.” He paused and sighed. “I’ll be glad to see them off to Sydney, but bear in mind, if some women are born badly, others are made so by bad men.”

There could not be any disagreement with that.

\*

Rosalind Jervis

Eloura 31st December 1909

I awoke in the surgery at about six, with a nurse sitting primly, her sharp, cruel, features looking very smug.

“You are awake, have your shower. Towel and soap are on the chair. You will find that your clothes have been cleaned and your valuables are under them.”

While showering she tilted her head slightly to watch me.

“Honestly girlie, Lord knows what all the fuss men make over women can be about. They are silly creatures.”

When I was dressed and groomed, she brought me the property and visitor's books to sign and after that she opened the side door.

"Now leave here and never come back."

I was soon to find out that *here* was a very ambiguous word. Whilst going to find Reverend Hawkins and his family my expectation was for kindness as always, being offering me a place to stay, and as in Cornwall, the kind of Christianity I always hungered for and for which his church inspired, charitable, tolerant and concerned with practical things. There was always something to do, as there was now, floats to organise, and kiddies to put into costume, and I was happily doing this, when parents began to take their children away; in one case pulling a little boy out of my arms, leaving the smiles fading on my face and his. Even worse were the patronising with their smiles plastered on and their comments about 'We are all equal in the sight of God.' I almost found myself preferring Allen Fisher, who denounced my theft while grinning greedily as he asked what I had done with the money and suggesting a horrid way to earn more. I was going to slap his face when the gigantic blacksmith Eakins came up.

"Ah little Allen, causen' trouble as usual? Off with ya loud leetul weasul or I will slap yer face – an' as yer ken see, I' be no wee girl."

Allen left snarling and Eakins McKenzie gave his barky laugh. He had wild, tawny eyes that seemed misplaced and moved separately, and he was burly and tall beyond anything I had ever seen. What skin could be seen beneath body hair, hair and full big beard was flecked with little burns, probably from metallic fire spit. He was supposedly seven feet seven in his socks and thirty-two inches across the shoulder. I could well believe it. He was very much like every stereotypical blacksmith in every story or play; small men must surely either grow or get out of that profession. It was widely believed he had been kicked in the head by a



horse he was shoeing, although later the truth emerged. During military service he had punched an officer and been given prolonged solitary confinement, much of it in total darkness.

“Being three hundred poun’ o’ bone, muscle and gristle, ge’ a man great clout.”

There could be hardly any disagreeing with that, and it was a rare individual who ever disagreed with Eakins McKenzie, apparently the sight of him flexing his muscles and clenching his fists and a voice that could perhaps drown out a bellowing elephant was enough to quieten the rest: therefore he could engage in his eccentricities to his heart’s desire. Such desires included loudly singing folk songs, shanties and poetry while he worked, proposing marriage to virtually any Christian woman, and attending any Christian service he liked and walking out when he felt like it, sometimes with gratuitous unflattering explanations, at other times with twenty=pound donations. My father, Reverend Jervis got “Man yer know yer bible, an’ yer believe ‘et, but read Corinthians, yer ha’ nae love en yer, sae yer nought but a clangin’ gong.” This was followed by a walk out. He would usually stay after service to sing out his favourites in an empty church. The glories of Scottish Protestantism, Kipling’s genius, analogies to the forge and the church and similar favourite Eakins themes were sermons kept in reserve of late.

“Are ye yer mouther?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Then ken. E’rybody roun’ abuat seem ta think they be God an’ say yar bad cause of yar Ma an’ Pa. Canno see it myself. Be who ya want, not what othur’s decide fer yer out o’ envy.”

“Envy?”

“Envy. Yer the bes’ looken girl in the district, yer landed the bes’ looken chap, him who will be a big man here and rich, an’ yer’ got his

best friend lined up if yer want him instea.’ Yer usually happy till yer let mongrel bastards make yer sad an’ yer got two thousand poun.’ Envy.”

“I am returning the money.”

“Nae need. Young Ross got his lawyer Andrew an’ Uncle Max to work it all out an’ telegrammed it off high priority early this marnen’. Got a response on the wire all the way from London ‘less an’ hour back. Max’s loan goes to his Lardship fer nane prosecution an, there’s nane objected’ ta ma’s parole en two weeks.”

It sounded too good to be true; then the thought came, and what might Ross want for two thousand pounds? Answer – me - kept in an isolated seaside cottage, or something like that, just like my mother.

“Ross isan’ that bad, bad enough, though. He be a regular Jekyll and Hyde, an’ he’s like the officers I served under in colonial service. Kill a man or a private be kilt beside ‘em an’ they be more worried about the blood splatters on their fine tunic than the man. He and all the Clarke be descended from lards... officers!” He shook his head vexatiously. The comment about not hearing the screams came to mind and seeing his older brother in uniform and I realised that eccentricity was more about improper manner than a lack of perceptive intelligence.

“So fer bein’ a gentleman to you an’ yer Ma, I won’t hit him o’er the Reverend, tha’ clangin’ gong. “Preach to ‘em as much as yer like, love ‘em with all yer heart. They canno change. An ’you canno’ change him. Maybe Andrew McPherson ull be the better man fer yer. Godly certainly, an’ nearly as han’some.”

He motioned with his head over to the other side of the park where Andrew was with his brothers.

“Thank you.”

He nodded kindly and wished that God would look after me in the year to come and I was finding out who my friends were – and were not,

and there were many surprises. On the walk over to the McPhersons Mrs Hawkins came over with a hard face as if she had not known me from a toddler in Sunday school back home. "Miss Jervis, my husband seems to have promised you accommodation at the rectory-"

"He did."

"Well, we must withdraw it, we are crowded out!"

She waited for it to sink in that this was a convenient lie. It did not take long. The amazement and the hurt did. This was a woman who seemed like a second mother, so saintly and cheerful...

"And now that you live in Eloura, you should follow the rules and attend the church in your parish."

"But my father has-"

"Is it really wise to discuss your father, who may be anyone or nobody?"

The Methodist rectory faced the park, and there on the veranda for all the world to see, was my valise and my few meagre possessions. Mrs Hawkins knew, as did the Methodist families watching carefully from a few yards away. Suddenly much became clear. The Hawkins family were dependent on the Sunday collection which came from the people behind her and others like them. Left to themselves they would have given me refuge, but they could not. Reverend Hawkins would have stood against it, which is why his wife was here. Just behind her hard face were the string of orange and yellow Jack O Lanterns with their big black mouths and eyes: masks and her immobile face had become another that I could stare at just as long as I liked and like them it would not change, a message for me. Perhaps her usually sweet face was another mask, perhaps her whole life was.

"Good evening to you Mrs Hawkins, and thank you for your past kindnesses." I nodded and continued on my way. The McPhersons were

hospitable. Alexander held out a glass to me.

“Try this fruit punch, Karl and Ruth concocted it.”

Andrew offered me a glass as he spoke, I sipped and smiled, glad to forget the last few minutes.

“I made sure no medicine went into it.” Alexander quipped, and he added, “I assume that you have heard the good news.”

“Why assume?”

“Because it came in minutes past in Eloura. You may be the last to know.”

He got my explanation about returning the money, but despite the humour in the banter Alexander was like he was at the Boxing Day dance, just a little too fond of talking law at a happy celebration, just a little too, well stuffy. Karl the eldest, knew how to be agreeably polite, even witty, but he had a reserve about him. I liked Andrew best, and although he did not touch me, he wanted to. Chatter took us close to midnight and during the fireworks I crooked my arm so he could take it and smiled his way, but suddenly it was apparent how Helen could love two men at once. When midnight came and others were using it as an excuse to kiss, he bashfully took my hand. With the fireworks blasting away, my mind turned to Ross. Rather absent-mindedly I agreed to attend church with Andrew next Sunday. And then when the crowds were dispersing, I realised there was nowhere for me to go to tonight.

Fortunately, Zelda Chapman saw me and interpreted the situation and told me of fifteen unoccupied rooms at New Albion, but although she did not say it, a guest cannot stay forever.

\*

Helen Ryan

Hawk's Nest, Port Jackson 8th January 1910

The coachman knew to be discreet and quickly piled our portmanteaus up and left us. Few men could really lift a woman up in

their arms to carry over the fresh hold with blithe ease, but despite his deceptive lithe, not very muscular build, he could. He even carried me upstairs and to the bed, as expected!

“The luggage?”

“Oh bugger the luggage!”

“Certainly, just as long as you don’t bugger me.”

That was only half a joke. With consenting women Evelyn would do nearly anything sexually. He undressed down to his trousers, me helping with his flash patent leather boots, a bit much in summer, but he was always a dandy.

“Will you do the buttons and the stay?”

There was no saying that twice, he was good at dispatching stockings, although he never really undid buttons and stays without fumbling, and excitement never dies with this one.

“Could be the last time you have to fumble, can you see why on earth I should wear a pestilential corset? They squash my insides, hurt the ribs and they are so hot.”

I left out what he already knew, that not wearing one was a sign of poverty or being a slattern or a suffragette.

“Not for the waist, or ribs, but what about breast sagging?”

“The Americans are putting out brassieres soon, that’s a new women’s undergarment out that solves that. The women’s magazine says they should be here by year’s end.”

“Then I would like to see it.”

“Just so long as you don’t add it to your eccentric clothes collection.”

By now we were both naked and my head went on his chest and felt the sun-heated metal of his ridiculous bracelet on my shoulder. He had continued to grow after putting it on and now he could not get it off, not

that he wanted to. I ran my tongue up his solar plexus, throat, chin and lips and stayed there, time seeming not to exist as we explored each other's mouths and the sun came in warming our bodies and his beautiful room on a quiet summer's day, heaven.

\*

Karl McPherson

McPherson's Surgery 14<sup>th</sup> January 1910

Rosalind had turned up to answer the nurse wanted notice and she was in the worst mental state for it, yet there could be advantages. She congratulated me on my recent marriage and we got down to talking. After asking her what she recalled of China this soon emerged as a sore point.

“We arrived from India just a few months before the rebellion started and we left at Christmas 1901 so many of my memories are coloured by the Boxer Rebellion.”

“So you fear the Chinese, you think them barbarians?”

“Not at all, they are highly civilized, polite people. Some supported that rebellion, some did not, and some were its victims. Many of the most barbarous acts in that rebellion were committed by Allied troops. That was when they captured Peking and plundered it.”

“And what do you think of Europeans married to Asians?”

The question, or rather why it was asked, puzzled her.

“Well, it should not be commented on, but many derogatory comments on this were made in India and China, by people who should mind their own business.”

“My wife has Chinese descent.”

She just nodded. “And she is a nurse.”

“Yes; you will have to take instruction from her. Could this be a problem?”

“No.”

“Other problems may arise from the nature of nursing and we have other tasks, as you can see the house needs renovating, we are both extremely busy... Now concerning nursing. There are aspects that are delicate. You have for example seen blood, surgery performed, or a corpse?”

That was a very wrong question. Her body tensed and her throat muscles constricted and the gloves in her hand were clutched.

“Many hundreds in the siege at Peking.”

That reaction only confirmed our suspicions, that she would bear close watching, that there was something behind her immediate reactions to Ross’s violence and that meant she would be a terrible nurse. She also needed at least a month away from pressures. Fortunately, the house needs renovating and we would be too busy with cooking, cleaning and accounts, we could employ her for that.

“Well why don’t we try out this situation?”

\*

Ross Clarke

Eloura Railway Station 26<sup>th</sup> January 1910

For the first time in his life and to my amazement Karl asked me for something.

“Ross, I have a favour needed.”

“Then ask it.”

“My wife arrives on the afternoon train today and there could be trouble.”

That puzzled me and he read my face the way he read everybody's. Bookish people are not usually like that. Alexander usually was like him in that, but not Andrew. I waited for the explanation.

“My wife is of Chinese descent.”

“Oh, Allen and his hoons are going to make a good deal of that. He continually hangs around with his layabouts looking for an excuse to cause trouble.”

“Which is why you should control him. Normally Eakins does, but this situation requires more tact than Eakins possesses. We did try getting Allen elsewhere, but that only alerted him to the situation. He knows that my wife will be coming and for him this might be a fine performance opportunity. Already he boasts...”

“You want me to talk him out of it?”

“Try that first.”

“And then?”

“Sergeant Mcphee will be in charge, but his blacks should not be deputised for this situation. Nor should Tom or Grahame, who just might side with Allen. Alexander, Max, your father, Leo and Douglas have already agreed, will you join us?”

“Of course, but what of Andrew?”

“Like my parents, Aunt Zelda, Rosalind, Murie and Uncle Reg, he had best stay out of any confrontation. They are all preparing a welcoming meal at home.”

I waited for the invitation that did not come and then another realisation of what might be in his mind came. Rosalind does not like violence and if things become violent Ross will be in the violence and Andrew will not. Therefore, Andrew will look good in Rosalind’s eyes.

“There can be no shirking a fight.”

He sighed and explained that he thought that the attraction that had once existed between Rosalind and I was now over, that perhaps it would be better if Grahame, my parents and I came to dinner while Rosalind was away and that Rosalind might stay and learn the nursing profession.



“That will limit her marital prospects considerably. Would a landowner, a bishop, or any man in the higher echelons of society wish to marry someone who has been a nurse or a servant?”

Karl just stared with his lips curled and he had misunderstood. I was thinking of how my mother and society in general would react, not myself., How she worked at her living did not worry me. I started to explain, but the train arrival whistle blew.

“Excuse me Ross I have a bride to attend to.”

We expected a very short, black-haired, slant-eyed, chubby, obsequious woman who would be servile and happily chatter in very loud mispronounced broken English. We got the hair colour right and everything else wrong. My first impression was that Grahame and Allen had played a joke and put a desiccated head hunter’s trophy on a tall pole and then draped it with the white and grey of a nurse’s uniform. She was about six foot three, impossibly thin, speaking perfect English in a well-modulated low voice as she was introduced to us. Servile must be the last word anyone would apply to Lynda Taun McPherson. Karl told me that her maiden name meant Lord and it was appropriate. She wore a nurse’s summer clothes and cloak like they were royal robes. Everything about her was imperious. Her expressionless, finely drawn face with round eyes, inspected us, remembering our names and giving us glances as if we were volunteers under her command. She was brave, I will give her that. This was at just seventeen years old.

Allen and his layabout mates turned up and were surprised at first, then he led the verbal attack, which considering the chain in his hand was a relief - as was the sight of new and young Sergeant Mcphee with Max, Dad, and three of the requested cousins. To Allen they only meant a larger audience. When Mcphee told them to disperse Allen acted as if he had not spoken.

“Cor what! Everybody’s got a chink today Karl. Look I mean, here's a lot.” He rattled the chains. This was with his mouth tight in a grin and his eyes glittering. The way he rattled the chains had a certain ambiguous cunning to it, he could claim it was harmless, but he made doing that look menacing with his glittering eyes, fixed sneer.

“Let’s have a competition! Now I reckon the quickest way to destroy this timber post is ter whip it with my chink, so why don’t yer show that yer can do it quicker? You being such a brainy fellow yer can beat me can’ $\frac{1}{2}$  yer!. Turn your chink horizontal and heave her into it, a nose like that will cut through timber real fast. Chinks gotta be good for something.”

“Why don’t you leave state government property alone and put that dangerous weapon down?” Mcphee asked, Allen ignored him while his mates, his audience sniggered.

Quickly he swung the chain back and then into the timber, shattering it. The swing back tipped Mcphee’s cap off, the swing forward sent splinters and dust into people’s faces. Karl had a splinter in his eye, which was filling with blood.

Allen laughed and was about to say something smart when my punch got to him first, hurling myself onto his arm, straightening it so that it went into the post, breaking. That sent the chain flying, narrowly missing people. Allen yelled in agony.

“Arrest him! Arrest him or I’ll report you. And my mates will get him!”

“Ross, Allen Fisher: you are both under arrest. Karl?”

Karl sat while his wife calmly tended him dabbing as she spoke.

“It seems to have missed the eye.”

“Yes it has. In under the eyebrow at about eighty degrees. But the wood was too soft to penetrate the skull, so it went vertically, feels like it rests subcutaneously for about half an inch above the eyebrow.”

“Oh poor fella so brave describing his injuries. Just trying to attract attention to himself. Look at me broken arm and I aren't sayen' nothin'.”

Sergeant Mcphee found Alex while Lynda wiped away Karl's blood.

“Alexander your professional services are needed. You layabouts disperse.”

“Nah! These are my witnesses!” Allen had a sing-song whiny voice and was talking like the defeated always talk, making themselves out to be the victims.

“Ross you are on your honour to report and wait at the police station. Use the time to get a lawyer and make your statement.”

“And what about my honour?”

Mcphee just clamped the cuffs on him.

\*

Lynda Taun McPherson                      McPherson's Surgery 26<sup>th</sup> January 1910

Even before the fight I was becoming certain in an impression that Eloura was even more bigoted and gossipy than Karl had led me to believe. The old biddies on their verandas with too much tea and too little exercise and the early morning pub drinkers, both groups were just staring at me with expressionless faces, waiting for me to take my eyes off them so they could start their gossip by stating the obvious about my appearance.

Then came the fight and its confusing aftermath. With bail arrangements, treating the injured, Alexander and Mcphee getting statements and those who were there telling those who were not there what happened, the place was very much something less than welcoming. Just to top off the confusion there was Rosalind, a first week nurse with a

fear of blood and violence. Her boyfriend was the jailed man of action, which contributed to her tantrum in the surgery. One by one the clan left, without eating. Rosalind was very efficient at cleaning up and putting the uneaten food back. She would be obedient and easy to control, one of the few Eloura denizens who were.

It was amazing and disgusting at what my husband suggested we do. Men must be controlled or we become their slaves, literally in China and here was, if more subtle ultimately very little different, except for a few crucial factors. Medicine provides a lifesaving service, at the least it relieves pain or incapacity: they need us. Marriage confers respectability; knowledge gives power and the correct use of language confers and publicly confirms that power. Money acts as a conduit for that power and as armour. I had come a long way from the starving, weeping, filthy urchin in the Chinese alley and except for the Australian missionaries being placed there, luck had nothing to do with it. These people did not see the advantages before them. Foreigners on this continent call it Treasure Island and for the wise and energetic, that is what it is.

When I was sitting at the open-air table at the top of the overgrown courtyard looking at the gallery and its worn Florentine tiles, crumbling stucco walls, chipped filigree and cracked balustrades, the thought came that much can be done with this, soon it will look Chinese. It never quite did, despite the three-foot high bronze happy Buddha dead centre in the top of the courtyard garden, the equally high pair of porcelain Chinese dragons guarding the courtyard garden entrance, the Chinese water lilies and goldfish in the pond which was spanned by a Chinese bridge and the chrysanthemums and geraniums. Excepting the Buddha, so obviously foreign and exotic, Australians absorbed all the others into their concept of normality.

Repairing the stucco, filigree and balustrades meant repainting and the cream and azure filigree and Sienna orange stucco recalled Italy, the use of second-hand pews with their carving and turquoise inlay reinforced this. The imported Italian tiles were too expensive and too rare to replace. The frangipanis, agapanthus, vines, orchids and ferns looked too good to take out, as did the centrepiece, the fountain. It had two levels and the top one held a statue of a long-haired naked water girl, holding aloft a jar from which the water perennially poured, sliding over her into the fountain pool almost noiselessly.

Italian and Chinese should not have merged into one harmonious whole, and Australian and Chinese should not have either, even if the eye injury meant he did have to lie motionless and more or less celibate for the first month of our marriage spent here.

The serenity of our garden paid off in different ways; patients loved it more than they knew. It calmed them, rarely did we have a “why are we waiting so long?” enquiry and also worry, that great and perennial ally of anything requiring medical aid, was soothed away for many. Ah yes. Financially we seemed to attract more people with our courtyard garden, which was also good for courting – or could have been if only Andrew was not a.f.b. (a frightful bore) in British Empire school yard parlance.

Time after time announcing his name would get a gleaming eager smile from Rosalind, but the lustre went out of those smiles, and then they were positively wan, and finally they were plastered on with a weariness in her eyes. They would sit together there in that most idyllic setting for an hour or two and when he left looking happy, I would ask her what had happened and she sighed “He explained to me how experts now believe that Mark’s gospel was written before Mathew’s and why they think so. Last week he spent one hour explaining how puseyites

were a waning force in the Anglican Church and when after an hour I could slip in ‘What is a puseyite?’ He gave an hour more in explanation.”

Next time he was boring her I accidentally slipped, making sure that the three of us fell in the pond and Rosalind’s beautiful figure was highlighted. It stopped him for about ten minutes and his appreciative gleam faded into blushing guilt when I saw it and he knew.

For me and Karl, there were few worries that cups of tea in the garden, or a card or board game there would not dissipate. There were fewer worries that would survive a swim in the pond. The stone encircled deep water was in slow perpetual motion, got very little direct sunlight and came from deep pipes, so the pool’s temperature range was always chilled to cold and therefore refreshing. There was always dawn meditation before the Buddha, reminding that every dawn seen was a victory, and that life could be happy. A few times I got Rosalind swimming, but she was uneasy with that and puzzled by meditation.

“I am not a Buddhist” She declared.

“Neither am I. My family are Celts from the Taklimakan Desert in Western China. That is where my height and European looks come from, we are Moslems now.”

“You follow Islam?”

“I follow my instincts, trying to get the best out of all the great teachers and leaving the followers and dogma alone. Jesus, Mohammed, Saint Paul, Confucius, Lao-Tse, the Greek and Roman classicists....”

“I’ll try meditation, but not before a craven image.”

She also tried nursing, but was the worst person for the profession any of us had ever worked with. She earned her keep with her garden restoration efforts and as Karl thought it would be better not to lower her status with pay, a sign of servitude. We repaid her in fine dresses, hats and books, no derelict ever dressed better. Everybody noticed how she

picked up whenever somebody mentioned Ross. While he was on trial for assaulting Allen she just sat tensely in the garden, oblivious to anything and when Alexander brought news of his acquittal she burst into tears of relief and we could see how it should go. It would be better if she was with Zelda learning how to run an estate like Clarkestead and Ross was a frequent visitor at New Albion. Zelda, Karl and I devised a plan.

\*

Rosalind Jervis

New Albion 12th February 1910

I would never be a nurse and as well as that newly-weds should have time alone together so I accepted Zelda's offer with alacrity. I would not really be a servant I initially assumed, just learning household skills which would be an asset in my married life. There were many accepted skills, which I had yet to learn, dance, horsemanship, accounting and the social skills of dealing with people, especially employees. The words underlings, lower classes or servants were disliked by Australians and the common English attitudes on class matters were very much milder. Disguise the matter as they might, my real role was as much a defacto servant as an observer, eating with them, sleeping in the servant's quarters, working around the estate and in the new emporium. And yet my prospects were considerable, namely the position of minister's wife, now that Andrew and I were seeing each other. There was a certain goodness to him, and no patronising. While preparing the summer gymkhana he worked with me and the other servants so everyone could see I was not beneath him. We attended morning service to avoid the Clarkes, who being evening service, avoided us.

I had a certain level of respectability in Eloura and a popularity. After observing the ostlers together Zelda left me with them. After five minutes of watching them bale hay Jenny Doyle the blonde said:

“Still watchen’!”

“I’m supposed to learn.”

“Good, there’s a fork, an’ there are spare clothes in the loft; doin’ is learning.”

Within a week I was saddling up as second nature and riding, even if it was the most placid mare in the stable and cantering started next week. They taught me that being an ostler was a trade, not a job, and it would take years of studying to learn as much as these girls knew. But starting made me happy with them until the letter came.

Mrs Jervis

4<sup>th</sup> January 1910

London England

Dearest Rosalind,

This letter contains no return address because I leave tomorrow for America and a new life. I am afraid that my mistakes have brought you nothing but misery and undeserved shame. Your young man who so generously got me out of this situation sounds like one to stick to, just as he has stuck by you. It will be a source of constant happiness to think of you as a rich farmer’s settled wife. I think it best that you have no communication with me as my reputation will mar your chances in a new world. We must both build new lives separate from each other and from Hilton Jervis.

You’re Loving Mother

After that I was moody and Jenny and Brionny came to see me:

“We have a problem, an’ you can solve it.” Jenny started.

“Our play *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, we are putting it on for Saint Patrick’s Day” Brionny started. “Well, the Irish girls are fighting furious for the role and with so much arguing nothing else happens and the vote



stays deadlocked, so ta break it we will select someone Celtic but not Irish – that bein' yourself.”

“Well thank you but-”

“Ya will be perfect; ya look exactly right. Deirdre has long raven black hair and dazzling beauty. She is more of a symbol than a character, an image of womanly beauty who men hope ta attain-”.

“Is this a polite way of saying that all I have to do is look beautiful?” I said it with twinkling eyes.

“And desirable, and there ull be some dialogue, yes.”

“Some? Not much please.”

“Why not? Lynda Taun McPherson? She looks impressive and is also Celtic.”

“How can that be? Celts in China?”

“Some went west to Europe: some went east to Western China. She says few people know of it.”

“Never heard that one, neither has anybody else here. No, that complicates things. You are *obviously* Celtic bein' from Cornwall.”

Being Celtic it seemed, had much to do with mental states and appearances and less to do with reality. The descendants of Celt-killing Vikings could be in; Chinese Celts were out. After thinking of all the help the girls had given me, it would be churlish to refuse and might be fun, so I became Deirdre of the Sorrows.

Max let the Irish use New Albion's great hall for the preparations and there was always someone there, working on some aspect. Jenny Doyle had the children making costumes and sets, both medieval for the play and later ones for the dancing display and both were rich and elaborate. Most of the people making them were poor or just above it, and there was something poignant in their extraordinarily dedicated efforts, making things they could not afford for their national day. I learned fairly

quickly both the high levels of dedication Irish politics could inspire and the impossibility of its reality – at least in the forms they imagined.

I walked in for rehearsals one afternoon and there was the map Jenny and the children had painted. In bold red Celtic script at the top she had written THE GREAT CELTIC CONFEDERATION A UNITED STATES OF CELTS and on the map Ireland, Scotland, The Orkneys, The Shetlands, The Isle of Man, Cornwall, Wales and Brittany were coloured bright green with a common red border. Beyond them were murky grey lands which apparently did not deserve a name. In the middle of Ireland was a painted castle in a lake with the logo *The Castle of Heroes*.

“That will be the confederation’s capital,” Jenny had come up beside me unnoticed.

“Because it a famous place in history or because it is perfectly preserved?”

“Lord girl ya education! We are going to have to teach ya about more than horses! The Castle of Heroes has not even been built yet!”

Jenny then went on into great detail about its construction, the decorative statues of past heroes, and the symbols that would be used until they made it unintentionally apparent that if it ever came to be it would be a replica of a late medieval castle built in the twentieth century and designed by a poet with no architectural training.

“Who designed it?”

“Yeats and Maud Gonne MacBride.”

The names were said as if I was supposed to know them almost personally. After being asked who they were Jenny was stunned to the point of being open-mouthed.

“Why girl, Yeats is just the greatest poet in the world and Maud Gonne MacBride is one of the leading fighters in the world fer Ireland.”

“Jenny, do you honestly think England will give up all these lands peacefully?”

“Of course not! The fight will be long and hard...”

“Have you ever seen the British Army in action?”

“You have?”

“In China ten years ago. Millions of Chinese opposed them, even so, they won.”

“Ah nothin’ worth fighten’ for is ever won easy. They been beaten us since the Norman days and Granpa had a gun ready in the glorious ’sixty-seven yet et came to naught, but one day we will be out of the lion’s paw. If all the Celtic peoples unite we can defeat anybody. That’s why all the Celts must unite and why we have invited all Celtic peoples to share in our common heritage an’ language.”

“All I know of Celts in Cornwall is that the Saxons finally conquered them over a thousand years ago and the last speaker of the ancient Cornish language died in the century before the last.”

“Girl this is disgraceful; one look at yer and you are more purely Celtic than blonde me or red-haired Donal. The true Celts, which is ter say those of unadulterated blood, are just like yer, but we are from them eastern parts where the Vikings raided. Ah! I can see yer need educaten.”

And educate they did. Donal was cast as Naisi, Deirdre’s rescuer and husband, Jenny was the prophetess who warns that Deirdre will cause chaos through her love and being loved and Eakins that fanatical Protestant, was now fanatically in favour of the Celtic Federation and agreed to play the evil old king who gets savage when his love for Deirdre stays unrequited. His savagery was kept at the verbal level, the idea of Eakins slashing about with a sword on stage scared everybody. Donal’s union members played the king’s warriors who did the slashing for him and Andrew and Brionny played Naisi’s loyal brothers. She had a

moustache like Wyatt Earp's glued on, her breasts bound under a loose jerkin and she put on a growly voice that even the toddlers smiled at. Those two as loyal defenders of mine, Jenny as a prophetess and me as the cause of trouble were ideal casting, but Eakins, who apparently never had a lecherous or malevolent thought in his head was drama's nicest villain and suddenly, with an attentive audience, did not even bellow. The villain's role should have been taken by the hero. On first seeing Donal I thought that no man could be so handsome, but as soon as he moved around the stage there came a sense something wrong; he was too self-assured, too much in control, as if a little amateur bush band was an orchestra performing before royalty. During rehearsals there was a scene where he as Naisi puts his arm around my waist and his head over his shoulder and proposes:

“For I will always be loyal to you and serve your wishes.”

“Then treat me like a queen and a woman.”

At first he seemed to just act too intensely, but then Jenny, Brianny and all the other Irish stared knowingly and as director, producer, star and treatment adaptor he wanted to see me alone. That sounded suspicious and more so when the door which had a glass section was plastered over with a DO NOT DISTURB sign. When he insisted I shut it I said I would prefer it open and stood by it, arms folded, unsmiling. None of this had the slightest effect on him. I just stared levelly while he stared back, as if I was undressed. Then Andrew turned up.

“My instructions were that I wanted to see Miss Jervis alone.”

“And I think that is unwise.”

“As do I.” I added.

We walked out together. During rehearsals my main worries were (not so much Donal, who backed off) but not to get hit with a sword, or burned to death. In the final scene Naisi's and his brothers are trapped

and fight off the king's warriors, but he sets fire to their fort and they are blinded by molten lead which pours from the roof and are then burned to death, while Naisi stabs himself and Deirdre, captured alive, and bought before the evil king, chooses death before dishonour by drowning herself.

Donal was very insistent that red and orange foil being rattled by backstage children was just not good enough, more than that it was an insult to Irish tradition and I found that in local Irish politics, what Donal wants Donal gets. It was in the last dress rehearsal that I saw how far they would go. On the edge of the stage was the pilfered Chapman firewood, with pilfered expensive pine and cypress rails piled high and above the stage boys with braziers ready to drop bits of burning oil, soaked acorns and what we could only hope was not molten lead. The blunted tin swords were replaced with real ones. The safety control consisted of Kenny Moon with two buckets of water beside him awaiting orders. Even Eakins was worried. Apart from Donal, Jenny was the only one who was not. He looked around at the faces.

“What you are all saying, that pretending should be good enough for this great Irish play? What should we do say ‘Oh hark look at the flames’ and there aren't any? That is gutless, gutless, gutless and cheap. I even got pine because pine grows in Ireland and pine smells of pine, eucalyptus smells of eucalyptus and with eucalyptus everybody knows we would be just pretending.”

“What of the molten lead?”

“Cold Slag will do; the fire is essential. Why are you all so worried?”

“Because selfish me does not want to be burned alive.”

“Where is the danger pray tell Deirdre?”

“From flames Naisi the-”

There was no getting another word in. Everything was principles and dreams with him and ‘nothing but the best’ was his maxim. Even Max realised that Donal had taken over the great hall and could not be stopped; but between them they wrecked the play. Max had fire exit signs up at every window and door, the fire brigade in full attendance and plain view and all timber furniture removed, with buckets of sand and water everywhere and thick, absolutely sodden felt covering the stage. We squelched every time we moved. The audience had not turned up to see the play: they had turned up to see if the Irish were really going to light a massive fire during the play. When they did half the people rushed off. Ross stayed, his eyes never left me but he never approached me either, with Andrew being there. With so many safety precautions there was no real fire damage. We had our hair and costumes soaked, but nothing works as well as a fire-fighter's voice yelling “Righteyo the idiots have actually done it, hoses at the ready, count off!” to wreck a play, except people inhaling smoke and coughing and they did.

There was nothing for it but to extemporise and leap to my death in a bathtub disguised by rocks yelling “death before dishonour!” rather than Donal's long, stilted speech added for me to recite. As soon as Jenny announced that the story had come to pass as prophesied the firemen moved in behind her.

It took nearly two hours before the hall was ready for the display by the professional dancers and the subsequent musical acts and dancing and everything went well in a hollow kind of way. And yet Donal had wrecked any chance of achieving what he had set out to do. He had isolated himself and divided the Irish. He had put creosote on some of those timber beams in the final set to make sure that they burned better. The carvers had laboured so lovingly at creating them. A week's spare time and hard-won savings went into their creation, making beautiful

patterns with inlay and now they were sodden ash with their carvers just staring blankly at them.

Donal however was not stupid, he saw their faces, read them and turned on the charm as if it were water and his mouth a tap. "Well girls you learned a skill, and it made for a fine sight and the play was a magnificent success."

One of them, the youngest smiled in adoration that the great Donal Shaw would speak to her. The other two just stared at him with faint sneers. Brionny spoke:

"Next year spend a week carving, then burn your own work. Truth to tell all your blaze has done is convince many people here that Irish are indeed mad and silly and suddenly it becomes very tiresome to be thought of in that way."

"You might be tired of that, but that counts for naught. They will always-"

"Even so keep your distance."

He looked around trying to find somebody else to blame and there wasn't any, so he talked with the other boyos about what a great success the evening was. The rest of it was enjoyable until going to my room I was surprised to see someone sitting in the shadows. I could smell the alcohol and smoke.

"Donal get out of my room!" I hissed, and retreated towards the door.

"Its Brionny love, but give him an hour an' it might be Donal. You might think you are a wakeup ter him, but he is worse than yer know."

"How? Pray tell?"

She paused embarrassed, blowing tobacco smoke. Uncertain about how to start I was just starting to tell her not to when she did.

“Thank Christ he was not me lover, kissing and groping were bad enough. Thank God Jenny took over. I’ve never felt so degraded in me entire life.”

“Then why stay with him?”

It was as if I had not asked her. Brionny just continued. “Why don’t yer spend the night with yer boyfriend? He seems nice an’ you have been together for months now.”

“I can tell Donal to leave or I yell.”

“You have never seen him turn on the charm an’ when that doesn’t work violence becomes tha next tactic.”

“You know much more than you are saying.”

“Of course! Now spend the night elsewhere. Obviously the Chapman’s are not letting him in this house again, tonight is his best chance; he has suffered a defeat an’ whenever that happens he wants a woman – and in nasty ways – Even Jenny says ...”

“And you will be around.”

“If yer think it’s a pleasure, hide en the stable and watch him with Jenny. She does not object ter much. Come on, I’m serious.”

I apologised, thanked her for her advice and took it, excepting the latter. The thought came that Ross would be the better defender, but Andrew was still there cleaning up and he understood and was reliable and for once, randy.

“Perhaps we could share your bed.”

He blushed more than I did, but to my amazement crept quietly into his home and led me into his room. His breathing was excited and we both knew that if he finally kissed me he would lose control and there would be no stopping. It was flattering, he was kind, protective and handsome - and he was not Ross. With Ross I would have done anything



and he could not move fast enough for me. Andrew just made me want him to stop. As Andrew moved in gulping, I held up my hands.

“No Andrew this cannot be right”

He thought I meant morally right. It took him a minute to calm down, and he agreed, with shame in his voice.

“It would be best for me to sleep on the veranda settee. That way the gossips who probably saw us coming-”

“Yes Andrew this is understood.”

The reverend was up early and saw Andrew asleep outside. When I appeared at breakfast the mouths were open and not for food.

“There was a man causing trouble at New Albion last night. Rosalind was advised to sleep elsewhere.”

“Oh” Edna McPherson said as she poured and passed me a plate of breakfast porridge and Alexander pulled out a chair for me and manners being manners, nothing more was said.

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Respectability and reputation, Christianity, thrift and domestic order. These seemed to be the cornerstones of a woman’s life.

The problem for me was that they were now all wobbly. My religious beliefs were fading. Respectability and reputation seemed false. The Hawkins and Donal had high reputations that they did not deserve and people gave me a low, undeserved one. People and the idea of order were more complex than they had once seemed and so was my situation.

With exceptions, such as Albert Moon, I had always believed in the virtuous poor and thought that after work servants would love to escape their masters, but no, excepting Jenny and Brionny, they talked of little else: their mouths were full of revolting gossip.

“That Lynda Taun McPherson, she’s got him trained, do you know what their new servant girl insists she heard her say?”

Then a coarse description was given which I did not care to repeat.

“Cor! Shows you who wears the pants in that family.”

“Hear she swims nude in that fish pool of hers whenever she feels like it if there aren’t people around. And she eats rice all the time, like for a main meal, Chineese ways...”

“And pagan idols. She kneels before one in that weird garden. Weird Chineese ways, obviously.”

From there they descended into a world where the speculation was on Leo and his fiancée’s sexual consummation, the Presbyterian minister being seen by a local itinerant at the Ballarat racecourse last Easter, Tom Caufield’s secret money stashed in an Ocean Ridge bank, a Hungarian forestry worker suspected of arson in another forester’s woodpile so as to get him sacked, (that being weird Continental European ways) Murie and Ruth McPherson’s possible marriage can clearly lead to idiocy and look at Murie anyway, him two years younger than her and what did Murie’s mother really die of? The nurse said there was blood all through the stools. At that one, bored Brionny looked across to me and butted in.

“Prefer fresh open spaces?”

She meant horse racing and we left, the sullen faces staring at us; let them. Gossip was their form of revenge, an expression of envy masquerading as morality. And yet what their pathetic destruction of privacy meant was that they were revealing there was little Christian self-denial, no respectability, no order, only a veneer of all these things. Even so, give me horse riding over grassy pasture to sitting round discussing the colour of somebody’s turds any day. No servants for me, ever.

Another revelation was that concerning women. Excepting fallen women (who of course were sensual and therefore evil) I believed that women were not sensual and therefore good. Over the last year my mother and now Helen Ryan on one extreme as the baddies and virtuous

Rachel Clarke and Mrs Hawkins as the goodies dented that commonplace wisdom.

Then there was Minnietta, of Latin descent far back, but with a Cockney accent. Excepting being a champion gossip, she epitomised a good house servant, immaculate, cheery, polite, and obedient, she limped from a club foot. She regularly attended evening service and I thought that after a month I knew her. Then one morning at breakfast while alone with her and soon found that this was arranged.

“If I was to say to you that I know a way that you could earn a thousand pounds very quickly, would you be interested?”

“Of course. But bushranging is outmoded.”

“Men never are.”

If it had been anyone else I would have woken up immediately, but Minnietta seemed so unlikely. She also did something that puzzled me and so she threw me off the track. Picking a sausage up she began to jab it up and down, becoming more vigorous in her motions and then panting with a strange smile and then suddenly stopped.

“If that was something else, I just earned more in a minute than anyone here earns in a month dear. For you it’s more than you would earn in two years, well first time off anyway.”

“There’s a gentleman in Sydney, I showed him a clipping of you from the Boxing Day newspaper photos and very interested he is in you. To the tune of a thousand pound.”

I just sat there stunned.

“That is if you are a virgin and as pretty as you photograph. Who knows? If he likes you and why shouldn’t he, you could become his mistress.”

This felt like nightmare, but no, the clock ticked in the hallway. Minnietta had never seemed anything but straightforward, and simple - until now.

“Rosalind your face will be your fortune: it’s not like I’m trying to lure you into becoming a haggard streetwalker. Them courtesans to royalty, well they had painters and sculptors and servants and poets writing hymns to their beauty and they lived in them palaces. And it’s not like them are just olden day people, why look at Lola Montez! When she toured the gold fields some years back and there is Miss Lily Langtree and-”

“And how much do you receive?”

“Two hundret an’ fifty pounds.”

“Then you should earn the rest”

“There is no need to be cruel. You have shapely ankles, an’ I’ve got a club foot. I’m flat chested, and you are very buxom and our faces.... Even so I’ve got a fella, a regular gentleman – an’ he has to pay. Ten shillings extra a week at least goes in my account.”

That sounded confabulating to cover her pride, but she could read faces.

“An’ he’s not so distant from you as yer think, so don’t look down your nose at me. He might have to be at morning service so we don’t meet in church, but he’s kind enough, presents every birthday and Christmas.”

“Ross!”

“Not that snob. Alexander. See everybody does it. Saturday is Saturday and Sunday is Sunday and bein’ poor is a situation to get out of, not fall into an’ the church ain’t so moral. You know why they got so much money? Those nice moral parish council people invested in one of them sulphur factories that rots off skin, what is so moral ‘bout that? I’ll

call Jenny in, she serviced a Catholic priest quite regular and can tell yer all the details of yer new work.”

Minnietta went out and there were deliberately low voices talking in the corridor, then Jenny and Brionny came in and sat. From my first day there it was obvious that they were not pure, but they were not slatterns either. Like many of the Australian born, these West Coast Irish were frank about sexuality and more casual about their involvements. Jenny chatted for a time about the pleasures of sex, then got to the financial aspect. Across from me Brionny’s face was absolutely expressionless, even her eyes looked dead – as she intended. Her chair pushed back so that Minnietta and Jenny could not see, but I could.

“Make ‘em pay for it, there bein’ no great difference. Me big regret is letting a Catholic priest break me in fer free. Lor! A price like you are being offered comes rarely, believe me.”

“Not rare enough thank you.”

“Its yer choice,” Jenny shrugged, “Just do it fer fun with some. Yer the one who should be getting paid for bein’ bored ter death by them same ones. All them talks about Wesley’s concept of purity compared ter Luther’s, my my.”

“Remember how them Van Groendhal boys have their beds under the tables for early morning bakes?” Brionny nodded with a sneer and Jenny laughed.

““Jan and Hendrik! So who is...?”

“I am with Jan an’ Hendrik” Jenny said sweetly.

“And I am with Hendrik an’ Jan.” Brionny replied equally sweetly and they looked at each other and chorused.

“An’ sometimes we are both with Hendrik or Jan. An’ sometimes....” And then they kissed each other passionately for a very long time. And when they stopped Brionny stared at me, sweetly.

“There is a woman here who buys me” Jenny added as if offering sweets at a cut price.

“And if you want to learn, well boys are silly but fun, think of me, well us.”

“No thank you.”

“Well if you don’t like men, or women, could you please find something else, somewhere else because being in a sexual triad can be fun an’ is nert degrading. Trying to sleep while you excite yourself on the other side of our thin wall is degrading.”

They left and I quickly reached for the job vacancies page of the newspaper.

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After finding nothing but employment dead ends I spent a boring afternoon with Andrew, then went home to read the recent best-seller *Green Mansions*. Lucky Rima to have a forest, dutiful lover and normal caring father. She pays for it ultimately, being burned alive by the nearest community of religious moralists, pagans this time. Why can’t people just be happy without punishment?

I thought about Jenny and Brionny and how many things now fell into place and what my future with them was now and concluded it must not be.

Faint regular sounds from the stables, wood being kicked? We were supposed to check on restless horses and the girls being out, I checked. It was from the end stable and it was the same sound coming from my mother and Lord Bee. The riding boots were toe down in the straw, the bare, female feet upwards, the grunts and shrieks were deep in rhythm. At first I thought it was Donal, but the horse was side saddled, and I remembered the boots, as I should, they had lasted her for decades. *There is a woman who buys me*. Mrs Hawkins.

As I left the stables Brionny was there. She motioned me to the empty kitchen and quietly shut the door.

“Well Rosalind, with ner job vacancies who do yer prefer working with, lesbians or gutter gossips?”

“Don’t include me, not in being a whore or mistress or whatever.”

“I’m not either. Dunno how she can do et. I tried tellin’ her, but she likes tha money. Yer think us slatterns?”

I only sighed and looked out the window.

“Although I’m eighteen this year I have only had one man and one woman fully. Once each I had the Groendhals, who I don’t go all the way with, I massage them for Jenny and then leave- do you know what getting them randy means?” After shaking my head she made a masturbatory gesture.

“Apart from them and her there was my Irish boy. William.” She waited for a comment. “So what’s wrong with Andrew? Heard he slept out on the veranda.”

“He wanted to, but he was just not right.”

Brionny nodded, looking at me with an inscrutable face yet not hostile. She poured tea. Mrs Hawkins head appeared as she walked by, her usual saintly expression on. Masks indeed.

“Dern’t be too hard on her. Most of her life she spends on others. It is her only indulgence an’ I suspect, love affair.”

“And the church money is spent on prostitutes.”

*We should not be selfish children, the money you now no longer spend on little pleasures will buy food for those starving in Africa and Bibles for their salvation.*

“She only found out after she was married. She’s lived a secret life fer decades.”

*Rosalind tomorrow could you help Jenny put up the Christmas decorations in the vestry? Saturday is always my day to visit my sick friend in Winchester.*

“Before yer condemn her bear in mind that could be you if yer marry Andrew. Never take up prostitution and never enter into a loveless or sexless marriage. You have seen Mrs Hawkins, now yer should see cast off mistresses and experienced prostitutes.”

“I already told you that I was not doing that.”

“Good fer yer girl. Pressure will be on and I’m not sure you know all the tricks and will be on ta them.”

“I am not the stainless innocent you think.”

“I know that; yer stayed to listen and then yer watched us.”

“That is not what was meant. I meant with Ross. I enjoyed as far as we went, but that was before he scared me, men scare me.”

We just stared at each other. She spoke first.

“You are sixteen soon, your body craves, your spirit wants total unity and you are old enough ta start knowing your own mind an’ old enough ta start. You might want ter experiment, see if yer are attracted ta other women, shrug it off if yer are not. Yer are attractive.”

“If you will excuse me.”

In my room I was feeling tired and changed into my shift and lay there thinking.

*Now girls on this church camp we will have to share beds, three to a bed. You are now reaching an age when you are becoming young women and if any of you find your monthly courses out of sequence you are to arise immediately and you must wash and replace sheets. If any girl gets into bed without a shift on you are to arise and report her to me immediately. If any girl tries to remove another’s shift or places her hands where she should not arise immediately and report her.*



The gospel of Godly Behaviour for Young Ladies as spoken by Mrs Hawkins. What happened to any reported girls Mrs Hawkins? Keep them for yourself, cane them or give them a sanctimonious lecture? Whichever way you choose was repulsive. After starting at five this morning and wandering around in the heat, I dozed off

It felt as something imagined at first, just the faintest trace of a wisp on the nape of my neck, vanishing, then another and another with more strength and certainty and then a tongue, so softly, so quickly darting and darting more forcibly and then the darting stopped and the long slow languid pressing began and her body moulded to mine. Feet to feet, kneecap to join, her thighs to my arse, her chest to my back, her hands to my shoulders. Brionny's bracelet, two entwined snakes up close, blond and brown hair streaming and with human faces and breasts and suddenly I saw how the bodies were entwined, what looked like tails were the heads between legs. Brionny's nipples were barely touching my body and I could not feel them through my shift, she was not annoying, I suddenly realised. Without thinking any-more I reached down to my hem and in one bold movement lifted it up over my head and threw it as far away as possible. Like the whispers and the licks, the rubbing started imperceptibly, but increased in pressure and speed until our bodies thrashed together in unison. Her left hand clutched my shoulder, her right going across my abdomen to clutch my hip and our bodies were so tightly pressed that our ribs scraped, the crinkling of her pubic hair, and the wetness as she became excited. Then came the panting, almost a race for breath and her hands going over all my body. Her fingers gently went into my mouth, one underneath my tongue, one over and I playfully slid my tongue round them and we played like that, but with Brionny sexual play goes further. Her fingers went to my crotch and I touched them.

“Yer don't want this?”

“Very carefully. I’m still a virgin, so not just yet. That might sound silly but...”

“No et doesn’t sound silly et all. I understand...being the same, Jenny before William.”

“Let's do everything else but that. I have already done things with Ross.”

“I understand, and will be careful. Just let yerself go if yer feel like et.”

Brionny took my hand, entwining our fingers and began to rub gently, and as before with more pressure, then with more speed and finally the excitement came, and then the panting and the tired pleasurable rest, just lying in another’s arms.

“Turn around and face me.”

We kissed long and deeply, there were seconds of strangeness as with Ross, then the unfamiliarity in the excitement turned to pleasure.

“Yer tongue, uhm.”

“Is two and a half inches longer than it should be and pointed at the end, not circular. One of my school nicknames was Lizzie lizard. I’m continually rolling it around my mouth, pressing it against my teeth.”

“Oh I can find a better home fer et.”

She held up the bracelet for my inspection, her eyes a glitter.

“Want to try this?”

“Oh yes.”

“First one of us is aggressor, then the other – an’ then we do entwined circle.”

“I want to be inside you, I want to do this to you.”

Her eyes glittered, the corners of her mouth curled and she tilted her head slightly as she ran her fingers through my hair.

“My my, aren’t yer a surprise?”

I did not hesitate, no uncertainty fear, guilt or nerves came. I ran my tongue from her lips to her belly button, then my hands clenched to her hips and one of her hands stroked my hair while I gave her pleasure and I did not stop until much later her hand pulled my head up to kiss me the way Ross did.

\*

Exhausted, we slept entwined and awoke in the early morning hours.

“You warned me about all the others, but you did not warn me about you.” I joked, smiling.

“Rosalind, I wanted this ter be beautiful for yer.”

“It was, thank you.”

She paused as if about to say something which could cause problems.

“If yer only wanted this one time, I understand’.”

“Oh no, I want this all the time.”

“Jenny and I have been together six year, there can be ner jealousy or division between us. We always share. Yer will have ter like her as much as yer like me – an’ do this if she wants.”

I nodded. Brionny raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Rosalind der yer want ter put some more thought into this.”

“No. I am so very tired of thinking and worrying and people telling me how to be moral and what a bad person I am for kissing and being illegitimate and, and, and. I like Jenny.”

“Yes, I see, now tomorrow night...”

“Now.”

“Now?”

“Yes - and could you explain to Jenny, and be here as well. If this is new to me I want you to experience something new as well.”

“Anything else?”

“Ross has a week to finish what he started. Can you give him that message? This being sexually involved but still being a virgin only confuses my sense about who I am. Next Saturday if Ross has not turned up you should do it. I want to be a woman.”

She nodded as if somewhat puzzled as she went to get Jenny and we all felt a little nervous, despite massages, they had never formed a threesome with anybody before. There was a moment when the yelps must have woken Minnietta, for she stood at the door, staring at us entangled. Exhausted again as the sky started to lighten, the three of us slept entwined. Yet when I awoke, I was alone and for the first few seconds thought it was all so bizarre, vivid and unfamiliar that it must be a dream. Then I saw the hurled away night-shift at the far end of the room.

\*

Brionny McNamara

New Albion 20th March 1910

We had been expecting her ter be timid or angry, not ter find myself an' Jenny sexually exhausted. Them signs were an uncertainty, tha long stares, “*If you will excuse me*” then tha door an' tha figure with her back ter me in her shift, dozing or pretendin' ter at four in tha afternoon. I gave her every chance ter stop et, but she never took um.

Jenny and I were awoken near midday by an angry Minnietta, carrying many of Rosalind's things, which she dumped among ours.

“Well now that you have made her one of yours, she should be with you. I have told Zelda Chapman that Miss Jervis has the makings of a fine horsewoman and working as an ostler being a real trade, she needs to focus on this if she is to run to horse breeding. Therefore, she should live in the stable with you. Now that you have made her what she is, you two need to be kind to her and help her learn to cover herself. Being horsey could be a good start.

Personally, I think you are all fools for throwing away good money, on what you so casually thrown away.”

“Where is Rosalind now?”

“At church believe it or not. Zelda came down saying ‘Rosalind you will be late for church’ so off she went. Off I go to for that matter and you won’t get any more offers from me.”

We waited till she was out of hearing.

“Now what?” Jenny asked

“She has a chance ter be tha wife of a rich handsome fellow. If she plays tha situation right, but after last night an’ church this morning there is ner telling which way she will go.”

“Maybe she is just a once offer or an experimenter. Treat et like a dream an’ maybe she will go with him an’ be happy.”

“And if she does ner?”

“If she really wants ta join us let her. She’s nice, she’s lively enough, and cor’ that tongue.”

\*

When she returned we were friendly enough, as we had been before, but when she tried to kiss me I acted puzzled and Jenny put in her contribution.

“Cor! But we got a friendly one here Bri! Glad ta see yer with us but if anyone walked in then, well what would they bloody think hey girl!”

Rosalind took the hint, but that night when we all slept separately, I could hear her crying. It is always better not ter be cruel, but thought it best for her ter forget us. Jenny moved in ter her bed, holding her, then I did the same but it was not sexual. At lunchtime Rosalind brought it up.

“How long are you two going to pretend nothing happened? Brionny, is this the dismissal now you have finished with me?”

“Why don’t yer shrug off whatever you think happened as a dream? Marry your fellow and have children.” I put a mask on.

“I want you. We agreed this coming Saturday.”

“If Ross does not turn up.”

“Rosalind, all that we are trying ta do is bloody protect yer from becoming one of us. Yer have no idea how our kind are treated. People treat us like circus freaks, plague carriers, retards or Satanists. Yer have ta keep everything secret and trust nerbody. Most of the women who take me are jus’ satisfying curiosity. Now if yer are doin’ tha and yer go off with Ross, we understan’, just keep our secret.”

“Once is just satisfying curiosity, they aren’t really lesbians. It be just like Jenny says. There is a line yer have not crossed yet. See how et goes with Ross, wait till after then. That bein’ only four full days.”

“But I want you both now.”

“I will see Ross fer yer Friday afternoon if we work late on tha feed tonight and tomorrow.”

\*

His Pa was better than expected. No airs an’ graces, no bad manners either. He politely led me ter their parlour an’ went off ta get Ross and the Ma. The parlour was not a place fer any Irish, Orange men excepted. It was like a little museum fer one family’s part in British Imperialism. Maybe Ma Clarke thought me deaf or the kitchen was soundproofed.

“You let an Irish into my parlour?” I could her hear storming down the corridor. That Ma! She was like every Ulster Protestant lady of the house that ere I came across. Button everyone down, never forget the Battle of the Boyne, assume all Irish Catholics believe tha church and are dirty, poor, ignorant and live on a diet of potatoes an’ beer. The drink I never had a taste fer, and swore to myself never ter eat another potato me whole life when we sailed from County Clare. Priests? I never believed

them, an' clean? I was so clean that even Zelda Chapman herself said cleanliness could be taken too far. Sometimes my speaking voice were more English than Irish, sometimes tha other way. This time I tried. No yers, wrong mes, ters, an' tas. For a certainty, all were give-aways

“State the purpose of your visit thank you very much.”

“To see Ross Clarke on a personal matter.”

“We have no private matters in this house.”

*I just bet*, but I had her rattled; she was guessin' and guessin' pregnancy. Just then I heard cantering, looked an' could see why Rosalind was hooked on this one. I remembered him from the Boxing Day dance. The freckles, wide grin, wavy chestnut hair an' carefree air all overwhelmed. There was an obvious goodness about him and he was definitely horsey. Any more horsey an' he would have had to be a centaur – and that was just fine with me. If Rosalind dropped him he was mine. When our eyes met the attraction was clearly nert one way.

“Ah this must be Ross.”

“No it must not be.” She nearly sighed with relief. “You are quick to say who must be who in my house. That is my youngest son Grahame. Here comes one of my other sons, Ross.”

I turned around and he was handsome and if clearly Grahame's brother by facial resemblance he was his opposite in personality. I remembered him from the dance an' thought him handsome then. Like an earl or a colonel by his imperious bearing, but not hostile to me, he became assessing and a little flattering in his appreciation of a woman he thought good looking, but nert overboard. Maybe he would have as much trouble bein' faithful to Rosalind as she would to him, which means either a blow-up or a strange compromise.

“We have nert been introduced. I am Brionny McNamara, an ostler at New Albion.”

“We saw you at the Boxing Day dance and then in the play”

“Ya seem to have shaved since then.”

Ah some humour, lucky he said et with a smile and with the grace ter order tea and cake from a milkmaid and wait fer her ter go.

“You wish to see me.”

“About Miss Jervis. We are very close and ...”

This flustered me, not only because we were both her lovers, but because the setten was making me nervous, so I continued on in a nervous rush.

“She misses yer very much. She is a very beautiful girl with many fine points.” That only got something appearing in tha eyes. “I assume tha she refers to a marriage proposal. If not et should.”

“Are you aware that she has attached to my best friend Andrew McPherson?”

“Is attached tha right word? They chat over tea on religion and attend church.”

“Andrew’s father, the reverend, tells me that she left service in tears last Sunday.”

“That has much to do with you and little to do with Andrew. She is a very confused young woman who desperately desires security, respectability and you.”

*And me.* We both have an air of quiet confidence and sensuality that she so desperately desires. Any wonder after going through that Chinee war, thinking that loud puritanical reverend was her father, realising her mother was a mistress and suppressing all personal desires all her life, till now.

He seemed uncertain so I continued.

“Well if Andrew is tha only problem between you, he will be told soon.”



“Her father-”

“If you mean Reverend Jervis, Rosalind has avoided him since that incident where he lost several toes. If you mean her re-”

“Her parentage and past actions matter not at all. The current problems matter.”

“The current problems being Andrew and her not contacting ya.”

“Both are being solved, she will settle the first and I am here on her behalf.”

“You will take a message?”

“Of course. I was hoping yer would ask.”

I was tired of the formal clichéd talk and rememberin’ correct English an’ so was he.

“Look we both know what she means when she says yer should finish what yer started. She told me precisely how far yer went. I don’t make judgements on what people freely choose ter do-”

“Did she tell you she initiated?”

“Are you one of those men who lures a woman in, then despises her when you have gratified yourself?”

“No.”

“You don’t believe that women who feel sexual desires are slatterns or evil?”

“No.”

“Is it over between you and Helen Ryan?”

“Yes.”

“Then why don’t yer settle down with Rosalind?”

“Because she has not asked or given me a chance to. I do miss her.”

“Tomorrow is yer last chance. Rosalind wants evidence that she is more important than anything else. No excuses accepted.”

“I will be there?”

“Certainly. Now I forgot that it’s quite a ride out here, so while you write arranging a time after work could I tend to me horse?”

While doing that Grahame did what was hoped, coming over.

“Your third horse, and three years old?”

“Spotting age is easy, how did yer get tha third?”

“Three different saddle blanket stains on your saddle underside and the saddle is an expensive Irish import, looks like about eight to twelve years wear.”

“Yer a pretty sharp one.”

“That’s because my brain's not cluttered up with booky stuff, religion or booze. I can write my own name, but not much more.”

“Well, tha things people boast of.”

He smiled and et was like all the sunlight on this bright blue day went into him an’ came out en his smile. He could say anythin’ an’ make it sound fine an’ soon he did – an’ he could make hours seem like minutes an’ he did. Comin’ out of our horsey talk et was near ter twilight. Mrs Clarke was bringin’ a tray of milk an’ sandwiches.

“Something to speed you on your way. I trust beef salad is not a problem.”

“Should it be – oh you mean that Catholic taboo rubbish about not eating meat on Fridays.”

“Do I detect a certain hostility to papism?”

“Ireland will never be anything good or great or free until et is free of Catholic priests!”

“Indeed!” A smile came to her face. “And you are by religion?”

“Anglican Ma’am, as was my father, an ostler on the Craig estate en County Clare.”

He apostatised for regular work and to vex them priests he hated an’ to get into an Orange fanatic’s household, not that he could ever give tha

Fenians any worthwhile information.

She was misunderstanding what I said, very well; let her misunderstand some more.

“So Miss McNamara you would say that Home Rule is...”

“Rome Rule. That is the conventional wisdom in Ulster Ma’am”

“Ah come inside, we have matters to discuss.”

On one level, well it was a parlour tour, on another it was a tour of her nasty, fanatical little mind. There were the father’s ancestors back ter the days of the Normans, and there was her family. The first known ancestor being a Cromwellian soldier who she boasted had killed fourteen Irish at Drogheda and settled on farmland owned by some of them and improved by capital gained by the charmin’ habit of collectin’ five pounds for the hacked-off head of every Irish found west of the Shannon. Her grandparents were Ulster émigrés and she was sent back for a traditional education et their traditional Ulster ladies’ college. She came across as a Protestant version of a convert being more Catholic than the Pope. The little family farm in Antrim, the ancestry and Anglicanism would have scraped her into Protestant Ireland’s rulin’ class, but colonials are usually despised by Britain’s ruling class and in that snob school she would have been at the bottom of the peckin’ order. Pickin’ on Catholics and demonstrating fanatical loyalty to their cause was a way to rise.

But why continue with it out here decades later? A local Ulster support group? Was it all a way to assert her authority and superiority by representin’ goodness incarnate - an’ getten obedience from believers?

An answer ter that came when she showed me her old 1870s dance cards. Among them names regularly appearin’ where the current extremist leaders of Protestant Ireland, James Craig, Sir Edward Carson and Eustace Hughes. The last appeared in faded clippings showin’ ‘em

together. The disappointed, bitter look on her face over thirty years on revealed much alright.

“A man like Sir Eustace had every unmarried Ulster woman hoping, I was fortunate to have come so close.”

She was a one- woman man and Sir Eustace had been et. Most of us recover an' adjust, but not megalomaniacs who think the world should be for them; so she became absorbed in a substitute hero, in this case Jesus, as he fitted in perfect to her expectations of perfection. From there she saw real people around her as failures because they were not Jesus and the impossibly good saints. Most Catholics who thought like that ended up nuns, priests or radicals. She was their Protestant equivalent, but with a family of disappointin', disobedient humans who would not know their place in the peckin' order beneath her. I was gunna have to be careful with Grahame, he may have inherited more than hair colour; et was too early to tell.

I excused myself, but had two invitations, one to visit any time and the other a disguised command to be at Sunday service. Riding out along the main road Grahame came out from behind a clump of trees like a jovial highwayman, a grin near to splitting his head and he made neighing noises.

“Stand and Deliver!”

“Pray tell me deliver what, bold highwayman?”

“A sweet kiss from your red ruby lips.”

“Very well, but then may a poor maiden go on my way in safety from such dangerous rogues as yourself?”

“For now.”

As he pulled up beside me, he was holding his rein hand high, so I reached across, quickly kissed it and raced off.

“Hey that's not fair! Even unto the horse!”

He galloped after me and I was far ahead until the creek crossing. No gallops there. He was funny, a bit of a silly bugger, but that was a relief after grim Donal.

“Well,” he said, “Here we are at the greenwood tree, where we can blight our trough and together be.”

“The only trough I know of is the ones horses drink out of, so na thanks. As for blighting what is et?”

“Get off your horse and I’ll show you what it is.”

I smiled, shook my head, but got off Trixie, roped her ter a tree and walked away off the road with me back ter a large tree that wind or age had pushed it ter about a sixty-degree angle. He, the expert horseman, nervously fumbled tying the reins and was blushin’ and stumbled on branches as he reached me. The thought hit that he had never done this before and he had not. The kissin’ was excitin’ and unfamiliar, nert just because he was new, but because he was a he. I had given up lettin’ Donal maul-kiss me years ago and William was five years back. For a certainty he was ardent the way a fish on land be ardent fer air, so I ended up tryin’ ter inhale as much through my nostrils as possible and then broke off.

“Well!”

“Lets-”

“Let’s have a break!” I panted an, he was no pretendin’ bein’ erect. This was going too fast and after increasing my total number of lovers by a third just a week bac,: life did not need more confusion.

“It will be dark soon.”

He misunderstood and nodded eagerly; that made me start to choke, that proved that laughter and pantin’ did not go together. I recovered.

“We have to go home soon Grahame.”

“When will we meet again?”

“Church on Sunday.”

“I don’t like church or all that Ulster stuff, boring, silly, useless-”

“And I agree, but we can sit together, and have tea and bikkies at the rectory and stay on yer mother’s good side. Remember what happened with Helen and Ross?”

“Right! We pretend, but not when we are alone.”

“And we der not tell each other’s secrets.”

He assented with his face. Here we go and perhaps he does ter, but deceit tires.

“You picked my third horse, now pick the lovers I have had.”

“Shouldn’t.”

“You will be the fourth, after you have courted me. And two were women.”

“Women.” He nodded in amazement.

“Yes women. Now you know my little secret, if you wish to ride away immediately I understand’.”

“Women.” He nodded in amazement again, starting ter turn what I thought would be a poignant moment inter a joke.

“Yes women, would yer like to demonstrate what I do with them?”

“Certainly!”

All I could do was laugh, head towards Trixie and say “The woman I am keeping. See ya at church. If you want ter be tha man in my life yer are welcome, but court me.”

I rode over, tussled his hair, bent over and kissed his forehead before ridin’ into town.

By tha time I was back Rosalind and Jenny were entwined and I joined them, passing her tha note, which made her very happy.

“This is only a possibility, but just say Grahame and I become a couple, would yer dislike it?”

“Dislike it? Of course not! We might even be sisters-in-law! But what of Donal? He does not give up.”

“Tomorra Donal and Andrew are going to find themselves lonely.”

\*

Rosalind Jervis

New Albion 26<sup>th</sup> March 1910

I awoke to my last virginal morning with my face inches away from Brionny’s large pale breast and Jenny’s head nuzzled against my nape. Perhaps it would have been more sensible to let Brionny, my first lover break me in, but not if marriage to Ross was probable. Perhaps it would be more sensible to pretend it was a dream and be amiable sisters-in-law.

Time still to be a good girl, treat Brionny and Jenny as a dream and back out – and what pray tell, is so virtuous about waking up with my hand between my legs? Or writhe on the bed all night fantasising of Ross if I did not? Brionny had a point. Where is virtue? Not with me if I inherited my mother’s character and it does seem so. *'This is what you do when you do not want to get pregnant but want to give your man some relief to keep him happy. You will do it someday. And here is a book to give you some ideas. Off you go.'* I was so fascinated with the illustrations of copulation that she entered unheard *'Quite the assiduous student, aren't you?'*

Someday was now. I was lucky not to be deflowered by Lord Bee, Albert Moon, Donal or Andrew and for that matter perhaps Brionny or Jenny. A month before turning sixteen, Ross was my choice.

\*

Ross Clarke

Chapman’s Emporium 26<sup>TH</sup> March 1910

It was true. There she was wearing the same Chapman uniform that Helen had worn, working at displays and folding drapes in a store, insistently paying Max back the difference between the two thousand sent and the little over eighteen hundred she had left to give back. At shop

assistant's wages she would still be here this time year after next at the least. It was not just sympathy. As much as Andrew was likeable and decent as he was, I had to be there for her. She noticed me and kept on working, a little too calm. My eyes could not go off her.

“What would you like Ross?”

“To walk with you around town.”

“Finish time will be in ten minutes. Ross no more trouble, please.”

“No trouble.”

I was feeling nervous s we walked, so I showed her around. “Here is the parlour for milkshakes and ice cream, both locally made, served chilled with real ice, very nice and expensive, but I'm paying. Grahame put me onto winners.”

“You are paying for yourself as I am. Gambling is a vile practice. And incidentally in this Australian heat we all have a milkshake or an ice cream after work every day, Max allows a daily free to staff.”

We walked past the large bakery where cheery Jan was behind the counter, and to my surprise, but not his, Rosalind scowled. Jan just ignored it. After the long dry goods store, with its cedar floor and rafters and its grains in barrels came the assayers, where miners still sometimes came with a nugget or grains, but the jewellery, and assorted time pieces had long taken primacy and I told Rosalind this.

“Fascinating Ross, absolutely fascinating. You do realise that if I had not gone off with you at the Boxing Day Ball I would still be in a family, a church, and the respectable segment of society? Instead, people see me as part of its disreputable outer edge, along with Helen, the supposed slattern, two Irish ostler girls, Kenny Moon, now a happy street sweeper, who has to be told to seek shelter in thunderstorms, Eakins McKenzie and yourself!”



“Albert Moon would have brought on the scandal sooner or later and as it unfolded, your mother got out of jail now, not years off. Albert remains discredited and away, your name has been taken off a warrant and fair-weather friends have been exposed. As for respectability, it’s a sham. As for loss of reputation, you seem to be joining our church and there can be no more respected young man in Eloura than Andrew and he seems to be courting you.”

“So why ask me to walk around town?”

“To be here.”

“But there nothing exists here but displayed geological specimens, timepieces - and rings.”

\*

Rosalind Jervis

Eloura Assayer’s Shop 26<sup>th</sup> March 1910

I had no sooner said the word “rings” than the meaning hit, then came the thought, no he cannot mean that, but one look at his face and he certainly did.

“Jewellery! Ah! You wish to buy me a birthday present!”

He played along with a face that was hard to read.

“Well yes.”

We walked in, but I already wanted the displayed gold, emerald and ruby broach, leaves and berries on a stem and said so, to test him and to tease him. Stepan Bach, the son of a Nordic miner and himself quite literally born into mining by being born, raised and educated in a gold fields tent, was an alderman, assayer and jeweller. Today he looked like a man who had not made a sale all day and was now pleased.

“Please gift wrap it.”

“This broach costs sixty pounds.”

Ross handed the money over and gave the gift to me, mentioning he would get a card at the dry goods store. Out of hearing I asked what I suspected.

“I hope you are not trying to buy me.”

“It wouldn’t work. You could have had the diamond engagement ring if you wished.”

“As with kissing, you move extraordinarily fast.”

“Move slow and you might marry Andrew.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Everyone considers him highly eligible.”

“Everyone are women who have never been alone with him. He might be the nicest man anyone could ever come across, but he studies for the ministry and all he can talk about is religion and after living with my father, hearing your mother for six hours straight and Eakins for more and then the Hawkins family betrayal, my religion - or rather, remnants of it stays quiet. within myself.”

He nodded and I hesitated before going on.

“And he won’t kiss me. All he does is blush and look at me as if he can’t take his eyes off me. That feels very flattering the first time or two but, then it’s irritating and ultimately weird. And there was that time at the beach...” I fumed. “It was a hot day so I took off my shoes and rolled my dress up to my knees” and after getting an eyeful of ankles he was morally offended asking me what kind of woman I was?”

Ross nodded and took my hand; I felt excited at his touch and blushed and my heart started pacing. Part of me felt like pretending, but another part had more than enough of pretending. I blurted the words out

“And yet he and all those others who say I’m a bad young woman have got it half right. The naïve young girl whose greatest happiness was

church socials and who would rush at every opportunity to church events was running back into childhood and I don't want to run anymore."

"Run from what?"

"From the reality of what financed my home, to escape the sexuality that sometimes emerged there; it hung over the household permanently. My mother anxiously staring into the mirror, scared of what she saw, developing crows' feet eyes and neck wrinkles. Those memories of the church here and in Roydtown were happy memories, but they are fading rapidly. Realities emerge more clearly now."

"How?"

"My father- Reverend Jervis, the childhood memories of India and China came back and now I could see that what I thought of as heroic in charging the Chinese rioters was probably either conceit or a foolish belief in invulnerability. What I had once thought of as a righteous strictness was the desire to dominate others, coming from a crabby life-hating hypocrite."

"There are many in that line, especially round here."

Ross was clearly making an inference about his mother, but better to let it pass.

"Reverend Hawkins was sincere and kind, just as Andrew is and if Andrew becomes an Anglican minister, he will be the same – controlled by his parishioners and a wife he does not understand."

"So, you are no longer a good churchgoer."

"No and the illegitimacy story seems probably true. I remember meeting the corporal a few years ago. My mother was startled just by the sight of him in the park and he watched me with this sad look I could not fathom, then. They talked alone somewhat tensely away from me, then my mother introduced me and I wondered why..."

"How does this concern us?"

“From what people say and from your mother, genealogy and a good family name are vital to the Clarkes.”

He just shrugged his shoulders and asked if there were anything else he should know.

“Yes - there is, actually. That incident that Albert referred to.... when my school friends and I walked in on my mother and Lord Bee...”

He nodded, while I nervously bit my lip then blurted, “Well the others talked about it being disgusting but after initial surprise I was - curious. He was very handsome and kind to me and his faults were not obvious, at least to me, then. If my mother had encouraged me when he wanted us, I don’t know, perhaps.... I, I, am still a virgin but ...”

He nodded in surprise that I should speak so boldly.

“I want to be a woman. You understand? Do not buy me an engagement ring if you do not wish to. At nine I will be under the willows near the creek and will wait till midnight.”

“I will be there.”

“All I do ask is that no gossip emerges.” He nodded. “Now to see Andrew – to make a clean break.”

We were just a few yards from the rectory, so we parted without touching. Reverend McPherson and Edna were both on the veranda in the heat and offered me cordial. They could see by my tenseness that something was wrong and were puzzled. They took me round to the side veranda where Andrew was studying theology as usual, while Alexander on the other side of the table studied law, both getting the last of the sunlight for reading, rather than candlelight.

“Hello Rosalind!”

“We must talk. Alexander could we -”

Alexander had already risen, nodded and then excused himself, shorter, older and slower to speak, Alex was Andrew’s opposite, shrewd,

realistic laconic and practical. I felt like telling Eloura's epitome of decency to marry Minnietta, but had more sense.

"Andrew you are a nice person, but what do we have in common?"

"Christian-"

"Your Anglican church cannot be for me."

"Why not? What is wrong with it?"

I felt like saying that when Eakins McKenzie jumped up and belowed 'Yer hymn book looks like sumbody found all the hymns weth tunes en um und ripped um ought, yer got naught but dirges.' Eakins was telling the truth, but I merely repeated myself.

"Is there somebody else?"

"Not yet. This conversation is not happening because of anybody else."

"Have I done something wrong?"

"Ye- no I mean no."

"What? If you mean yes, say what it is."

"Well apart from the wide differences in our backgrounds, you know very little about women – or how to court them."

"Meaning?"

"Andrew if you are a gentleman, you will not press further on this matter."

That had him, like a boy with toy soldiers desperately losing a battle he launched his reckless attack on the most salient point.

"We saw you with Ross. He is my best friend, but I am glad he pays no attentions to my sister."

I kept my temper, stood, thanked his parents and noted their obvious attempts to conceal their relief. Then I walked home.

Being Saturday night, the servant's kitchen was empty, except for smiling Jenny and Brionny sitting at the kitchen table. Jenny eyed the

broach, rolled her tongue around her teeth and they smiled, eyebrows raised. Brionny did the talking as usual.

“We saw you walkin’ together. Late assignation we suppose. We will get yer ready an’ keep guard. Cool dip in tha creek first, massage, warm bath dress, sound good?”

“Ten o’ clock. It is happening.”

Jenny nodded towards some parcels. The little ones were expensive soap and perfume, the larger were a very stylish silk apricot night-shift and the most beautiful dressing gown I had ever seen in my life. It was densely woven silk, a deep, rich, royal blue with white cranes for decoration and all their details coloured in and yellow, red and purple edging with a high colouring. The queen’s tapestry from the play was now a ground cover, wrapped to bulging with what I could smell – rose petals. Like their Saint Patrick’s Day accoutrements this must have cost months of savings. Extravagantly overdone romanticism was part of their character. Characters? No character. I just stared.

“Japanese I think et be.” Jenny contributed. “And God has put on Halley’s Comet ter mark this occasion.”

“If this is what a cast-off teenager gets, what happens if the Queen of Sheba visits?”

We all laughed, but beneath that the thought came that these girls lived in a world too intense, too colourful and too dramatic, but then I was distracted as they looked at the clock. At the creek they virtually would not let me wash myself, stretching out my limbs washing with pears soap first, then with chilled fresh goat’s milk, every inch of my skin, scanning my face.

“Makeup would spoil her.” Brionny assessed and Jenny nodded “Never seen a more beautiful complexion.”

“Now soak, massage and unguents.”

So the three of us soaked and they crushed lavender and thyme in their hands and rubbed it into my skin, then slowly massaged every part of my body, stretching finger by finger, toe by toe. Scalp to heel they did me and then slowly wafted their hair over all my body and then a long slow breast rub which did not speed up. There was no raw sensuality this time, just low sensual pleasure.

When I stood naked before the mirror, they dressed me with the clothes I put on, crowning me with a circle of geranium. Whatever the reality of my situation as an illegitimate, debt-pressed defacto servant, I was close to being royalty as anyone could make me and I did have three fine assets, my face, hair and body.

“Girls you are making me very partial to your Irish rituals.”

“Which are not over yet.” Brionny was emphatic. “Jenny I have more English bits yet an’ have already met him. I’ll be back to get ya” She left with the tapestry.

“What’s this?” I asked Jenny.

“Just making sure Ross is there an’ knows a few things, how ta treat yer good, not ta boast or talk of et ... Back home we would check him out for yer. Nar disease, impotence, inadequacy... Helen Ryan been his only, , says his fine. Do yer want us ta massage him, clean him up?”

“And wait till midnight with your rituals?”

“That’s the hour ya do get back home. Some people say et goes back ta pagan times in Western Ireland. Others say et was all invented ‘bout sixty years back by a local rich widower ta protect women an’ make et all easier. Me gran’ she bein’ near ta ninety, she says her ma knew that tha woman, well she got bits of lore and memories an’ accounts in old documents an’ revived et. Others say et started when priests were hunted an’ there were nah Catholic weddings an’ their Lordships got the girls first. I dunno, whatever ets lots of fun and that’s the main thing. I’ve had

near to a hundred women, an' prepared others like this over twenty time, including Brionny fer William, put 'em together an' yare still tha most beautiful." She caressed my face.

"Here comes Brionny. We walk yer over and leave yer an' wait here just en case we are needed. We watch out fer disturbers, maybe people out ta see Halley's but we won't watch you an' him. Yer don't think or worry about nothing, jus' let sensations flow, like when you were with Brionny first time an' us rubbing last night. It's really first time now."

Suddenly my stomach and throat tensed, my fingers tensed and I would not have minded a few more rituals. But by the clock it was sixteen past ten. Time had seemed so slow walking home, now it rushed.

I opened the door and stepped out barefoot into a low-lying mist, Brionny beside me, Jenny following, counting past the twenty poplars before the first creek willow where Ross was, leaning against a tree in his best clothes. Beside him with the tapestry already spread out, were rose petals and a pilfered silver service tray, with iced coffee and wine. His eyes enlarged when he saw me, smiling slightly. He couldn't take his blazing eyes away. His jaw dropped and he was like a statue.

"Have you ever seen a more beautiful night for making love?" Brionny asked.

"No."

"Then don't waste it and we won't keep ya." Brionny took my hand kissed it and put my fingers in her mouth for two seconds, then held her hand out to caress my jaw briefly and then she left. Jenny was kissing Ross on the lips quickly and then me the same way. Then they seemed to glide off in the mists, like mythic nymphs.

"I never knew the Irish had such style."

"It is all a very localised west Irish thing. They spent some time washing



and massaging and preparing me. I know all this - and they - may seem strange, but they are important to me.”

He nodded and kissed, more like caress. I broke it off.

“What did she say?”

“Oh rituals help emphasise importance and calm nerves. You want to be a woman; few women go to a virginal bridal bed and the more beautiful they are the less chance exists for that. It’s a miracle you are still a virgin. You are determined to lose it, but still nervous. You and Andrew would be a disaster. You are too good to be a servant and would make a fine wife. Did I want the massage and the clean-up?”

“The last one was the only one I disagreed with, “So let’s put the world away.”

He nodded and I turned around and could hear him undressing, then he moved his body close to mine. Softly and tenderly, I ran my hands along his shoulder, past his ribs to his hip and there was only skin. I laid him on his back my long sheeny black hair forming pools on his chest and he placed his finger carefully in my mouth while I caressed it delicately at first, then with more rhythm and he gently told me to be careful with my teeth, pressing my lips around their edges before kissing. What was meant was obvious. We went deep into each other’s mouths straight away and it was prolonged and I ended it by running my tongue from his mouth to his chin, then down his throat, along his chest and stopped at his belly button. I placed my hands firmly on his hips with my head level, just as I had with Brionny and Jenny and with my eyes still shut lowered myself onto him and again the sensation was overwhelmingly strange at first and I thought little beyond “This is really happening, I am really doing this.” Everything seemed so strange, but when he spent himself inside me and we had finished and I turned around curling myself into a little ball so did he, my body matching his, his hands

clasping mine and his teeth gently nibbling my shoulder. I could see moonrise over the purple mountain ridge, over the tops of forest trees and hills, over the town buildings and poplars and plane trees, making everything Prussian blue and silver, colours I had never liked till now.

“Time now” I said, taking off the dressing gown and shift, forgetting my floral crown, hoping he liked my body and would not say anything or gloat or stare; he did not. After years of having virtue and morality pumped into my ears about virginity until I was obsessed as my elders and controlled by them, I gave it little thought, fear or importance. It was just one more sexual thing I had not done before. Lifting my shift for Brionny or penetrating her and Jenny were as important. I propped myself up and straddled him and smiling quickly lowered myself again. It was as Jenny and Brionny had said it would be. There was the tearing of flesh, the cry and the blood and then the pain turning to unfamiliar pleasure with the thrusting.

From what I had learned from the girls, I knew the rhythm of thrusting and matched his, to his surprise and mine I put my hand on his arse and pushed. His rougher skin and the flatness and hairiness of his chest was not what I liked, or rather had not become used to, but after a time it merely seemed different and then I came to like it. His thrusting was more powerful than either of the girls, but not as prolonged and four more times I gave him French sex or breast rubs to get him erect. His hunger for my breasts was as extreme as mine had been for Brionny’s that first time. Hours later and exhausted we became tangled in each other’s bodies, and dozed, then in the early morning hours came the realisation that my beautiful nightgown, Ross and I would all need cleaning. Hand in hand we walked down into the water and not thinking, I slipped on the mud and silt, which was soft, deep and clean – lucky as it went all over me. Laughing, I saw Ross slip and impulsively I threw a

clod at him. That started a contest that went into playful grappling which ended in both of us sliding, slapping and slipping in the mud and lying there, tummy down laughing. I clambered on top of him and gave him a mud-generated body rub that ended with me on top, still but nuzzling the nape of his neck. Then I lay on the ground enjoying the slimy squelchy feel of silt. I enjoyed it more when he thrust me into it again and again while I giggled uncontrollably.

And then came swimming and he used the half-empty wine bottle filling it from the creek. And pouring it from the crown of my head downwards. The cascading water brought back memories.

Ross did not mean it, that way, he only meant to cleanse me of the silt in my hair, but I recalled. Suddenly I knew what I wanted. I walked up to the grassy crest and knelt, my knees far apart and motioned for him to follow. “Remember my play?” He came behind me and cradled his head against my shoulder, kissing and giving gentle love bites.

*For I will always be loyal to you and serve your wishes.*

*Then treat me like a queen and a woman.*

I was suddenly aware of everything sensual and everything was giving me pleasure, not just the feel of him as I ran my fingers through his hair and he clutched me. Aware, feeling and smelling stronger than I ever had and more than that, sensing. The sensations came one at a time fast and vivid. The water, sweat and silt running down my body, the tingling from his touch, my hair wafting against his skin, the moonlight on my body, the faint taste of sweet wine, the flecks of my blood still on me and his seed. Now it was clear why they did it, they were not being silly or overly romantic at all. They knew and now I knew what Jenny tried to tell me.

*Things now seem separate but they are not – or for long. Everything merges into everything else sooner or later rain and earth and seeds*

*merge become plants that rot back into earth and then the wind and whatever it carries comes in to and everything merges and so do we. We just change shape and we can't control it very much, just at the start when our fluids join to create and just near the end when we ask our friends to make us into something else, flowers and flames, earth and ocean. So we continue but what do flames and flowers feel or know or enjoy? Life is good, beautiful and rich and all around you, so why waste it and be blind, deaf and dumb? Be aware of all the things that are around you because you have not all that long in your best shape, which is now girl. There is an order in things and you are a part just know it and enjoy it.*

Now it was clear what all the religions, poets and romantic talkers were trying to reach I was not aware that I was yelling with pleasure, or that my arms were outstretched until near the end and I was panting.

“Ross could you put on your gown, and pour water over me please.”

It felt clean and sweet and the tingling subsided everything looked different. A drowsy warmth came over me. Beyond exhaustion, I could walk, just.

The moment was going, to hold on would have been wrong.

From there we could hear the birds begin dawn chirping, and the sky was a dull blue now, dawn still away and the mist thinning just a little.

“The mist won't last much longer.”

“Ross, could you roll up the tapestry with the leaves and the shift and put it outside the stable? While he did I put on the dressing gown and walked beside him to the stable door. “I am suddenly weary.” I smiled then – for some mysterious reason. “We cannot do this again for some days as I will soon be in my time.”

“The weekend after the engagement party we can spend together, it's a cave in the bush. Would you like that?”

“Oh yes, and I shall like doing everything possible between a man and a woman. You will be at my birthday party. Should we announce my engagement then?”

“Oh yes.”

I nodded, waved and stepped inside. Their toes were visible on the bed's edge. Brionny was pressed against the timber divide on her side, hugging sheets while Jenny naked, was in the middle of her bed facing Brionny. I lay beside her, moulding in, just wanting the warmth and getting it, she murmured, not fully wake.

“I love you.” I whispered and saw the edge of her smile and felt a gentle caress on the fingers.

“Sleep, girl.”

I did.

\*

Twilight, the thought came with the light though on to my face, and I woke up a new person, still exhausted.

It was heaven to just lay dozing sometimes, recalling memories of Ross, Jenny and Brionny, alternating them, wanting one and then another. They came in cheery Brionny talking, Jenny watching as usual.

“Awake, Queen of the Dawn!”

“No more Irish rituals, well just for now. The one you gave me was wonderful, thank you very much.”

“That was a joke darling, welcome to seven o’clock Monday morning. You have slept twenty-two hours for some reason.”

“And feel like more should follow.”

“Max has given you the day off.”

“Not the sack. Use it to get all your announcements in.”

“He deflowered me.”

They both burst into laughter that went on for some time and then

Brionny continued.

“Oh really? Really! You woke us at close to eleven, then midnight, three, and eight. We reckon your cries would have woken up anybody within a mile of that creek bank. Everybody in New Albion knows. Everybody in Eloura District will know soon enough. You and therefore we are being watched like hawks, so no signs of affection. On practicalities Ross came round to see you and ask is this notification fine for the papers. His parents consented.” She smiled and reached for it eagerly, looked and nodded.

“Could one of you take it to Andrew?”

“I will.” Brionny nodded. “Well! We have come ter the road’s end.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yer have your fella-”

“So now I’m broken in we can relax and you can both go deep into me.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Absolutely nothing He’s perfect. I’m in love with him – and you both.”

“Yer might think so, but yer don’t really know us.”

“Jenny I might need to speak more Standard English so we know each other better.”

“I have the Gaelic.”

“Well just because you feel sick-”

They both burst into laughter again.

“Rosalind that is what we mean. Gaelic bein’ our native language an’ saying we have et bein’ our way of saying we speak et. Jenny has little English.”

“An’ by intent! It confuses me ta bloody buggery. Like now there be stop, desist, finish, end, abate, abandon, abort and lord knows how many

more all fer one thing, millions of words with different spelling rules en tha one language and yer don' spell em tha way yer sa em sometimes but other ones ya do an ets - homophones and homonyms and other bloody forms of more mad word poofterism than a dog could bark ets head at and that's what et sounds like, dogs barkin', an' a mongrel language bred of Latin an' Greek an Eyetalian and everybody else like an international gang bang a dogs no good breeder ud let near a half-good bitch an' I'll have none of et."

"You say you want ter enter our world, but there more goes on et than lesbianism and yer should not enter. In a way yer cannot."

To emphasise that they walked out

\*

Brionny McNamara

28th March Eloura 1910

We took the notice over ter Andrew an' he just looked at et an thanked us in a dead voice. Lucky, he had been called out on an urgent news story at Royd town Saturday night or he would have heard her. Good o' Donal ter set that wild goose chase up fer us without tha knowin' of tha why.

We talked in Gaelic for secrecy. I spoke.

"If she gets enamoured with him she might give up us. I get Grahame an' that's regular money off for Ireland, better than fly by nights with warrants.

There will be somethin' fer yer somewhere. I don't want ter have ter split up but tha law might do that anyway."

"An' have children. And a mother-in-law who by your own account bein' the most extreme Ulster supporter ever!"

"And who blabs. Secret information from a source they would never suspect."

We could laugh thinkin' of them blamen' each other for a security leak.

“Do ya think she knows anything important like?” Jenny asked

“No, but possibly.”

“And you’re romancin’ tha boy ta spy. This is dirty work.”

“So is prostitution, stealin’ and fencin’. And I like the boy and we have our orders.”

“Like a toy or a pet. Cor, poor bloody Rosalind.”

“Is headin’ fer a good marriage instead of prostitution - due ter our efforts.”

“Brionny ,yare both heading fer deceived husbands. Nae me”

“Can we be honest?”

“Does Rachel Clarke come across as the type ta welcome Fenian daughters-en -law with lesbian pasts ta yer-?”

“Rosalind probably isn’t just an experimenter. She has no lies in her and she is beautiful and good–hearted and nobody should never reject love.”

I held up the bracelet, that Evelyn's inspired, my double ouroboros and studied et as tha entwined snakes devouring each other glittered in the sunlight. We could get three new ones made, each with three snakes, next time we were in Sydney

“We give her what she says she wants, and then a tighter bind.”

\*

That night we came back and there were two Japanese dressing gowns identical ter that one one we got her. They had geranium laurels on top with what remained of our soaps and perfumes. We was hopin’ et was done with humour and et was. She was already dressed in hers.

“Hello, once wasn’t enough?”

“Women’s night, so knot your middle fingers together, down by the river bank after we bathe and anoint. Everything possible between three women will happen.”



I started ter say my cautioning refrain but et was ner good, an' finally I was tha seduced one.

“Let her be what she is.” Jenny added, putting on her laurel deliberately askew, down ter one eyebrow while giving a cheery wink.

\*

After about three weeks she did no' possess the slightest sense of guilt or abnormality about lesbianism or being sexually involved with both of us simultaneous or of us gettin' sexually involved en front of her – and neither did I. Jealousy becomes hard ter maintain when we all agreed ter give ourselves whenever another asked an' we shared everythin'. We slept together for warmth and she loved et – and us an' Ross. Rosalind was a true bisexual, without guilt and we came to like her immensely and long fer our lovemaking. Jenny had the three new ouroboros bracelets, each one had three snake-women, agate, brown opal and gold made their hair. Bein' not as good as Evelyn's, but on the way for a certainty.

“They are not just snakes, or even snake-women.” Jenny explained. They are the ouroboros, bein' like a phoenix, 'cause tha snake always sheds ets skin and that's like rebirth see an' ets totality, nothings more total ta itself than a snake eating ets own tail, or crotch, like these things do, so et's rebirthing itself and showen' immortality an' tha circle of hexistence, for all life be a heternal circle, see?

Rosalind nodded, entranced with the beauty of it and nodding getting some of the idea behind the symbolism, but loving the bonding, pleasure and loyalty et really symbolised.

•

“Attending church on Sunday, dinner with the family, social events all very well. Keep your ears and eyes open. Know where things are - but don't take unless I authorise it.”

“Yes Donal.”

“And don't engage in any sexual activity. If you do, he and you are adulterers and you will be punished, severely.”

“Yes Donal.”

“You and William were lucky enough to get away with exile.”

“Yes Donal.”

\*

Rosalind Jervis

29<sup>th</sup> April Eloura 1910

And so as the bans went up and I became engaged to Ross on my sixteenth birthday. This meant we could be seen together everywhere, and yes, hold hands in public or take his arm while strolling. It also meant some discreet forms of sexual involvement was no longer a major crime, albeit not tolerated if revealed: selective blindness came in. The legally required wait of five years without parental permission was a long wait and everyone knew couples would not live celibate that long. We did not; our second love making was nearly a week after that before we were able to slip away to the cave. There was always sudden work at New Albion, and Rachel Clarke seemed to be finding, indeed inventing things Ross just had to do and there was the intended weekend of love that turned into Saturday lunch.

When we did get time off his jolly, if somewhat simple cousin Murie delayed us on the track to the creek with some pointless, almost idiotic verbal ramble which started with the fact it was fine and sunny weather, went in to declining health of King Edward, the sad death of Mark Twain, “the man who wrote the best novels in the world Grahame says, so I reckon its so” and then we got on to bird life, Ross was apparently a consultative expert on whether crows were more dangerous than kookaburras. That set Ross of suffering fools gladly or perceiving some kind of humour was beyond him.f:

“Dangerous to who? What can possibly be bloody dangerous about a bloody kookaburra Murie?”

“They are pretty dangerous if you are a snake. They pick them up and take them to great heights and drop them. I reckon a bird thinking that cleverly could think up to go for our jugulars from behind, or maybe they confer with the crows-”

“Did you know Kenny Moon lives in town all by himself, fascinated by birds he is. Eakins is also there bird watching by the smithy and not a bird in sight.”

“None here either.”

“Murie there are a flock of about eighty screeching galahs in the branches directly over our head. They are making the noise that almost drowns out your deep wisdom.”

“Oh them. Oh, they aren’t the type the birdwatchers want. They have feathers and beaks.”

“We don’t see any bird watchers weird or otherwise.”

“That’s because they don’t want to be seen. The woods are full of them.”

Ross paused and a flicker of doubt in his firm belief in the idiocy of cousin Murie passed across his face and he was listening more carefully, letting him ramble. Having seen much of Murie at the McPhersons where he courted Ruth, I had woken up to Murie. He loved to play the fool with Ross, who was too humourless to see it and Murie was either delaying him or trying to tell him something and bird was slang for a sexually attractive young woman.

“In Australia Miss we call the woods the bush and over those mountains is a forest, but that's too far to stroll there before noon.”

“Oh really, Murie are you sure? The mountains are only twenty miles away and we have forty minutes to noon.”

“Which means we will be home for lunch in plenty of time. Ruth and Alison are home today and cooking.”

As in England to refuse a dinner invitation without reason was improper, so we went.

“Alison is my cousin, we look a bit alike.”

My beloved had the Australian habit of understatement. He turned his head to speak to his cousin Douglas and I turned the other way, thinking he had moved and seeing the hair below the collar I said “Ross you need a haircut” and thought again how androgynous his finely chiselled face was. Also noticeable now were a couple of eye lines, the start of crows feet, previously unnoticed, odd. The slate grey eyes twinkled with more good humour than I had previously seen in him. It was the dark brown leather coat and horse rider’s boots that gave her away, then the nicotine stains on the finger tips, she must roll her own and Ross never smoked. Her hands were his, as finely elongated with a body as thin, tall and angular as his. Man’s clothes and being flat chested helped the misidentification. Her voice tones and pronunciation greatly resembled his, albeit some polish, humour, courtesy and honey were added. Jenny and Brionny insisted Ross had a cousin who they knew to be an obvious lesbian on sight. The warmth of her welcome to me confirmed it. She looked me over head to foot with a merry smile and a whistle that could win any heart and she murmured, nodding to herself “Oh honeybun, Ross is going to have a great deal of fun with you.”

“I beg your pardon?” That was said with a fixed smile.

“And you are going to have a great deal of fun with Ross. Nothing wrong with that, marriages should be fun, but Saturday morning down by the creek in broad daylight might not be the best time or place.”

Alison raised her eyebrows and licked her tongue. She could bottle the humour that Ross had in drops. “Murie was a wake up and heard my

husband and younger brother Allen. Tom just wanted to catch you spooning and make a great to-do. Allen wanted to see you naked. I rode, but couldn't find you pair, Murie did."

"And they are going to get away with that?"

"Not at all. I'll deal with mine at home. For starters when they turn up they can sit there as starving silly buggers with fading hopes while we eat their lunch, if we start right now."

She was in control of the milkmaids and drovers and rang the bell and gave the orders like it was second nature. Bringing up three brothers perhaps or more than that, being a teacher, probably made her that way.. She spoke to my thought.

"Yes actually teacher at the chestnut school. My brothers and cousins and the McPherson children were among the pupils."

That was sharp and she did it to let me know that she was sharp. I helped Ruth bring out the plates. Amazingly servants, well, not really servants, hired help sat at the same table among the family. The Aborigines sat by themselves at the table end. Clyde Whaley, the tracker sat with his wife. The women wore immaculate white cotton dresses now that work and washing was over; all wore crucifixes and wedding rings. They were all very quiet people, with wide smiles, shiny white teeth and bright dark eyes, soft-voiced, polite, but after an elder took their plate and loaded it with a fork they did eat with their fingers. Following my gaze Clyde commented:

"That knife and fork thing, that white fellas stuff Miss not for Murray fella"

When I asked who Murray Fella was gentle laughter went all round the room and Clyde commented:

"We all Murrays Miss"

“Ah, yes, the words sound the same, there is also the name Murray which originated in Scotland.”

“Hey! That’s exactly where we are from!”

The laughter went round the room for some time, then subsided into giggles while we ate the abundant baked meal of beef and vegetables set before us - and it was not Sunday. I wondered if there were any Aborigines like the ferocious savages of the English papers and Jules Verne’s novel *Mistress Branican* which Mrs Hawkins, Jenny and I foolishly read on the voyage out for knowledge of Australia. In both they appeared half-naked with spears and boomerangs and at the mere sight of a white and either killed them or kept them in miserable captivity. Jules Verne had never been here. After the main course the Aborigines and the other help started to pack up and oddly, take leftovers with them, but weren’t they staying to eat the ice cream? Ross saw my puzzlement and explained:

“Aborigines share everything, that’s why they take the food home, but ice cream melts, so what can’t be shared stays, at least that is what the Eloura tribe do.”

After the ice cream Reg got out his pipe and I rose to go, but Alison started rolling her own. I had never seen a woman do that and wondered why Ruth also sat there. Uncle Reg explained:

“Ah Ros, ya doing this English thing were the women go and let the men smoke, not done here. If you break any rules we’ll forgive you and let you know, sit with us.”

“Ross may I smoke?” Jenny had got me hooked.

“Cor blimey! He’s got her trained!” Uncle Reg slapped the table and gave a guttural laugh

“You were to be asked next.”

“No need girl, no need.”

So out came my cigarettes. I publicly smoked for my first time while Reg and Alison lit up using the old-fashioned tinder-box, which took much longer.

“You may use my safety matches.”

“Can I advise you against them?” Alison asked. “They are expensive - and in a few seconds more a tinder box will do it. This one was brought out from Worcestershire - (She pronounced it Work Ester Shear) when was it? 1823? Dad?”

“Yeh, when we were peerage aristocrats. Those tinderboxes will last yer all yer life and your life may depend on fire. Those matches look fine but they aren’t good against the wet.”

Murie contributed. “Even the humidity or just age can wreck ‘em. Like with that dead new chum drover you found Ross. Where his matches sodden or just humid?”

“A little wet, He had no idea.” He turned to me. “Happened winter before last, cold enough to snow on the range and his horse bolted in the forest. He tried to light a fire...”

Alison took over “If tinder gets wet first you dry it with cloth, but that can never be enough, some moisture and cold remains. To get heat out of the stones you must give them heat, from your heart like this.” She undid a button and put the stones at the start of her breast. “Usually not under your armpit because it is clammy and sweaty. When you think they are dry give them a friction rub like this.” She demonstrated briefly with her hands.

“You might think we are stingy, not buying matches and keeping the furniture we brought over from England,” Uncle Reg started, “Especially when Douglas comes back late, with an evaluator who tells you the value of this place. Yet you must never be extravagant in the good times for the

day will come when water has got so scarce a man with a water van will come by and you will pay whatever he wants. It might look like England, but if it's not the drought it's the floods or bushfires or some bloody law and politics thing and if it's not them and everything is fine, then there is always some bored mongrel, man or woman, trying to stir up trouble. Money is like blood, you don't part with it, it's messy, best hidden and it must keep going if you are to live. Be generous with perishables, like meat, but learn thrift girl, little and big, that's how many a farmer's wife has got the family property through the hard times."

Murie, Ross, Ruth and Alison all nodded while her boy little Jack ate. I was coming to like this very abundant land with its generous, good-humoured and thrifty people who left many of the annoying English snobberies behind - then Allen and Tom turned up and the other side of Australians rapidly became apparent.

Little Allen had a nasty look on his face while big blonde Tom was bland. Reg started in.

"Nobody will ask you where you have been, we all know."

"So what?" Allen spat those words out like "Do ya wanna fight?" which was almost his way of saying hello from what others said of him round town. He and Tom moved over to the food and Uncle Reg glowered.

"That's not for you two to take, When Douglas and the evaluator get back they eat."

"And what do I eat?"

"Nothing here; people here who work eat. Yer don't work so yer don't eat."

Allen smirked, got a plate of food for himself and started eating; everyone tensed, even the child Jack.

"Did you hear me boy? Put it back"



Allen spat into the food then put it back sitting with his arms folded smirking.

“Tasted like shit sister. A lubra could do better than that.” Nobody took the provocation, so he continued. “And if only workers eat why do Ross and Miss Rosalind eat? That only makes sense if you think playing rudies some type of work.”

The other Ross was out and getting ready, yet a touch from my hand on his clenched fist stopped the rising movement and his snarl turned into clenched teeth.

“Work in the orchard needs urgent attention, best be rising to it. Uncle Reg, Alison, Murie and Ruth, thank you. Allen do not set foot on Clarke land in future thank you.”

We rose to go.

“I’ll go wherever I bloody like.”

Everybody could see that he was trying to provoke a fight and Reg said so. Then I rose to go; Ross signalled for me to stay. Reg spoke.

“Oh, we all know that, it’s payback for not seeing what he wanted to see. Whenever somebody does something Allen can’t, like reading a newspaper or attracting a beautiful woman, Allen has to cut them down.”

“You wanna fight old man?”

“Do you wish to be thrown off this farm?”

“What’s it matter? It matters shit. You are going to give the farm to Douglas.”

“As I should. He’s the eldest and he works hard. With every year that passes there’s less chance of you getting anything. All you do is drink and fight and *say* what a hard bloody worker you are.”

“I’ll punch yer Ross Clarke, you cold arrogant bastard.”

“Not here, not now.”

“Threaten anybody in my house and you will end up picking your next fight on some drover’s camp. Those places are full of black sheep like you.”

“Too right! Piss Off!” He stormed out and everybody gave a sigh of relief.

“Please the language.” I interrupted, “Ladies should we leave?”

They looked puzzled and Alison responded. “We are all grown adults here. It is best to stay.”

Her husband Tom, who seemed permanently sullen, until then had the sense to stay quiet, now he spoke. “It was only gunna be a joke, with us leaping out of the bushes and yahooing. Anyway, better to keep Allen out of trouble.”

When he left he did not even look at his wife, in fact he had not so much as looked at her during the brief visit. It was suddenly four o’clock and we left. I waited till the lent horse got us a mile away.

“Why did you insist I stay?”

“Because you and they are part of the family, and if you left it means that you are either opting out or only a fair-weather friend.”

“And the swearing?”

“Once again among the family it’s one thing, not done elsewhere and grown adult meant sexually experienced.”

“Perhaps Australians aren’t as simple as they first seem.”

“Nobody is. The creek cannot be on this weekend, everybody expects us there.”

“So April nineteen fifteen is a long wait.”

“Friday night isn’t. We vanish after work”

He had some hidden place up his sleeve but I did not think he had a whole cave large enough for twenty horses without crowding. He was

enigmatic, sharp and full of the most extraordinary surprises, the opposite of Andrew, not that I minded that.

\*

We stood at the birthday cake which Briionny had somewhat archly made of chocolate. Last night we had rubbed our bodies down with it; now she licked in a suggestive manner others sensed as odd, but could not comprehend. I could only wonder at the difference between my fifteenth and sixteenth birthday parties. Last year in Cornwall I was looking admiringly at my idols, my mother, the even more morally upright Reverend Hawkins and his adoring wife, the ideal couple who I could hope to emulate, with my best friend (their daughter Jenny) smiling, admiring me. I had my virginity and had not even been kissed. That talk about girls sharing beds was a week off, therefore my knowledge of lesbians was non-existent. Then Christianity was at the core of my respectable middle-class being, That core functioned on fixed ideas of goodness embodied in the people round me. Paganism was evil, Irish servants were lesser beings and an unbeliever husband meant Satan was the bride's father-in-law, the reverends insisted.

Now my three lovers, two of them Irish servant women, and one of those a sometime prostitute, were gathered round the birthday cake. Religious talk was anathema now, and I had found my mother was a kept woman and a jailed criminal, the Hawkins were weak hypocrites and my father the reverend was not my father. I had even been deflowered in a ceremony permeated with paganism. The only thing the same was sweet Jenny Hawkins smiling admiringly as she always did. It was hitting me how preposterous my life had become as bizarre circumstances whirled me about.

Alison Caufield was there, initially a relief, nothing bizarre or impractical, elegant and yet simultaneous earthy, and a genuinely friendly

face and a chat whenever she was in Eloura for an event or shopping. That was rare, they had little money, so she invited me out after the weekend after next, which was perfect timing, I needed all possible friends and she was very, very attractive.

\*

Alison Caufield

Caufield's Farm 8th May 1910

It was all very uncertain so I invited her out. Everybody says that kind are apparently the surly ones that should have been born men, and yet Rosalind, Jenny and Brionny were three of the most beautiful women in the Eloura District, they could have and did have the handsomest men around. Rosalind and Ross, Brionny and Grahame, Donal and Jenny. That was the way it seemed and perhaps it was the way it was – but, but, but...

There was something odd about those Irish girls and that game with the cake was a signal. If I had it wrong well and good, Rosalind seemed easy to like and friends were rare, why not make another?

Things began well enough, Ross and Grahame had timber for firewood to collect on the Clarke's southern borders so they dropped her off around nine and would be back at twilight. She had picked up much about horses, as she demonstrated while helping in the stable.

At midday when the milkmaids finished by bathing the problem started.

“Bathing in midwinter?” She asked.

“Milk spills, forking manure, sawdust, sweat, all make it a daily necessity.”

So why did she insist on bathing if she was so initially puzzled? I stayed at my usual spot, on the hill keeping a lookout for the girls – and Tom. She came up to join me too soon and with an odd look that started alarm bells ringing. Those bells got louder when she sat too close naked and when her eyes went over the girls then I knew for a certainty. Still

undressed, she stretched out with a smile and put her hands behind her neck and smiling, she even began to stroke my foot with hers. I did not lead her on any more than I had to.

“Take me, you want to.” She virtually commanded, cool as the water on her.

“I don’t want to. Where did you get that idea?” Suddenly she looked genuinely confused, and what she was thinking became obvious. “So you think that because my hair doesn’t grow very long, and I roll my own tobacco like a man does, and wear trousers like a man does, that shows me up as one of your kind? The clothes are a necessity for horse riding and farmwork. Well young lady, put on your clothes and leave. Incidentally, that weird bracelet you wear is that some type of secret code so your type can recognise each other?”

My voice was probably sharper than it should have been, for her fingers wavered; she was too flustered as she dressed and tears welled up.

“No, it is a sign of friendship, thank you very much.”

“Sit down.”

“No thank you. I am dressing as fast as possible.”

“Please listen.”

“If you do not tell Ross, I will. The pair of you are heading for a life of deceit and misery.”

“We are quite happy and would be even happier if bossy, self-righteous people would leave us alone.”

“And trying to seduce his cousin expresses this desire to be left alone?”

“Clearly a mistake.”

“You are making many.”

She was dressed now and from her face and body stance it was obvious that she would not listen. She walked off, saddled had her horse

and left. Brionny, who also wore one of those bracelets, was going out with Grahame and suddenly I smelt a rat. Were they fortune seekers working the Clarke family? Suddenly it was my business, literally. They could soon be our neighbours and what else did they have up their sleeves -apart from weird bracelets?

\*

Frank Clarke

Clarkstead 27<sup>th</sup> May 1910

She was back at it again, trying another flanking movement in a lost battle. She wearied me, had done so for most of my life. Life or God or circumstances had not gone the way she demanded, so screaming would start and God was ablaze with anger and when I said that she might settle even him down she went right off.

“Apart from the jailed mother, what could be more trouble than an illegitimate daughter-in-law with a police record?”

“An illegitimate grandchild?”

“That is why I gave my reluctant consent. Fortunately, God in his wisdom gave us Reverend Jervis who has refused consent, so five years must pass before the engagement ends. And in that time -” She was on some never say die scheme, drifting off into thought. “Grahame may yet show possibilities. He needs a firm hand; Brionny entrances and with maturity which she will develop, he could surprise us.”

At that moment Grahame, eighteen, was sitting on a fence neighing with a carrot in his face, teasing a horse.

“Concerning Brionny, Max, and Zelda confirm my initial impression of thrift, manners, diligence in work and fierce anti-Catholicism. Apart from that horror Donal, whom she despises, she has not been seen with boys and loves horses. She did not attend service because she was not invited, that has been rectified. What documents Max has seen confirm her father was a Protestant and an ostler. I am awaiting word from

Ireland. She seems a fine young lady who will bring Grahame to heel and perpetuate this estate."

*And wipe the smile off his face. I did like her until I found that you did: now I'm wary.*

"Please call out Ross." I asked as she went inside. We sat alone at the veranda table.

"Ross, this land and family is what I have worked for all my life. You probably know that as second eldest and Robert on other things, you will inherit the estate, and you inherit by ability as well. You also know that I'm not far off sixty and many an estate has collapsed due to an unexpected death. Its best you start learning now – and when times are changing."

"The district farmer's cooperative meeting to discuss buying the tractors?"

"Yeh, you go and vote."

He nodded, knowing that more was coming.

"You know Brionny McNamara?"

"One of Rosalind's best friends. She is well-mannered, very Irish, and very horsey. Grahame likes her, she seems nice."

"Here is a key to one of the spare rooms for Miss Jervis. Don't dishonour it."

He nodded as he took it. "I should not have to say that but we both know that I must. You know women could be your downfall. Look at Evelyn. One day Leo's going to be where Max rules now – and where Evelyn should have been. Now Leo will look after him, just as Douglas will inherit and look after reg and Murie. It seems we have a feckless silly bugger in each brood."

He looked over the land, loving it. He might make something of it, keep the traditions going. He was the one real chance. Much would

depend on Rosalind, who might go the way of her mother or be the most respected woman in the district.

\*

Ross Clarke

Clarkstead 27th May 1910

After discussing issues it was late twilight and there was time to think and survey the land that one day would be mine. It gave me a sense of belonging. Beautiful fields harvested, trees wafting in a slight breeze; cattle lowing off in the distance; savouring a leisurely fruit punch after an Indian summer day. A beautiful fiancée who wants to spend the weekend being taught everything sexual. Life was good.

He came along the coast road, a tall thin unknown man wearing dark clothes and a horseman's wide brim, still riding on a tired roan that most would have walked, but then I saw that his left foot was out of the stirrup and bandaged.

“Hey mate, that horse needs a break and a drink.”

“As does his master.”

“He rode to the gate but did not get off, just smiled, in a way that suggested he smiled at the whole world and then he saw the black crêpe.

“Don't worry, it's for King Edward. Grahame!” I called out to the stables.

“We got a horse needs looking at.”

Very gingerly, he stepped off. I offered him a cane, which he took with smiles. Grahame shook hands as he led the horse away and he slowly walked up the steps, glad for a chair. Up close he was in his forties, with a seamed face that spoke of years under the sun somewhere hotter than here. His blue eyes were shrewd and merry and so was his mouth, set on its curve like it always wanted to grin. He was the type of man people took to instantly. All this was evident in five seconds and he



knew I saw it and showed it merrily. We held our hands at the same instant.

“Name’s Keith Anstey.” He had an odd accent. I gave mine.

“My school friend Karl McPherson is the local doctor in town. After the drink we’ll take you in on the dray.”

“Foot’s only swollen. Foresters had a look and a tending to. Those tin lizzies and most of the others rattle and clunk a mile off, but not those smooth seek Rolls Royce Silver Ghosts. Not his fault, the horse shied. Not the horse’s either. We will blame it on the tree, should have had more sense than to be growing there.”

We smiled; he polished off the fruit punch with the hand motions of a man who drinks spirits by second nature and with the quickly concealed disappointment of a man who finds he isn’t drinking spirits when he expects it.

“Perhaps a bit of alcohol for medicinal purposes?”

He smiled widely and that smile went into folds across his face. “Ah yes.”

“I will bring it out, you don’t won’t to go into the parlour.”

I went to get some wine, Rawleighs ointment and some leftover beef and salad. On the way back I found him in the parlour.

“Never tell a shark to ignore blood in the water, don’t tell a fox the hen house location and never tell a journalist they don’t want to see something.”

“It is something.”

“The continuous history of British imperialism, from the Normans to Cromwell to Edward’s death. With the commission of the President of Eloura District Branch of the Ulster Unionist Association on the wall. Your grandmother?”

“Mother, who also serves as chairman, secretary and treasurer.”

“Who forms the audience at meetings?”

“God, if he knows what is good for him and Reverend McPherson and his wife, they definitely know what is good for them, Constable Mcphee and her new follower. Brionny, Grahame’s girl.”

“Ulster?”

“County Clare, but Protestant. She’s nice and would be nicer without all this politics. Ireland’s a long way off, but not far enough.”

“Ah, many Irish here?”

“More of late, Catholic mainly. The older families are often English and Irish. Often Anglican, like that man in the Rolls, as only one Rolls exists round here it was probably my cousin Leo or my uncle, Max Chapman.”

“The mayor here, father of the famous artist Evelyn, another cousin?”

“Indeed.”

Keith started into the food.

“He’s the fellow I’ve come to see about employment. Apparently the one overworked reporter also serves as the editor and everything else.”

“Andrew McPherson, Doctor Karl’s brother and you have arrived too late to cover my fiancée’s birthday party, where we announced our engagement. Uhm, we were...rivals...”

“I see. That coverage, would it be worth another glass in a toast to the bride?”

“It’s worth a bottle, more.”

“Ah, fate has certainly brought me to the right house... and your fiancée is another relative?”

“No.”

“So, she is not Eloura born? Irish?”

“Anglo-Indian.”

“An officer’s daughter.”

“And missionaries. Cornish descent and background. Brionny and her friend Jenny are her best friends, Celtic United, people call them.”

He gave me a shrewd enigmatic look while he ate and I realised he was getting information without giving any.

“Max will be in tomorrow. I can take you into town as I am in for the party anyway. Maybe some of that alcohol could be more directly applied.”

“You know farmer’s hours? We are up at dawn for breakfast. A good guest-room for a man is the third on the left, there’s spare shaving gear and men’s wear, none of those prissy little flower decorations. If you want to be here again, at breakfast, no blasphemy, churchy jokes or any criticism – well you seem a pretty shrewd fellow, you will follow the drift.”

“Already on to it. You seem a handy person to know.”

“Likewise.”

While leaving I turned around and he was mulling over something.

\*

The meeting over tractors verses horses was held at the Eloura farming cooperative. Max chaired, calling the meeting to order.

“Now Leo, just back from his honeymoon, has been giving the tractor a try out for a season, so let us hear from him.”

“Cost wise they equal four Clydesdales. Fuel wise they are forty percent cheaper. That margin may increase as petrol and oil become more common. You also save costs with no harness needed. Although tractors need mechanics for repairs, they are half the annual cost of vet’s fees - and you don’t get mechanical breakdowns in the middle of the night waking you up or kicks in the head or panic in fires.”

“And you don’t get warning neighs when snakes or strangers are around or delays while spare parts come from Sydney.” Tom spoke in a hostile way, as usual.

“The tractors do plough more land much faster.” Leo added.

“But they leave oil patches where nothing grows instead of manure for your fields. Those oil patches burn real quick and could start bush fires. Like their smoke, they smell awful.”

“And manure does not?” Murie called out. That got laughs and Tom always hated that.

“But Leo, you sway on that thing swaying like a sailor rounding Cape Horn.” Tom’s rejoinder again.

“Now we are at the crucial point.” Uncle Reg interjected. “We have all seen that swaying and it looks mighty dangerous.”

That’s because it's so.” Leo added. “It is the worst point about them. Now getting an automobile driver’s licence was easy. After a few months its second nature, actually easier than being a wagoner, but the tractor works differently, all the time you must balance yourself and it. Now Tom’s point about being like a sailor comes pretty close to the reality and driving it, well that needs a real, even particular skill and after a year I’m not sure that I’ve got it.”

“And if you over tip its worse than a bolting horse.” Douglas added, “We hear of high casualties in those districts that have gone in for it. Bodalla, Bega, Shellhaven, Illawarra, Sutherland and Goulburn report a total of forty-two dead and nearly a hundred injured using these things, and that is only in the last four years.”

“And figures are down by four fifths on reported ruptures from ploughs in those same areas.” Leo shot back. “We all know of somebody who got a gut rupture or whiplash when their plough hit a stone or log that even the best land clearing missed.”

“And many of those tractor driver casualties were inexperienced.”

Max added.

“Hold on.” Tom interjected. “You saying that in future farmers won’t need the strength or the guts to push a plough? That’s what is being said isn’t it? Any sissy or sodomite who can use one of these tractors can be a farmer. But have you thought how reliable that type will be when drought, flood, or tough times hit? Nah, keep it tough with horses and ploughs, its good training for tough times and keeps the sissies out.”

Nobody could answer that, so they ignored it. Douglas spoke to Leo.

“So, you say we need either trained tractor drivers or training.”

“If we are lucky, we will find one, maybe two professional drivers, we will need to train from him and so best hold buying the tractors till we know how to use them, maybe this time next year.”

Max put it to the vote and except for Tom, we all voted that the funds would be used for training first with tractor purchases in mid-winter next year. Everybody sensed that locally it was the beginning of the end for a type of farming that had lasted thousands of years, men, ploughs and animals; where would mechanisation lead to?

What was also less obviously decided was that Leo deserved to be community leader after Max and that Douglas and I, would follow our fathers and also that Tom was a contrary toughie.

\*

Later that afternoon the Eloura cricket team gathered and Max also chaired that one. It was time for winter practice and planning the summer line-up. Leo, being just married to Marsha, and Murie, just engaged to Ruth, and me for Rosalind, got congratulations. Andrew normally cheery, looked sullen and did not say hello. Max noticed and while the others chatted, tried to smooth things over.

“Well a lady makes a choice and a man has to live with it. And who

is to say it is the wrong choice? Or that soon some other young lady might not accept you? And that in ten years you might hear her name and have to pause to think who she is?" He paused to see how we were taking it, Andrew was not really taking it, so Max tried another tack. "You two have been my best all-rounders since you were six. It would be a pity if the team suffered over this and worse if mates became enemies. What is to be gained by rancour?"

What indeed? Andrew bit his lip, looked around at the watching faces, including the assessing ones of people he had known as friends for years, Max, Leo, Trevelyan, George Whaley, Jan, Hendrik, Reverend Hawkins, Eakins, Alex, Murie and Douglas and he could see they were still sympathetic, but that might change; he would be seen as a sulker or what Americans call a sore loser. The sneers of Tom also had their effect, and softened a bit and took a proffered hand, but later when he was not around Max asked us not to make jokes or refer to Rosalind.

\*

Rosalind Jervis

New Albion 25<sup>th</sup> July 1910

The initial promised weekend with Ross turned into many. We spread them over months. On those weekends I had no sexual desires for the girls, just as during the week there was only them and Ross was in the background. Those days turned out to be a relief to all the pressures. He led me into a cave none knew of. He had made it comfortable and surprisingly clean and with the cool weather coming on a fire and a bed made of piled up warm animal skins were both rather necessary. Food, clothing and drink stayed chill in water that seemed colder than ice. When on our first weekend there Ross said it was a beautiful morning and we should swim and enjoy the sunlight; I just shook my head and let him go. I loved the crackling flames and the slight scent of smoke as we pressed into each other and then rested, but more than that I loved the

utter darkness, with or without the feel of him. No thoughts, nothing but sensations.

And yet on Monday mornings there was the world. Many of those problems were of my own making. Nobody else forced me to walk down the street looking at women the way men do, thinking to myself how they would look naked. Donal was still a problem. After years of contempt Brionny could still not shake him off.

At the stable door Brionny and Jenny were talking with Donal in Gaelic. I butted in and said it was a matter of urgency and took her behind the door and started; amazed she just stared:

“Let me, let me!”

I was nearly weeping with pleading and her eyes were ablaze.

“Ay yer gone mad?” I was clutching at her and she was on the verge of hitting me and more loudly, I begged and she kept looking to the door and worried by my voice she led me to the hay bales 'do not yell' she whispered.

“Now come ter mummy fer a feed. That is what it is all about isn't it?”

She put my head to her shoulder, but suddenly her chest arched and the fingers in my hair tensed.

“Brionny men back home get a bullet through the kneecap for adultery. You promised me never again, no more of them. For this, definitely expulsion. At the least and as a favour considering your good deeds past, you get five with the duster and I'll not report it. You select where.”

Donal Shaw was speaking in a very different voice. He lectured us, having a great deal to say on the purity of Irish women being a national glory, associating with an English pervert being a sure road to hell and unnatural acts as a sign of middle class degeneracy. As Brionny was

shaking with fear nobody gave a great rave for Sapphic freedom. I was not even game to turn around. Brionny was stroking my hair with the well-practised movements she used to calm horses.

“Ah yes, hang your head in shame. Somehow, I don’t think you will be playing Deidre, Maeve or anybody else, assuming you are still alive next year – or in ninety seconds.”

Cold round metal made a mark about the size of a shilling in my nape, not an inch higher than where Brionny blew air on our first night. The click was a pistol trigger being pulled back.

“Say your prayers, perverted whore. Go out with the Our Father. That being more than Old Noll gave our people at Drogheda. Soon you will see God face to face and he will meet out his justice, just as we meet out Ireland's.”

“Donal no! No!” Jenny’s voice, far away was going into screams. All the thoughts that came were to die bravely, to stop shaking and do something good.

“I led Brionny into it, I seduced her.”

Death made trying to think of something important, then of someone, but only four faces came, my childhood friend Jenny, Brionny, Jenny Doyle and Ross. The shattering bang in my ears and the acrid smell of smoke came with the blow to the back and head as falling forward my bladder and bowels went – and I was gasping for air as he pulled my hair back and dropped something small, acrid and vile in my mouth; it nearly choked me. His face was less than handsome from upside down, too close and filled with smug hate.

“That was a kick and a firecracker off in your ears. That was just a bit of fun. Now look what I have that’s real. See this lead bullet between my fingers? Do you see it, whore?”



I nodded while shaking; the bullet was between fingers encased in brass knuckles.

“Guess where that is going if you ever touch Brionny again? Or talk of what you know.”

“Brionny don’t touch her ever again. Are you with us or against us?” She must have nodded assent. “Then move your room away into their big house.”

Usually proud defiant Brionny, suddenly moving with a quick fearful servility I had never seen from house servants in this country, rarely in England, and only sometimes in China or India, grab her things to her chest.

“No Brionny, wait and watch. She needs to be taught, doesn’t she?”

Nearly weeping, she nodded. And stared at the floor.

“Brionny reluctant support is no support, a leader must have obedient, enthused comrades if we are to get anywhere. Now I want to hear you say it.”

She mumbled it and he asked for it again and again, each time telling her to be louder.

“Well it is loud enough. But put some fire in it. I never expected to have to put steel into you.”

“She needs to be taught! She needs to be taught! And I tried so very hard to teach her. But she is just a confused teenage girl who becomes infatuated with the first gentle person-”

“Ah yes gentle. We can cure that attraction. She gets her first five from me and you will give her the second with that ridiculous thing you wear. Maybe if she does not look so pretty and we make girls you like not so pretty we can cure you both, two birds with one stone so to speak-”

“Leave her be, she’s just-” This, from Jenny, who never knew fear even when she should.

“Jenny, you need to stay silent and you need to be taught that we must have unity and discipline.”

“You need to be taught and it’s exceeding your authority.” This was a man’s unfamiliar voice, “That shot and Jenny’s call for help have done it. If you say one political word I’ll have you shot. This sadism is about you, not Ireland.”

There was a rush of footsteps, and I turned around, Max and Leo who had hunting pieces in their hands, Zelda, Keith the new newspaperman, Andrew, Jan, Hendrik, Jenny Hawkins and some of her school friends, Karl and Lynda, Reverend McPherson and others and then Sergeant McPhee came and his Aboriginal police. Everyone’s eyes were going round seeing things and getting much right. I was on my knees with brick dust and scars on my face and the horseshit on my back. The pistol in his hands. They were getting things wrong too, our cast-off shirts held to our chests, and the scratches on our backs which I had not realised were there.

“Keep the Aboriginals outside.” Max seemed more in control than the police. “Zelda, there are things to mention that aren’t for mixed company, please look to the kids and keep order out there and please, it does not matter how you do it, just keep Eakins McKenzie away.”

“He left for a job at Caufields twenty minutes ago.” She replied as she gave us pitying looks and walked out as Karl and Lynda began to look at us and I was heaving.

“She’s choking! Its not just fear, he stuffed a firecracker down her throat.”

Karl rushed over and put his hand on my back asking where it was I gestured to the top of my throat.

“Heave. Use your oseph - your gullet to heave it.”

I did and coughed it up into a handkerchief he was holding. He took water from the bottles we kept on the supports and washed my mouth out with it. Soon my breath came back. I could hear that and somebody else panting, like seething, and the pensive neighing of horses who could pick up on tension in the air, even I could feel it, not quiet silent.

“Just hold washing the excreta away for now. I am terribly sorry Miss, but we must photograph this, then collect it as evidence for the trial. Max and Leo note the left pattern, then see what how his left heel looks.”

“There will be no trial.” I panted. “Even if Eakins lets him live, Ross will not. He branded and castrated Albert Moon for making indecent suggestions, so how do you think-”

“Don’t worry about Ross! Worry about me!”

Even with two hefty Van Groendhals on one arm and his father, the newspaperman and solid Leo on the other, Andrew, eyes blazing and fists clenched made another four strides. Andrew was rising in my estimation.

“Mister Anstee, we need this one out of here and come to think of it, could you keep Ross out of town and this – this incident out of your papers? A woman’s honour is involved.”

“Yes to both and Donal Shaw, you are for it. Pray English justice or Ross Clarke gets to you first.”

Sergeant Mcphee waited till they went. Leo alone stayed. Karl and Lynda were washing our backs carefully in preparation for ointment. I asked that Karl stop as I did not want to be touched by a man. My voice sounded shrill. Lynda took over. She was calm, all too calm, a face totally expressionless and eyes that did not reveal much. She made calm, soft, soothing circular motions on my back, carefully avoiding the shit.

“Max what was the thing you saw?”

“His penis erect, still in his trousers with him leaning over her, fist raised.”

“Anybody else see that?”

“Maybe Zelda, she was behind me.”

“Me.” Leo spoke. “I saw the same thing.”

“Any news on the boot Karl?”

“Bright green new hay, old straw, clay, excreta and brick dust are on both the boot and on her neck and they match, as does the boot heel and the neck mark.”

“Two witnesses on that point alone. Well young man, what is your side?”

“It was just a bit of fun.”

Sergeant Mcphee went motionless; then they all did. Lynda was the first to recover, removing her hand. Leo sighed and Max grimaced.

“Well it was a practical joke like, that’s all. A kick and a noise.”

Mcphee looked at our backs and Donal followed his gaze.

“Oh that, you think I did that. The whorey bitches did that to themselves.”

Mouths dropped and sighs came in at what they thought was his audacity.

“You are probably wondering why they would. Well, that is very difficult to explain.”

Max spoke. “That any explanation is a difficulty will probably be the only true thing you will get out of him.”

“There's no blood on my hands, look.”

The fool held up his hands, smiling. The brass knuckles glittered as his smile faded and Mcphee continued.

“After five years of police work, I know how knuckledusters work and why. ‘If I hit him as hard as he says, my knuckles would be broken’ being most common. Second to that comes ‘There is no blood on my hands.’ Both are literally true, blood washes off brass very easy my boyo

and there is the water bag. Assault, attempted rape, possession of an illegal weapon. Possession of a firearm. Case closed”

“Trespass.”

“Thanks Max. Trespass to. Only one last thing that puzzles. Motive. Why would the handsomest man anybody here as ever seen, who can get virtually any woman he likes, and who has a beautiful mistress already, try to seduce the fiancée of a man who brands and bashes Moon for just speaking the wrong way to his beloved? Answer me that.”

He said nothing, just avoiding Mcphee’s steady gaze. Jenny recited.

“For she was the fairest flower in all the lan’.”

“Thank-you Miss Doyle. Most enlightening.”

“It is if you know the next line,” Lynda’s voice was level. “Pure and good, unsullied by mortal man.”

“Enough of that.” Max said.

“He wanted her bad, so he got Minnietta to offer her a thousand pound for a first night and when that didn't work Brionny and me we were his back- up scheme. We were supposed to lure her to et. Five hundred pounds bribe, and all his charms. The money is under our pallets. We spent a little on women’s things for Rosalind so she would look good for Ross. You know about Donal and how he wants Brionny. Well, this morning Rosalind barged in when and where they usually meet an you never butt into anything he says and does, especially that an’ especially if ya have defied the great Donal Shaw, Ireland’s last hope.”

“His money was probably gained by paling up to Grahame Clarke at the racetrack.” Leo contributed. “I saw it a few times.”

“Pretending to be his brother’s friend so as to get his money to turn his virtuous future sister-in-law into a whore.” Max shook his head. “You are scum. Should things be made ready?”

Lynda winced, Karl sighed, Leo blanched and suddenly what Max meant was made clear.

“No! You are all going to brand and bash. No!”

Excepting Brionny and Jenny they all knew what was meant. Mcphee looked around before commenting.

“Here’s the usual pattern! As soon as punishment comes the story changes.”

“No! It is all true! But I don’t want to see what you are going to do. It’s barbaric.”

“Why is that?” Max asked.

“Have you got any idea how odd this sounds to English people?”

“Yes we are still a bit of a frontier society. But your reputation-”

Brionny snickered and even Jenny had a glimmer in her eyes and Karl and Lynda saw them and looked at me and each other.

“My reputation is undeserved! And I can’t stand violence and never could. Ten years ago in Peking in the rebellion we did not quite get into the fortified legations and we survived by hiding in a night soil wagon while for two days the killings of dozens went on around us. Knives and axes and guns and screams and shrieks and spurts of blood from the killings and beheadings and the rapes and then we had to run for it. Snipers hit my mother in the shoulder and her blood poured over me and then when the great liberators came it was worse. One of them, an American said to me ‘Look little miss there’s no need to be scared of the Chinese now they are all dead, we have restored order’ and he held me up over the battlements to see their rotting heads on spikes. He was also restoring reputations or repressing bad people. But perhaps not, perhaps beneath it he liked horrifying little girls.”

Unable to take any more I cried and cried and cried and a puzzled look came over Donal’s face as if he had just opened his eyes at what he

may have really considered a hearty joke gone too far and he tentatively stretched a hand out and was puzzled at my responding snarl.

“Miss Jervis, what do you think should we do with him?” Karl spoke quickly and softly.

“If he loves Ireland so much send him back there, with a well-deserved reputation.”

“Sounds like an idea.” Max suggested and Mcphee nodded and then spoke. Alex spoke up about getting him deported as an undesirable alien

“As the investigation is stalled and death threats have been made, we should move the suspect to a safer area. Sydney under police guard and handcuffs, get my boys, Cyril and Clyde.”

“What handcuffed to bloody blacks!” His face was almost comic in its horror. “Mcphee, man! The whole town will see me and think-”

“That law abiding Aboriginals are better than bad whites any day. And they will also think that the only thing you are superior to is a snake.”

The Aboriginal deputies came, trying to hide their puzzlement at being handcuffed to a white. They would track them, but in this society arrests, guarding and any direct contact was white to white. Donal suddenly had to protect his vanity.

“Enslaved and enchained and by the lowest of the vile! An Irishman oppressed by Ulster Unionists in the Antipodes! I will always be of Ireland and Ireland will be free-”

As he was carted off there was more in that line, a decrescendo of shrieked self-love for a martyrdom he would never believe was unjustified or self-induced. Everybody looked relieved and cynical, even Jenny. Mcphee surveyed the group. before organising. “Now those of us who are Irish had best realise we are in an abundant new land where

there is enough, so leave old conflicts alone. No more Irish donations from me, none from you?”

Brionny and Jenny said nothing but were expressionless. After we could all see that they would not take up the offer. Karl wearily muttered what we all knew:

“We all know Ross will follow him to Sydney, maybe beyond.”

“Max could you be in charge? Here is his race money. Now get him a one-way ticket to somewhere obscure, somewhere where the boats only sail every few months. An Antarctic birth with our explorers would be just the thing. But get Clyde and Cyril to book it. Do they have much of an ability to remember difficult foreign names they have never heard of?”

“I’ll make sure they don’t.” He winked and mimicked a tippler, even if it was illegal to buy Aborigines drinks. “There’s all the paperwork to do and charges pending, just to let him know so he won’t ever come back.”

“I’m on to doing that.”

“Now Rosalind is there anything we can do to help?”

“Yes, nobody should see my face until it heals. Ross should not see me like this. Is there somewhere safe and quiet I can be?”

Max nodded and Karl spoke.

“It would be best to wait a day or two, best three until the scratches for possible infection from the excreta and the hay can be rechecked- and perhaps riding or travelling after shock is not good?”

“I will need my own room for a few days, then well perhaps if there are two beds, Jenny can be there if there is another bed? And then some days off, no pay?”

\*

After they were all gone the three of us sat staring at each other.  
“Well did he intend that I could continue with Jenny so he could



blackmail the Clarke family with my lesbianism, which was the backup plan wasn't it?"

"Very likely. I do not know. It was not important." Briionny was back to a stony face and a voice to match.

"You do know that Donal is a monster, a hypocrite and half-mad, don't you?"

"Those things are not important."

"He is destroying you."

"I am not important."

"I was nearly bashed by you."

"Your face is not important and neither are you."

*You warned me about all the others, but you did not warn me about you.*

Jenny was sneering, outraged and butted in.

"Hold on. She thought he was going to kill her and she gave up her last seconds, her last chance at saving her immortal soul to save you."

"That is unimportant."

"Then gal, what on earth is?"

"Not what on earth, but which place on earth? Ireland! It is all that was and is and should be for us."

"Irish freedom is never going to be, at least not fer our kind. I can see that now. We thought tha' if we got rid of tha English and tha priests et would happen, but yer heard that mad bitch Rachel Clarke an' there's nearly a quarter a million like her with guns an' English backin' so we'll have ta kill 'em all off or push them inter tha sea an' they bein determined as we are.

Say somehow with luck we beat them an' tha English, which in a thousand years only tha Americans an' them Afghani's have ever done before, an' we get Ireland. The Donal's will make et likely our kind will

be burnt at tha stake, or the firing squad wall, no matter what we do fer tha cause. Rosalind you might laugh at that but contraceptive sellers and abortionists will be murderers under their laws, there'll be nought much more than nursery rhymes allowed past them censors and Irish women who resent bein' bashed must go ta confession ta crave forgiveness fer holden' grudges. Oh, et will be a paradise, but fer who? Donal?"

Brionny answered

"Donal alienates, I'm not fond of being bullied and yer say that he hits his sperm into yer like yer a side of beef, but who said Curchilian, Brian Boru, Wallace tha Braveheart, Tyrone, Bonnie Dundee, Wolfe Tone or Parnell were kind ter women? Warriors usually aren't. As sweet Rosalind will find soon enough. It's tha woman's task in life to succour them, bred more of them and for only a few women ter take up the weapon-".

Fortunately, all this was said in a fluctuating way, between genuine fanaticism and a tired self-hatred, as if reciting learned by rote lessons. I butted in.

"I am very very tired of Irish politics for some reason. Jenny come up to my room when you are ready if that is what you want."

\*

It was, much later in the night when she came in and we could not sleep, although at my request, we snuggled up every night. Even so, we did not make love for many nights. Even over four nights in the cave the sexual involvement was less than we both expected. When there the pain of Donal and Brionny was wearing off, but the closeness seemed to expand from the work we already shared into little things; cooking, dressing each other with all the ties and stays, combing each other's hair, making up each other's faces, washing each other when bathing and taking the warmth from each other's bodies when we slept. I read to her

fiction, she would recite poems, stories and songs. They seemed more vivid by firelight in the cave. Jenny requested that I not have any other sexual involvements until “my term of trial” (as she called it) was over, but in return she would do anything sexual anytime and I pledged the same and we kept our word. After years of repression, frustration and sublimation, much of which I was unaware, there was a great freeing pleasure in that.

And yet this tight bonding could not be total. Instinctively she steered clear of much of her life, the childhood in poverty, the prostitution, and more surprisingly, the Irish politics, which she would adroitly turn into the world of myth and magic. I was the same; what purpose was there in recalling the horrors of China in detail? Or the endless dreary winters in Cornwall, the school yard ostracism and bullying? The nights with Ross, in fact most of my life with Ross seemed intensely private. Beyond her words she made me wonder at the wisdom of what she was attempting.

Max kept a spare room for us with two beds, we would return to the inside room sometimes, but preferred the stable and not just because of the extra on call money. With its large space and light, its grassy, horsey, oat and timber smells and bird sounds from the eave nesting's, what Donal did in there was fading. By intent to help do that or otherwise Max had the last stall where it happened turned into another double door and entrance. The whole place was washed, painted and rep paneled with pine while we were away, so it seemed a new place.

\*

Ross Clarke

McPherson's Surgery 31st July 1910

“Come in Ross” Usually there was nothing to be nervous about in Karl's surgery, today was different. Lynda was with him.

“Could you tell me what you know of the case?”

He got what Max and Leo had told me and news of my four-day search in Sydney which led nowhere.

“Donal has fled the country so he is no longer an issue. Rosalind’s physical and mental health must be all that we focus on.”

I nodded and asked how she was.

“Recovering. The kick seems to have not caused any fractures or brain damage, and her hearing remains unimpaired. She passed all tests related to the physical side of things.”

“But?”

“But indeed, several really. Like every facial injury victim we have ever treated, Rosalind feels a massive blow to her self-esteem. The best way to deal with the scar should be pretending it does not exist. No jokes, no comments about it making her face more interesting.”

“You think I would make such comments?”

“Others have in similar situations.” Lynda sneered as she spoke.

“Be very careful about everything you say and write, yet without seeming to be.”

Impulsively I passed my get-well card to Lynda. It read “*I am not worried about a mark on your face, I am worried about you and miss you so very much. Heal.*”

She read it and sighed with relief and passed it to Karl, who commented.

“Ross sometimes you say just the right thing.”

“You must continue to do so.” Lynda added. “She has suffered more than just a facial mark; she has suffered mental and spiritual blows. How she gets over them will depend on how you react to her behaviour, which may seem odd, even a little mad.”

“In what way?”

“She will be jumpy if people walk behind her, speak to her from behind or make loud noises.”

“And probably touching, at least from men,” Lynda added in a way that suggested there was more to it than that. Karl nodded in agreement.

“Do you mean Rosalind will be jumpy like someone who has been snake scared or bitten?”

“Very much, only the effects will be stronger and longer.”

“Something else remains unmentioned?”

They exchanged looks as if I would explode at a word said wrong.

“You are one of the rare exceptions, but many teenagers go through a stage of questioning, of rebellion and defiance. How extreme this becomes depends on how much repression, cruel treatment or strict rules they have endured.”

“Now does Reverend Jervis seem an affable type to you?” Lynda asked rhetorically.

“So Rosalind rebels against...”

“Religion, social expectations... Often others in rebellion become attractive people to them and the more their behaviour seems outlandish and defiant the more attractive they are....”

“The ostlers.”

“Yes. Such figures frequently over-reach themselves or the rebellion becomes stale. Pleasure is used as a salve against pain, which any hint of violence or temper or mention of Donal will recall.”

“So I should?”

“Tolerate anything except violence until she recovers.”

“She has made a big commitment to you.” Lynda added, “So you must commit to her through the hard times.”

I nodded again to that, wondering what they really meant.

\*

Rosalind Jervis

New Albion 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1910

Brionny had gone to work for Keith Anstee on the newspaper. We saw her in the distance and kept her there. Minnietta had vanished very quickly and Zelda had taken over her workload, checking on everything. Ross had sent me flowers and a card. *"I am not worried about a mark on your face, I am worried about you and miss you so very much. Heal."* My happy reply was *'Ross sometimes you write just the right things.'* *The injuries are healing fast. You will see me on the day I am totally well so there will be no sadness.*

Then came the ambiguous hint:

*Jenny is with me all the time and sustains me. Since the troubles in China I have always feared sleeping alone and now this fear becomes more intense. People behind me or an unguarded back, make me jumpy so Jenny and I sleep together, her navel to my back, her arms to mine.*

He did not get the message in the message, or perhaps he did. When he wrote back it was all prosaic keeping in contact letters. I felt safe with Jenny, who was never moralistic, and as the weeks turned into months I did not want to come out.

\*

Brionny McNamara

Eloura 31st October 1910

*I am very very tired of Irish politics for some reason.*

Rosalind's last words to me kept echoing through my mind at the oddest times and like my memories of Donal, the more I tried to suppress them words the more they came back. Another phrase kept coming back in that same way was *She needs to be taught! She needs to be taught.* I had never talked that way before, never wanted to again and the truth of Jenny's words about Ireland's future was comin' continuous inter me mind an' erodin' belief. Beneath all them pious words and propaganda, it would be a nation organised by the Donals of this world for the Donals. Titbits

would flow down and the exploitation would become more subtle. England would probably get the same old money from new exploiters. The image of Ireland would change: for a certainty they would get support on long memories kept going on old propaganda.

It was sure as potatoes for tea though that there would be no folk songs about brutal Irish republicans bashing women. No novels would appear on how Donal ordered William on a fund-raising mission to Canada and took his place with the New South Wales team so that he could try to seduce me and tell me it was my duty to submit. No romantic poems would ever explain how he then kept Jenny in sexual thrall with his money, emotional blackmail and political allegiances because he could never gain a woman's heart with his personality.

Now here was a land of opportunities and after six years of politics time for some right to part of my life. There remained only the sense of being a traitor by giving up, but the Fenians took care of that, the only liberators I and I suspect anyone else got from them so far. Odd that it came in the mail on Halloween, the day of the walking dead.

\*

Top Secret

Dublin

11<sup>th</sup> November 1910

#### Report on Activities of Roisin Republican Fund Raising Group 23

This group, consisting of leader Keith Anstee, and Donal Shaw, Brionny McNamara, and Jenny Doyle, initially showed great promise, particularly after infiltrating what seemed to be an Ulster-Protestant fund raising groups with direct links to the highest levels in our enemy camp.

However, this group has engaged in disgraceful behaviour that cannot be countenanced and so must be disbanded. McNamara and Doyle have apparently been seduced by an English harlot into performing unnatural acts and have of their own choice engaged in fund raising of a

type which means that no decent person should use the funds. Their activities would only bring discredit to us if revealed. They are here by expelled from the RR and all associated organisations. Keith Anstee has for some time been showing libertine tendencies and a lack of proper dedication. He has always been no team player and his toleration of, and involvement with, one of these women is hereby condemned and he must also be expelled.

Donal Shaw has freely confessed to his adulteries and taken the standard punishment manfully. He distanced himself from the fundraising activities and tried to reform the fallen women and enforce standard RR procedures, but without National Committee authorisation. These are redeemable errors caused more by Anstee's misleadership than Shaw's misjudgement. Donal Shaw will soon be back in Dublin and must be retrained and await further assignment.

The surveillance of Rachel Clarke has proved disappointing. All we have found out is that her contacts are irrelevant, she makes occasional donations, and many consider her an outdated eccentric, even in her old circles. All surveillance will now cease.

\*

Brionny MacNamara

Eloura 30<sup>th</sup> December 1910

Keith got me work at the newspaper and he looked at the just arrived letter from Headquarters in Ireland.

“How do you feel Keith?”

“Free, Free! Free!”

He got the scotch out from the safe and poured two.

“You don't usually drink this-”

“Tonight, we will. What is tha first thing yer will do tomorra?”

“Sleep in and read something pleasurable. And yourself?”



“Consummate my relationship with Grahame. First Donal threatened ter kill him and then trying ter get info meant I couldn’t, I do like him.”

“And being a farmer’s wife?”

“When he asks. Looks like I’ll be a farmer’s wife with some secrets.”

\*

Rosalind Jervis

The Cave 6<sup>th</sup> January 1911

With Minnietta, Brionny and the two housemaids who took up prostitution gone the workload increased. Even so, Jenny could insist on and got four days in the cave. On the second evening a howling storm came, blowing thick branches off and old dying trees over. Massive lightning and thunder became so strong that I thought it was a simultaneous earthquake. Jenny was near a tree; furs wrapped around her smiling.

“It’s a banshee night, they are here, and the old gods are angry.”

“God? The Christian One?”

“Whoever.” She shrugged. “Why yer off in yer cave missin’ such a fine show?”

A tree branch thicker than our entwined arms blew past with enough force to snap our legs. I dodged. She stayed, the top leaves whipping her ankles. Sometimes Jenny’s romanticism went beyond eccentricity to the edge of sanity, yet it always had a starting point in some perceivable reality. Now at sunset the sky was blood red and the clouds really were black. Usually when people talk of black clouds, they mean dark grey, and with red sunsets they mean some shade of orange, but not this time. If the banshees had bought passage out they were announcing their arrival in grand style. I told her so and she laughed.

“Ah gran’ style. Ya said et without tha d et tha end, yer got tha phrase from me an’ yer said ie with just tha right spirit. Yer got me lilt.

An now yer read tha stories like yer believe ‘em. Yer ride a horse so fine thart Bonnie Dundee could do nar better. I’m maken yer girl, fer sure I’m maken yer.”

“And now you say those instead of them, my instead of me sometimes, have seen instead of just seen and speak with a lower voice.”

“We are maken each other, our ways and days merge totally an’ us ta, now let’s merge with everything else in nature just like yer did with Ross.”

My face lost my smile, for hurled tree branches, a wind so strong it could force people to the ground and lightning so powerful its light was like a full moon, making our bodies silver and for a few seconds, Jenny with her blonde hair blowing and wide clear eyes gleaming with lust and excitement and wide smile was a mad albino banshee and terrifying. Suddenly the break between us started.

*She's just a simple teenage girl with a head full of tales and she loves too much and doesn't know when to stop.*

“Ya were united with the natural world with Ross, but that was just moonlight an' mist. This ull put fire into yer.”

“Perhaps literally, Lightning kills Jenny!”

“Rarely, an’ only if et be fated. Fer others et goes through ‘em purifying ‘em so they arise anew, reborn, et separates tha sheep from them that's goats.”

So why, why, why, after hearing that, did we end up in the middle of a wind –blasted rain lashed, winter paddock, when a clean, snug cave with furs and fire was in sight? She seemed to sense my fear.

“We both know ya have got the courage in ya, for ya weren’t shy on either of ya first nights, ya good with horses and they don’t trust fearful people and we heard what ya thought were ya last words with Donal behind ya.”

*But you did not see my throat go up and down like a hit ping-pong ball or smell it when I shit my pants.* Then it hit me that the others were true – and that Donal had unintentionally made me reborn, conquer many fears, the last of the naïve, shy, Christian school was gone with his kick. Jenny said to block all thoughts out so that the sensual contact with the wild natural world would come, and I did block, but only after making sure there was nothing but mud, grass and water around us. So once again I knelt with a lover behind me and my arms outstretched and frolicked and slipped and slid in mud and was pounded into the mud with sexual rhythms and did the same and did what the ouroboros depicted. She was right in a way, the sensual world did come, and it was exhilarating, fear-conquering and made me appreciate how wonderful and precious life is, Afterwards, reality came when finding myself so exhausted that I nearly slept in drizzle and mud, lying there wondering how much exhilaration can a body take, how much difference exists between visions and lunacy?

\*

Allison Caufield

Caufield's Farm 6<sup>th</sup> January 1911

I was not usually nervous and was never known as a prattler. Today I nervously prattled on trivialities, trying to be amiable. Ross, who had done storm preparation already, had come again to help with the brothers and cousins but they would be late, doing their own preparations first.. They all so often did this, with Tom so often away. At breakfast he asked me to discuss the important issue that I mentioned first off, but it was awkward.

“How's Rosalind?”

“Everyone says she remains nervy; haven't seen her since July, she is a worry.”

“Are you still engaged?”

That embarrassed him. He just shrugged his shoulders. This was a mercy. Let it fade off. I never liked tell-tales when teaching.

“The most important issue now concerns a gale coming off the sea, so Tom goes off earning hard cash. Everything should go under cover or tarpaulins soon.”

“Then let’s work.”

“Shutters first”

We went to it. Shattered glass was not only dangerous but incredibly expensive and water in the house would definitely cost; cattle and sheep were chancier and we had not culled yet, the storm would do that. The barn and sheds could only take about a fifth.

It got more and more blowy and there was always more to do: tools and implements to get inside and palings to nail down, then the bark roofs on the barn and house to nail and rope. After that the firewood went to the barn and inside and then there were the slit trenches to dig, like so much else, work Tom should have done, but he was off as usual. The fruit was not yet ripe, it might survive, and there were herds to round up.

By twilight we came to the big-time devourer, the long-dead gum too close to the house, we agreed it would probably come down and we had best cut it to direct the fall. Axes first to make the angle breech on both sides, we took turns hacking into it, one hit from me, one from him, but after the first eight inches from the bark the timber was not as dry as it seemed, sappy still and it was difficult to saw. It took hours and the rain was pelting, massive gobs that splattered into normal sized drops that bounce up nearly a foot from solid timber or rock. Between the rain and our sweat, we both were drenched. While fishing waterproofs covered me to the waist, my shirt was just extra thick dark cotton and I did not have or need corsets. There was not time to reach the house and change before I was drenched; I was embarrassed but felt a tingling, and felt amused as

well, I was thirty-one inches around the bust and I thought the cotton was enough, but it wasn't for a drenching, so we stood there panting with my top half clearly showing and him red faced.

“How long have I been this transparent?”

“About an hour. I was pretend it was not so.”

I nodded, shrugged my shoulders, and undid the buttons, taking the damned thing off and wringing it before putting it back on. He had looked away.

“We are both soaked, no sense in getting rheumatics.”

By now it must have been well past midnight and the sky was showing lightning. We had made cuts that meant the tree would fall away from the house, so went inside for dry towels. At breakfast he had arranged to leave when the cutting was finished and the cows were rounded up, but now that was impossible.

“A rider will be the height of a tree out on bare ground. Attract the lightening. I'm worth more than a cow Ross.”

“I think so to.”

*And maybe I am attracting more than lightning.*

“Since before Jack was born it's been a forest girl for Tom. She's hardly a Pre-Raphaelite woodland nymph, suppurating sores on her ankles, missing fingers, stringy hair hacked at the edges, a vocabulary of maybe two hundred words.”

“What appeals?”

“Sheer availability and as she has narrow hips, a heavy workload and a horrid diet, so she always miscarries. Sometimes its lubras. It's been over a year, my syphilis avoidance tactic. Not exactly a husband to inspire loyalty. Anyway, it is too nice a night to talk about Tom.” He looked at the flashing lightning, the rain pelting onto the glass and the wind so forceful it was blowing away large branches - and got the joke.

Being too tired to light a fire for a hot bath I towelled down in the bedroom and changed into a fresh cotton shirt and what I called my bed shorts. We could have to wake and work in a rush, which is why I went to sleep on one of the two divans out on the north veranda, placed to see across the plains for the best view. Ross slept on the corner one where creek willows and shrubs concealed the view, the other was damp from slanted rain. With Ross pressed against the back there was plenty of room for sleeping sideways, so I shrugged my shoulders and hopped in. After arriving with the dawn Ross had worked nineteen hours straight and did not notice me slipping in. His body was two inches from mine and soon we both slept and awoke to sweet cuddly warmth, toe to toe, nose to neck, arm resting on my navel, he had on his underpants and a shirt and I could feel his organ pressed into me and swung around to face him, his arm going round my back, his face awakening to mine with amazed delight and a kiss that held nothing back and was everything I wanted, delicious excited, expectation fulfilled.

“Take me if you like.”

The last word still hung in the air when one of his hands was on my undergarment, pulling it down; I smiled and duplicated the effort with his, my elbow plonked on his nose in the shirt removal, but with our gazes linked and the throw away over us, we had not seen each other naked, and did not till later. We went back to kissing and I had to stop, my breath was coming in excited jerks, I looked into his eyes as he penetrated and we soon had simultaneous orgasms. After the climax we did not stop, the pleasure just increased until exhaustion set in. He withdrew, I kissed his shoulder and we slept, the rain pelted down, suddenly sounding sweet. It was the type of day where it could be noon and still be almost as dark and dull as a cloudy dawn.

There was no time, just wind and steady rain, greyness and us. The south bridge was washed away and the creek was not fordable: nobody could come.

When we awoke, we began again and he made love slow and sweet as I wanted and that night before the fire he was as aggressive and thrusting as I wanted. There was no need to communicate with words. It felt strange to see him naked after all these years and stranger to walk around him naked, the fire making our bodies a flickering orange.

“My body's not much, most tell me my eyes are my best feature, I'm scrawny and my nipples aren't even three inches from my ribs.”

“So?”

“Yes? Ah yes. Helen was scrawny as well.”

“You look good to me, always have.”

“Ah yes, the longing gazes going my way that were not for the participle forms on the blackboard behind me.”

“You were the object of every wet dream until Helen arrived.”

“Ross you subtle, secretive seducer!”

We laughed and drank tea before the fire, looking into each other's eyes.

“You remember when I ran out all red-faced?”

“That was your first eruption and I felt like calling out ‘Do you want a hand?’ Pun intended.”

“Yes, I wish you had.”

“So Helen, Rosalind and ....”

“You.”

“Three women and my three men, Sean, Tom, and you. Three enough for you?”

He nodded, sensing where I was taking this.

“Whatever happens know this mate, I’m your first cousin, your former teacher, eight years your senior, you are engaged and I am married and none of this means much because I love you and always will. I thought living without love was possible and it is, but it is horrible and you are here now, we have become one.”

We lay there and dozed, but then went to sleep out on the veranda.

“If I divorce Tom, will you marry me?”

“There is Rosalind.”

“Who has not contacted you in four months, let her fade out.”

“We need to resolve that, otherwise yes, oh yes.”

The warmth of his arms around me, the crinkly feel of his hair, the way he could not take his eyes off me made me go to sleep happy and I awoke to the nightmare. There in the dawn light at the veranda’s edge was Tracker Cyril Abaya, staring straight at us expressionless.

\*



Lover

Book Two

January 1911

Ross Clarke

Caufield's Farm 7<sup>th</sup> January 1911

"Mister Clarke early today we see two dead white women in the field."

Cyril was smart enough to keep a totally expressionless face.

"Dunno who, seed 'em a long way off."

"Are you sure they are dead?"

"They not moving a long time, with rain and lightning all around and no clothes on. One black hair, one blonde, women, but maybe young."

And being smart enough he went no further, obeying his orders to wait far off while we dressed for riding in wet weather. It was only while mounting that it hit me who it might be. Few white women had long black hair and new arrivals from England were more likely to underestimate an Australian storm than locals. Rosalind loved to swim... Trying to reason myself out of it failed: my throat and stomach tensed up and my fingers couldn't clasp reins first time; Alison looked pensive. She took up Tom's old wartime binoculars to search, perhaps as much to take the focus away from our shared guilt, not guilt about Tom or even the principal of committing adultery, but about Rosalind, who I should have looked after, rather than let her make mistakes.

\*

Rosalind Jervis

The Cave 7<sup>th</sup> January 1911

In a way, being in the cave with Jenny was worse than being outside. The warmth and sense of safety from the storm were of course welcome, but the cavernous stillness, the total silence except the weak crackling of the fire, seemed to devour all camaraderie, for me. It began to devour all we once had in common and suddenly I felt alone with a strange stranger while she gushed on about how we were almost there to total unity and there was only one more thing to do.

“What would that one thing be?”

She removed Irish decorative cloth and so revealed a scalpel, a blood pressure tester, gauze, ointment and medical basins were there - and oddly cannelloni.

“Are these from Karl’s surgery?”

“They will be back soon.”

“Do you realise that someone just might possibly die because these medical things are missing?”

“Thought wha’ we just conquered ya death fear an’ made ya realise that life was about taken’ chances. Yer would nae be backsliding now?”

“Why are these things here?”

“Fer the last ritual, then we be truly united, blood sisters. Oh, yer must be thinkin’ this is a schoolgirlish ritual where we prick each other’s fingers, but that’s only a drop, if that. Here we do a much more full job, tha pump up thing makes tha veins and arteries stan’ out, tha scalpel opens ‘em pretty neat an’ then these little tubes’ from the dispensary, they kitchen transfers blood from one ta the other, it’s all very simple.”

*And so are you. Even for someone not yet nineteen.*

“Actually, it is a complex surgical operation.”

Telling her that this was dangerous and could lead to death was useless - as those points had already been answered and in a sense a person who thinks up something so preposterous cannot be answered logically. We argued back and forth until finally I put my foot down.

“There is no way that we are going to be a part this! Not at all!”

“So yer don’t want me blood es et?”

“I want you to live and not die in some botched amateur surgery.”

“Ya der nert want ta be one with me.”

“I am not Irish; that makes it very hard for the total closeness you crave.”

“Ya said yerself, not we.”

That hung in the air and she looked sad. I did not want to lose her.

“Jenny perhaps no two people could be as close as you want; but we can be very close, even if I am an English soldier’s daughter and you are an Irish Nationalist.”

“Maud Gonne MacBride is the most Irish person yer could ever meet – and she born in England, her father being an English colonel!”

“I am not Maud Gonne MacBride!”

“Tha’ is all ta obvious.”

It was the wrong time of the month for strains on my temper, counting to ten calmed.

“Jenny! Could we please talk about something else; we need to find common ground elsewhere.”

She tried for minutes, but could just stare around before she fixed on a book. She did try.

“When ya read the end of *Treasure Island* ya made me see et true. Young Jim realises tha truth that tha treasure were not worth tha sufferin’ and both sufferin’ an’ money will continue in his life when he wakes up from tha nightmare and tha parrot says ‘Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!’”

This was not a simpleton’s raving, or at least not totally. In some cryptic way she was referring to something beyond the book, something similar, but it was recondite. What was obvious was a woman nineteen this year, reciting something learned to gain approval from an adult, much younger, but in the teacher’s role. Suddenly like a brick thrown into my chest the price of sexual pleasure gained without a full knowledge of the other person hit.

“Yer gunna drop me fer ya fella aren’t yer Ros? Well, that’s al right, because me fella has already proposed an’ I said perhaps.”

*When we bind this tight we have absolutely no secrets from each other.*

That no secrets agreement could be mentioned, but it would only get an adolescent response of throwing abuse or blame back at me.

“Thought that would shock yer.”

“Jenny it is late, this feels very tiring.”

“Sleeping alone or with company?”

“With you.”

She had this enigmatic look, slightly sneering. “Thought ya said ya were tired.”

*This is how she thinks of those who pay her.*

“Not sex tonight”

So she lay in my arms, like a child to comfort, another Jenny to give warmth and company against life’s cruelties. Maturity was not yet my fortè either.

One of her movements woke me up and through the chink in the rock light came in. Wanting to go to the toilet, I moved the rock and could see, far off, riders. Binoculars made them clearer, Clyde Whaley in front tracking, Keith Anstee, Leo and Douglas, each with a portable stretcher strapped on their horses, Grahame and Brionny, biting her lips in tension and sadness, and vicious little Allen smirking at her pain.

“Jenny wake up, there is a group out looking for us. We must move.”

“Who – oh. Too right! None must know about this place, that is a certainty!”

Very quickly we made our way west along the creek banks, and they saw us, galloping our way. Brionny reached us first, dismounted and clutched each of us with one outstretched arm, bringing our heads into the side of hers. Her ribs expanded as she gasped for air and tears poured out

of her and she shook. The others came up and Grahame stared, his gaze going to the bracelets. He was still uncertain but he was beginning to understand, and so was Allen. The others did not, seeing us as just weepy women. Grahame spoke.

“The trackers said you were dead, that they saw you naked in the middle of the field.” Jenny ever the impromptu actress when danger threatened, gasped quite properly, the embarrassed maiden. Everyone was paying attention. Although embarrassed or pretending to be; it did not do to talk of nudity in gender mixed company.

“Oh that. We were caught out in the open with lightning’ everywhere. We put our clothes in waterproof bags ta keep ‘em dry. Sodden clothes lead ta colds, an’ all that.” She gave a quick assessment and pressed on, overplaying, as those lacking subtle qualities usually do.

“And well! We could hardly show up at a farmhouse with our clothes sodden, they become ta revealing.”

“So how come they are bone dry now?” Allen sneered as he spoke, looking around at the others to see if they believed us.

“Because we dressed when we saw you coming; sorry to disappoint you *again* Allen.” I could also be sharp.

That got him quite a few knowing looks and that made him angry.

“So where are these bags? The ones you say you had.”

“Down by the rocks in the middle of the creek a mile and a bit off. Be a gentleman and get them.”

“Who else but a new chum would leave bags on creek rocks?”

“But the rain has stopped.” That was me being dumb so Allen would be thrown off this dangerously logical track by pouncing on a chance to show his superiority through wise bushy knowledge.

“The rising water level hasn’t ended yet it will rise first, bloody new chum idiots! The rain from the mountains still flows down-”

“Allen get the bags and watch the language thank you very much.”

Grahame spoke with a new if brief maturity.

“Who are you to order me around?”

“One of the Clarkes who own this land.”

He just stayed; seeing this the Van Groendhals gave each other and then us a glance, excused themselves and left to get the bags.

“Perhaps we should all be going back.” Leo suggested.

“Could a word alone with Mr Anstee first be possible?” Jenny announced.

“No!” Allen snarled and everybody could see from his face and body language that he was on the edge of violence. Jenny suddenly wise spoke to calm him and distract the others.

“Then it shall be said in public. There ain’t nothing like nearly bein’ killed to make ya decide nert ta waste yer life on missed opportunities, so me answer ta Mister Anstee’s marriage proposal has changed from perhaps ta most definitely.”

Jenny moved over to hug him and ride back on his horse while others cheered and clapped, relieved at how well things had turned out. Just then Douglas saw three riders, coming closer and as they saw us, they cantered, Ross, Alison and Cyril. My beloved, the expert horseman, was so eager to bound off to me that he did not wait for the horse to totally stop so he landed on twirling toes and soon flopped face forward into the mud, even that and everyone’s laughter did not stop him from clutching me as tightly to him as possible.

“You silly duffer, nothing’s wrong with your face. You are healed.”

With that I was healed - and everything would have been right; if only my gaze when my head went over his shoulder had not gone to Alison Caufield’s basilisk face with the tears welling.

Alison Caufield

Caufield's Farm 30<sup>th</sup> January 1911

The refound happy unity between the young lovers should have been the end of Ross and I. Nobody but her suspected and when Tom returned a day later Ross would not be here while Tom was: hard to blame him.

“Alison, yer silly sheila’ Jack and me are back.” He tramped in, giving me a glance but heading straight for the stove. Tramping mud on the floor that took hours to clean, and wax does not come cheap either. “Shit woman, you were told what time we would be back, so why isn’t the fire lit for tea and lunch?”

“Last time I did that, you arrived a day late. For me there’s work enough to keep the farm going.”

Andrew, Grahame, Hendrik, Murie and Douglas, all here to help, sensed a fight was brewing, said hello to Tom, then remembered herding and left for the far paddock.

“Yer can come in now.” He yelled at the door.

“With the money got from this cedar, we can keep the farm going better than ever, watch and wait.”

“What does that mean?”

He walked over to the north door, with a smirk that increased dislike, made sure the others were out of hearing and then the south door.

“It means that when the Clarke’s hit trouble and have to sell land, we will be able to buy acreage just across our creek border. With that good volcanic soil, we could get somewhere.”

“That sounds a big if. They look prosperous and well set up to me.”

“That is because they are. That ain't their bloody problem. Aunt Rachel goes bloody crazier and crankier every day and she controls that place. She donates so much to those Ulster Protestants that they won't have any cash reserves left when they need them. With over half the farm workers being Irish-Catholic she won't get good help. Even if its years



before that happens, Ross won't last that long before he's in trouble. Rosalind is trouble, but not so much as bloody Ross's prick. If he takes off it's that silly bloody bastard Grahame will probably take a year to wreck what the Clarke family spent generations building up."

"Maybe Brionny will straighten him out."

"Aunt Rachel thinks so to, that's why she favours Grahame. But what if bloody Brionny takes off after Grahame inherits or Grahame hears rumours about the weird bangle brigade and drops her? Or Aunt Rachel gets jack of them all and sells up?"

"This sounds all too hypothetical."

"The money in the bank isn't. The trouble your crazy Clarke cousins have is not. All we have to do is save and wait."

"We would be better off tending our own concerns. This farm would fall apart if the brothers and cousins you connive against did not work here for nothing!"

"There's no bloody conniving, just watching and waiting. The land is not a place to play silly buggers on and if they don't know that after generations there, it's not my fault they are shit stupid."

"Ross and Grahame are your friends."

"They were, well as kids, but Grahame turns seventeen soon, and he still stays the same silly bugger he was at nine. Even then he was a bit much. Bush kids mature fast, he doesn't. Ross, well he's all right if you like cold, arrogant, stuck-up bastards who are always quietly staring at everybody like we are them fleas under that microscope you got for us in science once."

Stony Tom, people were beginning to call him and with reason. That nickname was not just because our house, veranda and barn were all built of solid brown and yellow stone. Beneath his simple fella from the bush routine, he was quite cunning and intensely ambitious and this loudly

declared mateship concealed a manipulator who held everybody excepting himself in contempt.

“How long till bloody lunch?”

“At midday, if the stove fires now and the roast should be done in two hours.”

“Good, you butcher that storm crippled cow yesterday, like you were told?”

“Douglas and Allen did.”

“Good! Everybody gets lots of steak for lunch, keep them happy. Get to the bedroom and get your gear off.”

“No thank you. Did the lubras in the forest go walkabout?”

“None left down that way. Farmers killed most off forty years back and disease got the rest.”

“And your forest maid?”

“Moira twisted her ankle bad. You’d think someone who spent her whole life in the forest would know better than to run into a tree fork.”

*Maybe she does. That is one way to get out of sexual involvement with you. Now I must find another.*

“Where’s Jack? I asked him “He should be starting school.”

“With Moira injured he’s needed at the camp. The loggers are looking after him, he’s their pet.”

“He should not be spoiled by a bunch of drunken sods who can’t or won’t father their own children.”

“Women! When you don’t want to do something, you are clever at changing the subject. You don’t have to do anything you call obscene, just lay on your back for ten minutes if it makes you happy.”

“It does not actually. Tom...”

Best to stop. Divorce was too problematic.

“I am in my time and do not want to get pregnant.”

He snarled and sighed. “To beat the other bunch to a stand we found this mongrel of a wagon has to be back by twilight tomorrow. When’s your time finished?”

“The day after tomorrow. And anyway, you will have to have a social disease check with Doctor Karl first.”

\*

So Tom went on another long trip to collect cedar. Like Murie, Douglas, Grahame and Andrew, Ross turned up on his roistered days, and volunteered to take Leo’s now vacant place, as Leo was now married and a father, so he needed family time. His wife Marsha disliked me for some unknown reason and anyway Leo was increasingly busy, taking over Max’s role at New Albion.

“That is kind of you Ross, coming all this way. Staying overnight?” My voice sounded arch.

“If you will have me.”

The day passed as it had before we became lovers, we worked around the farm, and after dinner at dark there was chat, news and a reading of a short story from *The Bulletin*. There was however one important difference; we could not take our eyes off each other for long.

“What news from town?”

“Lynda expects a child around winter’s end. Keith and Jenny have set a date, May. Guess who is best man? Rosalind and Brionny are bridesmaids.”

“And we might be expecting a child in September if we make love tonight. Why can’t we just lie together enjoying each other’s company?”

“Sounds sweet.”

And it was, until being Sunday, we slept in and Rosalind poked us awake.

“Your pairing was obvious at the rescue. Can I get a chair? We have matters to discuss.”

“Are you going to adopt a high moral tone?” I asked in warning, but I noticed the bracelet was gone.

“Not at all.”

“You left me for months.” Ross spoke calmly.

“Let us avoid blame, morality and duty. It seems all three are just concepts that lead nowhere. We need to discuss options.”

We both nodded and sighed and she gritted her teeth: best to humour her.

“First Option. Ross drops me and you divorce and you two marry. Have you considered that?” She looked shrewdly at our faces. “Yes, you have. Have you also considered the high rate of mental defectives among first cousins? Or how tedious it will be continually saying ‘We are not twins, but married first cousins.’ Or what Tom will do?”

“I do not wish to give you up Rosalind.”

“This leads to the second option, which is preferable. You end this affair, permanently, come back and nothing more will be said, unless it happens again.”

We just stared resentfully and the hope left her face.

“Third option, my second choice, the only other possible option and the most dangerous, which you will probably choose.”

“This being?”

“We continue as we are, with my permission. At times my role be as a cover by coming out here where knitting, swimming, cooking, and reading occupy, while you two do what you have to. My mother was a mistress, so I do not look down on such women, they have their place. In India and China officers take mistresses who serve when wives were sick, pregnant or sent to the hill country during inclement weather, particularly

the monsoon. That system worked because people tacitly accepted it. Here we must keep it secret. So! Alison becomes the mistress and I become the wife... Tom is the danger of course.”

“And the loss of reputation and of any chance to inherit Clarkestead.”

“Which is why you must be very careful. Now do you agree?” We looked at each other. We had already concluded close to what Rosalind said about marriage. We did not wish to split and nodded; it was the best we could manage.

“Now, our immediate options; we must make sure there is no jealousy.”

Here we go, some slow seduction into lesbianism, but Rosalind was a woman of surprises.

“The first option is that while I make breakfast nine feet away you two make love, I’ll hear everything and see little and then later you Alison prepare lunch while Ross and -”

Ross had dropped his jaw and seemed paralysed. I had to do the talking.

“That perverted thing sounds even sicker than Allen and Tom planning to spy on you!”

“It seems Ross, that you have a puritanical mistress and a libertine fiancée. Perhaps we should have breakfast and then justify our time out here with work.”

And they did. She was politely compliant with whatever I asked and when Ross was away she brought up the topic “You notice that I am not wearing my bracelet anymore. Thank you for not telling Ross what it meant. My time started so tonight it would be best if you two are together.”

“You can have some contraceptive cream; its under the bathroom sink; there are instructions with it. This cannot be an entirely an altruistic gift.”

“Such things exist?” I had heard unconfirmed stories.

“Oh yes and they are effective. Jenny, myself, Minnietta and her two women of the night used them. These tubes are expensive and hard to find, but they work. There are also rubber caps but they...”

“Is it true that you had never been kissed before that Boxing Day Ball?”

“And your voice calling out for Rossie boy was one of the first things I heard after performing my first mild sex act.”

Preparing lunch was a relief, Smiling, she helped by peeling potatoes.

“There is something to bring up, or rather someone, Tom.”

“Yes? He is.... He stays faithful to you?”

She knew he was not and was trying to be tactful, appreciated.

“No, so don’t feel any guilt on that point and don’t worry about me passing on a social disease. He does not come near me without a medical check, if at all.”

That night I diplomatically excused myself, telling them that the guest room was ready. Yet there was a type of lunatic wisdom in what she said and awaking with the birds just before dawn, I entered their room with a tea tray. Rosalind woke first smiled and whispered “Glad to see you.” She studied my face for a few seconds, and seeing I was not up to making love with someone else watching, glided out. When we did emerge, there was the fire going to keep breakfast warm and she smiled again.

“Everything fine?”

“Oh yes.” Ross nodded and yawned.

“A bit tired, satisfying us both?” Rosalind quipped.

“Perhaps he needs an afternoon veranda nap by himself.” I added archly.

“I can manage you both, no worries.”

We laughed and ate.

\*

We also laughed over our shared portrait or at least some us did. Evelyn invited us to a creek picnic. We knew he had been down there painting his Pre-Raphaelite landscape most of summer. That style takes so long with not only every little leaf painted individually in exact detail, but the veins on it as well. We were expecting him to unveil his masterpiece, but it was clear what he intended when we saw the canvas set up on the easel with blanks for figures, and among the potted Greek agapanthus by the water’s edge were towels, seven hyacinth garlands and tunics. He was doing one of his classical canvases, Hylas and the Maenads and he wanted Helen, his old models Jenny Doyle and Brionny, Katie Dean, Douglas’s newly-wed Marsha and Ruth, Rosalind and me to be his water nymphs luring the poor ancient Argonaut to his drowning, apparently for no reason excepting a love of mayhem. We were all supporting players to the chief Maenad, the most beautiful woman any of us had ever seen, Deborah. She was tall, svelte, with long blonde tresses and startlingly brown eyes and a jaw line so delicately shaped that it looked like those on finely chiselled statues. She radiated sweetness and sensuality and perhaps innocence, for she stripped naked without any sign of worry or guilt.

“Oh I would not ask you to take off your clothes unless you want to” Evelyn spoke after the deed and shook his head in self-agreement while we exchanged sidelong glances. “Look at these garments here for you.” He held up thick burlap tunics. “This painting will be sold to a German,

so nobody will know who you are. I will even vanish while you change. Any who do not wish to partake may leave.”

“I am a minister’s daughter.” Ruth declared, stood up and walked off.

“And we are married women” Marsha added and joined her. Katie looked uncertain, bit her lip, looked at the others changing and shrugged her shoulders and joined us. She probably had no idea how boring posing can be, but she soon learned. Jenny and Brionny looked at each other and stripped. For a lark we were in the pool reaching up with beguiling innocence to his wire and plaster of paris model of Hylas. Holding the pose of enraptured sensual innocence took ten minutes to arrange and two hundred to hold, then it started to go.

“Come on fella, it’s a hot day surely, but ets freeze’n in here.” Brionny started.

“Our skins are wizening, dearest one, wizened skins will not look good on the canvas.” Helen added.

“A mullet’s nibbling on my toes, maybe he thinks we been in here so long we are dead.” Katie added.

Engrossed Evelyn grunted in vague acknowledgement that the real Katie had some type of problem while Katie on canvas was coming along brilliantly. Katie was the only one of us to be a real-life forest nymph, was the first to be fed up with her idealisation. Helen got out of the pool first and we all followed, getting the towels on while the artist-God grimaced and snarled in vexation and went for a stroll leaving us to dry.

“Back at one for lunch, you’ll hear me give a yell.”

Amazingly we all stayed. And one by one, did indoor poses for our heads, and let him take photographs of our hands. It took him a year to finish, and true to his word, well sort of actually, he sold it to a German, but one residing in Sydney and the German put it on display at the



National Art Gallery, Sydney Domain. He invited us to the opening and apparently thought it a great joke, for what he had done was imagine us without our tunics and imagined in detail.

“You treacherous blighter!” I was half-aghast, half-ready to burst into giggles. My small flat nipples that a shilling would cover were the size of fried eggs. Katie said what she should not have said. “They aren’t mine, my breasts don’t look like that at all.”

“Well the main thing is that you don’t expose yourself to prove the point.” Evelyn shrugged his shoulders and heads in the audience were turning. Leo, who had posed for Hylas, looked across at his brother with raised eyebrows. “I am glad my wife did not pose for this”

“So am I.” Marsha added. “Leo let us retire to the tea rooms. It appears splendid, but...”

A very angry Keith Anstee, now Jenny’s husband, followed while Jenny, a woman incapable of correctly pronouncing subtlety, let alone knowing what it was, chatted on loudly about how we were the Maenads.

Grahame just stood there transfixed, focusing on the portraits of Brionny and Katie. These two never stood together or greeted each other with smiles. It was gladdening that Tom was not here - or Ross. Somehow word spread down to the district and furtively and frequently smugly, and usually alone, many locals came to admire and think they knew what we looked like naked. Fortunately, almost miraculously, it was all kept a secret from Tom, Allen and my father.

We learned to manage our ménage la trois quite happily. While still insisting on one to one sexually, my guilt and jealousy lessened rapidly and Rosalind was essentially right. At night one of us used the guest room and we never had sex on the same night. Worries about lesbian seduction vanished when she said “You control your own body, not me, you were

very clear back in May and that killed off any desire. You are becoming a sister, not a lover.”

And she was; intimacy took other, more prosaic, indeed sisterly forms. Cooking, washing, cleaning, farm work, horse riding, swimming, shopping, doing up each other's stays, back buttons and corsets and taking turns to teach Jack. Excepting the sexuality, everything became like two close sisters, doing all these same things it was like three, they were here at last, the sisters I always wanted and never had after giving up on any thought that it could be so.

Another happy impossibility came to fruition; our farm prospered. This was not because Tom put money from his timber trade into the farm, not one penny ever went towards that, but because of the relatives helping so much and the horse racing. From January 1911 till March 1912 was my golden year. After the extraordinary, often violent events between Rachel Clarke assembling the family in November 1909 and the great storm of January 1911, life settled down for a time. Jenny and Keith married and after a miscarriage Lynda had a baby girl, Keddy in May 1912. Leo and Marsha had their first, a boy and three weeks after his birth his best friends Murie and Ruth announced their engagement. Soon after the third of those close friends, Douglas, started a romance. After the Berry races, we went to some local tea rooms where Douglas could not take his eyes off one of the waitresses, Barbara, who seemed to be ineptly half-concealing a smile at her luck, and was assessing him in the moments we distracted him, for he could not take his eyes off her, despite anything we said.

After eight cups from a man who usually wincingly sipped on the one tea he took to be polite, we saw the way it was going, announced we were and told him the times of a later train, he did not even hear and turned up a week later, a smile fixed on his face still, it seldom left.

He soon found excuses to continually turn up at Berry races; they announced their engagement at the Boxing Day Ball 1911 and married five weeks later. So as to not upstage them Grahame and Brionny announced theirs a month later at the Australia Day Ball with a wedding to follow in November. They were actually ahead of Murie and Ruth, who married that Easter, Ruth was considered a little young for marriage at sixteen, but she insisted.

There were times when Ross turned up by himself and times Rosalind visited as well. Frequently they would arrive with company; Grahame and Brionny, Murie and Ruth, Jenny and Keith, Leo and only once, disapproving Marsha, but the others were often with us – and came to the races. Sometimes those with high workloads got time off, Dad and Douglas, Clyde Whaley, Cyril Abaya and their wives, Max and Zelda, and even on occasion when they were around Tom and once, while visiting the district, Cousin Robert. Fortunately, the stony one and His Prissiness seemed to understand they did not fit in with happy, relaxed people and with both, trips away became mercifully longer. Allen tried to join us, but was excluded and so more and more was off with Tom. We soon got into the habit of going to the Saturday races, not so much at Eloura and Ocean Ridge, where Grahame had gained a reputation as a punter to watch, but along the race tracks on the Sydney train line and in the Sydney area, and then small towns on the train lines out of Sydney Central Station. Grahame had learned not to show off his skill, playing a simple servant in the background and alternating the betting placer amongst us. We would never go to the same racetrack twice within a three-month period or have the same bet placer and began to accumulate much wealth with Grahame's success rate of regularly our in five we even trusted him when he insisted we bet on the longest odd in a big field, a jade that just got past scratching. The least of us made over a thousand

pounds that day. We had Sydney bank accounts to stop the Eloura tellers gossiping. At dinner one afternoon Murie asked the question everyone wanted to know.

“How do you do it Grahame?” He was however, coy and shrewd Keith answered.

“My wife and Brionny know nearly as much about horses and many a farm boy or jackaroo comes to the races with the same idea, although ultimately they don’t do anything near as well. That is because they focus solely on the horses and that plays only a part of it. It's the jockeys, isn't it?

“And the trainers, the punters, the managers, and all their wives if they are there.”

Keith continued. “No jockey likes to lose and they usually know and look sad or fatalistic, and they also know if it’s a crooked win or a crooked loss, they have this certain guilty or nervous air, they have this look, yes?”

“And so do the others.” Grahame nodding, smiled, like a caught schoolboy with a teacher’s lolly collection. “Sometimes its just pure horse sense. But with the faces it has to be the horses too, some just have a natural confidence or none, or just *something*, but after a while you know which of them have been doped on speed-ups and which on slowdowns. It shows in their eyes and their movements. Today every horse but the winning nag was on slowdowns and bribed jockeys. Every time odds of fifty to one or more appear better look for that and put a tenner down anyway. It makes us look like idiots - and sometimes it pays off to look like an idiot.”

*Indeed not so simple cousin, indeed.*

“Sometimes we idiots put over a thousand pound in the bank in one day.” Marsha and Leo nodded in unison with gleaming eyes and a

knowing smile, imitating Grahame and we all imitated her to him and he had the good heart to laugh.

\*

Oh the good times: to be able to go into a shop and order the finest earl grey tea and have it placed before you with creamed up chelsea finger buns and little jars each with butter, sugar, cream and chilled milk! No rushing off to the milking or whatever! My attempts at cream was lumpy in runny bits. My fruit glazes uneven and sickly. The bright yellow in butter that was a universally expected sign of quality never appeared in the Fisher or Caufield kitchens, my churning never worked. Just sitting in the cafes, savouring the flavours, wonderful. Unstinting cuts of champagne ham served with salads without spots or cankers on the food and everything crisp and juicy just as it should be. I never was much of a cook and like most in that situation, loved it when others served me the wonderful food we could neither make nor afford before.

That is not to say the racing money was squandered. Nine full truckloads of fine volcanic soil were purchased and ploughed into the vegetable patch and into what was the worst acre of our pasturage, that wasteland became a little orchid. Clydesdales with new and quality accoutrements replaced our jaded, weaker Suffolk Punches. Retaining walls were built with drainage pipes; a trough and pump for creek water was installed and a barbed wire fence along the creek banks to go with it. Previously the animals contributed to erosion and fouled the water we swam in and drank from. Four big corrugated iron rain water tanks connected to the barn guttering and four more like wise to the house meant no more reliance on the unreliable creek too prone to flooding or drying up in drought and literally shitty, particularly a danger to children but also to adults as cousin Caroline's death demonstrated.

Instead of three food tins in the pantry there were ninety. Curtains, carpets and a phonograph with thirty records brightened up the living room. Worn farm tools used since Tom's great-grandfather came out from England were finally replaced and eagerly accepted by Stepan Bach, doubling as the Eloura museum curator. He dated some of them to the 1790s. The old bark roofs on the barn and house were also replaced with corrugated iron roofing. Only those who have never lived in a bark hut for very long can romanticise them in picture, story and song. Possums, rats, birds, snakes and every conceivable type of vermin imaginable loves bark or soft timber, just like the literati their idea of bush homes. Unfortunately, this love does not take the form of staying in them. Then the roof dwellers always made noise that made sleep impossible. That was not the worst point. There is nothing quite like a streak of possum shit hitting the dinner table before the sitting guests to leave them unimpressed. We were rained on by dropping termites, fallen rats, snakes and possums, bird's eggs and shit of assorted kinds, often in clear weather. Rain did the same. Not any more, the summer heat and winter cold glare of a silver corrugated iron roof stops all that and the rain that swells timber and dilutes caulking or clay, thereby creating gaps, now runs into gutters and then into the new tin tanks for our benefit.

Dry, quiet, clean, hurrah! Through technology, we do progress. Don't tell me about the good old days of the colonial era: we lived it on a time-warped farm. The cost of phonograph and carpets, anything not tied to work or making money, would send him up the wall until he got used to them.

But how would my other half take all this? He initially appreciated much of what I had done, but music? A year of happiness was about to end.

The kettle was on as he wished and he had Allen with him, silent for once, but smug. He was a vicious, envious little shit from as soon as he could talk. Teaching him was hopeless. Like many an illiterate he was stupid, envious and took it out on others: being a little man compounded it. He vanished round the corner with a smirk that warned.

“Got the kettle on and we got a new roof.” I smiled, unwise

“Anybody can see that shiny roof ten miles off! Including tax collectors! Stupid bloody Sheila! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Now what else have you done?”

Clearly Moira was out of his life and he had not found a replacement, cranky from celibacy.

“Anybody can also see the metallic guttering and the metallic water tanks, four on the barn, four on the house. They are there because you insisted.”

“I can see a bloody waste of money that is what I can see.”

“Perhaps if you were the one who has to trudge a hundred yards uphill from the creek with two pails of water you might see things differently. Pictures of milkmaids with the yokes like a horse’s collar might look pretty, but my chafed shoulders have never healed yet and my back and muscles are strained. Now we can use rainwater for the house.”

“Nothing wrong with creek water.”

“Except the bits of cow turd, offal and the general flavour of piss and whatever anybody upstream tosses into it.”

“You are a bloody fusspot. This money would be better off in the special account for the new land.”

“It’s my money.”

“And something funny goes on about all this. Dunno what yet, but we’ll find out. Allen! Bring out Dinnie.”

Dinnie was a lovely old border cross I had since she was a pup and I was sixteen. Allen brought her out on a rope and he had a gun.

“No! No! No!”

“Want me to do it?”

“Wait mate. Now school teacher, it's my turn to read yer a story. Once there was a little bitch called Dinnie. Everybody thought Dinnie was a pretty little thing, but those in the know noticed she was a slut that would go for any straying mongrel, so when her belly swelled up she got a kick there. Everybody thought that had taught her a lesson, especially as the years went past and she was now much older. But one fine day master came home and found she was up to her old tricks. So master did something like this. All the way down mate.”

He gave Allen a nod with a smirk and as I screamed Allen fired a shot into her genitals. The agonised yelps pieced the air. Tom's eyes were glittering and Allen giggled.

“Now you finish her off.”

When I reached for the gun he refused, smiling. “There's a big rock, use it.” I stood there, blood and bone soon splattered into the first new dress I had bought since my seventeenth birthday.

“You can have your farm and you can sit at a kitchen table with possum shit pouring down and you can drink all the diluted horsepiss you like. Give me a divorce.”

“I just divorced Dinnie. Think that could not be you? I killed six in South Africa, and with one I went through their pockets and found that one had breasts. Didn't worry me.”

It was uncertain if he was lying or not because he did not want me to know. Those glittering eyes, fixed triumphant sneer, feet a yard apart. This was what was beneath the simple, hard-working bushie act he usually put on.



“Now we don’t need all them visitors around here, making you bloody houghty toughty and smiley smiley. The land is hard and all them like that go under. You got Allen to look after you and the farm. You can go to your bloody races, but you take Allen. He works out how it works and then we take over and get the money. We will give you some.”

“I don’t want Allen in my house. Dad will kick him out any day now. And why do you think something funny is going on?”

“Because something funny is going on. You laugh and smile like a schoolgirl in love and it has never been like that for me, has it?”

He looked at me with a sneer.

“Now it’s about time you got a bloody brain in your head. You might think these retaining walls and metal roofs and water containers an’ all the rest of it are smart and clever and they are in one way; but you set off the envious gossips and they think that it comes from my cedar trade; so they followed me and cleared us out of one of the best stands left. They got six thousand bloody pound!”

*Now he was making a sort of sense and it was becoming clearer.*

“The gossips are also saying Minnietta works now as a madam in Sydney and you and the bangle brigade go up there and see her to sell yourselves while the boys go to the track as a cover.”

“How utterly ridiculous!”

He stared at me for a long time and decided I was telling the truth.

“Now take this hundred pounds; turn it into five hundred next weekend or there’s gunna be trouble. And let Allen see how you do it; he is the type of man who wouldn’t tolerate his sister doing things she should not.”

“And don’t spend any more money on this farm. My father died before forty, burnt out on this place, my brother died of a hernia when we were stone clearing. Since then, I’ve sweated my guts out on it. You

come along, and with some silly bugger who knows nothing but horses, mocks everything Caufields 've tried to do."

*By succeeding easily where you nearly failed, so you frame it as mockery. We barely thought of you.*

"And something else, the way you sit there reading with that smile on your face, trying to make me feel small..."

*And succeeding apparently; without intending to. He is not only selfish, sly, and brutal, he thinks that we are as obsessed with his lack of abilities as he is: a sublimated form of conceit.*

"And tonight, I get my marital rights. The doctor said there's no diseases and none of that in my time bullshit. Another baby will keep you out of trouble."

He looked at me shaking his head. "And do yourself up. You look bloody ridiculous, literally bloody as you arty, farty book-reading types say, standing there in that silly dress with bits of dog splattered over you, now why did you do a silly thing like that for?"

Then he laughed to himself while staring at the sun as if it was his personal mirror and Allen his bushie mate, snickered in triumph with his gleaming eyes while staring at me. I left them, seemingly to clean up, but watched until after they rested the dray team and got fresh horses, riding off to town.

They would head to the Crown Hotel, commonly known as the Clown, due to the no-hopers who hung round to cage drinks by agreeing to whatever the drink-shouter said. Within a few hours he would have a crowd round him agreeing that Alison was an uppidity bitch, that Dinnie was nearly dead and it was a mercy killing or that I was a mad bitch who brained my dog to death for no good reason. He would whine about the lost six thousand pounds and some sharper would ask where and drunk, he would tell them, never blaming himself when he turned up and all the

remaining cedar was all gone, or realise why. His self-induced blindness protected his self-image.

He showed me two hundred pounds still in his wallet, not much of that would survive till tomorrow. He could have bought three phonograms with records for that, but that would not stop tomorrow's hung-over tirade about wasting money.

So why, why, why, endure it! Goodbye phonogram. I did not bother to lock up. Jack saddled up, we packed some clothes, took the money and rode along the leafy creek bank to town, so they could not see us.

\*

Early risers, they were sleeping in the stables by the time we made town and it was no surprise to see them entwined. The way they related to each other over the last months, moved and spoke all made it clear. Brionny had reduced her newspaper load when Jenny became engaged and was back to being an ostler. They started to make excuses but rapidly gave up.

“What is wrong?” Rosalind asked and I motioned to Jack.

“Oh Jack, how would you like to help Brionny with the horses while we cook everybody some tea?”

After he was in bed we three sat around the kitchen table. Brionny started.

“Well we three and Ross have got something in common; we all love two people at the same time.”

“Not me,” I responded, “One. I hate my husband.”

“We did try.” Rosalind contributed, “But we love each other. Ross must know. If he cannot cope and leaves me that will devastate but that will be my fault and you can settle down with -”

“You are probably expecting me to say you should tell Ross and Grahame. Please hold off. Allen and Tom are up to a good deal, we need everyone united.”

In my turn they got explanations about the racing and timber money, Tom's ideas and what happened today.

"Be very careful, we all must be from this point on."

\*

Alexander McPherson

Eloura 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1912

"I want a divorce, please start proceedings."

Even for Alison, this was direct, being exclaimed as she came in.

"To start, there must be grounds. Adultery, desertion, extreme cruelty..."

"Adultery."

"Adultery with?"

"Moira, one of the foresters and there are assorted lubras."

This was going to be difficult.

"We will keep the Aborigines in reserve. This Moira, you do not know her surname, address, anything?" She gave a physical description. "If we get a subpoena the foresters are going to melt away like hunted bushrangers. We will have to employ a detective, to infiltrate, persuade the police to take her into some type of custody without a warrant and hope she does not perjure herself. Knowing querulous Tom, he will dispute the divorce. Do you want custody?"

"Yes, and he will dispute. He got Allen to shoot Dinnie in front of me and said it was a divorce."

It took me a few seconds to remember that Dinnie was her pet dog. The case sounded a little easier after recalling that, but not by much when the implications sank in. Last night Tom had gotten right drunk at the Crown, boasted of killing a woman soldier in South Africa and broke the nose of a fettle who called him a bullshit artist. Allen joined in the fray, Mcphee arrived and arrested Allen and now by good luck one of the juniors was due at the court for bail and a plea in three hours.

“Messenger!” I wrote a quick note to Sibley’s, my rivals, outlining a conflict of interest and asking them to take Tom’s case. Nothing unusual in a district this size. Immediately I asked for more details about Tom’s violence and threats and got much.

“We wait until the guilty verdict comes in on their assault and drunk and disorderly charge, go before the same judge, getting court orders against them for violence and threatened violence and they leave you alone.”

“Court orders?”

“He will not be allowed anywhere near you without a police escort. If he violates a court order, he finds himself taken before the court for contempt. They usually get hefty fines and suspended sentences.”

“And how long do they last?”

“Eternity if you wish. So why not spend a few days with your father or if there are problems stay with my parents or Zelda until the court order goes into place and then have the cousins and better brothers visit?”

“These court orders sound the right way.”

“ You do know that Allen may well be heading for jail on the Whaley case.”

“I have heard nothing for some days. We had to get the new roof on so Rosalind, Ross, Andrew, Leo and Marsha and Douglas stayed four nights.”

“Allen bet with Kenny that he could break a man’s rib cage with one punch and picked on Clyde Whaley’s boy to try it. He thought that being in an alley with an Aborigine there would be no creditable evidence if they did talk to the police. Cousin Grahame and Brionny, Douglas and Barbara, Murie and Ruth were riding by and put a stop to it. Mcphee investigated and they did not make false statements.”

“He already has a suspension for the last brawl.”

“Yes he has.”

\*

Alison Caufield

Caufield’s Farm 24th March 1912

Subsequently the nightmare of sharing a house with Allen melted away. He got a year inside Goulburn Jail. Tom’s threats also melted away. He got a suspended sentence and like Allen, a court order to stay away. God bless Alex! We all went racing again and now I could pay good wages and get more volcanic soil, family and friends did not have to work for me, sacrificing their own time. When told that they did not have to protect me anymore, it was only two days before he turned up initially as subdued as he could manage, which is not saying a great deal.

“Just here to talk! I’m not gunna threaten you!”

“But the law will do more than threaten you! You will spend a year with your little mate in Goulburn Jail if you don’t vanish!”

“I am only here to say that-”

I slammed the door locked the windows and got the rabbit rifle.

“Thought I was supposed to be the violent one.”

As he was unarmed, I moved to the back and unleashed the new especially trained and therefore expensive German shepherd. Despite the frenzied barking and snarling and being restrained by a spiked, metal collar and chain which he still didn’t give up, ripping a fence paling off. By good luck the stage came through late and Kedda was a passenger!

“Caufield! Always the trouble-maker. Go now!”

“Thank you Principal Kedda! Could you tell the police? - Oh Tom, are you riding into town with the stage?”

He rode, but after that Ross always had an excuse to stay. That was in bliss and it seemed that it would last forever, but like the weather, it was Indian summer for us.

\*

Brionny McNamara

The Cave 25<sup>th</sup> March 1912

Rosalind and me, we discussed makin' things clear ter them both, there would be ner jealousy and if et was found out we had violated ser many respectabilities that we may as well be hung fer a sheep as a lamb, besides what could they do really apart from them cruel words?

We had a fine coincidental opportunity when Grahame and I bein' in tha cave an' Ross and Rosalind turnin' up late after the fire had died down an' nearly collided with us, we both being asleep.

“There is nowhere else to sleep except cold stone. Hop in. Rosalind and we sleep back ter back. You don't mind rubbin' arses now do yer Rosalind?”

“Not with you, only you and Ross.” He should ha' picked up on them words an' her tremulous tone and me innuendo, but by all tha saints he did not. Even Grahame did, his eyes widenin' an' me given what was a slight nod ter him. He could not complain, Me permission ter roam he had, with an older Sydney hotel receptionist, a wealthy Katoomba racing enthusiast and three local milkmaids, Katie Dean at sixteen, his favourite an' two Scottish sisters.

“We have horse blankets, our own saddled up and there's another batch of skins over there. Roll them up for a barrier down the middle.” Ross spoke curt, like he were a big boss, and we girls sighed while Grahame was a stunned mullet. Later, while he slept, I smoothed out his tussled hair with loving movements in front of Ross's gaze, our eyes meetin'. “You are a likely looking lad.” I whispered to Ross.

“So is my sleeping brother.”

At that there were nothen' fer et but ter roll over. While studying his face he was nert so enigmatic. With this English aristocracy ancestry of his bein' transplanted like ter local conditions that seemed ter have much of the American Wild West about them, et softened tha usual cold

arrogance of them ruling classes, although enough of it was there in him still. Given a good deal of repression to make him into a wealthy and successful landowner, he never got any love from his Ma, could dislike in fact. All this repression worked just fine to make a leader and commander, but when there is repression, there's an outlet, and this one did not drink, smoke, swear, fight, gossip or gamble. Instead, there was a devouring hunger for women and wealth; Rosalind told me how for three nights in a row he left her and Alison exhausted, craving more. More of a woman's flesh or more love? That bit were uncertain; but a congenital lecher woulda gone for me last night, next reminded me of where my loyalties should be. I moved my nipple over to his lips so that it was just out of touching, and was suddenly aware of a smile on my face, but Grahame stirred and so I moved away. When they awoke, I gave him and her a quick dry kiss.

“Which of us are you trying to seduce?” Ross asked good-humouredly as if considering something. *Which?*

We girls burst into laughter that did not subside until we had woken Grahame up. Ross was beginning to wake up in more ways than one, this were a certainty.

\*

The Saint Patrick's Day Ball came and went most finely. Once again, Rosalind was *Deidre of the Sorrows*, but this time it were not Donal's mishmash, but Synge's fine recent tragedy and Rosalind rose to meet the challenge with Lynda, so tall and statuesque, making a fine seer and Eakins impressive as the King. This time we put NO REAL FIRE on the posters and newspaper ads. We used glass encased expensive red foil in waved braziers, so everyone sighed with relief. Once again, all Irish and Celtic people were invited and to much initial amazement, many



attended and many were Ulster Protestants makin' a point of socialisin' with Catholics.

Irish politics had been hottin' up since Home Rulers got the balance of power in tha English Parliament two years back an' made home rule look likely. That meant five armies now existed in Ireland, fed weapons by tha likes of Ma Clarke, and there bein' those like her on all sides – an' there bein' more than enough sides. Against home rule were Ulster Unionists while nationalists were divided three ways, Republican Fenians, socialists an' those Home Rulers who jus' wanted to be a dominion en tha Empire. Keeping everybody apart were tha British Army. While home drifted to civil war fast nobody here tonight wanted to see Ireland torn apart by civil war an' so made efforts ter get along. I was beginning to like this peaceful land.

We had troubles of our own enough without worryin' about poor bloody Ireland. We danced together ter give Ross tha message an' unintentionally gave et instead ter some of the shrewder observers, Karl and Lynda, Sergeant Mcphee, Barbara Fisher Mrs Hawkins, Alexander McPherson, Keith Anstee and even Grahame. Others began ter suspect - Max and Zelda, Reverend and Edna McPherson, Leo and Marsha, Douglas, the sullenly jealous Van Groendhals, but most saw et as a schoolgirlish thing. Ross tha intended recipient, seemed ter get tha message, and we got one back, intended or no. He spent much of tha first half of the evening with Alison, chatting and dancin' an' as gossip had it her and Tom and Ross were a romantic triangle with Tom the loser. Such complications were unwise and Alison at least seemed to sense et.

“Grahame give Alison a dance or two, she does not want to be bored by Ross all night.”

He did, while Ross's name went on my dancin' card twice, as did Rosalind; he proved himself a supple and charmin' dancer. The more I

saw of him the more his charms for Rosalind seemed understandable, but he was bein' unwise tonight. Tom was not loved by anybody, but respected fer bein' a tough, hard-working, no nonsense bloke. En any society I have ever known or heard tell of, tha wife and lover are blamed and cast out an' the husband gets tha sympathy, ner matter what. Judging by them faces of the suspicious, here was ner different.

Rosalind an' I were gettin' another message et seemed; if we were lovers, they would be a settled down pair. We knew from the faces that if they stayed here they would be ostracised. There were points ter discuss and as we were helpin' ta pack up after the events I asked Ross, Rosalind, Grahame and Alison ter meet at her farm on Saturday night, when we could all be there. How et would have worked out remains uncertain.

\*

Inspector Travis

Goulburn Jail 28<sup>th</sup> March 1912

“You say you have information concerning corruption in racing.”

Allen Fisher, the little weasel, nodded. He was nothing unusual. Five foot two and permanently angry about it. Near to illiterate from stupidity judging by his attempt at written statements. That came to two big resentments against the world and the usual developed conceited criminal cunning to compensate.

“Well let's hear this information.”

“What do you offer for it?”

“A yes at your parole hearing if it's good and you are till then.”

“Can you move that hearing up?”

“Maybe, but you had best not ever get in here again. Everyone will know why. Allen.”

“They have a bloody ring that is what it is. They win on odds of over fifty to one all the time. Call that luck?”

‘No WE DO NOT.’

*Here we go, a trip to Goulburn for nothing.* Then he started giving me the names, locales and dates and my mood cheered considerably. It looked like he knew the escaped remnants of the Baxter gang. It got better when he gave the names, among those were his brother and cousins and a thousand pound coming my way in rewards, enough to get my boy through Teacher's College.

\*

Grahame Clarke

Clarkestead 30<sup>th</sup> March 1912

Brionny and I were just cleaning out stables when they came, standing there at the barn door, three of them, and they knew our names.

“Why on earth do you want Brionny?”

That was in a loud voice, but they knew the trick and started searching quickly. Lucky that she was at the back door, but they would have caught her but for me tripping one with my broom and the other delayed. That led to a punch and a wallop back with the broom handle, then my arrest for assault. While we scuffled, he handcuffed me to a post and all three concentrated on controlling me, asking me where she was heading, (as if I would really tell) but blubbering and thinking slowly of false places giving her precious minutes.

“He's stalling! You two after her, she must be visible on clear land.”

They raced out like horses hearing the starting bell. The Inspector glared, “‘The Black Velvet Band’ will be your favourite song from now on lad – and your life story.”

I wanted him to face me and not see the pulled-up floorboard with the glitter of gold underneath it, but when he turned around to watch the chase, he did see it. He was looking at a necklace with dark blue stones closely holding it up to the sunlight as my mother came in.

“Ah this one matches the description of the Currans of Hurstville, such a pretty thing, you would think the Currans would have inscribed

their name on this flat piece right here at the back wouldn't you? Where is the rest?"

"Inspector? What on earth is happening?"

"Mrs Clarke? You would not by any chance be English or of the Irish Protestant persuasion?"

"What does this have -"

"Brionny McNamara and Jenny Doyle usually target such people. We did not expect to find them in such a remote area. Townsville to Rockhampton was their area. Pretending to be servants, getting inside. Pretending to be worshippers come to pray. In those areas church wardens frequently closed their doors and windows. Fund raising for Irish rebels it was, but they apparently expelled them for the church robberies. We thought they had stopped then. There is no Donal around, is there?"

Mum started to splutter and he passed her the reward poster, while she stared, with a face crumbling. He watched intently, winced, sighed and wiped his face.

"I'm terribly sorry."

My mother had a face like the statue of Queen Victoria in the park, except for the clenched teeth and hands and the blazing eyes.

"Inspector, please ensure that Jenny Anstee, nee Doyle will not be permitted to escape."

"She was taken in on the way out here."

"Miss Rosalind Jervis?"

"Wanted as is both your son and several other relatives."

He explained about the racing wins and then I did, but he just sighed and said yes.

It was a long while before they returned, one of them drenched.

"She jumped in the river. Sank so fast the loot must have been in her dress and she carried heavy looking bags as well. Couldn't see much,

water's muddy. What's the record, not even ten minutes? We waited fifteen."

"We watched, no head surfaced and outside that muddy pool, there was total visibility all the way down the creek."

"Mrs Clarke, do you possess hooks, poles or nets and a row boat?"

\*

Brionny McNamara

The Cave 30<sup>th</sup> March 1912

The gold came out of greed, but it was probably me salvation from jail as et weighed me down. Grahame and Ross had pointed out tha hole where tha water flowed in, under the wattle tree and eight feet down. With policemen after me I jumped in over a hundred yards down from there out into the middle and sank, swimming back ter that hole in tha bank underwater and against currents. With thick willows as a shield fer me face, surfacing, gasping a breath and seeing what happened were safe. With the swift current so quiet tha police talk reached me.

"She's a goner. Nobody survives fifteen minutes under. Its all flat thirty-degree angled rocks that far side, and it is like that all the way down to that ankle deep rocky shoal... She would have shown up there. What about this bank?"

"Checked."

"Even so, let's get the dogs, trackers and then do a dredge."

"Because the in laws are visiting and the longer we drag this out the less ti-"

"Fine. And there's a sermon that God in his mercy decides I need to miss."

As they left et seemed that sneaken away were likely, but then Frank, Ross and the milkmaids came. Everybody I am pleased ter say, was sad-faced, particularly Ross. They had a boat they used fer this creek, and nets ter keep the bats out of the orchid, so they did a very thorough

search and grief started to mix with puzzlement, but then hope came on to Ross's face and slowly, he searched my way.

“She can't have gone up stream son.” The inspector called out.

“Oh.” He pretended to be dozy and waded to the bank and being caught in a snag, he got within about five yards with his voice down.

“Use the channel to the cave. They're bringing dogs and trackers and will be here soon. I'll get to you soon, but it could be days. Wait.”

“Sound out a deal. Me for Grahame, all charges dropped.”

“He's already a goner. Assaulting an inspector. Two other coppers just took him into town. His sacrifice for you means nothing if you give yourself up. Careful with sound and light in there.”

Then he got on the bank with a forked branch wedged in his gumboots and pulled it out. The strong current going into the hole was easy to find, but Grahame, a strong swimmer, who once did it for bravado, emerged, gasping and worried, shaking his head. It soon became obvious why. Although the current was strong, carrying me towards that pool, soon my lungs were nearly exploding and despite all my willpower I had to surface and there was air, but only in that five inch gap between the rock walls and water. And at times even that ran out and twice I had to dive, fortunately finding air pockets soon. This tunnel did not run parallel to the creek but at a crooked windy angle and what if there were no more air pockets? Death for me when my second big mouthful of air exploded and I was thrashing around against rock – and then suddenly my thrashing hand was hitting nothing. With one last tremendous push I made it out of that tunnel; suddenly the top veered off and currents slowed. Here was the pool, with me nearly going paralytic from cold of it. Sobbing and shaking and out of my clothes and getting dry kept me alive. Anybody who thinks I had merrily escaped punishment has never nearly drowned

trapped in rock or endured solitary confinement en darkness, wondering what horrible fate awaited tha others.

\*

Sergeant Mcphee

Eloura Police Station 30<sup>th</sup> March 1912

*Oh do shut up you foolish simpleton. Sober up and stop answering the questions I must ask you.*

“So yer see, Mrs Hawkins an’ them Van Groendhal brothers were payen me ta do et, for me favours as they say, but not Miss Rosalind Jervis or Briionny, that was all ‘bout love that was, an’ Rosalind, well she knew nuffen bout stolen stuff, even if she was sleepen' on top of et. A nice girl but an’ ignorant one, didn’t know about Parnell, the glorious ’98, or not much at all ta do with Ireland. Since my engagement ta Mister Keith Anstee, editor and owner of the local weekly, we been nought but friends Ros and I, but cor there are times when I miss her tongue! She learned right quick how ta work et and where ta put et!”

Laughing gleefully, she gave me a slap and chuckled. Mrs Anstee, it seemed, had little capacity for alcohol and had joined the celebrations over what would be the last win. Inebriated, she had taken a shine to me - or rather to my performance as Mister Soft, the decent understanding fellow you could confide in. I kept on waiting for Travis to do Mister Hard, the stern intimidator who enforced the law for the moral good of us all, but he just sat there and watched as did the others, those being mainly racing crowd.

Mister Hard was unnecessary And why should he be? Jenny was giving up everybody. Mrs Hawkins, who was more harmless than most mice, now had a cell to herself. She sat there like a wax statue. Her dazed face suddenly looked old. Her hair, once naturally bright, now looked dull, tired and on the edge of sudden grey. Her eyes reflected her mind: the nightmare was real. Her husband, sitting outside, was until tonight

stocky and vibrant. He now looked like a melting mound of flesh. Skin sagged under his eyes, cheeks and chin. If his skin was like dough, his once bright dark eyes were like boiled sultanas stuck in the mound.

“Now you say the church accoutrements stolen from the Rockhampton Catholic church were donated to Mrs Hawkins for her church?”

“Well why should all them Catholics have all the nice chalices and tablecloths an’ the little chapel church have nuffen’ hey? I was just evening things out a bit as Jesus said we should do.”

“And the other stolen goods found in Mrs Hawkins possession?”

“Oh them’s different Mister Mcphee, when the auditor came ta look fer the descreepancee some suspected, she couldn’t pay me, so I asked her tah sell some of me things next time she was in Sydney and pay me with that and I would give ‘er a go fer credit. She had ‘er doubts but was so hot fer me an’ so full ‘er love she did it. She’s not like some, who preten’ they don’t know yer in public, like that Presbyterian min-”

“We seem to be straying off the topic. Now our assayer Stepan Bach.”

Poor Bach, sadly for him Aldis, our town butcher, was inspecting stock at a Bega abattoir and Alderman Babbey was at a family wedding somewhere in Sydney, so Bach was next on Jenny’s neat alphabetical list.

“Oh him! Offered me a tenth of the value, like I’m a hignorant girl who don’ know nuffen’ I’ thinks that I have proved here tonight that I know considerable. Told me he would offer me full value with provenance. Provenance ha! You should have seen them beady little eyes glitter when ‘e said et! An’ the silky tones in that voice an’ them hot licky lips! He wanted me body an’ ‘e offered me more if I topped up the sale with meself. Thought it best ta go along, but how his wife tolerates et is beyond me. He don’t look so clever now does he?”



And indeed he did not, sitting in the men's cell. His loyal wife, who until then believed it was all a mistake, stood up and walked out, pausing.

"You remember feeding our children at breakfast?" He nodded, staring at the floor. "Well store that memory away because it is the last you will ever see of them. Mister McPherson you do divorces?"

He nodded and looked at me and I got the message, but stickler Travis watched.

"We have only regained about an eighth of the missing treasure - and the rest?"

"Sold and stored with oh maybe two hundred different people. Some are clients, some not."

"How on earth can you remember?"

"Can't: not then, ner now. That's why I write et down in me client book, along with every payment made, them that took stolen goods has got the asterisk and a number, but this leads to what them in the legal profeshun call a conflic' o' interest. Like Prosecutor Sibley and ol' Judge Soames. They don't have their names with an asterisk but they are in. I charge Soames triple, nert particularly fond of letting 'em do sodomy."

Nobody moved, except their eyes, and they were to her. Keith Anstee alone had a warning look. She seemed to be sobering up slightly and sensed that something was wrong. Brilliant girl.

"Well! I was in me own special way, keepin' the course of justice on an even keel so ter speak." She looked puzzled. "Well how can et be justice if some cranky old judge gives out a stiff sentence cause he's got a stiff? All the women here know what I mean, give et ter them as they likes et, best basis fer a marredge -"

"Jenny please shut up." It was her husband, risking arrest.

“If yer don’t believe me you fellas take a good long look at his member next time yer in the urinals. I seed that purple birthmark that goes from just below the circumcision line up past the pubic hair line-”

“Tracker Whaley!” Calling that out loud shut them all up. They all knew the rules about speaking of white criminals in front of blacks.

“Tracker Whaley! Could you take Mrs Anstee to the kitchen for a *very nice* cup of black coffee?” I put my head in my hands and then in vexation ran them through my hair to the nape of my neck, shaking my head slowly. *Nice* with that much emphasis meant get her out of here fast. The fingers to the nape meant out of town, and the shaking of the head meant at all costs. There are some people best not jailed. Those goaded into punch-ups with Allen Fisher, who always has lying layabout mates like Tom as witnesses on his side, drunks who have to be watched all night and fed breakfast and therefore treat the cell as a private motel, terrified blacks who just might kill themselves and kids like Grahame Clarke, who never intentionally break the law and therefore do not understand how easy it is to be lured into trouble. With the clatter of hooves, it was clear Clyde had got the message. Getting rid of her was worth my horse.

Travis motioned me into the office.

“Well Mcphee, she is either the world’s most brilliant actress or the simplest songbird the world has ever known. Which?”

“Max and Reginald Fisher went to school with Soames, they called him by his nickname Purple John. So far we have one probable death, three families wrecked, one divorce, scandals brewing involving the local judge, Presbyterian minister, assayer, a barrister and lord know who else. And that’s with only three arrests and she says there are two hundred names in that book and we have not even reached c.”

“Now why did you took up this career?”

“Laugh all you like, but I wanted to be like Sherlock Holmes. Why did you?”

“To protect the community.”

“From itself?”

“We must uphold the law no matter what. Now let’s get her sober and get a written statement.”

Jenny Anstee was of course long gone and we raced out the front for a view. People pointed to the north road and Clyde and Cyril rode after her, making a great show.

“While we wait let’s chase up this Rosalind Jervis, the third in the trio.”

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Rosalind Jervis

Eloura Road 20<sup>th</sup> March 1912

*“While we wait lets chase up this Rosalind Jervis the third in the trio.”*

It was most fortunate for me that the inspector from Sydney did not know me by appearance. He was among a crowd watching Jenny ride almost literally hell for leather, to use the vulgar phrase. Mcphee had requested my presence at the station at this odd time, but with the whited jail windows open Grahame was now in sight, Stepan Bach, who sold us my engagement ring and Mrs Hawkins were in cells, while most of our racing gang were in there. Suddenly someone spoke up, too close to me.

“The police are looking for Brionny.”

My startled jump came with reason. It was Mrs Clarke, looking positively venomous. “Our legal advice states that it is inconceivable that Grahame will get less than a year and he was always weak. Even if he survives, he will be useless. Brionny was his chance and her betrayal will ruin him. Now Ross remains the last chance we have - and he will survive you leaving.”

“I do not wish to leave.”

“Now you can leave on the ten fifty Sydney train, with this one-way ticket - or you can wait and leave in a police wagon, but you are most definitely leaving.”

“No.”

“Young lady you need to think of how you appear in the eyes of the law. Stolen goods were found just now where you sleep. Rewards are out for your best friends in theft, these best friends being a prostitute and a Fenian, and this racing racket, which I warned against, now undergoes criminal investigation. About half an hour ago your perversions with your partners in crime have been bellowed out by Mrs Anstee, so that everyone knows them. What chance do you think you have in court? Shall I draw you a picture of life in jail? Even if you somehow survive without a conviction there can be no way you are ever going to be mistress of Clarkestead. I will sell it first before seeing a pervert like you live there. Look at how much misery you three have caused already!”

She had a point there, with three people under arrest already. What choice was there?

The train pulled out a few minutes later with Mrs Bach and her six children just making it.

My ticket was for the first class, the Bach's for second, a mercy. Caufield's Farm was just before the downward slope began, so the train barely moved as we passed and there seen through a window in the kerosene lamplight were Ross and Alison. Arguing, anguishing, and coming together in grief? This was supposed to be the night we resolved things and we did, in a very different way to what was expected. Goodbye my love and the sister I desired all my life and had for fourteen months.

The train pulled in at five ten and I had enough pocket change for tea and muffins before my home branch bank opened. Outside the station there were a few dozen female outcasts or down and outers on their luck like myself. One or two were obviously pregnant. Early morning fruit and vegetable sellers moved among them.

“Who will work for nine pence a day, who will work for nine pence?”

They rushed him. Others were getting cut price servants and others looked like the streetwalkers opposite, but a cut above them were madams, one of them turned her head, Minnietta – and she saw me. With a warm smile she approached and sat herself down, pulling out a newspaper.

“Rosalind, you made the early morning edition. Oh! the wonders of the telephone! You are on page eight, wanted for questioning and are believed to have fled on the Sydney night train. Fortunately, our police are overworked and a bit slow, but it won’t be long before they are here, asking around, so why don’t we go for a little chat?”

“Not in a brothel thank you.”

She nodded agreeably and we ended up at tea rooms at Circular Quay. As soon as she walked in the waiter tensed and looked at me as if at a condemned prisoner. When he was behind her he mouthed a silent no.

“You may think that your big bank account from the races will keep you out of trouble. Try it and you will find that they will ask you to wait, then while you wait, they call the police and it is off you go.”

“You have an option.”

“Three. First you work for me. There is a definitely a market for lesbians, both for women and for men who like to watch that type of thing. You might even become a companion for a rich lady, very

comfortable. Or if you prefer men, that is standard. That face of yours is worth a fortune, so keep it fresh and sweet. I could get you as much for one night as one of them streetwalkers could get in a month. You could even get you a regular like that, a very polite grateful gentleman.”

“Option Two?”

“Andrew McPherson. He studies at that Anglican seminary, not too far from the university. Sweet Sir Galahad the others nickname him. Personally, Galahad seemed so good he was boring. We met down that way one morning and he could not stop himself asking about you.”

“Option Three?”

“Start with legal advice. If you have not broken the law your situation may be better than you think, then you can get to your money. Take my card. If you choose Andrew its my guess you would be bored to screaming and will be working for me within a year.”

Best to take the card out of politeness and pay my share of the bill. She waited outside the bank and it went exactly as she said. After an extremely fast exit we caught an omnibus.

“You get out next stop. Well Brionny and Jenny warned you about me, but I was only trying to protect you from them, those poor foolish silly girls. Well now Brionny has paid the price.”

“What do you mean?”

Her face showed dread and puzzlement and she handed me the paper again, then walked off. Trembling, I sat down and read through the article. Brionny had apparently drowned, not far from the cave. Her body was yet to be recovered.

\*

Ross Clarke

Eloura Jail 30<sup>th</sup> March 1912

Grahame looked subdued and Mcphee looked embarrassed. He left us alone.

“Brionny was no con artist.” I started. “Ma had a thousand pound ready for Ulster and Brionny had the key for months. As far as we know by the account books they kept little or nothing for themselves; they were rebels.”

“Ross she was loyal to me.”

“Still is.”

That made his eyes gleam and put heart back into him.

“She made it to the top tunnel hole and went down.”

“Oh God no, I did that and nearly died, she could still be drowned, Ross, she could be injured or have gone mad in there alone. Save her.”

“Getting into the cave, that’s hard now. Mum put out a five-thousand pound reward for her, dead or alive so every bloody forester, layabout and bloke who needs money scours that creek or hunts the district. The tunnel's blocked off with a log so it’s not noticeable but...”

“Do whatever you have to, just save her. Jail will kill her. Get her out of the country. It must be over between us. Looks like you and Rosalind are also over. Brionny and I won’t be any good for each other now, even if the law would let us live in peace when they release me. She will be up for five years at least, theft and assault... and.... well... anyway everybody sees the way you look at each other.”

“Any news with your case?”

“Even Sibley and Travis have given up on the racetrack one and the stolen goods stuff. In return and for pleading guilty they give me six months and parole for assaulting an officer and aiding an escape.” Alexander says considering its Stickler Travis this agreement comes in as near miraculous.”

“Clouds are building for a deluge and maybe tonight the searchers will stay in.”

\*

Brionny McNamara

The Cave 31<sup>st</sup> March 1912

Eleven days solitary were a long wait. There was a good deal of stored material, food, books, clothes, even cards an' a chess set, although when you are reduced ta enjoyin' playing chess solitaire yer need ta worry fer yerself. Finally, Ross got through tha back tunnel, haulin' a massive sack. I have never been sa glad ta see someone an' even hugged him.

“Quiet, quiet, even in this weather they could be out there.”

“Weather - what's that?”

He did not get tha joke and explained why he waited sa long ter get here, about Jenny's escape, his ma's reward, the searchers an' the massive storm, but all that could no stop me chatterin' me head off. He waited patiently.

“Here's some warm food, writing paper, fruit and vegetables, meat, books even timber for the fire. Can you give this place another week, maybe two?”

I hesitated and saw the sympathy in his face.

“They are going to jail you for a minimum of five years here, then deport you to Ireland, to face more charges there. Here can only be heaven in comparison.”

“Ever endured eleven days solitary, much in darkness?”

“Here is a plan to get you out.”

“Lovely. Let me hear et.”

“We hire somebody who looks like you to name herself Brionny. She gets caught, spends a couple of days in jail as Brionny, proves she isn't and we have got maybe three days without reward hunters. We get out by the tunnel and there will be a dray with a cedar load waiting. Wwe join and take the inland road to Sydney.”

“This sounds an expensive deal.”



“Certainly. The impersonator gets fifty pounds a day for every day in jail up to twenty days. She gets a tenner a day on retainer until the scheme starts. A dray full of cedar does not come cheap either.”

“How can I repay yer?” That were bein’ sardonic, probably nert wise with tha whole world huntin’ fer yer an’ bein’ down ta one strange, humourless aristo Protestant ally.

“Grahame is paying for it. Once the racing charges were dropped his bank account was accessible.”

“But I am not.”

There was along awkward silence while he heated up tha lukewarm soup.

“How is Rosalind?”

It was the wrong question. He bit his lips and stared into the fire.

“The detectives were paid off yesterday after they gave me the report. Some people overheard my mother at Eloura station who made it clear she would be arrested if she tried to maintain any type of relationship with me and panicked her into fleeing. Gave her a ticket to Sydney Central Railway where she met up with Minnietta, who took her to a place where the usual deals were done. She ignored warnings from the waiter and took Minnietta’s card and they left together on an omnibus. The ticket seller remembers seeing her crying in a park near Broadway across from where the prostitutes gather and she went off with some fellow. Women who take up prostitution usually cry their hearts out first time the detective says”

Neither of us could speak immediate like; I am too tough ter weep but...

“Suppose you blame me and Jenny.”

“She said she was always a woman made of two extremes, the Christian puritan and the libertine. On the first night we met....”

He stopped, not wanting to talk on that.

“She told me. We were very close. You know.”

“Alison tol’ me that night we meant to have that meeting. She only confirmed what I had long suspected and knew instinctively after tha Saint Patrick’s Day Ball.”

“And yet here yer be, planning me rescue.”

“Rosalind endured being in the next room with me making love to Alison for months. I did wonder why. It leaves me in no position to criticise. And Grahame asked me to rescue you, he said to do whatever it takes, anything.”

“And Grahame?”

He told me of how he was, the plead deal, and of his breaking off with me.

“I should wait six months en some other part of Australia, just like tha faithful maidens in many a tale, but aye, he would indeed return ter me transformed, but very likely the opposite of what he once was, that boy so lovable. Could yer tell him I was after himself, no tha money? Tha evidence bein’-”

“He already heard it, and with evidence about the Ulster money. He thanked me for telling him, then said that he did not need to hear it.”

“A dash o goodness among the growing pile o’ sadness. An’ what of Alison?”

“After the stares at the Saint Patrick’s Day Ball and the arrests, Douglas and Uncle Reg are watching her farm for my coming. Not that there is any great need. We know we could never get away with it and live here and the gossip would follow us - and anyway, she does not want to leave. She does not want to be seen to be too close to the bangle girls either. Being assumed to be lesbian being amongst her pet hatreds in life.”

“So! Rosalind has become a streetwalker, Jenny vanishes, Grahame gets jailed, Alison prefers ter survive by bein’ conservative, Brionny finds herself stuck in a hole and poor Ross is left alone with mad Ma. Ain’t love jus’ grand?”

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During tha next twenty six nights while rain and lightnin’ raged Ross came on fourteen, always with food an’ firewood an’ news. Before Grahame were jailed he heard that I was alive an’ gave Ross his repeated assertion that et was over. He was holding something back an’ I asked an’ asked.

“He said there was an attraction between us and it was alright, to do anything to save you.”

“Well!”

We were playin’ chess. We often did, and played cards an’ read to each other, him doin’ most; print troubled me. Such things helped us take our minds off lost loves. At other times we talked of Ireland and I asked why.

“My mother prattles on non-stop about Ulster, I wanted to get a balanced viewpoint from the other side, but you seem to have given up.”

“Aye pretty much, why waste me one life on people who despise me an’ boot me out?”

“Indeed - and there seems to be a certain amount of envy in all that obvious, loud hatred of those in the great houses.”

“Meanin’ what!”

Me voice must have pitched up a little too high, fer he mentally he jumped back and then recovered, but went very quiet an' still and stared at me. His face could not be read. Everybody else were easy, nert this one. Most men were at best nice and naïve,, more often bossy and conceited, usually lecherous with transparently obvious games, even

when bein' sly they think. Sometimes that were with violence et were easy to see coming: Donal in the stables were ner surprise. With this one he was too still, too expressionless. He was assessin' me and that was all I could suss out.

“I was picturin' Donal livin' like a Protestant lord in one of them great houses, after the revolution.”

“And for a certainty, there is more.”

“You... You saw a great deal of the Protestant Ascendancy life as a girl when your father was an ostler.”

“Fer sure, nine years livin' on tha estate until he was caught, then na more luxurious library with the overstuffed ottoman. Back ter the boghole.”

This led ter quite calm questions about me early life that went all over the place, food, who taught me English an' schooled me, (nobody did) what stories I read and heard, how I got inter Irish politics, me family an' relationships, me interests and expectations of the future – and that last stumped me.

“I want freedom I suppose. Still fer Ireland, but me first now. Here's as much freedom as I'll ever see, there is a certain happiness in bein' a troglodyte.”

He just nodded; bein' like most men, impervious ter irony.

“Grahame is in his hole and I am in mine.”

He had ter be told not ter cancel the rescue, we were waitin' on a willin' lassie.

We compared ancestries and his maternal grandmother was an Ulster Hill, the patriarch of that family being the hereditary High Constable of Ulster. He had no real idea of what that meant or how Irish people might feel, yet even so, tha mutual attraction that started at tha Boxing Day dance an' that Rosalind overwhelmed were growin'. His

eyes would roam admiringly over me body, but on me hands, bare arms, hair and eyes. This was particularly noticeable on tha night he arrived when I was bathin' an had just time ta reach blankets he had given me. He said never to call out, voices reverberated and just outside was tha reward chasers favourite camp site. His eyes went over me, but in a way that flattered. Me Ma said if a man's eyes go over all yer body an' stop at yer eyes and stay there its love, if they focus on yer sex organs, then won't look you in the face its lust. I dropped the top slightly, to just above the nipples, making it look accidental and his eyes stayed with mine, but roved over every bit of me while we played chess in flickering firelight.

“Mournin' for Rosalind are we?”

“No we are not. We both know what she has become. Tomorrow I go to see if a willing actress can be found for you. You are in a mess and you must get out of it. Can you do four days alone?”

It turned out to be more than that with plenty of time ter think about myself fer once. There was bitter thought over tha way Donal used all of us, always workin' fer Ireland was really workin' for him even if he didna know et and Ross had him worked out – an' me. That was why he asked all the questions about me, ter get me talkin' about me, so as get me thinkin' about me for a change. We never had time ter think over anything, analyse anything, question anything, an' look at motives. Donal an' many others like him always had some urgent thing fer followers ter do. Some great crisis we must sacrifice everythen' fer. Now time ter think came in abundance. Catholic or Protestant. Conservative or Liberal, they all had their Donals an' their dupes. Me an' Jenny being en the latter.

*You are in a mess and you must get out of it.* His words went round me mind an' I started me seein' myself as I was. Just bog Irish, half-educated an' half above my station, Sometimes that were through money, sometimes by language: sayin' me for my an' ter for to, too an' two, yer

an'ya for your, definitely bein' for is, not many letter dees an'gees et the end an' the rest. Bog Irish English sometimes, aristocratic English from the estate years. Gaelic from mother when she recalled old tales and songs came ter mind.

Love for Jenny reinforced Irishness. As much as me father, she got me into politics, an' theft. Him puttin' a teenage girl guest in tha same bed as his teenage daughters definitely got me into tha world of lesbianism as much as Jenny did. But then he was a naïve man, kept so by his political obsessions. Fathering nine children an' no knowen' women had sexual desire unless they were bad.

The lesbianism I did nert regret, not with Rosalind, but after a thousand times with Jenny best ter distance myself from her, mentally now, but in reality, if she ever came back. That spontaneous generosity, that loud, effusive, extravagant love o' life, of adventure, love of sexual involvement, were all undiscernin.' How on earth she could lie back an' just concentrate on physical sensations coming from fat old men with spittle runnin' down their lecherous lips was beyond me, but she did. Best ter distance myself from her because being close ter her was makin' me like her. Even if she did not intend so or see anything wrong, et was surely happenin'. Touchin' Jan and Hendrik for her was tha obvious thing, but tha relationship with Grahame had an exploitative side, for our movement et least and with Jenny's spontaneity I nearly offered ter trade me body ter Ross for a trip ter Sydney and then passage over the sea.

Unknowing, tha three of us, Ros an' Jenny an' me, had been slowly sinkin' me inter that world which ends in gutters where women parade en cheap gay clothes with their hair dyed gaudy colours an' their brains half gone from either tha syph or tha drugs that get them through their workin' day. Even that assumes we were not jailed first, fer thousands we never

saw a penny of, an' me not bein' jailed due ter Grahame putten a broom in Inspector Travis's way. By what miracle Jenny escaped nobody knows.

Pure luck had got me this far, but how much further could et go? Like Rosalind, I could end up stranded in Sydney with some Minnietta making me offers or at best curtseyin' ter some young miss ter lazy ter pour her tea. Ross was lookin' like me best hope, me only hope really: the proverbial rich an' handsome, good mannered, nert lecherous, nert loud ner conceited ner brutal. As we had both had Rosalind and I knew of Alison and Helen he could hardly berate me on morality either and had probably sated his sexual curiosity. Rosalind told me much of him an' it was all ter tha good. When she said he liked oral sex Jenny guffawed, 'Law girl, any man on tha planet that don't?' Point taken, pun intended, never done that yet, but imagined it was not a problem: never know till yer try. Jenny had demonstrated with a banana, when she tried to talk me into givin' her a break from Donal.

Well! I wanted freedom from exploitation and here et was, so why was I desperate ter get out?

\*

Grahame Clarke

Goulburn Jail 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1912

They let Stepan Bach and me serve more days in remand as the prison wagon going to Goulburn axel's broke and Eakins took his time repairing. It would have been better if his lifetime went on that axle. Even though he was not a local Stepan was an alright bloke. We had not known each other well before, but we became mates and agreed to look after each other. It was wise to have a mate in Goulburn Jail.

Luckily, they put us in the same cell. Stepan was a bit boring; he knew all there was to know about mining, minerals, rocks, Jewellery, town councils and the family he did not have any more, but when it came to horses, he could tell a Clydesdale from a pony and that was about it.

Likewise, dogs; supposed I bored him to, about Briionny, horses and dogs, but after a while jail makes you as stony as the grey walls and you do not want to think about anything that used to make you happy. You just think about little things, and getting out. Some people go stir crazy: that gets penalties so then trouble comes. Stepan said we should always guard each other's backs and I said "From knives?" and he said "Yeh, and from pricks to." What he meant wasn't clear until two males did it like dogs and one was yelling 'no! no! no!'

"Stay out of it, no matter what happens stay out unless he's your mate." It was the same when one of the big men at breakfast reached across and rammed the spoon down the little man's throat and while he was choking half to death the big man reached across and ate his food.

"He does not bloody need it, does he? Stupid shit looks like he is choking."

He did not die because a guard got to him, but nobody among three hundred prisoners heard a thing. Next time Stepan got onto mineral deposits in West Australia that topic never had a more intent listener. The day before Ross visited, Allen turned up in our cell, very paly, shaking hands.

"Had to pay a guard a fiver to get in here. Eloura fellas should stick together. We are the three musketeers down under."

We chatted over old times for a while and then Allen warmed up.

"I've got a surprise for you each, they aren't things I'd give to any man. Got one for myself too. Worth its weight in gold. Wanna guess?"

As if he was producing a million pound note he reached into his crotch and pulled out three T-bone steak bones, cleaned and polished to sharpness.

"Wouldn't look like much on the outside, but in here nothing can be worth more, 'cepting a proper pistol or a real knife. Look what it can do."



He jabbed in the air as if a real person was there and while his back was turned Stepan gave me a long enigmatic look.

“That was someone losing an eye and getting brain damage. Now when the British Army issued the bayonet they made them twenty- four inches long because they did not think that anybody could kill a man with only four inches, hey what did they know? Slice through the jugular, go for the femur.” He demonstrated against an imaginary opponent and then showed us on his body and then demonstrated the military use of the steak bones for about an hour before getting more on to his favourite topic, killing people.

Back home it used to be how to win punch-ups. After a while he was more boring than Stepan’s rocks and when he asked me how to pick winners it was good to go into great detail and he listened intently. When he got back on to killing to get him off that I asked him what he was reading and he showed me. It was the same reading book we had when we were six.

“It’s a Henty story, I can read most of it but you read the hard parts. In court they said I could not read, an ill literate they called me. Well, I am not sick - and sick or not I can read and here is where I prove it.

The cat sat on the mat.

The mat was read and gold

A- bove the mat was a w-window

Where spread a horrid mould.

As a joke I clapped like we did in chestnut school and suddenly Allen’s eyes went snake glittery and his mouth looked cruel and I knew I should not have done that.

I knew it even better next night when the guards came for me with truncheons and they pulled a bloodied T-bone from under my pillow.

\*

Ross Clarke

Goulburn Jail 29<sup>th</sup> April 1912

When they bought him out he was unrecognisable. He was shaved bald, and had eyes so blackened and swollen that he seemed to be some Chinese, the shape of his mouth had changed due to more swellings and a dislocated jaw. He had lost about a fifth of his weight and was already developing this servile, head-bowed wal other prisoners had. When he tried to speak, he could not be understood, even on a fifth go.

“Do you want newspapers?”

He nodded like a simple child.

“Books?”

“No good asking that type of question sir. That one just got all privileges and his chance for parole removed. Quite a vicious fellow, be careful.”

A more harmless looking person was hard to imagine and both his foot and hand manacles were locked down.

“Have you heard of the *Titanic* disaster?” Puzzled, he nodded. “A full list of the survivors came out. Brionny McNamara appeared on the saved list.”

That kind lie got a few seconds the old Grahame was back: he was trying to ask something and eventually it became clear.

“Yes in America, she will recover in America.”

“Brionny loved horses.”

If only he would not clap his hands in joy like that. He asked for me to see Stepan and as they took him away he waved cheerfully. Stepan was wariness personified.

“What happened to my brother?”

“He angered Allen somehow or Allen tipped off the cops about the races and we are all part of his secret plan. In the next cell there is this former professor or some such thing, an avid reader, six foot three. Allen

threatened to cut him down to size and he almost surely did. Poked his eye out while he slept, slipped the bloodied bone under Allen's pillow and when they came Grahame had not yet learned the proper subservience and after the first truncheon blow he reached for the bone. It only increased their belief that he was guilty and dangerous. They subdued him, and he was in solitary for days, till yesterday. Clearly he suffered brain damage."

"And Allen?"

"Even if they have suspicions, he stays their snitch. He got parole for his first offences, moved eight months ahead and for testifying against Grahame he will get more off: if he lives so long."

"Do you need anything?"

He put in some requests.

"Tell Allen I will be waiting; that is all."

\*

Allen Fisher

Goulburn Jail 30<sup>th</sup> April 1912

My old pal Inspector Travis turned up and so off for an interview. What fun. On the way Grahame got a wave, he nodded his head cheerfully, a nice substitute for a wave, can't give a proper one when you are in a strait jacket, but then he will do them bloody dangerous things won't he? Nobody will give that dog a T-bone. The idiots might have titles like doctor and reverend and warden, but they were easy enough to fool and they thought me an idiot just because my reading and writing skills were not as high as them with their walking encyclopaedia ways. Harmless cousin Grahame, who couldn't bear to sell a horse or slaughter a pig had been described as a homicidal maniac. That was enough to make a cat laugh. Even funnier was the way that he would never pick a winner again, but he left the secret of how to do it with me and all the la-

de-dah crowd who thought they were better than me would never get another winner.

Travis looked like he had something up his sleeve.

“We have decided not to prosecute Grahame Clarke over the assault on another prisoner. Too many people, including the victim, are convinced it was a setup organised by you. Grahame Clarke however, did have a dangerous weapon in his possession and attempted to assault a warden.”

“An assault I bravely tried to stop and to save our beloved wardens it was yours truly who stretched out my hand and took the blow.” I held out my arm so he could see the scar, well scratch really.

“Yes, that is in the report. We all suppose that now you will ask me that this should be grounds for parole.”

“Well it is, isn't it?”

“Oh yes, it is. Now we have some good news and some bad news. First, we find that having a snitch murdered lowers our chances of getting more of you valuable fellows, so we want you out of here; many people both here and in Eloura want you dead. You get parole, but only if you agree to see which parole officer we choose and under our conditions. Your remaining sentence time before the parole meeting to be served in West Australia.”

“But-”

“No buts, if you have any sense at all, you will come with me in handcuffs and take passage to Freemantle and never set foot in Eloura again, where your father has disinherited you and will sue for trespass if you set foot on his farm. Likewise, all Chapman properties. It seems Grahame was also popular and at the local pub they are discussing the most painful way to kill you. Go west young man, go west.”

He was having a shot at me and that go west also meant to die. People always hated me just because of my hearty sense of fun and was so clever at cutting down the hoyty-toyties, them that think themselves high and mighty. Well, if Kidman started an empire with nothing but a one-eyed horse and five shillings so could yours truly - make an empire over there, good idea.

\*

Brionny McNamara

The Cave 4<sup>th</sup> May 1912

By the time he got back I was near ter screamin'. Yesterday in vexation I had rolled away the rock facing the creek and them accursed searchers were still at et.

Soon after that he came in, making a very slight sound and mimed a shush. He could not walk properly, his knees still bent and he wincing. He had ta be helped.

He even quietly put out the fire, even though a visit back he brought in a tarpaulin to block any possible light.

“There has been a big storm over the mountains, but just light rain here, that means a flash flood - and in this section where the bottom becomes bedrock, it will act as a gigantic flusher, dredging up everything - so they are gathering.”

“Last ta see Brionny’s corpse is a rotten egg? First bags thousands?”

“The good news is that when the flushing finishes Max and Dad are building retaining walls and putting in a weir and gravel. Two kids nearly died among the submerged branches diving for the Fenian lady. Further good news is that we have found an actress, but we have to wait for this flush thing to finish, they won’t go away from such a surety. After the disappointment of waiting in the rain they will.”

“You are no fool, but why do you smell sa oddly, burnt leather and please can you swim with soap? Ner meanin' ter sound offensive but...”

“Possum shit is offensive. If I’m so smart why have I been treed like a possum for over ten hours?”

“Why indeed?”

“One group used the nail on our hollow tree to pin up their tarpaulin on one side and made their fire on the other. Opening the lid or going back would have made a noise, best to wait in the same tight position till they were gone.”

“Hold on ta tha edge while yer swim, yer may get a cramp. I’ll bring out timber ta start a fire.”

\*

Ross Clarke

The Cave 4<sup>th</sup> May 1912

Even after drying myself and sitting beside the fire while Brionny was away at the toilet the shivers and cramping pains wouldn’t stop.

“Blue toes! Feet out straight now, na nonsense.”

She rubbed each toe vigorously, pulling slightly.

“Used to do this for me Pa and brothers sometimes, tha boys bein’ fishermen and peat gatherers.” The massage continued up to my cramped calves.

“Your sex organs and abdomen best be leaving fer yer, they tend ter freeze last.” Her hand went to my heart and stayed there while she looked into my eyes.

“Heart be normal, now yer hand, I’ll go up ter yer ears” She did that with both arms and then my back while I lay flat.

“Yer better sleep: now.”

I did there and then, for nearly twenty hours, and awoke. Brionny was at the cave sliver between rocks watching; she heard me and motioned me over for a look. Our faces came together side by side, that made my heart beat faster – and hers. The pulse was going through her jugular.

We could smell the steadily falling rain. Clyde Whaley's boot heel was three inches from my nose and Tom Caufield had his legs a yard apart and a hand clenched and resting on his hip in his usual combative stance, usually taken while talking to somebody else.

"Now you two can give up because this pool's been flushed, but I'm staying."

"Six hours of it and if that dead cow came up entangled in branches she would have also."

That was Jan speaking, which meant Hendrik must be close, sure enough he answered.

"Yah Tom, what sense in freezing out here when we could be earning money warm in the bakery. Yah?"

"Small money"

"Good money."

"She can't be anywhere else. I'm staying. Five thousand pounds *from Clarkes to Caufields* for a mouldy old body useless for anything practical. It's a laugh."

Jan and Hendrik started packing and Brionny turned away very hurt, very angry sitting before the fire, her arms around her knees, biting her lips.

"Please leave – an' when yer come back rescue me."

At the escape gum the foresters were still camped and arguing about staying on. The majority felt that if Tom stayed, they should. I went back.

"Rescue is et?"

After listening to the explanation, she just stared into the fire again for a minute.

"So Brionny McNamara, bog Irish lesbian Fenian burglar and sort of Anglican, finds herself trapped in a cave *ad infinitum* with Ma Clarke's boy, the Protestant Ascendancy direct descendant of the High Constables

of Ulster, wealthy squatocracy officer material. And what pray tell do we have in common? A shared lover we both deflowered in our different ways, chess an a taste fer literature. This bein' most bizarre, ridiculous ... Ah! Men!"

At the third word she threw a piece of timber and I managed to catch it before it clattered. With the rock sliver nearly open the sound and all her yelling could carry. She followed my glare to the rock hole, sighed and stared at the fire again while sighing with vexation several times.

"Could yer get dressed further up the tunnel please? Yer look ridiculous."

"Could you be quiet please? You might want to get arrested, not me, aiding a wanted felon?"

I went off and returned dressed. There was a thick rolled blanket, down her half of the bed and the rock hole was blocked.

"Get tha massage, your Lordship? Society wouldn't expect yer ter be a gentleman an' sleep on tha ground fer a weird slattern would it?"

"Keep your voice down, I have never called you a slattern and I will take a candle and the other spare blanket and sleep over here."

I picked up a book and set up and read, but tonight in here was little above freezing, away from the furs and fire, but at least that shut her up. Just occasionally I saw her looking at me sullenly, but she darted her head away when she saw. When I got up she snarled.

"What are yer doing now?"

"Going to the toilet."

"Well go then, where yer can't be seen."

I woke up chilled through to the bones and almost unable to bend my knees. As she was still sleeping, I did not revive the embers or rustle anything to get food. I noticed the knife clutched in her hand, went to the toilet and returned to find her waking up.



“Ascendancy Lordship or bog Irish, yer all make the same sounds. And with your teeth chattering yer kept me awake much of last night. Sleep in front of the fire tonight, where yer can be watched.”

“You aren’t bog Irish; ad infinitum and bizarre are not the words used around the peat fires. And you are not fake Anglican, you said your father had you baptised and confirmed in the Anglican Church.”

“As a ploy. Et is nearly as silly as tha Catholic church an’ as boring’.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you agreeing’ with me?”

“Father, Grahame, Robert and I are not involved in these Irish things. So what if my mother’s mother came from Ulster and was descended from somebody famous over there. We are here.”

“Where yer Ma wastes the family money on machine guns fer Ulster.”

“Not with my approval. I’ll be damned if I’ll see this farm wrecked for all that Irish rubbish and your fund-raising methods for your side where the same and were for machine guns for your side. You aren’t as different to my moth-”

Her smug smile stopped me. “Oh don’t stop there Rossie boy, or is et that yer can’t compare yer mother ter a lesbian slut?”

I packed my gear and started “You are on your own.”

That made her pause. “Try et an. *we* will be arrested yer Lordship. Find jail a nice place did yer?”

“How can you say that when you must have some idea of what Grahame is going through?”

“Grahame mus’ be dead ter me.”

“If you will excuse me, this book makes for a fascinating read. And incidentally brothers share the same mother and ancestry, yet you never blasted him like this.”

She started on more abuse along the your Lordship line that was best ignored, then she was muttering about men and it faded out and she also read. Later she asked me to leave while she swam and washed and we ate sullenly, sleeping back-to-back with the roll between us. Later that day I was in the hollowed escape log and could see the red towel on the line that meant the actress had been found and there was the dray, ready. The forest family were actually packing and had carted half their things when a little girl saw my eye at the sliver and went to get Daddy. I pulled the timber cover down fast and pulled with all my weight on the rope. “Brionny! Brionny!” She came running. “Help me pull on the rope, the cover can’t even wobble or they will know.”

Fortunately, the exterior timber cover still retained natural looking bark and with my back pressed to it and Brionny pulling it tight, it neither wobbled nor reverberated when the prying blows came, which was lucky because I had the knife ready. Brionny saw it and she had this look, a glimmer of liking?

We must have held that position for twenty minutes after they stopped. Then I explained how everything was going ahead, but we had best wait two more nights.

There were no more baitings after that, yet she was very quiet, at night serving me food, we ate before the fire.

“Have yer any idea what et is like ta have people that yer think liked yer, comparin’ yer ta a dead cow, scouring fer yer like, no not like, as if yer were really rotten offal worth a good deal? I never got really involved with those two, jus’ kissen’ for sexual arousal fer Jenny, so don’t think

me promiscuous; yer know all but William. We were only involved thrice before Donal found out and sent him on a mission ter Canada-”

“Please.”

“Two men and two women, enough - and in four days I am twenty. You have had three women.”

“You are close to obsessed and you give the impression that once you are out of here you are going to be either obsessed or totally forgetful.”

“The second option es what ter try fer. This cave came as a problem but Henry Ford, that very smart man, says that a problem es jus’ an advantage in different wrappin’. The blackness comes good en handy ter know myself and wise et ull be ter leave tha ostler’s Protestant daughter behind, she sneaking into the great landowner’s house library ter learn ter read, and the girl who shared blanket and bed with five sisters an’ Jenny in a turf an’ stone hut. Goodbye ter tha fanatical Fenian, an’ tha young woman attracted ter naïve, nice soft boys like William an’ Grahame. Tha lover of two women simultaneously, tha thief, tha servant, tha ostler, tha fugitive, all them roles are goin’ or rather they are stayen en here an’ that ull be a certainty.”

“And who will emerge?”

“An adult leavin’ childhood in a cave, like et’s a second womb. A new person, with a new identity: Mrs Brionny Mary Clarke. If we are ter make it ter Sydney with me pretendin’ ter be yer wife and we get ter tha ship, can I take yer name?”

“Certainly.”

“Mary was one of me sisters. Me name made me always envious she got that name. Pa named me after his favourite horse, na offence, for et was a fine horse at that, but Mary sounded more woman like.”

I smiled and nodded and passed her some of the raisins; she ate them

out of my hand one by one. We played a few games of chess.

“Ah yer play an’ agro game.”

“Let’s sleep.”

“Certainly, for et is a good idea. But don’t you be thinking ter take me. Helen and Rosalind, you had them both here. There’ll be no me en that line.”

Yet she moved away the blanket and did not raise any objection when I started undressing. She did not turn around to watch either. In the morning I found that we had snuggled together and my arm was across her midriff. Better to take it away but while moving she put her hand on mine, undid her top shift buttons and put my hand over her breast. I massaged it gently. Her face was hidden by the angle of her head and her hair.

“Na further than I want ter go Ross. We do not consummate until yer make me Mrs Clarke and I can see stars.”

The ambiguity of her words sunk in. On this day we only talked of minor things, until just before tea. Yesterday’s frenzy gave way to amiability.

“Are yer gunna kill Allen when he gets out?” She blurted out, smiling, focusing on my face intently. She was mesmerising.

“Unless someone else does that first.”

“And yer enjoyed breaking his arm, riding over Reverend Jervis’s toes, and what you did ter Albert Moon.”

“Not the last and not like you might imagine, with all of them there was a sense of triumph, but no; it was not enjoyable like you might enjoy a song or a joke.”

“Surely. And yesterday when yer held the knife yer would have used et if yer had ter wouldn’t yer?”

“After threatening them first and hoping for a back off.”

“And not killed the women or a child, that surely being against the code.”

“Of course.”

“Of course. And yer were disappointed ta find Alison was ner as strong as she seemed, that family, farm and reputation meant more ter her than you. The woman yer thought was so independent and hard, weren’t and yer did not like tha, ner Rosalind nert copen with violence.

I have worked you out, you are essentially an atavistic warrior, a clansman, a chivalrous knight, a cavalier, a samurai, a Confederate off defending yer land and yer family. Yer are very much in that mould, seein’ killin’ and fightin’ as a part of life.”

“Which it is.”

“Most assuredly, glory be. Except that there es no war. Jails, surely, but no war. Be careful Ross me boy. I can cope, but tha law cannot. As I said, seein’ nice boys crushed by life becomes tirin.’ In fact I am tired of nice boys, en a brutal world they lose. You will win an’ there’s none of them bastards I mentioned I woulda nert killed but for jail – an’ physical strength ter do et, but not ter like bein’ brutal. I would ner like to be married ter Donal, Tom Caufield or Allen, them bein’ bullies. You have resilience, a certain amoral charm and Rosalind, Alison and Helen all give yer good bedtime reviews.”

“Thank you.”

“What is me name?”

“Brionny Mary Clarke.”

“Normally yer could take me now, but nah, ets all I got ter bargain with.”

\*

Brionny McNamara

The Cave 10th May 1912

If he had said anythin’ else I woulda slept alone, but standin’ afore

tha fire, in an orange glow, I reached across and kissed him on the ear quick like, then gazed into his face tha way he was gazin' into mine, although I was apparently tha enchantress. He were hooked, mesmerised, bound, whatever yer want ter call et. It seemed so until he bit his lip an' broke his gaze, but he was panten and bitin' his lips an' flexen his fingers and throat muscles ta do it. This was enjoyable, most immensely, but et was not tha right day, even so, we ended up sleepin' in each other's arms, but he was restless, He had not spent himself for at least four nights, so his restless movements were endured, but he did not spend himself, but I could feel how large he was from his pressing: alright, but nothin' special from what little I knew, but enough. Most girls go on about big, but et is usually bravado or what they have been told ter like, even so wisest ter do what my sister Maeve told me ter always do first, men who agree ter wait until wedding night are odd she says, so I did what I did with Grahame first time, makin' a ring with me thumb and first finger encircled et an' did tha strokes until he came. My head rested under his chin so he could ner see me face an' ter get a good look. Like his brother he seemed ter take hours: slow and gentle, fast and hard made ner difference until I let him kiss me hair at tha temple. Et were not degrading, a little pleasurable and I pressed a pillow into his organs when he was done and then we slept.

Better ter get up before him, tend the fire and go' back ta being a little distant.

“Breakfast is ready.” That woke him.

“Uhm thank you for last night.”

“Me pleasure. No not really, not much anyway. We don't have time for cranky males –“

A dull noise came and from the rock hole we could see dredgin'.

Max and Leo were there with a work crew emptying the pool. They had already put a weir in. Tom was talken'.

“Wait till the shitty mud shovels up and then, maybe that bloody reward comes my way.”

“How do you work that one out?” Max had been smiling, but now he laughed openly. “If anyone or anything remains down there the workers will find it and get the reward. The papers say she has been found at Gosford anyway, the police got her.”

“Nah, its fishy.”

“Like many others lured here, your time would be better spent doing your own work. So many wives are carrying work burdens alone.”

“Well better bein' at bloody home than listening to bullshit sermons! You control nearly everything in this town, but you do not control me.”

Mercifully, off Stony Tom stomped.

We knew it would be a long night so we slept after the dredgin' machine stopped. We did not have to pack much, jus' all my winnings. Burglars should not have traceable bank accounts or stolen objects for that matter. I filled the dress I escaped in with stolen objects and tossed it in the cave pool with the rest Jenny tossed there. Steppen' out into a clear, crisp, starry night after six weeks in the cave were so exhilaraten' and nearly made me scream for joy. It was like becomin' a new person purified and the pure cold air only emphasised that. We raced up the slope to the cedar-filled dray and there was Frank Clarke

“Got your bill of sale, your bankbook, blankets and swags, food the lot.”

Ross thanked him, but his Pa was virtually ignoring me.

“So how long will it take you to get there and back?”

“I may not be back. Dad, she is going to destroy this farm, why should we work my guts out and worry, just do she can donate our profits

to get machine guns to kill people on the other side of the world, people who never done us any harm?”

“Can you name one person who has ever controlled your mother, ever?”

“That the point. If I could save the farm I would, but she will wreck it anyway. Despite being twenty-two she sees me as her bad six-year-old. It’s clear why you always were away.”

Frank just sighed, nodded and waved, tears welling up. He drained away the happy mood an’ Ross fumbled tha reins and brakes as we headed towards tha mountains. That night and tha next we slept in our clothes, me now bein’ used to him huggin’ me, back to chest for company and warmth. It were same next night. That day I was exuberant and he tried ta be, but he could not be, leaving his father, friends and knowing he was seein’ tha destruction of his home.

“Ross et is not yer fault, what else can yer do? Stay there an’ see et all destroyed? Endure seein’ Grahame as a wreck? For a certainty yer have tha money and ability ta succeed elsewhere. All anybody has ever seen there is trouble. What if Tom finds out? You’ll be ruined even if yer ma does not ruin yer. For a certainty et is a new life that yer start now, ner an end.”

He pondered on that and over the next days improved, putting our differences aside, we found more and more in common and could chatter on, we both had the same sort of shrewdness, a wry humour and a sensuality. Two more nights were tha same, and on the last of these he streamed his fingers through me hair and opened me top slippin’ his hand over my breast. “Please.” I murmured and he did not stop until I turned round, putting his mouth at my breast just like Grahame and he enjoyed me until I moved my breast away and bent low and we kissed deep and



for so long that the sky began to lighten. It was making me moist an' thinkin' of givin' in, but that ring and name must come first.

“No more until I am Mrs Clarke. Now let's sleep. I am twenty-two terday.”

He made much of et, buying me a great dinner and fine clothes. For a few more days we went no further than we already had an' clearly he wasn't drawn ta me jus' by lust or a desire ter relieve; so me feelings were becomin' stronger, certain. Then in tha outskirts of one sleepy little town we passed a dilapidated, clap board Anglican church. Next door was a rectory, and on the veranda was a very aged reverend. He slept in autumn sun, his rocking chair still, his book fallen ta his ankles.

“Game?” I asked, wanting ta leave tha slut and the lesbian behind.

“If you are.”

Openin' the creaky gate woke him and he was startled.

“Oh what can we do for you young people?”

“Marry us.” Ross said.

“Oh my goodness! Mrs Karney, Mrs Karney, a marriage in the offing!” Young people!“

He tripped on his fallen book and Ross broke the fall while his slightly younger, much less addled wife came out with a date book, saw our cedar load and understood.

“If that dray is yours you won't linger. Banns, a reception...”

“We are by ourselves, and as you say we cannot be lingering... ‘That load an' our financial futures depend on bein' in Sydney... Brionny added “So we thought today.”

“Today, Young people these days, always wanting things to speed up so fast -oh - and is that legal? Let me remember...”

He started mumblin' ta himself and Ross counted out ten gold

sovereigns on the veranda table. That settled them vexing legalities. A frugal man, Ross, I suddenly realised he was not kidding, me or them.

“For expenses.”

They focused on the coins, the reverend’s reverie suddenly over.

“My granddaughter stays with us. She was so disappointed that she was not a bridesmaid at the last wedding.”

Taking the hint I suggested the obvious.

“Oh and cakes and flowers, a dress perhaps?”

“The dress has been purchased and a fine suit.”

“Have they?” I asked goin’ back ta thinkin’ he were jokin’.

“The one you were gazing at last town, with the embedded little red stones.”

“They were genuine rubies Ross on imported muslin. It was well over a hundred pound.”

“Bargained him down to ninety. Surely there is somewhere to change.” The flustered reverend contributed ideas.

“Oh we must have a wedding breakfast first, and....”

“Perhaps the granddaughter would like to get us some flowers and a cake in town?”

Ross asked that as he put out more money. “We would like a quiet wedding.” That meant ‘*This pay is fer silence and ter be left alone*’ Even the reverend got that. It was doubtful that en the last year they had got in anythin’ like that thirty-pounds that was there on the table now. So over breakfast in the parlour on their finest china we chatted.

“And when did you decide to marry?” Mrs Karney asked.

“A few days ago.” Ross responded.

“That is his answer. For me et was Boxing Day 1909.”

“And when did you first meet?”

“Boxing Day 1909!” We said in unison and the old reverend made a sound like a saw on gnarly wood, his laughter and we all joined in as our flower girl, all decked out, came in with an iced cake.

“Ready!” She exclaimed smiling sweetly.

And so on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1912 aged twenty-two in a ceremony presided over by a doddering reverend and witnessed by his wife and a school girl, we agreed ta forsake our shared lover, endowed each other with our race winnings, agreed et was time fer sex tonight an’ a Fenian renegade an’ bog Irish, married a direct descendant of the High Constables of Ulster, who used ter put bounties on tha heads of me ancestors. None of et seemed ta matter.

As we got on the dray again and waved goodbye he asked:

“Stars or a roof?”

“Stars.”

That night there was tha usual cold clear starry sky with wonderful moonlight and we had gone two miles on a branch off tha main highway, down a grass grown dirt road leading ta an imploded long-abandoned farm. There were nobody around.

“A fire afore we start would be nice. An’ could yer bathe in tha creek?”

He smiled an’ nodded. It was quiet a blaze. The dray had the sides pulled down ta block tha view of the fire from those on tha road or nearabouts, while tha creek foliage would conceal us, should there be passers-by. While he was away bathin’ I undressed, expectin’ ter be under the covers by tha time he got back but time went on tryin’ ta remove that bloody bracelet, but as the carver warned me arm had grown and the ouroboros would have ta be broken or stay, So they were still with me in a way. Me hair was dishevelled an’ combin’ et back engrossed. Sittin’ there naked with my knees bent back so that me toes tipped an’

curled under me arse, with me flesh coloured orange by tha glow, made me apparently look quite a picture.

He returned and ser did that longin', mesmerisin' gaze an' he hovered over me, not tryin' to see my sex organs, then knelt beside me, takin' off his dressing gown, we embraced and kissed and he enlarged, rubbed, then penetrated. I could hardly believe et was happenin' but soon did, the sense of unfamiliarity vanished an' we both climaxed together.

I thought he was tha excited one, but he said me eyes were glazed and givin' short little pants before kissing started. I lay on me back, rolled him over onto me and the best sex I ever had started, in tha excitement he ejaculated quickly tha second time and time seemed timeless. The next took so much longer. He came once more an' so did I an' my heart was flutterin' until exhausted, we stopped.

\*

Six days after that we came inta luck. While sleepin' in tha back when a youngish rider galloped up ter us, or rather ter our timber, givin' us an idea of how a crusader might look if he finally saw Jerusalem.

“Hello miss, sorry to seem to stare.”

“My wife, being Irish, she often finds herself exhausted by the sun.”

“Not her. It's the timber.” He was quite serious. I was gunna say somethin' about twelve hours of sexual activity, but let it pass before a stranger. His boots, saddle and clothing were all of the finest quality an' I mouthed 'rich' ter Ross.

“Suppose this load's been sold mate.”

“We intend selling it in Sydney.”

“For?”

“The highest price.”

“You can get two thousand pounds now. Name's Baldwin.”

“Four and I'll dress the cedar if you need.”

“Done!”

“You act as if your life depends on red cedar.”

“My marriage does. The intended and the in laws are coming out from England and had a good deal to say on the merits of red cedar as one of the signs of quality. I get back from there and find white ants going through the Kauri pine. Every bit. And the old family home needs renovating.”

So fer six weeks we worked, Ross with timber an’ painten, me exterminatin’ them termites and then on ter interior decoratin’ an’ tha like. Young Baldwin paid us extra money, an’ chivalrously gave us tha best room in his mansion, insisting we do et up first. Unfortunately, he bored us stupid with the merits of his beloved until I asked did she have six breasts equal ta the best breeding sows. Ross sent half the money and the dray back with another cedar order ta his father. He used some of tha wages ta book passage to Honolulu for early July. Between us, with racing, cedar pay an’ burglary money we had over twenty thousand pounds. We reached Sydney by train. We had to, morning sickness hit by then and na wonder, at his devouringly lustful rate, even with fellato as a regular substitute, Ross left me lucky not ta have cancer of tha cervix. Et takes two ter reach that stage, and there were times when I would continue after he was tired. Baldwin seemed to notice the nights I shrieked and was developing great expectations for his bride.

When told that stayen' long in Sydney, were unwise, he agreed, but said it would be impolite of him not ter see Evelyn and Andrew, even if I must stay hidden.

So he went off alone. Fer a criminal supposed ta be dead an' consigned ter hell, heaven seemed close.

\*

Ross Clarke

Moore College Anglican Seminary 5<sup>th</sup> July 1912

“Please wait, I will send a messenger over to the accommodation rooms, your name would be?”

“Ross Clarke”

Something was wrong, the tense receptionist kept looking at me.

“Ross?”

There standing before me was Rosalind, looking healthy, well-dressed, a little sad, but something else was different. The receptionist was no fool and spoke up.

“Mrs McPherson, would you like a chair?”

“Mister Clarke my husband’s best friend, has probably much to tell me. We will go to the Broadway tea rooms. If Andrew arrives could he join us there?”

We walked in embarrassed silence, then she talked of the view. The ‘something else that was different’ was the respectability of a married woman who would soon be a minister’s wife.

“Could we make it these tea rooms, someone awaits us.”

When Rosalind saw Brionny they were both suddenly turned to waxworks dummies with open mouths and then they burst into joyous laughter, clutching each other.

We all soon worked out what happened. The detective got it wrong. The ‘fellow’ who supposedly solicited her was Andrew, who took her in and looked after her. They were nine days back from their honeymoon. Rosalind suspected that Brionny had made it to the cave after the body was never found. Rosalind was released and all charges were dropped. All the tragedies and anxieties melted away in laughter and now seemed trivial. Brionny mentioned her pregnancy and Rosalind seemed happy for her – and us.

From Eloura she had heard of Allen’s sudden release and move to West Australia, of Evelyn and Helen, who attended her wedding, and

then left for Queensland on a painting trip and there was no news of Jenny Anstee. Mrs Hawkins was out of jail and had vanished. Reverend Hawkins stayed at home writing a commissioned history of the Australian Methodist Church.

When the boat sailed two days later she waved us off, crying but trying to smile. Brionny was the same.

\*

Rosalind McPherson

Sydney Harbour 7<sup>th</sup> July 1912

*Why! Why! Why! Why! WHY!*

Why did bloody Allen have to mention their names? Why didn't they just make a break for it instead of waiting? Why did Baldwin have to be riding by the road?

Even now if they had asked me, I would have gone with them, and been quite happy to tend her when childbirth came. The two people I loved most in the world were gone – and with each other.

And yet after all, what chance was there of a *ménage la trois* lasting in a world where such things only attract revulsion, derision, laughter and trouble? And yet Ross, you did not think to take me away to America to escape our problems.

From the very start there was an attraction between them. Brionny's face showed it when Ross and I came back to the hall that Boxing Day Ball and she focused on him with a look that said 'My my, Aren't you the lucky one.' She had once said that if Grahame was not her love, she would try a *ménage* with me and Ross. Now everything that had unfolded from that ball rebounded ironically. Brionny and I had first seen each other there, and where I had first seen Jenny. Ross and I first met - and met our married partners.

Life was too ironic and the ironies continued. Andrew gave me succour, respectability and order; but by doing so he lost them for

himself. His parents now disapproved of me, but they were not the ones to report me to the Anglican board. That was done by that mad bitch Ross's mother and Reverend Jervis, after our engagement was announced in Eloura's Anglican Church. They got the train to Sydney, got a board meeting convened and testified before it and presented documents and made statutory declarations, much of it based on Jenny's drunken confession.

It boiled down to being illegitimate, the daughter of a runaway wife who became a mistress and had been virtually expelled from my own church, had sexual relations with three people, two of them women, consorted with thieves, and a madam and had twice been implicated in thefts, but no case had ever ended in court.

An embarrassed court decided that in all their history, only a former convict came close to being a more unsuitable wife for an Anglican clergyman. When they asked for my comments, the reply was "Why don't you accuse me of gun running to Ulster to kill innocent women and children - or is that a moral act?" As two wore the orange rosettes of the Ulster Defence League, nothing was said or developed.

They called Andrew in next and I assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that they told him. When he came out he was calmly bitter.

"The ultimatum was either ordination or you. You will never be accepted as a minister's wife. I chose you. I love you."

He gave me that look that was so difficult to resist and apparently for the first time in his life he was defying authority and if his revolt collapsed, he would be one of those mousy little people without guts, ambition, or independence. And there is something about being so totally loved by someone that they sacrifice their career for you and *seem* to have forgiven you for a sleazy past, and the relief in respectability and a lack of deceit and concealment soothed. I even got him to talk on other



things but religion; he bored me with the third love of his life cricket, but was passable on literature, horses and music: he was very handsome.

His father turned up, and we had tea together. He was polite to me, with some sympathy, but no warmth.

“Andrew your Uncle George gets older now, the guest house down near Eden has become too much of a burden. He has the most beautiful views and home, with a vegetable patch and hunting, fishing and timber nearby. You will get two thirds of the profits, and could earn a quiet, comfortable living.”

“Do they have an Anglican church and a cricket team?”

“Certainly.”

“Rosalind?” That was another positive point for Andrew, conferring, no orders.

“This sounds ideal.”

We were due to leave two weeks after the honeymoon, five days after Ross and Bryony sailed. If Baldwin had wanted them for another week’s work or if they had decided to travel the remainder of the trip in the dray, I would have thought her dead and him vanished, at least there was that. My father-in-law got them to forego Andrew’s expulsion, replacing it with two weeks’ notice for packing.

The wedding night was different to what Ross had led me to expect, there being no shame or guilt with Ross, Brionny or Jenny, but with Andrew guilt rubbed off. He thought I would prefer the room totally pitch black and he had no idea. Several times I had to place my body so he could penetrate and he hurt and when I yelled, he thought that was losing my virginity, as he made clear next morning.

“I am sorry to have caused you pain, but Karl said that it was inevitable the first time. You took it like a trooper.”

“Thank you, sweet sir Galahad, you say the sweetest things.”

One of the reasons Andrew could sustain his deluded view of the world was because of his bookishness. He was unable to read hostile face or hear dislike in voice tones. Irony, sarcasm and sardonic comments went unnoticed or taken at surface value unless screeched.

“I always knew you were better than your background and that those ugly rumours were untrue. We have married well.”

“Ah tonight the moon casts its gleam on the roses just for us. What do we do now?”

“The brochures say that they have trained dolphins at the aquarium and they do the most amazing things.”

My teacup stayed poised, just under my chin. It was then that I suspected God existed and was punishing for sexual gratification, the punishment to suit the crime.

“Well surely Ros, there can be nothing wrong with a little relaxation, especially on a honeymoon.”

“These amazing dolphins, do they jump through hoops?”

He nodded smiling, thinking me keen and amazingly, down there I soon was and to the extent that a female dolphin trainer let me do what few were allowed, to get in the pool with them. After the first time they virtually had to kick me out at ensuing sessions. I even coaxed Andrew in and he was at his best, laughing, cheerful, frolicking, coming under the influence of my new found finny friends, in fact my only ones.

So, with the help of dolphins, blacked out rooms and some tricks Brionny and Jenny taught me to on how to bring about ejaculation quickly, we got through the honeymoon. Life would obviously be more difficult.

\*

This missive concerns your recent debate on ‘Did Ireland’s Protestants Really Put Bounties on the Heads of Irish Catholics?’ It is amazing that you are arguing if this really did happen. Of course it did! What amazes is that some people now try to deny it. A price of five pounds was paid for the head of every Irish Catholic found east of the Shannon River. There were three things wrong with this policy. First it was discontinued, second five pounds costs too much for an empty Irish scull and third - they should have made it east of Iceland. Half measures then have led to Ireland halved now - and look at the difference!

Predominantly Protestant Ulster thrives, look at the Belfast shipyards where those leviathans, the *Titanic* and the *Olympia* were built. Look at the prosperous farms and great houses of Ulster’s countryside and then compare these to the overcrowded hovels, (little changed since prehistoric times) that lie west of the Shannon. Nor are Dublin’s slums much better. Filth, stupidity, cunning and at best a childlike ignorance are the characteristics of the Irish Catholic, just as they are of all the barbaric races who have given way to civilization and order.

Now once again the Irish raise their hand in rebellion and will continue to do so, until exterminated or exiled en masse. They tried to do that to us in the great surprise attack of 1641. We must do God’s work (which he started with the Great famine) - and drive the Irish from Ireland. Look at what has been achieved in Scotland since firm measures were taken in 1746. Before that date Scotland was a collection of feuding barbaric tribes, many of them Catholic; now that happy land, so predominantly Protestant prospers!

On the verge of America’s civil war Lincoln said a house divided against itself cannot stand; it must be one thing or the other, slave or free, now on the verge of our civil war these wise words still apply and who

pray tell, believes that Ireland will be free under the rule of the satraps of a pope?

Those who call Ulster's glorious new army the Ulster *Defence* Force should remember Napoleon's dictum that the defensive is a slow form of suicide. We have the chance to solve the Irish problem once and for all and to take another step forward in the long fight against Catholicism by purifying and developing Ireland. Advance!

Rachel Clarke

President of the Eloura Branch of the Ulster Defence Association and a direct descendant of the High Constables of Ulster.

\*

Frank Clarke

Clarkestead 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1913

But lord it should never have been said, but it seemed such a harmless thing, sitting there on the veranda asking Baldwin if he would like a cup of tea while the Van Groendhals greased the creaky axle, the Dutchers being grateful for any work they could get after last year's scandal led to a bakery boycott that was only slowly fading. We chatted while we waited.

"How's the baby doing?" Baldwin asked.

"Which baby?"

"Brionny's baby, must be three months old now isn't it? Or was it late?"

Behind me Rachel had been sweeping. The sound had stopped and she was motionless. She was quick though. Her voice was level.

"We have not heard yet, news travels so slowly. Have you heard?"

"Nothing since they sailed for Honolulu, they worked well, Ross served as a fine worker and the in laws praised her interior decorating. He seemed to take approaching fatherhood calmly, but then nothing ever upset either of them, newly-weds."

Quiet calm herself she brought out a photo of Grahame's engagement to Brionny.

"Brionny hasn't changed a bit, but Ross lost weight as he grew."

With slices of cake and more tea she got that they were headed for Sydney, had an Anglican marriage certificate from Miscoee on the inland road and she had wanted to marry him since Boxing Day 1909. As soon as they were out of sight she started up.

"There is a God in Israel and justice will walk this land! Both my sons! Both! That sly slut will pay! That Sapphic Irish whore! Rosalind Jervis was the purest angel in heaven compared to that sly satanic bitch! She probably was only half bad till Brionny led her into perversions. That... And he will come back to his duty! They both will!"

I had my doubts on that score. Grahame could not do his duty if he tried. Brain damage from the jail bashing, Brionny leaving and prison discipline including long spells in solitary had combined to make him incapable of much and Ross did not want to come back, even if we could find him. The earth had swallowed him up. We were grooming Murie and Ruth to take over, a desperate choice, but he had a way of smoothing things over and avoiding making enemies and would never die prematurely of a panic attack. She was as level headed as they come – and expecting.

"How are we going to find them?"

"With detectives of course!"

"Clearly they don't want to be found and detectives cost the earth!"

"What they want has nothing to do with it and God will provide, just as he provided Baldwin to buy our cedar."

"And there is no more of that cedar left and our bank balance drops with each Ulster donation. Next drought or glut ruins us. And it is your doing."

“God controls all. If he wishes us to prosper-”

“Then if he controls everything why doesn’t he drop machine guns from heaven on Irish Protestants?”

“Because we are instruments of his will.”

And then she was off and racing on her favourite religious themes. Approaching sixty-one I was too old for divorce. There was always an excuse to be away.

Fortunately, Katie Dean arrived, nodding today instead of the habitual courtesy she once had. Her family were 1907 new chums. Her father Rupert was of Staffordshire yeoman stock, forced into factory work, being the second son who did not inherit the farm, but he had the usual second son dream, and with the wife and eight kids, cleared a hundred acres of forest and was battling. We employed some Deans as milkmaids and the brothers Rupert and Earl as seasonal workers, they were good people. Nobody liked the way Rachel was using Katie though.

“Good evening, Katie.”

“Are you ready for this month’s visit?”

“Yes Mrs Clarke.”

“Then here is your twelve pounds travel money.”

Five would have been ample, but the girl had to see the value in it Rachel said, which is a polite term for a bribe. She had been keen on Grahame even when Brionny was around and Rachel was of the opinion she would settle him down when he was out of jail, as if anything would, or could. Her second use was for breeding another generation of Clarke’s, a grandson to inherit all we had inherited and achieved, as if he would not go the way of his father and uncles rather than be ruled by our queen.

“Thank you for the travel money, Mrs Clarke.”

“Grahame will be out in three more months: things will be different then.”

“Yes Maam, but how, well – he cannot be fun anymore.”

That was very much the wrong thing to say. Rachel screwed up her face in puzzlement.

“Let us hope not girl; jail will teach him the serious side of life. Running a farm must be a serious business: fun exists for clowns, and clowns are fools to amuse children and the feeble-minded.”

“Yes miss. Something else troubles.” Her lips trembled in fear. “Well not meaning to be impolite, but he does not follow good advice. He being such a good sweet person himself, he does not see how bad some people can be. Like well, when I told that Brionny was bad to the bone, he said not to be jealous, and when I warned him that Cousin Allen was not his friend he just laughed.”

“The folly of not listening to your good advice must now be apparent to him. If not, we will have words with him and if you are wiser than him you must bend him to your will: many wives find this out, it is quite a normal situation.”

She bowed and got her cleaning instructions for the visit of the great Sir Eustace Hughes, on tour for the Ulster Defence Force, he was due here in less than two weeks. Robert who had just been commissioned an officer, was coming home with a surprise. We had learned to distrust surprises and fifteen months after the last crisis that ended up with jailed people and a vanished son, I did not want more, even so, they would come.

\*

Rachel Clarke

Clarkestead 28<sup>th</sup> June 1913

He had not changed any, better dressed virtually unnoticeable in a crowd, very subservient, good. People who know their place in society prosper.

“Now Mister Moon, while going through a list of Sydney detectives looking for someone who would go to the ends of the earth your name

appeared. A blessing from heaven, considering your work for Captain Bee.”

He nodded hat in hand, and when motioned to sit, he did. And did not take the tea on the parlour table until proffered; even better. Here was a man who knew his place and who his betters were.

“The preliminaries are done. My son Ross, who you will doubtless remember, ran off with Brionny McNamara and cobbled together some type of marriage under an assumed name, without banns or notification or a required time. While I work to annul that dubious ceremony, you will find them and bring him home, divorced.”

“Will he agree to that?”

“They both will when they see the documents you give them. If they do not, have her jailed first, then if he then still refuses to see sense, jail him. The family name has been ruined by one son in jail, two will not matter and it will curb that arrogance.”

“Ross is a very violent man-”

“You may use some hired force, but not so much that he... the Clarke name must continue. Here, look at this folder of information and photographs. There last location was Honolulu.”

“America! Mrs Clarke this will cost a fortune!”

“So be it. Nobody makes a fool of me without retribution. And she is most definitely going to suffer retribution. God’s wrath will rest heavily on her and we are both instruments of his will. After the divorce and only after, serve these Irish warrants on her. Let her rot in an Irish jail if she loves that land that much.”

“First we must find them, in the vastness of America-”

“People still write letters home to family in County Clare. Already agents investigate there.”

“You are a most formidable woman Mrs Clarke.”



“And you are also a weapon in God’s hands.”

\*

Frank Clarke

Clarkestead 8<sup>th</sup> July 1913

After hearing Sir Eustace Hughes praised for decades and seeing my wife smiling as she fussed over his arrival, I was expecting a loud, peppery, little fanatic full of hate, bombarding us with God talk and Irish politics. He was also expected to arrive at the Eloura Railway station at three o’clock for that night’s debate.

Instead, he arrived at Clarkestead, just after breakfast, in a Rolls-Royce silver ghost which matched the grey colour of his frock coat, trousers, derby and spade beard and hair. That recalled Donal Shaw, lighting fires in plays so that the flames would match his red hair, beard and inflamed eyes. At six foot four or thereabouts Hughes was impressive in other ways. He had dark, but merry bright blue eyes and his receding hair rose up high and the most pleasing speaking voice, deep and as silver as everything else about him. It was hard to believe that a man of over fifty could be so handsome. The appeal of Irish politics was becoming evident. His secretary was introduced as his daughter Alice. When she took off her auto-mobile goggles she had the same eyes.

“It seems that even kookeebarras welcome here.” Her voice had music in it. I responded warmly.

“Kookaburras, also known as the clock bird because they wake us every dawn.”

“Come in for a cup of tea. My wife is off visiting Zelda, a sister.”

They took in some of the parlour and his face lost some of its merriment. He wanted to say something and so did his daughter, who politely excused herself to polish up the car.

“Say it.”

“Your farm looks prosperous, but considering the size of the donations we were expecting something massive. Your wife’s donations must be affecting your finances.”

“If anything goes wrong, we are done for.”

“And in farming something always goes wrong. May I speak to your wife on this, these days with the unfolding crisis, we have enough funds.”

“Certainly.” The man was likeable already.

“And on another matter? You are familiar with her recent head-hunter article in the Belfast News?”

When he saw my puzzlement he gave me a copy and sipped while I read.

“You do understand that Ireland is drifting towards the tragedy of civil war?”

“And my wife will help cause it.”

“This article caused a furore and others came out saying much the same. “One United Ireland! All or nothing! The slogans of the Republicans, but in reverse in of the Ulster Defence Force officers want to name a battalion after her. With five armies, Republican and Orangemen, British troops and socialists and Fenians all ready to fight each other. We are set for an explosion and do not need matches thrown into the powder barrel. All most of us want is Ulster for ourselves and right of passage through the other three provinces for those who want to join us, but she serves now as almost a combination of saint and visionary to some extremists.”

“You will need to speak to her alone. Now before she comes, a question which you need not answer, she never does. Although you are frequently mentioned, Why didn’t you two marry?”

“She never got my jokes.”

That made me just stare and he knew he should say more.

“Rachel had only three interests, farming, politics and religion. When we tried to show her the beauties of Ulster’s coasts, she could only talk of wanting to see the battle site at the Boyne. At dances when my feet were itching to go she was oblivious to everything but chattering political intrigue. At school she was too heavily influenced by the extremists and once committed, her views hardened.”

I could only nod and ask him how he liked Australia. I then make myself scarce after Rachel arrived by chatting about the car with Alice, the sweet car-mad daughter. Lunch would be late. Then we heard another motor and thought my senses would be failing with age, for the sound seemed to come from the air, but no, Alice looked up to and we saw the speck enlarge as it came closer, an aeroplane which circled twice, came low and slow to scare the cows off and landed in the pasture. The pilot was all too familiar, Robert. He took his helmet and goggles off and smiled in hello and then seemed to turn to wax, with his hand on his helmet strap. Following his gaze, it was easy to see why; she had eyes a man could drown in and a sweet nature that shone like a sunny dawn. Her eyes went over him with approval.

“This is my eldest son, Robert, a Lieutenant, just graduated from Duntroon.”

“And on two weeks leave from Point Cook, where the aviators are stationed.”

“A flyer! Take me up!”

“This is Miss Alice Hughes of Ulster, daughter of Sir Eustace Hughes, who has arrived a little early.”

“That is because I drive fast and am absolutely totally car mad, did you see the rolls I pestered father into buying? You must have, but you couldn’t see the chauffeur I got sacked so as to replace him.”

“Should you ask your father’s permission before taking you up?”

“At twenty-one? Besides he has never refused me permission, ever. How soon before you fly again?”

“After every flight the struts must be checked for stress and the carburettor sounded ominous just at landing. Maybe an hour.”

“Partially blocked fuel line?”

“Or grit already carried in.”

“Let me help”

Being unnoticed, I left. At dinner Rachel sat stunned or preoccupied staring at Sir Eustace, not with love or hate either, not with dislike, but just blankly.

“Oh father this is such a nice area, and we need to rest, Melbourne to Cairns all stops and more to come! Why not postpone the lectures for two weeks and rest? You should not push yourself too hard.”

“We have many spare guest rooms and you are most welcome.” Rachel said, noticing how romance was unfolding. Over the next two weeks things unfolded very well. Rachel threatened if I told, but I felt I must.

“You asked for a personal conversation.” He said to put me at my ease.

“It’s about Robert and his brothers. You see there was this Irish girl, Brionny. She was quite charming....”

“And...”

“She was a former Fenian, we did not know that; she even acted as a spy. And with quite a reputation for .... Or other matters. And when the police came to arrest her my youngest, her fiancé our Grahame, defended her, physically. Never had a black mark against his name till then, now he is in jail with some brain damage from the truncheons. Then she ran off with my middle son Ross, vanished off the face of the earth after they married.”

“Perhaps with this Brionny that is no bad thing. Thank you for your honesty. My political enemies could make much of this.”

“There are problems with Robert.”

“Nothing that appears obvious.”

“He went to a private school and came out very oddly, very high strung. Not the type to be attracted to women.”

“He certainly makes up for it now.”

Sir Eustace had a point there. They were never out of each other’s sight, chattering on together about anything, but motors mainly.

“Yes, I have no objections, to them seeing each other, but do you?”

“My daughter was jilted by a cad at seventeen and in what then appeared as school girlish vexation, swore off men forever. Since then it has been one fad after another – until now. I have a suggestion to make which Mrs Clarke should hear.”

I got Rachel, made pensive by my face.

“The tour exhausts us, we need an aide, could Robert be seconded?”

“Why of course!”

“The Ulster Defence Force has almost all the assets of a modern army. Excepting one, aviation. Aeroplanes are expensive, but aviators cannot be had for their weight in gold. We need trainers and our sympathisers here can get him seconded without resigning his commission, we need allies in the British forces....”

“And for this you ask my permission? Oh, sir Eustace! This is a proud moment. If only my other sons went this way...”

“And if in Ulster this romance between my daughter and your son progresses to matrimony?”

“You do this family great honour. The hand of God emerges in the events of our teenage years. Who is not to say that in some crucial battle to come the aviators trained by my son would not be the decisive factor?”

Or if the struggle goes on another generation that their children will be great in that time? His ways are mysterious, but at times we can see his guiding hand guiding us to a greater good. There is a God in Israel!”

“Indeed.”

\*

Evelyn Chapman Hawk's Nest Port Jackson Sydney 7<sup>th</sup> November 1913

Alice Hughes: the poor thing. So sweet, but with an appalling innocence that put me in mind of Mallarmé’s famous quote about when you look for the origin of evil you will find innocence. Sipping her tea, smiling demurely with her legs crossed, and eyes bright with good – hearted enthusiasm as she chirped on rapid fire with excited delight – about the Ulster Defence Force. She was a font for fine details of their machine gun types, ammunition supply problems, troop movements, developments in barbed wire and uniform design...

“Ah Miss Hughes... Uhm... Have you ever seen a battle?”

The smile froze. As expected, the look combined stunned puzzlement and a suddenly developing hostility.

“Of course not!”

“But you will soon?”

“How should I know?” She looked at cousin Robert and Helen in puzzlement while Helen put her tea down.

“What my husband Evelyn suggests is that war might not be what you think.”

“But I have not thought about it at all.”

*Obviously you stupid young woman and you also need to think more about marriage, specifically marriage to this man.*

“Do you ever think of Oscar Wilde’s stories?”

Another puzzled look. Helen and Robert were catching on.

“Of course not! Definitely not! Oh he has come back into fashion, but he is evil! And those new Irish writers Yeats, Hyde and Shaw are so radical, why?”

“Do you like Tchaikovsky?”

“Should I not?”

“The art of Simeon Solomon, Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes?”

“Degenerates both of them! One jailed and the other will be if he ever sets foot in England! And as we are all grown adults here we know for what unspeakable sin!” She turned her bitter angry fixed gaze at Evelyn as he continued “And there are many more like them boys with long hair who should have been born girls...”

“Alice we have an appointment before sailing tonight.” Robert’s nostrils were flaring as he spoke.

“Oh yes we do! Certainly, we must be going!”

And go they did. Helen sighed and stared.

“Well despite my best efforts, she does not take hints, does she?”

“She may well be his worst possible choice for a bride.”

“Can you see a good one?”

“Oh let them go Evelyn; it is their life and who can predict how a marriage will turn out?”

Suddenly looking at her glare my way made me uneasy.

“You gave permission, is that the problem?”

“Not really. “If a woman looks beautiful and willing, what can be wrong?”

“Evelyn that response is the problem. You cannot see anything wrong. Your latest is sixteen and a young sixteen.” Has it ever occurred to you that beauty may be only skin deep and that perhaps you need to look at what resides in the skull, not stay stuck on the skin?”

She paused, trying to out stare me. “Remember painting ‘The four Muses.’ Do you know what that beautiful girl thought when she had that look of rapture on her face that you capture so magnificently?”

“You are going to tell me and it will be distasteful and emasculating.”

Helen was a clever mimic, now she was savage.

“Cur! After standing' there starkers fer an hour an' 'e given me ten bleeden pound! That's beer 'n steak fer tea tonight and now when we get back ta Bargo we can get both chicken fences wired, an' now with them foxes kept out we'll be sellen' forty quid a heggs an' chicken a year, not bleeden twelve! Whacko ter buggery!”

I shrugged my shoulders and started getting brushes ready.

“Do you really enjoy waking up chatting with someone like that? Don't you find it degrading?”

“We did not talk that much. And you are beginning to sound like the nuns you say you escaped from. You may think you have them out of your head but you have not. Morality is dreary and castrating.”

“So is seeing a seventeen-year-old go through an abortion. You should have been there.”

“Elise?”

“Pamela. The maid from Newtown, the one with curls, who vanished suddenly, remember her?”

“Helen what do you want?”

“You should leave teenage girls alone. I know that it is because you are still a teenager, even if you are thirty this year.”

“Meaning?”

“Grow up. You leave me thinking that if I am twenty now how long will I last? How long after the first wrinkles or the few pounds weight too many....”



“The thought of leaving you never came to me; if you left me I would be devastated.”

She sighed. “Keep a mistress and a partner to do those things you like and I don’t, have them checked out for syphilis and the rest and leave the others alone. Ever seen an advanced raving syphilis case? They were usually in search of sensual beauty.”

She strode down the corridor and came back dressed for a cove walk. “Evelyn remember this quote you read, to me yesterday ‘Behind every evil act you will find innocence.’ Think on it. it applies to you.” Before I could reply she slammed the door and left.

\*

Katie Dean

Clarkestead 21<sup>st</sup> October 1913

Katie Clarke had a nice ring to it and the nicknames Meandean and Uncleandean, started in school and now continued, were tiresome for sure. Keeping the house clean in the forest was hard, what with them possums, snakes, flies, rats and mice all wanting to make a home in ours and we had to work hard to scrape a living anyway. Our forest land was not good for much once it was cleared, we got more cash from selling firewood than anything else. We insisted we were independent toughies, but not really. Well, I mean everybody depended on those of us who worked for the Clarkes. Mister Frank was as nice as could be, but Mrs Rachel, well she paid straight up and fair and was generous and we ate at the same table, but she had her ways. It was best to never smile, laugh, chat, stretch or yawn or talk around her. Disagreeing with her was something that never occurred to me. Dad, who worked in service back in Staffordshire, said they were all like that. The way to deal with it was to keep an expressionless face like, eyes downcast and say “Yes Maam” at the end of a sentence and curtsy when approached and dismissed. At least now, being Grahame’s fiancée meant no more curtsying, even if I

more or less had to join the Eloura Branch of the Ulster Defence Force. It was all her, as I soon realised. Her sister Edna and her husband, the Reverend needed the donations and well, policeman Mcphee. He was probably there to make sure she did not do anything too mad. Anyway, when she said jump it was 'how high?' and fine clothes, a nice room and a full stomach always come at a price, wherever anybody may be. And a nice fella in your bed too, for that. Grahame and I had done it plenty of times before he got jail. He was good at it, at least enough for me, and Brionny she knew, but did not care, a strange one that. Anyway, girls who take on too many boys get reputations and one good one was enough for me. Why want more?

When he came back Lynda Taun Fisher and others insisted that he was a vegetable and others said he was just more of an idiot than before, but he was more like a slow child with a bad head cold. With lots of coaxing and sweet words and no stress, he would chatter quite lucidly and if it was just little things like the weather or not enough sugar in his tea he sounded normal. You could not take him to the races and ask him which horse was going to win with any certainty any more. We tried and when the thing came second last all he could say was “But he had nice eyes.” All Grahame was good for was simple things like peeling bark off firewood, finding bad fruit in the crop, playing with horses and dogs and wiping and polishing – shoes, floors, furniture whatever. He would do that for hours, making everything immaculate, but his fixed concentration was unnerving to see.

He may have been better away from his Ma for every time he smiled and started to expand his simple mind a bit and she was around she would pounce on him with one of these shrieks that made me drop whatever I was holding and gasp for air. “Ah you are a nervy little thing.” She would say. *Oh please die soon so people around here will be happy*

*and maybe he will come good again* The thought came; even if that is a bad thing.

\*

Alice Clarke      Hugh's Beach House. Belfast Ireland 1<sup>st</sup> December 1913

The wedding was lovely, everything perfect. Even the weather! A sunny day in December in Northern Ireland! Weakly sunny, but even so, and not only the bridesmaids but married women looking at handsome him and became envious – but not all of them, some of them and some of the men had this odd look. I shrugged it off. It was the second warning as I was soon to realise. The wedding day went perfectly, the wedding night did not. We had enthused so much about motors, flying machines and Ulster's rights that romance seemed to flow off them like rainwater off a stony slope; not the basic thing. Oddly the guests were leaving before we were, even the cleaners were going. Neither of us were exactly panting with lust, trembling with nerves being closer to the truth.

We ended up doing what a woman friend said shy women sometimes do: turning my back, keeping my slip on, lying on my side so as to let him take me from behind. It hurt like she said it would, but there was something else, something unknown. He acted next morning like it never happened and we did the things we loved doing and talked of the things we always liked talking of, but something was going, the exuberance.

Each night was always the same, almost, me on my side or face down, him behind or on top. Then when I pleaded off he said we could try new things that would not get me pregnant and that started the alarm bells ringing. When I curtly asked what new things; he would not explain. One night he did them and I should have spoken up and he did apologise, saying he thought we would enjoy them, but if I preferred not to... I told him my own bedroom unshared was preferred. He nodded too quickly.

Oddly after a week of sleeping apart we were back to being friends again. For December, January and February he was allowed one night a month and we would do it his way. They were perversions – and he made me feel that if I did not do them someone else would. After February I relented and let him do as he wished whenever. He was considerate, not forceful and after two months of sodomy I was used to it, or rather as much as I would ever be. Nothing to enjoy, but the sense of unnaturalness waned away and a nip or three before bed helped. Not something to confide to another and sometimes a sense of angst, of degradation, pervaded my psyche but he was my husband, and in many ways a good one. He did everything right in public, no other women ever kept his eye like I could, he was generous, never hit, snarled or insulted me and more and more he would, with encouragement, do the proper sexual thing.

\*

Alexander McPherson          Hawk's Nest Port Jackson 7<sup>th</sup> January 1914

“Are you mad?” Ruth glared. “Why must McPherson men always marry the wrong women – well at least my brothers do.”

She actually said this while Deborah sat not eight feet away, her eyes enlarging in disbelief.

“Uurh ... she’s one of Evelyn’s models and we all know what that means.”

“He never touched me.”

“And illegitimate from an orphanage and from some nutty sect that cast her out and anybody with an admission ticket to the State Art Gallery can see...”

“We are marrying.”

“You should marry her for more than being pregnant and her good looks and she should marry for more than money. I’ll see you disinherited and disbarred for this.”

“Alexander could we stay in Sydney, please? Helen and Evelyn said they would be like this.”

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Ross Clarke            Horsey Hill. West Virginia Border 4<sup>th</sup> February 1914

Perhaps humans are not mentally built for happiness for any great length of time. Perhaps even two people in love need others or perhaps it was self-destructive guilt or the sheer boredom of a third week of being snowbound with one adult and a daughter not yet two. After the mail man George made his last delivery, which made him the last person we had seen, Brionny was depressed, restless, and even fretful. Maybe she had become more used to Eloura’s temperate weather than she thought. Maybe this enclosing recalled the cave. It may have even been as simple as she suddenly said, looking out of our window at the long panoramic view down the slopes and then to the mountains on the other side, a dozen miles away.

“Tha baby will come soon.”

“Six weeks premature?”

“Yes, yer need ter get the midwife and et looks like a break in the snowing, sa best ter saddle up, get in ter town.”

We had a four thousand acre spread as they said here, horses, pigs, turkeys, chickens and an orchid. A farm little different to home, the people were different in some ways, more driving, more polite, less impressed by aristocratic titles and more optimistic. Where Australians would say ‘I’ll give it a go’ they would say “I am going to make this work.’ They also tended to talk about racial matters more, own more guns and usually be puritanical about drinking, sex and gambling (excepting the stock exchange, where they made up for it) but otherwise people were the same. We followed their rules. These consisted of helping respected locals when they needed it, and refraining from overly close contacts with

blacks, attacking Protestant Christianity and mentioning the Civil War. Up here in the mountains, with the West Virginia border edging our land, the local people had divided about evenly between Union and Confederate and not necessarily on borders. Lucas our black help, hobbled because he had half his foot blown off for the Union at the 1864 battle at Cold Harbour. George the mail man, had as he said “rode for Jefferson Davis from First Manassas to Appattomox.” We followed their rules, attended town socials, attended Anglican Church (called Episcopalian here) and we were liked. Brionny was a charmer and we followed their rules, donating to local charities and working in team efforts.

We planned it out and when the snow started melting next day I rode off, getting Lucas, who had seen all six of his born (and live) and helped the blacks' midwife, to stay. And yet there was something else... Something nearly grasped in that house, something that was on the edge of knowing but could only come as a doubt. Surely Brionny could see some other solution than getting me to ride through midwinter's heavy snows?

Then it occurred to me, all those stories of doom driven lovers, sainted martyrs and unchangeable tragic fate had shaped her, passion was part of her intensity, never really relaxing, always dramatic. Donal and Jenny were also like that. Maybe they did not know where reality and entertainment ended; or maybe they moved in and out of both as expediency required. I got things half right, as I found when approaching town. Lucas's eldest girl struggled by, huddled over a bag of kindling.

“Go back, get your wife and go! Move fast!” She muttered that urgently and I turned round puzzled – and saw two riders, circle each of the alley's corners and after getting out their shotguns and point them my way, stay motionless.

“Now keep on moving, straight to the sheriff’s office.”

The sheriff was in his rocker on the porch as they call verandas here, looking like he was the one who preferred being far away in Australia.

“Knew you pair were decent – and on the run from something, even before hearing of the big bank account. Told you to head for the big cities, but oh no.” He shook his head slightly, sighed and scratched it as he looked through documents.

“She's in more trouble than you. Acted as a fence for jewellery stolen in New York, Attica, Baltimore and Richmond, sold it in Galway. The thief already confessed and implicated her and we have their address books and accounts. The Richmond job alone means she will be behind bars before extradition battles really start. Other state, Australia and Ireland want her for trial. You are to be held for investigation as an accessory.”

From behind the bars in the one cell town jail cum sheriff’s office my gaze went to the warming Franklin stove, and sitting there in a stylish gabardine coat, rubbing his hands and looking my way with gleaming eyes was Albert Moon.

\*

Little news about my wife and daughter got through my bars. Brionny was convicted in Richmond, then extradited to the northern states and given other sentences that totalled a year. Despite good lawyers the authorities deported me to England, being a British subject and so I crossed the Atlantic, but having heard more than enough in my ears about Ulster, did not visit Robert there, so after spending several days among Dublin's libraries and newspapers I sailed to Perth, being in no mood to tour. Another month went on looking for Allen, but he was not easily traceable or perhaps my face gave away my intentions. Back in Eloura little had changed, except at Clarkstead and Caufield’s. Coming up the

Ocean Ridge at Tom's place first that distant figure putting washing on the line was once someone who was the other half of myself. She paused at the sight of me, unsure and then sure of recognition, but did not know how to react. She was several months pregnant.

"Ross." She nodded smiling. Once again, my role was the liked cousin, the former good student, as if love was nothing or the scores of times we made love or coming within a hair's breadth of marrying me was nothing. From the quiet pleading look in her eyes she wanted to go back to what we had been before that storm: so be it. I fell into old habits and was invited in for a cup of tea.

"How's Brionny?"

Alison listened to all that had happened, then sighed. "Regrettably there's little good news, apart from Leo and Marsha and Murie and Ruth each having daughters. We have three months to go yet. Alexander married that beautiful model in the 'Hylas and the maenads painting. She stays in Sydney most of the time so he's often away. Andrew did not become a minister. They run a guest house on the far south coast."

"Your place looks pretty prosperous now."

They had a gramophone, expensive looking carpets, curtains, framed pictures and new polished timber doors. The new piano wasn't new: it was the one we had at home and Alison used to sing on it when the chestnut school was going. She bit her lips, and looked at the floor.

"When you get home, you won't find any joy, but bear in mind I had nothing to do with it and argued my best for your interests and regret that your marriage did not work out."

"The marriage worked out, my family did not."

"Best not stay too long; Tom gets jealous easily."

"He knows?"



“Suspects. If you wish to see us, visit us here or when we are in town, Aunt Rachel made herself no longer welcome here or anywhere else.”

I took my leave, noting the sympathy in her eyes and the longing that lasted a few seconds. Further to home I was struck by the way the old stone boundary fence was gone. Moved up over the creek two miles north. Next to it was Tom, in a tractor, which he drove over a smug smile on his face and he had his boy Jack with him.

“Thought I’d better make a couple of things clear to yer.” He leaned forward, his gloating arrogance all over his face and in his stance, the simple but wise and straightforward bushie playing a gloating game.

“This is my land now. Them detectives cost a lot. Who would have thought that Albert Moon, that grovelling sly little toadie, would end up with most of the Clarke money or me with Clarke land? Well Clarkes had more money than sense and not much of either any more. Relying on silly bloody Murie.” He laughed and spat.

“Does all this have a point?”

“You mix with crooks and lesbians, one brother is a sissy and the other is a simpleton and your mother is a bossy lunatic. I don’t want any Clarkes on *my* land. Its my land now. Get it? Now get!”

Then the glittery contemptuous smile went from ear to ear and he stared at the sun like it was his personal mirror. The simple working fella. Tom was another reason I would never believe in any type of radicalism or Christianity. They all rest on the idea of goodness being located in the simple common man. Sean, Tom, Allen, Donal, Albert Moon and many others cured me of that silly idea. Uncle Reg’s question asked by this creek when I was a runaway kid still echoed; who is good?

Nobody at home. Apart from selling the best third of the land, what remained was being run down, that was obvious from miles off.

Untrimmed branches, fallow fields, unrepaired fences, the barn looked dilapidated; nobody was herding. Oddly the house looked immaculate. Katie Dean, still a milkmaid, was working in the yard while Grahame was polishing a wagon wheel. Grahame looked up and smiled then seemed to go through his own mind.

“R- R –Ross.” He smiled at his ability to remember.

“Grahame! How are you?”

That was a cruel question, not intended that way. He just smiled and turned his head away, polishing on. Katie Dean took my horse’s reins and walked the horse over to the barn. It was clear I should follow.

“Questions or instructions about things he can’t see just confuse him. Ask him should he paint the wheels grey or brown with the paint in front of him and he is okay; ask him if the wheels need painting and he gets confused and retreats into himself.”

“You are paid to look after him?”

“We are married.”

Nothing could be said to that and it felt wiser to change the topic. Her brothers Rupert and Earl were walking over, looking habitually sullen and exhausted and they gave the impression they were trapped here because of family loyalty.

“Where is everybody? We used to employ a dozen people.”

“Your mother spent the money on all that bloody Ulster rubbish and then on detectives to find you. They sold one third to Tom and another to Max and mortgaged the house and the rest and are living on a bank overdraft and they will foreclose soon if nobody buys. Perhaps Max will and let them stay on, Tom will bid, but needs a bank loan. Not that many would work for her, Catholics wouldn’t after she became famous for that Ulster head hunter letter and the others reckon she’s a bossy bitch for some reason. With his heart mucking up your father should not be doing

anything, let alone as much as he does. Murie and Ruth were often over helping, but she abused him for making jokes, so they left. Now there are just the four of us, serves her right. If we only work fourteen hours a day we count it lucky and she and God have decided that baking, washing dishes, and making preserves on Sunday will not break the Sabbath, just things that are fun are.”

“What is wrong with my father?”

“Heart attack just before Christmas. Too much work, too much worry. The place just barely survives. Even she gave up on the detectives as a New Year’s Resolution, then Brionny wrote to her family in Ireland with the new West Virginia address. She had rewards posted in their town and they got to Albert Moon the day before he was to ship back.”

“Where are my parents?”

“It is best that we prepare your father, even nice shocks are not good.”

While waiting, my mother, looking careworn and much thinner, came round the corner carrying a dairy tin full of picked fruit. There was a gleam of surprise, then of triumph and she actually had the nerve to smile.

“Well don’t just stand there, start picking. If you don’t work you don’t eat in this place.”

I walked past her, seeing Dad off in the distance.

“I would like to exchange horses and go into town. How high does the overdraft go?”

“One thousand pound, with the Bank of New South Wales. The mortgage is another seven thousand six hundred.”

“Might make it back late, if not I will be back by lunch tomorrow.” I made it to the bank and then to the newspaper, where the Van Groendhals

where dismayed to see me, but put on a smiling act. Keith was a little better.

\*

Keith Anstee

Eloura 6<sup>th</sup> June 1914

It would take a heart as stony as his mother's not to feel sorry for Ross and I liked him from the first time that we met. He looked much older, much harder, than two ordinary years of age would justify. He seemed to read my mind.

“The years were good until February this year. It was not a marriage of convenience or of pity. For us home was that farm in Appalachia.”

There are times when wisdom consists of saying nothing: this was not totally possible.

“Letters have arrived for you.”

I motioned him to a desk and pretended to be busy. After reading them his voice was like iron.

“We are divorced. Our American farm is sold and that makes me about six thousand pounds richer. She enclosed some photographs of her and the baby and still wants to remarry, but when my mother dies.”

“And what do you want?”

“The same thing. And to restore the family farm here.”

“Brionny has been listed here as presumed dead. If she returns here she will be jailed and so will you as an accessory. You may have to choose between her and freedom.”

“Once everything at Clarkestead gets set right, including Grahame, I will be back with Brionny in a flash.”

“Regretfully you cannot do that. The bad news continues. Brionny cannot communicate with you. I was only able to find out through old Fenian contacts. Return to America and you are under arrest: the same applies to Ireland. After the divorce was finalised Moon doxed her in to

the British consul for the burglaries and Fenian activities she will get ten times what the Americans gave her. She will probably be interrogated and if she does not inform, she will get many years more.”

While pausing and looking into his absolutely still face and the proverb came back: *Beware of the wrath of a patent man.*

“Keith why do you give an impression of knowing more bad news?”

“After other prisoners complained, they were not going to put up with a screamer: Shenandoah was put up for adoption. The records are sealed, her name has been changed...”

“And the other child born a month ago.”

“Prison food is not nourishing and the work is hard...”

“The baby died.”

I nodded. Once again, the terrible stillness, while behind the mask something was on.

“Look I went through something like this when Jenny blabbed and all types of things came out that left me stunned and then she galloped off. Going on a drunk for three days helped, it blotted out things nobody could cope with and made a divide...”

“If you are suggesting I or we get drunk, no. I have enemies to destroy. You would not know where Albert Moon resides?”

“Kenny got a card from New York about three weeks back.”

“Any news about Allen?”

“Not a word since he was paroled and fled.”

He then went into detail about his recent attempts to find Allen in a calm, logical, obsessive manner that was scary. Whatever he would do in future to Allen, Albert, his mother or anyone else the bitterness was ineradicable. I tried.

“Revenge becomes a war without victories. Even if you succeed, you play their game, making them the centre of dramas where they get

attention. Hurt them and they are martyrs and they luxuriate in their martyrdom. As for love, so much culture tells us that love is the whole object of life, but if that were so we would all die of exposure if we did not starve to death first. There is so much to life, we all have to work to survive and there are other pleasures to enjoy-”

“How can anything be enjoyable knowing what Brionny must be going through?”

“Because you must know that she would not want you suffering.”

The next morning after sleeping on my couch he seemed more adjusted, but he left me wondering if he would ever smile again.

\*

Ross Clarke

Clarkestead 7<sup>th</sup> June 1914

I barged my way into the meeting of the Eloura Branch of the Ulster nutters. Dearest Mother presiding over Katie Dean, the cowed daughter in law, her brothers there to protect her, Trevelyan, who had massive investments in and coal contracts with Belfast shipping, Grahame playing with toy soldiers taken from the display cabinet, George and Edna game to show some wearied exasperation now Clarke family church donations were way down and immobile Mcphee, the obvious spy. All of them clearly preferred to be elsewhere while my enthused mother prattled on about the war to come and how Robert, “the worthiest cornerstone that the builder had rejected” was one of the British officers who had mutinied and pledged their refusal to fight against Ulster.

“We look forward to hearing an eyewitness report a little later on. Minutes and news from home first.”

When my report time came they got a very accurate report of what Irish tenancy evictions were like.

“But what has this to do with us?” Aunt Edna asked.

“A good deal; that is what you want to perpetuate. That is how the Protestant Ascendancy make their money, squeezing paupers. That is why the paupers are keen to fight. And evictions have a great deal to do with people on this farm the way things are going.”

Mcphee looked sheepish, as he should; if we were forcibly evicted, he would have to do it.

“Now here, take many facts and figures about the effects of the Eloura branch on recruitment and the head-hunters letter alone has added a thousand recruits-.” My mother beamed here “to the Republicans. The most extreme anti-British forces love you, dearest mother. You make them look moderate and any lunatic extremism they come up with looks mild compared to you. Here! Examine the proof!” I got a pile of clippings collected in Dublin, handfuls were distributed to everybody.

“And here, read of what your side think of you.” I pushed forward the next documents. “It boils down to you are a silly, mad and very dangerous bitch, an opinion that virtually everybody else who knows you, agrees with. So why don’t you disband?”

Nobody was game to speak. For or against.

“Well if you don’t disband, please hold your meeting elsewhere.”

“This is my house and-”

“Not any more. This is my house and you are here under my sufferance, which will only last till the day of my father’s funeral. Before you are much older you are going to wish you had left me alone in Appalachia. You are responsible for the death of my wife’s baby, for the deliberate destruction of my home and family over there and the near destruction of this place and that does not count the dreary years from birth on, so you are lucky not to get what the Americans call putting out a contract on your life.”

For once in her life somebody had shut her up.

“Here is the bill of sale on this house, sold to me by the bank yesterday. Here is the bill of sale on the land you sold to Max Chapman, also sold back to me. Here is a list of assorted shopkeepers and other creditors who were going to take you to court: I paid them off and I am now the creditor you must repay. Now if you don’t like my orders you can go. Doubtless God will provide a new home for you.”

“Doubtless he will! And from those who have witnessed this outrage.”

She turned to Reverend George and Edna who having sat there stunned now were swallowing with fearful faces and eyes darting at each other at the prospect of giving a home to God’s chosen one. My mother, who had been fighting back, and had eyes gleaming in imaginary triumph, slowly faded into dismay when she saw their faces, but she spoke.

“After a visit to Reginald for a fortnight you will see how much you need me. I am packing to leave.”

And leave she did. We had twenty days of peace and with the racing money and the Appalachia sale money I could get much done here. Jan and Hendrik worked with us for wages on Sundays having given up religion soon after Jenny had made them a laughing stock. Even Murie and Ruth turned up and Dad could do light duties. Although the workload was heavy, things were improving dramatically. Workers were coming back and produce was being sold again. I was even able to cancel Albert Moon’s bonus payment. Kenny said Albert was voyaging back.

A sure sign that things were improving was when I was walking on the same town shop veranda as Tom and Alison with her new-born girl Esmeralda and seeing me, he snarled and went into a surly mood. Nothing made Tom gloomier than seeing someone else happy or successful.



“You may have whined and grovelled your way into getting Max to sell you back what was Clarke land, but nothing will get you back what was Clarke land but bloody mine now!”

“Tom, could you just get out of my way.”

“You don’t deny whining and grovelling to Uncle Max! Nah, you sneaky bastard! Did yer do rudies with yer brother’s wife while the poor bastard was in jail? Well did ja?”

Alison who was cringing in embarrassment, called his name softly and pulling on his sleeve. He ignored her.

“And what type of bloody man turns his own Ma out so that she has to beg for a roof over her head?”

“So I can tell her to go and live with you?”

Alison nearly bent over and winced with her fists clenched. “Ross no!” Even Tom was stuck for a few seconds, enough for me to move out of his way.

“You are the type that likes bedding lesos that’s what type you are!” I stopped at the courthouse for a court order form. The simple bloke had done all this in the middle of the main street so as to feed the gossips. Quite a few people who did not know my mother well were sneering at me or walking on the other side of the street. There were garbled rumours going about along the lines that I had helped Irish Fenians steal a treasure, done them in and could now buy back the farm with the loot. Some horsey winnings money was in my account now but over half was from the Appalachian sale. In another story Andrew was the dupe while I had a closet affair with his intended, Brionny, but he woke up and married a decent girl, and Grahame finding out, got in a fight with me in jail where I bashed him senseless and my poor sainted mother, a witness, was now exiled.

On the other hand, relatives who had stayed away now visited and

Dad was laughing again. With our visitors, Keith, Murie and Ruth, Jan and Hendrik, Douglas, Leo, Marsha and Max, we were enjoying a good laugh while finishing off lunch out on the veranda, then she turned up. I realised that I was laughing again, never thought that would be. Eating on the veranda was for some reason had always been a major crime. One by one with us the laughter and smiles ceased.

“Why on earth are you all turning into a herd of pigs?”

“Because we ate too much ham for lunch.” Murie joked and kept on eating.

“Is everyone aware that I do not allow---“

“Did not allow. Your rule in this house finished three weeks ago.”

Dad said that, long overdue, still welcome

“Perhaps I should leave my own home where I have worked and-”

“Please do.” I butted in. “Uncle Reg only let you stay overnight-”

“Please Ross don’t.” Max asked.

I stopped and she started the attack.

“For the last two weeks I have enjoyed myself immensely at the seaside, staying at Andrew’s guest house. Miss Rosalind Jervis has made quite a turnaround and become quite a respected matron under the influence of a normal Christian man.”

“So why didn’t you stay there?”

“They are to be crowded out by a midwinter rush of prior bookings.”

Even stolid Douglas and Leo and the Van Groendhals, could barely keep a straight face and Murie and Ruth got the uncontrollable giggles, then Marsha and Grahame, who did not know why took it up. Max got hiccups suppressing his.

“If you are back in my house, it must be on my terms.”

“Son you are going too far.”

“She has been going too far since she was born, her and her God.”

The other guests, excepting Max, started packing. He asked to speak to me alone and Keith looked at me with sympathy, but biting his lips.

“Since your return Grahame and your father have improved, substantially. Everybody admires the way you turned this farm around, and not just financially. You got a workforce back there. You work seven days a week, up to eighteen hours a day, doing more than your best field hand. You paid a thousand pounds more than I asked to buy your land back because you said I had fertilised it, got the crop in and improved it. People admire that, or they should, but nobody will consider your achievements if you mistreat your mother, regardless of what she does.”

“Do you know what she has done to my wife, children and home?”

“Rumours circulate. A jailed wife does not lead to sympathy for the wife and husband. It leads to curiosity, suspicion and ostracism, better not to mention it. If you carry on this feud you will find she has said one wise thing, a house divided against itself cannot stand.”

He had true points, but no solution.

“There is another thing to consider. Everybody thinks that they are the hero being bullied or treated unfairly. Tom started out as an honest, hard worker and he nearly lost the farm until he stole cedar out of crown land and encouraged Allen into all types of trouble so as to cause your family problems. All of that was to get your best acreage. Allen was once a little boy who had to push bigger kids out of the way or be unnoticed or to starve. Reverend Jervis once believed he had a mission to save souls and felt sorry for a pregnant woman. You might end up a snarling bully kicking a weeping old woman.”

“She won’t get the abuse she deserves. I’ll work something out, but if Jesus Christ was standing here, she would remain unforgiven.”

He nodded and knew he would get no more from me.

“Looks like you will get three quarters of your winter harvest in and

prices are high this year. The farmer's co-op will have a tractor on every farm by September. Tom was the third to get his own tractor."

"After?"

"Leo and Douglas."

"We will wait till more money comes in."

In the morning I spoke with Katie.

"You don't take any more orders from my mother any more. Be polite and give her this. It is a weekly list of tasks I expect her to do. If she tries to distract you with talk about God or what scum I am let it pass without comment."

She took the list and looked at me.

"And what happens if she does not do this?"

"Then she gets nothing. If you do not work you do not eat. I do not wish to speak to her, you can deal with her if you wish."

Working almost a quarter of a mile out in the fields her yelling reached us and she came stamping out.

"You seem to forget that you can be jailed, obstructing justice aiding a criminal..."

"And so can you, withholding information, gun running blackmail."

Over the next few days she demonstrated how evil she could be. She came up behind Dad, yelling at him, giving him shocks with a smug smirk and then staring at me with gleaming eyes, as if to say "Stop it or this won't stop." After I sent him to the seaside for a holiday she started hectoring Grahame on pretexts, wiping out months of progress. I had to back off but after abuse and goading. Finally my temper went and I swung a poker at her head. We never spoke to each other and she kept to the side veranda. I was always up before dawn for breakfast and never sat at the same table with her. She moved into one of the guest rooms and tea

was always taken up to her. The servants and workers were told to avoid her and some of them openly sighed with relief upon hearing that.

\*

Keith Anstee

Eloura 1st August 1914

Over the last year we had some prominent visitors, first Sir Eustace Hughes and then Henry Lawson, we had met professionally on a few occasions. ‘Got to get out of Sydney mate, put me up for a few days and let me know of any local colour.’

Colour here meant colourful characters, settings or stories.

From a few yards off he had a face which was much younger looking than his nearly fifty years suggested, although close up folds in the crow’s feet showed, but his hair and moustache kept their thickness and colour and he was as lean and upright as any man could be. He had intelligent eyes which could sparkle brightly with good humour and go with his wide grin and when you saw him like that he could make you think the world was a happy place. Or alternatively he could stare out with the dogged stoicism of a battler losing badly and make you feel life was a losing battle. Those extremes in the man where in his work. He could create the sad battle to survive of the ‘*The Drover’s Wife*’ or the comedy of ‘*The Loaded Dog*.’

He was not drinking this visit, having been in clinics several times in recent years and we were not visiting the hotels for another reason, the man who was Australia’s great expounder of mateship was expected to shout rounds of beer at the pub, but was always caging. All the drinkers always thought that his stories selling all over Australia must have made him rich, but they did not. He was not wise with money or as well paid as many expected. We were having breakfast on the second story veranda of the newspaper offices.

“Who have you got for me Keith?”

“One Rachel Clarke, one more famous in Ireland than she is here.”

I passed him her now notorious head-hunters letter and he read it with eyebrows raised and he whistled.

“You need to read ‘Another Song of General Sickness and Tiredness’ it’s in a last year’s *Bulletin*. It’s about how being sick to death of political women and do-gooders in general. If she has a husband, he will be as mild as they come, right?”

“Yes”

“Writing on her means stepping into the Irish morass and there can be no worse time. They are expecting war to break out there on the slightest excuse.”

“Do you think this Balkan crisis will lead anywhere?”

“Do they ever?”

We laughed at that. We could see Eakins McKenzie striding down the street clutching paper.

“Here is your second topic; let’s see what unfolds.”

Eakins walked up to the nearby Catholic Church offices and banged on the solid door so loudly that it wobbled. A sleepy-eyed George Whaley Junior, bored deputy farm manager turned Catholic seminary student, poked his head out of the side window and winced and sighed.

“Ah... it’s not exactly healthy, wealthy and wise with ya lot, is it? Twenty to seven and ya eyelids are still together. And don’t slam that window in my face or I’ll rip this door down and wring your bloody papist neck.”

“I presume you wish to discuss a theological issue.”

“You write cremation is a sin against God. You say that the body should be respected and when George Whaley Senior gets asked why, he said when the dead rise again come Judgement Day we should not make

it hard for God to put together the body again, clothe the buried skeletons with flesh bein' easier than restoring particles from the air.

Hard for God! Hard for God! He has more power in his eyelash than the combined power of all humanity who has lived or will ever live! He parted the Red Sea and plagued Egypt! That being tha mightiest kingdom that ever was. He can make volcanoes erupt and bury whole cities! Do you think when he burned all those thousands at that Martinique eruption twelve years gone or got them killed at that Stromboli explosion six year back that they were not burned? Of course they were! And with both they were of your faith! Yet he burned them and don't say he de not, for scripture says nate a sparrow falls without him knowing."

"God does not-"

"Even if they be burned ta crisps by Satan that does nae mean they escape Judgement Day - so how is he going tae find it harder to put new flesh on old bones than join burned particles togaether? Answer me that, hey."

"Eakins you need to marry." Young George bit his lip.

"Done thut. She ran off; took Ahab, Judas, Belshazzar and Nebuchudnezzar with her."

"The dogs?"

"Our boys. Give a child a righteous name and he grows into tha sin o pride, thinking he be as good as his namesake. Give 'um names like that, they battle all thar lives to show they be good men an' their names mean little."

"Eakins when you at school you were told that the printed words were sacred and literally true weren't you?"

"Of course! but yer roaming over the earth to avoid tha topic. Now cremation."

“And nobody, not even the teacher was game to disagree, were they?”

“I kicked out many a troublemaker an’ heretic. Which is what yer Pope does.”

“Indeed, but you are not the Pope.”

“Wrong again, with Protestantism every man can be his own Pope if he so wishes – and this is the great glory of Protestantism.”

George was so stunned he just stood there, then burst into guffaws, saying 'exactly exactly' muttering something about getting that one down in writing.

My earnest hope that Tactlessness Incarnate would not hit back by booming out the obvious. That being that anybody young enough to talk upwards could see: that with a not handsome face to start with, George’s broken up face made him extraordinarily ugly and unmarriageable: hence the appeal of the seminary, where spiritual beauty counted. Eakins had other thoughts.

“Do not invite him up here.” Henry whispered. He motioned towards the back. “There are two problems, first, unless it’s sheer paganism, never ever launch an attack on religion and an attack on religious people or personages: that is seen as attacking God.

Second, he is too colourful. He is too preposterous for fiction: well for my fiction anyway. Let’s see from the other veranda edge if we can see any more my type.”

He spied the Van Groendhals turning up for printing.

‘They are Dutch brothers. Famous for well, tacky women trouble.’

“Sharing a wife is more common in the bush than you might think, there being so few women, but it is not something anybody writes about, including me.”

“That thin man who walks like he has lost toes.”



“Is Hilton Jervis, nasty vindictive cuckold, the Methodist minister, he was in the Peking siege twelve years back.”

“That extraordinarily tall Asiatic woman, in a nurse’s uniform, no she also appears too unusual...”

His gaze focused on Ross, riding into town.

“That handsome fellow looks like a battling ordinary Aussie farmer who has done well.”

“His paternal great-grandfather was in the House of Lords. His paternal grandfather was a cavalry colonel and they can trace their ancestry back to the early thirteenth century. His mother is Rachel Clarke and his wife serves time in a Dublin jail for Fenian activities.”

“Let’s see, there are always normal people at the pub. Who is that one?”

“Good choice. Douglas Fisher. He is as normal and steady as they come. Ross’s cousin.”

“No, peerage types or even their descendants are just not right for my writing. I want the common man.”

He was getting vexed and when that happened he would go on a drunk and his health was not up to it. No more objections.

“That one, looks like a decent Aussie battler who has done well and he has two kids and a wife with him. Let’s call him up, they look like an average Australian family.”

The Caufields were not an average Australian family, but Lawson’s simple belief in the common man, Tom’s wise bushie bullshit and tale spinning to him, Australian censorship laws and the silent acquiescence of Alison and myself turned them into the mythical average Australian family - for an afternoon.

Between them Tom and Henry created a story of the decent, honest cheery battler, a generous and loyal friend to all. With the farm threatened

by drought he must find a way to save it. Through his skill, perspicuity and faith he finds the treasure, the legendary grove of magnificent cedar which exists where none supposedly existed and so he saves the farm, returning to his loyally waiting worried wife and stalwart, worried kids. Jubilantly they find they can buy out the aristocratic new chums who have the good land they do not really know how to farm.

Nobody told him that the cedar was stolen from crown land or that Tom went on his trips with his girlfriend or that according to Jenny, Alison and Rosalind slept with Ross simultaneously while Tom was away. The court order and talk of divorce were never mentioned. Henry never saw Tom pick a fight or egg on Allen into causing trouble from which Tom profited. He never saw Tom standing over a bashing victim, feet a yard apart, hands on the hips, chin up aide smile and glittery eyes staring off into reveries of his own conceit.

To his credit Lawson sensed something wrong and would not publish it.

“I try to write true things about the ordinary battlers so many people ignore, but this one reads like a fairy tale where the prince goes out and gets the treasure and returns to his waiting princess and restores order and prosperity to the kingdom. All that differs being their clothes, language, job – all the superficialities. No, it just won’t do.

Look it may not be possible to say every true thing about a person or situation. That is the way the world is, but I don’t churn out fairy floss and say believe this to be true.

Maybe you know of some good views and scenes for poetry, know of any?”

I was in no position to criticise. How much of what was true went into my paper? Prices and coming events. What else? Perhaps it was best, Jenny’s drunken babbling at the police station two years back was all

true, perhaps the truest words ever spoken in this town, but even I was relieved when she galloped off.

\*

Rosalind McPherson McPherson's Guest House Eden 28th August 1914

Andrew came down to breakfast with a determined face. He got home late last night as I waited till ten, then slept.

"I have done it." He announced that in those portentous tones he used when he thought that he had done something important. He usually had and it was usually nothing good. Today was the same.

"I have enlisted at the recruiting centre, it just opened. I was first."

"Well unenlist. Spring comes soon and with whatever little rush we have. The ripening crops will start soon and that makes for a lot of work for me by myself."

Over the last fortnight the European war had proved a boon for us as foresters, fishers and travellers heading to recruiting centres had stayed here. Before then drought had meant people economised and it had been hurting us. Others were awaiting the recruiting centre opening at Eden, either way they needed accommodation. Now he wrecked it as he always did, I kept my temper for when I lost it he had this way of enlisting God on his angelic side and then proving it. He would listen if I stayed calm, so better a flanking attack.

"Andrew what do soldiers do?"

"They defend their loved ones and the empire."

"By?"

"By defending it."

"No Andrew, no circles today. How precisely do they defend it?"

"With courage and valour."

Although he was nearly twenty-one, it was quite possible that he did not know that soldiers killed people. After he believed that spilling seed

into my navel would get me pregnant, a pub joke that amputating a horse's leg was what was meant by handicapping, and taking an article seriously that the Aborigines were the descendants of the lost tribe of Israel. My Sweet Sir Galahad was obviously gullibility incarnate.

“More precisely Andrew.”

“I am not sure what you mean.”

“I mean that soldiers kill people Andrew. They shoot them and stab them and if they do not do that their own side jails them and if they run away or refuse orders their own side shoots them. Now what does the man who cannot bear to shoot rabbits or see cattle slaughtered think of that?”

“We are all in God's hands.”

With a grimace and a sigh, I left, walking down to the recruiting office before starting to scream with rage. Once again, I would have to protect my boy. At the recruiting office, Clayton Cuthbert, a retired British Lieutenant-Colonel, reinstalled now, listened politely and then made his points.

“First, we hear this all the time. My male relative or husband will never make a soldier, relatives say, but they do. The army either makes men or breaks men. Second everyone talks about what a splendid shot and horseman he is.”

“But he can't stand to shoot rabbits.”

That unsettled him, but he went past it.

“Third the enlistment papers went off in this morning's mail. And fourth, virtually all the experts and writers agree that modern military developments mean that wars will be brief.”

“Who is not in virtually all?”

“Rider Haggard and H.G. Wells, fantasy writers for children. Mrs McPherson you have nothing to worry about. As some of these rural

based units will do their training here to get the harvest in, we may not even sail before it ends.”

This was just one more problem in a problem-infested marriage. For me childhood images of heaven and hell were reversed. My thoughts went to a cave with bodies writhing before the flames as heaven, not hell, while our guest-house with its wide high verandas over the misty sea and its cool, clear air was in tune with the image of heaven. And yet it was a place I would have been happy to leave to Andrew for a supposedly hellish cave. It was not that I had been too much in love with Ross and Brionny; there was a great deal of teenage confusion and repressed, suddenly released sexual energy in that form of love. It was that there was no form of love to replace it and I had tried so hard.

He put locks on the bathroom, bedroom and toilets and installed heavy dark curtains too. They were so we could not accidentally burst in on each other naked. Whenever we did get sexually involved it was always the same, in total darkness, in the missionary position and usually with him not penetrating. He informed me that fallen women, women of little virtue and slatterns were that way because they enjoyed sex. Therefore, when faced with seducers or opportunities, they fell into the traps that would not tempt virtuous women, who would be quite properly repelled by what attracted the evil ones, who were just born evil. Therefore, in Andrew's cloud cuckoo land we had a happy marriage and he honestly believed that. I was careful to encourage him in that belief, letting him spill on my skin whenever he needed and complying with his lights out policy, for as if that morning when Minnietta turned up was not warning enough, there was the morning eight months back when Mrs Hawkins turned up, surprised for an instant then wary. She was very subdued and looking insomniac, struggling to lift too heavy bags while

her female companion, who looked like an elephant in tweed, prattled on about the beautiful views.

“Jenny please do the booking. Now leave me to look around.” Jenny waited till she was gone.

“Take a good long look please, for I have one last lesson to teach you. No matter how infuriating he seems, no matter how desirable they might seem or how safe it might seem, do not do it. Keep the respectability and the comfort, for there are others worse off than me. She buries me in an avalanche of flesh all too often and she has every minute of my life controlled with an all-devouring love, even if I am a slave, others have it worse.”

Sobs were coming, so she just stared at the carpet as she asked.

“Does he know?”

“Nothing. His parents might. Like me they keep him away from Eloura. He was at the seminary for most of it.”

“Do you hear anything of Jenny?”

“Your daughter or Jenny Doyle?”

“Either, well both.”

“They both seem to have vanished off the face of the earth. Brionny and Ross married and went to America.”

“Please now fill out the forms and be formal, even a little curt; you have no idea what jealousy means and she is also my parole officer.”

They left two days later and the laughing, vivacious, witty woman of my childhood had left that sad body years before. With a lesson like that, and memories of my mother and that day in Sydney when Andrew rescued me, staying loyal was vital and for not totally selfish reasons. He was in love with me and he could be likeable at times, even if his idiocies were infuriating. His belief in goodness was naïve beyond belief. Anybody with a sad story got free accommodation. Many of our clientèle

were loggers from nearby, coming in for a swim, or fishers wanting a break from the sea, but he allowed no swearing or drinking and put signs up to that effect. Others were couples, initially some pretended to be married and some did not, but when he realised why they were there he would throw them out.

“Why not put signs up over the beds, no adultery to be committed here?”

He actually considered it for a few seconds, then suspicious, asked if I was being sarcastic. Within weeks there was no need, as few people stayed and few of those stayed longer than a night. Considering that he lent *my* old racing money to anyone with a sad story it is a wonder that we were not packed out with spongers, a mercy from God perhaps. By secretly using some of Grahame’s old tricks, some money came from the racecourse, but nothing as spectacularly successful as Grahame in his heyday. Fortunately, we had a vegetable patch, a chicken coop and fishing and hunting were abundant. I had to do those as the man who would academically justify the genocidal slaughter of the Amalekites was now off to war, even if he could not bear to hunt or fish.

There were days when the horrible exploitation of others caused by such innocence was obvious. Uncle George died knowing that the business that had devoured his life would not survive him by long. Without my racing money we would have sunk long ago. So Sweet Sir Galahad rode off two weeks later for training in Sydney he thought, surely leaving me pregnant because he had ejaculated into my navel every night for the last week.

Without him our guest house started to prosper, with every penny of his six shillings a day army pay being sent home helping, good boy – sometimes.

Keith Anstee

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Three weeks into war and it was clear the local militia would have to go, crucial men away at harvest or not. So as the rural police were in charge of recruiting on Mcphee's call they assembled here on federal Election Day because it saved a trip into town and rural election centres had just been established. They had put on a recruiting performance in the same hall where we had staged our Irish propaganda play five years previously and once again, Mrs Rosalind McPherson nee Jervis just back in town, was the innocent victim of aggressive male lust and Eakins the lustful aggressor: the roles were different though, this time she was Belgium personified and he the brutal lusting Hun, in a paper machè pickelhaube helmet and with a German eagle painted on his singlet. As a portrayal of a demented orang tang, somewhat eccentrically dressed, Eakins was passable. Rosalind looked endangered virtue incarnate, supposedly as Belgium dressed up in French colours and costume, because nobody here knew what a Belgian flag looked like. Acting and dialogue matched, but the latter was so pitifully clichéd that it was no compliment:

Eakins/Hun: (rolling his eyes and bending at the knee, all the better to lean and leer over her) "Ha! Ha! Ha! Poor little Belgium! Now that the British and French empires are not here to protect you, you are mine! "Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Rosalind/Belgium as virtuous virginity under threat: (clasping her hands together under her chin, her arms covering her breasts in the universally understood code of threatened womanhood defenceless) "I will never be yours! Never! Never! Never! Britain and France will come to my rescue!" (inbuilt pause for applause, with a few plants starting the clapping off) "Help me! Help me!"



“We won’t leave you alone!” Max bellowed as he charged forward. As he was in uniform it seemed part of the act until puzzled Rosalind and Eakins went out of role and just stared at him as if untold about a sudden change of script. Tom Caufield dressed as Saint George with an Australian flag and kangaroo on his paper machè armour and shield was in the wings and puzzled but sensing he must do something, he charged forward.

Tom: “I won’t leave you alone my poor little darlin’”

He then clobbered the paper machè pickelhaube with his equally paper machè sword: result: both broke spectacularly, flying off in different directions, but this was minor hilarity compared to Eakins’s spectacular fall. Apparently nobody told the solid giant how to collapse on stage: instead of bending at the knees and slowly lowering himself he went as stiff and fast as a falling pine, and nearly as heavily. The reverberations went up through chairs and at the back, sent flimsy shelving tumbling in a snowball effect and the tools and paint those things held clattered in their fall. Eakins arose self-splattered with paint, serendipity for sure for it was red, and he extemporised.

Eakins: “Ah blood from a valiant blow, just as I was made to bleed from the valiant defence at Mons, but I am still dangerous.”

Then Rosalind stepped forward angles together, arms outstretched towards the audience; her diaphanous costume showing off her shapely, indeed perfect figure and even, quite daringly, a little flesh above the knee and all below.

“Who will help Saint George defend me?”

Instead of the sneering laughter this appallingly bad play led me to expect, the Van Groendhals, Trevelyan, Rupert Dean, Kenny Moon, Leo Chapman, Stepan Bach, George Whaley, Douglas and Murie Fisher, and almost every pub layabout shut their gaping mouths and rushed forward,

eyes ablaze with lust for our closet lesbian who could not stand men. Gratefully Sergeant Mcphee wrote down their names and shook their hand as fast as was humanly possible. Max and Alex McPherson saw it and took over handshaking. This was for consideration at the toss. It seemed to me that they were getting them down before the dopes woke up, but being at the front, I could see that as Rosalind was holding her appealing position, her tendons were making involuntary spasms and she was holding back a grimace. Ross and Alison, Karl and Lynda also noticed and were less entranced, they knew how she was moving heaven and earth to keep her husband home, but here she was proving that anything could be sold with sex appeal, even killing and death. Later that afternoon as they were doing all over Australia, they gathered to toss pennies in public to decide who would go to war and who would stay. They were so naïve that those who stayed home said they had lost the toss. First up were the Fisher brothers, Murie and Douglas, with their father presiding, tossing a penny.

“Douglas wins!” He declared and the winner had to shout a round after applause for him died out. An honest man, Douglas was not good at false smiles, he would have been happy to stay as would Murie, not hiding his relief. In a few minutes the Van Groendhal brothers tossed.

“Odd you want to fight the Germans: thought being Dutch you were their neighbours.”

“We were indeed their neighbours” Jan started. “And if you had neighbours like that you would want to fight them to.”

There was a few seconds of silence and then the joke and the way they told it sunk in and they got guffaws of approving laughter that peeled. They were regaining popularity with others but not with me, I had been wanting to sack them for so long over Jenny, but there was no excuse. Reg tossed the penny but it stuck upright on Eakins boot.

“Ah, that is a sign from God.” Hendrik started.

“We both go.” Jan finished.

Next were the McPherson brothers; the penny was wise. Alexander with his militia lieutenant’s commission won. Karl with a wife, daughter, months old son and more wisdom than patriotism, stayed. The penny was wise again with the Chapmans, for Max was militia commander and a little old fashioned, Leo was invigorating, up to date and had a family to raise. Mcphee squared off against Kenny and our village idiot would soon be wandering off with a gun in his hands. George Whaley junior looked relieved to win against his brother Simon the farmer. Hard to blame him, he had been emotionally blackmailed into studying for the priesthood by his pious mother and service provided an honourable way out. Cyril Abaya and Clyde Whaley won against two of their relatives. Many of the pickers, foresters, miners, shearers and drovers came in, poor men lured by the six shillings a day for volunteers. Reverend Hawkins won against one of them, as did Stepan Bach, himself a backwoods miner this past year and also Trevelyan the mines manager. Eakins won against his own senior apprentice and Rupert Dean against his father and Earl Dean against another brother. Kedda stayed while his history teacher, young Raymond Milleran, an Ocean Ridge boy went, so did his brother music teaching brother Hector.

“Tom who are you tossing with?”

“My boy, Jack, so I use my lucky penny on which I always call heads.”

While Jack took out his bugle and played Tom handed Max, who had taken over the toss, his supposedly lucky penny, twice as thick as usual. Guess who won.

One of the last were the Clarke brothers or what was left of them. Grahame’s problems were obvious and there were many there guiltily

hoping he would go and not return. With Ross the problems were there and becoming obvious. He was turning into a very cranky, bitter, obsessive man. Love and passion had been blocked and instead there was this desire for revenge and money which was eating away everything likeable about him, making him obsessive. His mother, one-time friend Tom, Albert Moon and absent Cousin Allen were the targets. He seldom smiled now. Living in the same house with her must have been hell. Yet if he went again, that farm would die out and everybody there knew it.

Their toss was the oddest and the most far reaching in its effects, for the lives of thousands would be changed by the fact that a piece of cracked paint collided with a penny. Max got so excited that he tossed it up to the roof and the penny hit a cracked section of paint and seemed wedged in there. Instead of a penny dropping a flake of paint did.

“Looks like the heavens above don’t like my toss boys, God wants you both to stay.”

“Nah he has changed his mind” Murie joked as he pointed.” Here it comes sliding down off that paint curl, sliding! Sliding! Gone!”

It span down, hit the bar rail and bounced off onto the floor.

“Ross!” Douglas, Leo and Alexander cried in unison.

While the tossing was typical, both this sending of a local unit intact and this fleshing out of it were not. Elsewhere few acknowledged Aboriginals were being accepted, or short men or those with sores or bad teeth; in the big cities and towns only the best was being taken. Here from judging what happened and Mcphee’s just suppressed glee, this situation solved many of Eloura’s social problems and embarrassments.

After the tosses came the patriotic sing-alongs and stories asked of South African war veterans, Max and Tom who like Lawson, could only tell part of the truth. They could tell more of it than I ever would, for I

had also been in that war, but with the MacBride's Irish Brigade which had fought on the Boer side, my little secret.

The wisest words said that night came from Eakins, the village eccentric. "What this war will unleash be a century of woe, fer when the white European empires fight each other with their mighty weapons they will wipe each other out or fight to exhaustion an' socialists, communists, Americans, Japanese, Latinos, Moslems and all them tha' right or wrong see themselves as oppressed will rise up an' take on the exhausted winners. It will be chaos an' strife fer many a yer."

"Then why volunteer?" Karl, the wisest man there because he said the least, asked Eakins, the most honest.

"For the same reason everybody else is here. I like a good fight and fine pay."

\*

Eakins McKenzie

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Aye, a good fight and fine pay are much of it, but not all, for there be a secret, known to some but never said: *man exists ta fight*. Battle or even fists show the ultimate proof of manhood an' without men there would be nae civilization, ner church, no order. Fighting weeds out the runts in the litter, them that has na rightful place an' be better off destroyed, which is what every littering bitch knows ter do but some with white collars round their necks hae fergot. Well in sword an' shield days et were certainly so, but rifles an' cannon ae dunno, a sissy could bring down Goliath these days, well we will see.

\*

Kenny Moon

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Many here said I was a dolt, but now they would see. At the bar I gave them my song.

*Oh them Germans did a bad thing and all the world did see, see  
King and Kitchener said*

*“Let’s send them Kenny!*

*He’ll fight em hard and fight em long and be real strong*

*An’ after Kenny fixes ‘em it won’t be long*

*Till they sees that they were in the wrong*

*Then when the world is free, well unleash Kenny*

*On them madam moselles that live in gay Paree!*

They laughed and clapped and asked for it again and then on the third time they all joined in: now they knew that I was really a clever fellow and no fool.

\*

Alexander McPherson                      Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

With the taking of a commission some years past I had taken an oath to defend king, country and empire and any lawyer knows that oaths are not taken lightly. It was as simple as that. German atrocities in what had been neutral Belgium until they invaded without cause gave me the same feeling defending an innocent client did. However right or wrong, we must rally behind the empire with total unswerving dedication, just as a lawyer must be behind a client. That was that, now for the consequences whatever they may be, though they may not be good.

\*

Andrew McPherson                      Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

At first it seemed any other unit would have been better: everybody said they were merely passionate kissers at the 1909 ball, but my brother and Max were here, so that could be good and orders are orders, Cuthbert said learning that was a good start.

\*

Tom Caufield                              Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

If ever a man needed a break from a hardscrabble farm, a bloody big loan, a nagging wife, a drought and niggardly income it was me. High wages, foreign women, hunting enemies. The Boer War was fun, this one could be.

\*

George Trevelyan

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Patriotic duty or not, I was a fool to be here and go for this toss. My deputy will get my mines job, 'just for the duration' – supposedly. I know him inside and out and what he gets he holds. More 'en twenty years of giving orders and now I have to take them. Twenty years of being in the office and having it comfy while others suffered in the mines. War cannot be fun, nor an adventure, whatever some fools here think. God has been good to me most of my life, but all in the world must suffer sometime. Enough of thinking like this going half-way to self-pity and that can only be a characteristic of a coward: we are all in and must make the best of it.

\*

Douglas Fisher

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

The pay will be good for the farm, but me going won't. Being mayor now that Max is going means Dad has much to do, especially with this drought. Even as ordinary mayor this is so, but with this war on there are so many committees and things: he won't be able to do much for our farm. Murie is good for the orchard and wagon trips, but how can a man who won't eat meat and can't stand killing things go with cattle and sheep and skinning? Word has got around among the tradespeople market buyers and itinerant labour to take him as a soft touch and a fool. He is not, his jokes mean more than they seem when you think over them. He keeps accounts as good as a chartered man, drives the new tractor well and he married very wisely, but he struggles as an agricultural all-rounder and weak on cattle, sales and deals and does not worry enough.

Luckily Ruth and Barbara are shrewder and stubborn and know narcs and sharpers and duds when they see them. Yes, the more it is thought over, the more the women will be the saving of the farm. The sooner this war ends the better. Max is a good man, but who wants to serve under my brother-in-law Tom? Everybody knows him for a cruel, mean, tough bastard and Ross not much better and going to the bad since he fled with that Irish tart and married her.

\*

Rupert Dean

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Going off to this war might be a good thing, might be bad, not too clear after three beers. At least this gives me a chance to push my old boss Trevelyan around if they give me a ranker's stripes. More likely he'll get the stripes first and push me round again. At least this way I get hellva better pay right regular and no black lung from coal. Might get some girls without angry pas, just might. Less thinking more beer.

\*

Earl Dean

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Never thought to make a soldier, let alone a cavalryman, never thought it of Rupert either. Cavalry is for aristos or at least yeomanry, but here we are sons of house servants and that Max that some say is extravagant and some say is generous has purchased uniforms for all and we have found fits. We should get a photo taken of us in them, perhaps holding our horses, or on them and send it back to our English town to those who thought we would never amount to much. Word of how our sister Katie started as help and married a rich landowner's son got back but was not believed. They did not believe the story of the eighteenth - century governor marrying the convict girl either, that was historical fact. Who knows where this enlisting will lead to in this land of opportunity?

\*



Stepan Bach

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Perhaps I would achieve something that would make them accept my reformed character. Perhaps not, but whatever at least I would give this place a break, earn six shillings (instead of sixpence) and free food and board every day, see something of the wide world, maybe jump ship if opportunities were good. They say the British will hunt a deserter to China, so that idea should only proceed if my own death can be faked, unlikely. Perhaps with this army pay and a nice long war will my bank balance will be enough to set up as a trader somewhere in the Pacific, where my kind are as common as seagulls and nobody cares.

\*

Raymond Milleran

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

“Well they say you should give teaching a break every five years.”

Hector smiled as he mused.

“Raymond, remember when we wanted to go horse riding for sport and father said it was a useless sport which would never get us a well-paying job and horses were too expensive, we would never get one?”

“Now Max gives us one each for free and we can earn more than at school.”

\*

Hector Milleran

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

I have signed my death warrant.

\*

George Whaley

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

My Ma would go mad with rage if she heard I was in any hotel, but a temperance hotel run by good Irish Catholics and that is one reason to be here. All my life she has been using God, the pope and the church to get everybody to do what she wants and that got me halfway to being a priest

but that isn't me really. Bloody Mad McKenzie asks too many questions nobody can really answer and I desire things no priest should. Maybe a long trip away will give me ideas about how my life should go; at the very least it will get her voice out of my ears.

\*

Hendrik Van Groendhal                      Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Jan got the signal and using putting on the uniforms as an excuse, we got to be alone in a side room.

“Perhaps now that we have enlisted, they will accept us again.” My brother kept an expressionless face as he spoke.

“They never have and never will. First, we were the Dutch boys and suspected us of being pro-Boer in that silly African war. Then we were the Dutchers in some strange cult – as if Calvinists were something out of voodoo land. Then when we were caught in Jenny’s scandal and they were not, so we became pariahs and still are.”

“Are you saying we should leave?”

He just shrugged his shoulders. “Holland seems just a few memories now. Wherever else we go the story will follow, Surinam, Dutch East Indies.....At least here we can hit back and say ‘And you were not involved with Jenny? You did not evade tax with Bach? You did not buy stolen goods?’”

I could nod at the sense of that and add something.

“But we are leaving, for battlefields and so are they.”

Jan just smiled, thinking something to himself.

\*

Jan Van Groendhal                      Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914  
Hendrik always thought there would be some way round it and one day they would forget and we could go back to being respected. Respected for being so earnest and consistent in our Dutch Calvinist religion, respected

for our hard work and pride in our work, outsiders yes, our outlanders, but they would never forget our mistakes, only their own roles. I could live with it, knowing that sexual pleasure always has to be paid for in pain of some kind: disgrace, birth pain, parenthood. Still this war will make a distraction and our past will pale in comparison to participation in the epic of battle. When we become soldiers we become heroes.

\*

Reverend Hawkins                      Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

They will need a chaplain and energy, strength, patience, forbearance and wisdom must be my mainstays: more than any in other profession, the soldier faces worldly temptations. The restraints of women and children are not there, the dividing line between righteous killing in anger and murder can become faint and muddled, theft becomes foraging or plunder, armies are a paradise for bullies, lunatics, camp followers, hatred, the sin of pride, envy and revenge. God make me strong and thank you for this new chance to regain the respect of my others and myself and the chance to forget my wife and what happened.

\*

Clyde Whaley                          Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

Bein' tracka bloody good – pay, uniform, horse, food. Get respect, but the way of the warrior even better, we get all this still and more. Better pay, travel long way off, part of the big team. A good man lives to be a warrior. Big Eakins he understands that an' can love Jesus an' know like Gideon an' Joshua an' David, the shepherd boy who became king of his tribe, that's the way of the warrior who serves God. Big Eakins is the smartest white fella I know, many do not even know this. These Germans deserve tracking, for burning babies, cutting hands off nuns ter make it easier ter get at them, shooting the unarmed elders, women and children,

and they white barbarians, worse than any white or black that we ever tracked here in Australia. Now Cyril and me, we track them and help bring them to justice.

\*

Cyril Abaya

Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

They let us join here because Max said so, but other blackfellas in other places, fine riders all, were told they not needed for light Horse units. Even so, when in, they would still not let us in to drink with them, we had to sit outside on the veranda with two lemonades Max brought out. So why enlist? We already had fine horses, food, pay, uniforms and regular work as trackers. This war did not sound so much fun or an adventure from what papers say so far. White idiots might think so, but I'd seen men kill and it was no fun.

No, Clyde was like my brother, an' to let him go off alone with a big bunch of whites trying to kill another big bunch of whites well, et would be like letting a child go off to swim at a shark infested beach. Sharks smell blood and start attacking each other in a frenzy. There were other reasons. Three years back when I was on that Stoney Tom's veranda looking down where that cold bastard mighty Ross Clarke was lying naked with his cousin, Tom's wife, Clyde was back on the tree line and saw it and they must have seen him. That means Ross and her want us both dead - and so will Tom if he ever finds out. Unless I'm there to protect my mate, either one would kill him with a bullet in the back real quick, quicker than most white fellas would kill a black fella.

There was another reason: that Eakins McKenzie was the maddest, silliest most dangerous white fella that I ever came across which was saying considerable. Clyde could not see that though, just his great strength and booming voice and biblical knowledge.

These white fellas were cluey on inventing things and taking other

people's land, but if they had sense to live by Aboriginal law they could solve most of their problems in a month. Elders would take Eakins away for counselling and keep him away till he got it right. Stoney Tom, his wife and Ross would be sent away. Once you go away from one woman one man you are heading for trouble. Our elders spot it and settle it quick and most blacks have sense enough not to start it, but whites never either live close enough to see it all coming or separate enough to not see it at all. They live in houses close, so some things are half clear and nothing's certain. That way makes trouble for sure. They worry themselves about things on the world's other side so it all might be true or not, nobody knows, but off they go. Maybe Ross and Tom, always first into a fight, will cop bullets and secrets stay secrets. The man who lives by the sword dies by the sword: Jesus said; that is wise.

\*

Captain Max Chapman                      Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

They were a fine body of men, looking even finer when they came out of the change rooms in their cavalry uniforms.

“Alright you lot! Eloura Mounted Rifles! A Squad line up for your photo! Tallest at the back. Little fellas front. We might even hang the finished product up over the bar. B C and D squads as well! Cyril and Clyde come on in!”

Mateship, courage, loyalty obedience, they had all those qualities and when we would take on the villains of the world we would win with them.

\*

Major Clayton Cuthbert                      Eloura Royal Hotel 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914

They were the usual motley crew of recruits with the usual motives. Jailbirds and those exposed in scandal and longing to escape. Other men have motives that are still the same as the alliterative phrase applied to

the conquistadores three hundred years ago shows. They are indeed hungry for gold, God and glory. Others are disasters as husbands or lovers hoping to escape, farmers none too good at it or worn down by hardscrabble farming and longing for a break, those on the fringe of society hoping to gain acceptance at the centre, seminary students of dwindling beliefs, simpletons along for the ride, and yes, patriots knowing that duty called. All of these motives in all these types were fine after after having seen them before many times and welded them into fighting forces before.

\*

Frank Clarke

Clarkstead 7<sup>th</sup> September 1914

At breakfast it was easy enough to tell Ross was going. We just looked at each other.

“So who on earth will look after everything this family worked for over nearly a hundred years?”

“You will, as you always have.”

“Humans have this way of not living for always Ross. At sixty-two my first heart attack has already come in.”

“Katie does a good job.”

“With the women’s work.”

“And Grahame shows improvement.”

“Do you believe he will ever be good enough to run a farm?”

He had to pass over that in silence.

“I should be resting, not working harder, yet we will have a labour shortage and who else can work here? All the cousins will be under pressure. Now it looks like fate pays back for all my trips off to war.”

“There was little real choice. What could I do? After being promoted to corporal I should resign from the militia because a war has started? It would have given me a reputation for cowardice, a well-deserved one and

that may have broken the camel's back with this district's attitude to us. Keith heads for that with his stories critical of the war; already he loses business. You know that after the jailings and interrogations, Grahame's state and Ma's Ulster madness we are on the edge of ostracism: my volunteering has brought us back from that a little."

He had made good points, but hopefully this war was not long. This time he was the one riding off in the mist to wars far afield and it was my turn to be the lonely one watching from the veranda.

\*

Alison Caufield

Caufield's Farm 7<sup>th</sup> September 1914

They came back after and went to their beds. Since Esmeralda had been born, I was using her to sleep in a separate room. At breakfast my pretence was for Jack's sake.

"So who won the toss? You or Daddy?"

"Daddy, and, and Uncle Douglas and Uncle Ross. Silly bloody Kenny, Stepan Bach who went to jail with Uncle Grahame. Stuck up Alexander McPherson and both them bloody Dutchers."

Try as I might that contemptuous response showed Tom's influence on my eight-year-old son was greater than mine. He would even disrupt Jack's education so as to keep him at the low level of his own learning abilities. When our son would pick up on his hints and spill all his ink so he could not learn his handwriting or "accidentally" drop his book into the fire, Tom would gleam down at him as if Jack's face was a mirror and he loved his reflection.

Poor little Jack; one day there would be a moment when he disagreed, or showed that he had more brains than Daddy or Tom needed a target to despise so that he could avoid facing what he really was.

"How can a farm be run by one housewife with a baby?"

"Like the lubras and the American Indians do maybe. Put her on

your back, you can work it out. A little bit of inconvenience for six shillings a day and all the food I can eat and they pay thirty pounds for the horse I bring. They are so short, we can sell them bloody Boho and Sot for thirty each, all their good for now is producing bloody manure. You live within your means: I stay in the army. We sail in late October, all the way to Europe, stay there for however long it takes to sort out the shit and it looks like it will take a while, and then we sail all the way back. That adds up to a lot of shillings in the bank that we need for Clarke land. This will be a good bloody war. And don't worry, Jack will be here to keep an eye on you."

He paused to let that sink in. "You remember that pet dog of yours, the one you bashed to death? That will be nothing compared to what I will do if I find that anybody else but your brothers and cousins hung round here while I'm away."

My mind went back to his return from South Africa and how whilst laughing I had jumped up, riding double and hugging him. Maybe that war and too many years on too hard land had killed what was once likeable. I did not want him back from this one. Ross, now him I wanted back and the world could gossip itself to death about us for all I cared.

The next day while he was off training and Ross was not. I stripped down to my basic under garments, put on my riding gear and with a spare saddle blanket, rode the wagon with Esmeralda in her crib over to where Ross would be clearing deadwood.

He smiled to see me and then looked puzzled, for a few seconds and twisted his neck and gave a grin in asking, I smiled and took out the blanket, went in the undergrowth and undressed while calling him. He did not linger either. Once again there was the exciting anticipation, the exhilaration of tongue against tongue and flesh caressing flesh and then the rhythmic aggression, the sense that he was delaying for my pleasure,



the satisfaction. The usual sense of being used like a sexual punching bag vanished and instead came what always did with him, a sense of being wanted and being loved, of two being one.

The world however, came from of my daughter's screeches and I had to dress and tend to her.

“See you here next week at the same time. It is a pity we have to be so quick.”

Yes, it is.”

“When you asked me to leave with you when you found out that Rosalind was a lesbian, I should have said yes. Sean and then Tom have made me too cautious.”

“Are you agreeing now?”

“Come back alive, then we will talk on this more. That might sound callous or calculating, but no. You worry me, as does our uncle, my brother and our old school friends, Alex and Andrew. Have you read the descriptions of the fighting in Europe? They do not say it openly, but they must be suffering thousands of casualties a day, cousin. Think on that – and us. Brionny and Rosalind are gone and now the Mormons have given up on polygamy, there is nowhere for us, it has to be one to one.”

I raised the eyebrow, waited for a yes, saw he was not really over them, flicked the reins and trotted off. His longing for the others did not worry me, he would have been shallow if he had given up easily and if he loved them, he loved me as much.

\*

Max Chapman

The Blue Pool 28th October 1914

Zelda and I were, like everybody else already exhausted, from local military training, inspections from Sydney-based officers, setting up the auxiliary committee, spring planting and harvest preparation and settling up as much business as possible. Last week it was signing up and

checking a total of two score more of horsemen from the Bega Valley, the Braidwood area, Sassafras and as far west as the Kybeyan Range and as far south as Eden. Andrew McPherson was reluctantly among the last mentioned. Even after amalgamating with nearby Ocean Ridge, we just did not have enough keen, fit horsemen to bring our company up to its fully expected strength of a hundred and fifty without these out of district men. With the first big force, the city-based contingent of the Australian contribution sailing about now, the Sydney training camps were emptying, soon to be filled up by rural groups like us. We left in nine days and I looked at her and the beautiful weather outside and knowing we had at most a week or two more together, said “Stuff this, time for a swim.”

The pool, was changed two years back, now blending in very well. It was one of my best ideas. Retaining walls and weirs stopped soil erosion and with the bottom scraped out and aqua blue gravel coating it, the pool looked a bright pellucid blue and you could see the fish and stones clearly. Because it was private land few came and we thought we had the land to ourselves. After swimming we lay on our backs on our towels, snoozing in the spring sun; we would not get much of that when and where we were going, probably after Christmas by the time we made Belgium. Zelda slept on, but voices woke me up and I realised that it was best to stay silent and still. We had only towels on and didn't want the embarrassment.

“Your father said to find you here.” It was Rosalind; she came just in sight with Ross.

“Well here I am, you probably thought we would never again meet here.”

“Who could imagine these circumstances, each of us married to our other great love?”

“Brionny divorced me. What circumstances?”

“Alison explained about Brionny. I am here about my husband.”

“You want him honourably discharged.”

“That would be ideal.”

“He would not accept a discharge, even if the officers did and they won’t. On the parade ground and on camp, he seems the perfect soldier. A crack rider and shot, enthusiastic, no complaints or disobedience. He lacks only two things and it will not show up until we are on the battlefield.”

“One being the ability to kill other people.”

“The other being a survival instinct. When we practise in mock battles he rides as if in a parade.”

“Keep him alive. Do so and you will get a reward to make you happy.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Four thousand pounds. It is the last of my racing money and what has been saved from the hotel since he has been away. Bring him back alive and-”.

“Alright!”

There was a long silence and they were so close that I could hear her sob and then she spoke.

“The offer of the money was not really meant to be accepted.”

“Then why make it?”

“To dramatize my blight... I suppose.” There was a long gap. “The catastrophes here and in America have changed you, haven’t they?”

“If you had never set foot in Eloura Andrew would still be doing the same things and so would I, which is trying to keep the silly bugger, my best friend, alive. And that involves training him to duck and take cover,

and if he must charge forward to meet the enemy, he should not do so to chat. I mean that most literally.”

“Meaning what?”

“I mean in war games that is just what he does. He doesn’t speak German by any chance, does he?”

“Who else enlisted in your squad?”

“Douglas, Stepan Bach, the Van Groendhals, Grahame’s brothers-in-law Rupert and Earl Dean, George Whaley Junior, Kenny and Trevelyan, Marsha Chapman’s father and two teachers from Ocean Ridge, the Milleran brothers. Clyde and Cyril will be scouts, Eakins acts as both our blacksmith and our sergeant major, and Hawkins will be our chaplain and Alexander our junior lieutenant.”

“And Tom serves as your sergeant. Please be careful Ross, be so very careful.”

“Alexander will watch Andrew. The most we can do is train him and he needs to listen. Play favourites and we put him he in more danger.”

“Promise me you will do everything you can to bring him back alive. He drives me to screaming, its like being married to an idealistic teenager and he is an economic disaster, but he loves me and I am not a confused teenager anymore.”

“I promise.”

“And you promise not to mention or imply anything about what we have done together, or about Brionny or Jenny.”

“Of course, but he does not know?”

“No. He was away for much of what unfolded, his family protected him and although not deliberately deceiving him, when things happened that made him sure I was a virgin, I did not reveal the truth.”

“We are both paying for our teenage sex lives, aren’t we?”

“Oh yes. And you might still on France’s battlefields. Do not underestimate Tom’s ruthlessness or greed for your land. Even Alison seems worried. He apparently does not know about you. I can only add my voice to hers in saying come back alive. Goodbye Ross.”

Lying absolutely still during all this was wise: waking Zelda up would have made it worse. Let all the innocent sleep on.

\*

Book Three

Soldier

December 1914

Helen Ryan

The Painter's Hotel Sydney 8<sup>th</sup> December 1914

The Eloura Mounted Rifles Militia, also more officially if pompously known as the First Auxiliary Company of the New South Wales Light Horse Brigade, turned up for their early Christmas dinner and drinks at opening time. Fortunately, they did not bring their horses, artillery or rifles inside; one hundred and twenty-five drinking soldiers on their final day's leave accompanied by about fifty relatives was havoc enough. Evelyn took one look at them and while shaking his head muttered his parody of many a soldier's prayer,

“Lord rush the sun through the sky, and bring on closing time soon.”

Max realised this dinner was a necessary idea rather than a bright one, and lunch was not cooked, so he called them to order.

“Volunteers! Twenty needed!” He got them. “Go to that bakery we passed and get two hundred lamingtons, likewise meat pies, and then we start off beers with the ginger kind!”

So it continued, eating before the drinking sessions reduced drunkenness and the drinking was also broken up with speeches. Max, a South African War veteran and now on his last day as Eloura Mayor, gave one on duty and honour and patriotism and his past wartime experiences. Frank Clarke, also a veteran, condensed his to “eat and drink well whenever you get the chance, because you don't get many, not like this! Don't volunteer because it won't ever again be for free food and keep your head down – and make the Huns do the same!”

That was met with good-hearted cheer and they broke up into chatter and Evelyn and I wandered around among old friends. Alexander was introducing Deborah, but she did not stay long, ostensibly because the baby needed nursing, but in reality because so many of them (though verbally polite) had essentially the same thought written on their faces. It was ‘How on earth did this dry stick of a man catch *her?*’ Alison looking

pensively towards Tom, or was it her brother Douglas, Ross or Andrew? Odd. Ross and I exchanged smiles and a nod, no more. Towards closing time there was one tense, odd moment when Albert Moon turned up with two burly thugs. He had become well off, judging by the homburg hat, spats, two-toned shoes and the American Sears and Roebuck clothes. Now he looked neither smug nor servile, his usual expressions, but today he was enigmatic, rather sad. Ross had to be held back by the Van Groendhals and Eakins and many others were sneering. Even up here we had heard of what Albert Moon had done to Brionny and their children.

“You had best leave.” I snarled.

“I am here to say my farewell to my brother.”

“Then say it and go.” Evelyn added.

He walked over sad-faced and Kenny, over-joyed to see his brother, burst into laughter.

“Just back from America Kenny. Hardly time to go down to Eloura.”

“Will you wave us off at the docks?”

“Certainly, Certainly! You look good in your uniform, who got you into it?”

“Nobody! I can dress myself!”

“Of course you can, but who talked you into enlisting?”

“Same answer! We went to the pub and tossed and some won and some didn’t. First time in my life I won and now I’m off to see the dancing girls do the can-can in gay Paree. Everybody says there won’t be much fighting by the time we get there and even if they are wrong, I won’t see much of it because I hold the horses. That is my special skill.”

“Oh, who gave you that job?”

“Corporal Clarke. But Max does not allow me to mention your name in front of him though. Probably because you got that bad wife of his



jailed and she lost her baby in there people say, but if she has another things will be smooth between everybody.”

Albert Moon’s beady little eyes looked around at the staring, hostile faces.

“It looks like a fine meal, best not miss out on your share. I will wave you off at the wharf. Goodbye Kenneth.”

Albert held out his hand and Kenny shook it. That nasty, brutal little shit who tried to blackmail Rosalind Jervis into having unnatural sex and could make sure that Brianny Clarke, who never harmed him, lost two children and would be in jail for many years, now had tears welling up in his eyes for his simpleton brother as he left. Ross was still being held and was clearly going to follow him when the others let go.

“Eakins, Jan and Hendrik, take Ross to the first room on the left.”

I gave Eakins the key and Ross ninety minutes to calm himself. The company were rapidly turning to gaiety after Albert left, forced gaiety to start with, but the flow of alcohol soon made it real, as it usually does.

I let myself in, locking from inside.

“Letting you out means letting you follow him. If you do not find him you will likely miss your sailing and be charged as a deserter. You know all too well what happens to people in jail?”

“Maybe I will end up finding him.”

“And end up in the same place by another route. Is he worth murdering?”

“Oh yes.”

“Let him go. He has to wander around with bodyguards for the rest of his life, bearing the contempt of everybody and the scars you and Robert gave him.”

My words had no effect; someday they would fight it out. After undoing a few shirt buttons that did not quite reveal my nipples he got a

long look. He was surprised.

“Don’t worry about Evelyn. Nearly five years of faithfulness gone to a man who has been through at least seven women that I can name – and there are more.”

“There is somebody else.” He was always direct. “On the other side of the earth.”

He meant divorced Brionny, the thought came to tell him the truth, but no; we undressed. Just a sad little pub back room on a grey rainy day with the occasional forlorn background sound of Sydney traffic. No golden creek under a sunny azure sky that warmed our skins while birds warbled in the distance now. We could hear the Christmas party noise, faintly. They were singing about peace on earth and mercy mild.

“For me it has always been you and Evelyn, I have tried, wanting only one man, but...”

My hands were on his shoulders, my chin to his neck after a kiss while slowly I lowered myself onto him. This time it hurt at first - so thoughts went to the child who would have my characteristics or his, who would look like either me or like Evelyn, they had the same physique, hair and eye colouring and facial characteristics, but very different brains. Much as I loved Evelyn, there was no way to endure a child like him: another child in the house, Life would be better for both of us to watch someone grow up. Ross did not stop after ejaculating, but orgasm stayed beyond me, this time something was blocking, guilt, the need to concentrate on what would increase chances. With help he enlarged and ejaculated again and again; although feeling tired, it could only be this one time so he must, and when collapsing onto him weeping into his shoulder, he did the right thing, which was to hold me and say nothing. We had agreed not to seem especially close at embarkation

At the quay those of us from Eloura and a sprinkling of Sydney

relatives waved them off. This second war fleet was much smaller than the first, so fewer gathered, among them was Albert Moon with his thugs, wisely keeping a hundred yards distance. Eakins, Reg, Max, Andrew and Alex, Hawkins, the Van Groendhals, Earl and Rupert Dean, the Whaleys, Trevelyan, Tom and Douglas stayed close to Ross just in case.

I made my way over to Moon, spat in his puzzled face and while his goons were unsure how to deal with a woman, walked back to wave off the ship.

“We need fighters like you in Europe.” Reg’s voice was calm. “And you to, Evelyn.”

“No, how do wars benefit me Uncle Reg? They are boring - even in stories. I want to get home to my art.”

*I want I want I want I want I want I want I want I want I want I want  
I want I want I want I want I want I want I want I want I want I want  
I want I want I want I want*

That was unsurprising, it was so common his voice saying that came into my dreams, classic egocentric Evelyn.

At least these boys in khaki had some idea of self-sacrifice, even if mixed with delusions and self-interest. Who would come back? Nobody was saying it in the papers or in parliament, but English casualty lists were already horrific. If Ross did not, something of him would hopefully live in me.

\*

Ross Clarke

Camp Mena Egypt 30<sup>th</sup> January 1915

On the voyage from Ireland to home last year I had seen a little of Egypt on a stopover, but for the others it was a surprise, nothing like they expected. Most wealthy Egyptians wore European clothes and the traders wore some European clothing. In Alexandria “Egyptian” could mean Jews, Copts, Arabs, Greeks, Turks, or European expatriates, mainly

French. Automobiles, churches, picture shows and hotels abounded, all things we thought did not exist in Arab lands. The pyramids were so worn that they were more like a sign of man's impermanence on earth, rather than a sign of eternity as the guide books said.

Egypt was no paradise. Dust and sand got into everything, water, clothing, food, blankets, eyes, mouths, nail, hair, skin. Even the lice and other vermin were dust-coated. Even the sunburn. Try as hard as you might, everybody got it and headaches from roasted brains, and sore eyes from the glare. The alcohol there tasted like either warm lemonade or caustic soda; considering the various water-borne diseases, there was little alternative.

Men began to fall sick and about three hundred Anzacs died before we ever saw an enemy soldier. Not all were by disease. There were brawls, accidents, sunstroke, people drinking wood alcohol and even a few suicides, mainly from sissies who could not take army toughness or from real or imagined fears of sexual diseases. We thought that we would see my first violent death in the battles to come but we saw Kirby, an Illawarra man with us, die when he started lifting munition boxes off skittish mules; they crunched him into a wall, a broken rib pierced his heart and he died with his eyes wide open in confusion and surprise. He became a lesson in how quick, random and pointless death could be for a soldier, no great martyr's act of selflessness that saved others or won a great victory, just an accident with a cranky mule and a loose cinch. For others there was a wrong choice: by March hundreds were shipped out with sexual diseases, mainly syphilis; among them was Earl Dean.

It probably happened in our Colombo stopover at Christmas. Somebody should have put a stop to the incident that led to that and other effects, but it seemed harmless enough. There were always natives hanging round camp, begging or selling and when the rationed lunchtime

beef was maggoty, we all chipped in and got all the lamb curry and rice the sellers had, rented out their brass plates and sat round under the trees. With the iced tea sellers walking round with their samovars, selling a big glass for a penny, a four-piece band and as much beef rice mix as you could eat for a shilling, it was a rare carefree time. The more you buy the more they try to sell, so the arrival of the “dancers” was no surprise. They were pleasant enough to watch, but after wandering through the streets of Sydney, San Francisco, London, Alexandria, Dublin and Perth, I knew what the just-concealed smirks, hard eyes and gaudy clothes meant. So did most of the others, even Andrew, but not the Dean brothers or George Whaley and those three were hooked. So was Kenny; absent-mindedly licking his plate close to his face so that only his much-enlarged hungry eyes appeared over their edge. Luckily for him even the “dancers” were repelled. Max and Alexander tried ordering the dopes, but knew how it would go; the three of them told us off and then went off with the gay ladies, and so did Tom. Time to write to Alison: she would make sure Tom kept on with those syphilis checks.

In Egypt Earl Dean was soon quarantined, due to early symptoms showing. Max ordered the platoon to visit the silly bugger and we arranged matters so that to get to his bed we had to walk through the worst wards. That got the message through, even to George Whaley, who had gone from seminary student to libertine mighty fast, swearing obscenities every third word, and gambling away much of what pay remained after booze and whores took most of it. The rest went on his pornographic card collection. If he was a surprise, so was Chaplain Hawkins, who everybody thought would keep on being the miserable, prematurely-aged, pathetic and unpopular creature he was after the scandal involving his wife, but no, in a new setting with much to do he renewed himself. He read and wrote for illiterates and he would read

through newspapers at lunch to men hungry for any type of news but weary of latrine rumours. He would also read fiction and sneak in the occasional biblical piece and he was behind the “typical Aussie barbecue” which our neighbouring British and New Zealand regiments were invited to. Getting steak and mutton was easy, but nobody could explain where he got the carrots, proper beer, tomatoes, beans, potatoes and butter, all rare luxury foods in Egypt. When asked how he fed three regiments all he would say was “Have you heard a Biblical story about some loaves and fishes?”

After that Max got Cuthbert to get Hawkins a captain’s commission and he doubled as health and sanitation officer. He was the regiment's most popular man: the most unpopular was another surprise. On leave Cuthbert, Tom, Max, Hawkins and I saw a circle of West Australian light horsemen around fighters and we moved in to break it up and there, with a wide smile on his little face as he was pulverising Jan, was cousin Allen. “Tom!” He momentarily lost his concentration and Jan did not, getting in a massive punch which flattened Allen. We ended it as one of Allen’s officers came up.

“Very well Fisher, you ignore warnings. Either transfer out or it’s a court martial for you and perhaps a dishonourable discharge.”

“We will take him!” Tom butted in and the rest of us, excepting Cuthbert, who of course did not know him, snarled or sighed. Allen’s officer was very quick to read faces and got in “a righty oh” and before any argument with us could start they had signed a transfer paper and handed it over. Cuthbert took it and we just stared.

“This man will always be nothing but trouble.” Hawkins muttered very calmly.

“Amen to that.” Max added.

“With Dean hospitalised Clarke’s squad is a man down.” Cuthbert

started. “And it would seem Clarke and Caufield would know how to handle him.”

“Tom is his best friend. Ross is his cousin and I am his uncle.”

“Then you will understand him and know how to control him.”

Max responded.

“Corporal Clarke, nephew or not, I will not tolerate you and Private Fisher brawling, let alone mutilation or murder. That goes for you; that goes for every man in your squad. Is that clear?”

It took me a few seconds to affirm it, but when I did it was meant, and Max wanted me to. We both knew what would happen to the platoon if we unleashed personal vengeance. And yet Allen knew he was in for a hard time and even Tom, who shared a tent with him back-to-back so Allen wouldn't be knifed in his sleep, knew when to butt out. The faces of the squad when he turned up were something to see. The Milleran brothers, who had never met him, smiled in welcome until they saw other's reactions. Most just stared and sneered, but Keny actually wept in vexation, Clyde and Cyril stayed expressionless, but exchanged weary wary glances, Hendrik and George spat, Trevelyan, usually a non-swearer made up for it then, Eakins had much to say, all of it obvious and loud. Andrew, Rupert and Alex, winced and stared at the ground and Bach put on a wolfish grin and gleaming eyes while thanking God for an opportunity. Even his brother Douglas, who nobody had never heard swear before or lose his temper, mixed obscenities and blasphemies and hurled his hat in the ground and tried for a transfer.

Bach was made lance corporal and when Eakins or I were not riding Allen he was. Between us we made sure he never got leave, spent all his spare time cleaning latrines and floors and when he picked a fight with Andrew and punched him he got a week's brig with hard labour. When he complained and tried transferring out, his old jail sentence, the week in

brig and his record with the West Australians meant nobody would give him a chance.

We were the regiment that did not brawl and we had Eakins to thank for that. He was now blacksmith, Regimental Sergeant Major and boxing champion and any brawler was assumed to be a challenger and had to face him in the ring. He also had it in for Allen. "Ya little bugger, why don't yer repent of your sin, god-damn yer? We all know why. You are the devil's own!" Then he charged forward and Max just had time to ring the bell before Allen was hospitalised. We actually saw three teeth fly through the air and could hear bones crack. For once, (while lying in a hospital bed) he was not in a fighting mood or even cranky agro. The only other time he was like that was when he was on first drinks in a pub, the only place where he had a natural smile on. He was out of hospital before embarkation and keen to go. The Light Horse Brigade stayed, but more infantry were needed, so the Eloura Mounted Rifles Militia were redesignated a temporary infantry company and our horses were left in Egypt. We kept the cavalryman's emu feathers in our hats and concealed our opinions under them.

Tom reckoned Max was an idiot and he said it in front of Alex and Cuthbert, who merely ordered him out, Max made our company as good as it was, even Cuthbert deferred to him in the handling of men. He could smooth over fights, made a new man of Hawkins, had Allen under control, which not even Uncle Reg, Mcphee or anybody else ever did, and made Andrew into a soldier. Max was liked by everybody in the company.

After the pathetic attempt of the Turks to take the Suez Canal failed a week after we arrived, there came the Dardanelles idea. Seventy-five thousand Allied troops would force the Dardanelles and with the fleet of over a hundred ships and submarines would take Constantinople. By



knocking Turkey out of the war we could supply the Russians, who as Cuthbert said, “Counted their infantry in the millions, their rifles by the thousand and their aircraft by the dozen.” Even that up to what the Germans had and maybe this war that had gone on longer than anyone expected would soon end.

Only one person amongst us thought it would be anything less than total victory. Andrew, Alexander, Jan, Hendrik and I were on deck on the first night’s sailing and Andrew was enthusing to his brother, who spoke with his shrewd assessing look.

“You need to develop a lawyer’s mind and consider the other side.”

“What other side?” Andrew was puzzled.

“The Turkish defeat of the Royal Navy a month back for starters. Clearly to succeed like that against the world’s most powerful navy the Turks must be well-armed, well-fortified and well-led. They are also defending their homes, but no high-up seems to see what that means to their morale and determination and they are underestimating the enemy. That bombardment gave warning of our intentions and six weeks delay gave them time to rebuild and reinforce. With our planes flying over we have no advantage of surprise and we are trying something very rare in military history, a successful amphibious assault.”

“Have there been many?” Jan asked.

“Landings and then subsequent battles? Yes. But seaborne assaults against entrenched enemies? All that comes to mind in modern warfare are: Howe’s attack on New York and Charleston, both in the American Revolution, Fort Fisher in their Civil War and the Alma, sixty years back.”

“When the Turks were friends and Russians foes.” Cuthbert, with Hawkins had joined us unseen, added. “My father was a subaltern at the Alma. How the world turns.”

“Some Latin or Balkan bunch tried it about here three years back.” Max added. “That gave the Turks a dummy run, and our generals have not conferred with whoever it was in it, something less than sporting, not that we need go on defeated dago experience, for we are British, the undefeated empire.”

“Let us pray that we all avoid hubris.” Hawkins was ambiguous and Alexander laughed hollowly as he responded.

“Well Captain Hawkins, like most lieutenants criticising generals, I may have it wrong.”

He did not have it wrong. Two weeks later when we were off the area we were to take we were breathless. Cuthbert, Max, Alexander, Hawkins, George Whaley, Eakins, Tom and the other NCO's were all staring landward and the reason for the grim faces and some nervous smoking was blatant. Like all half-decent militia officers suddenly at war Alex, Max, George and I had been studying everything military since enlisting. The result was that we could all see that the landscape we had to take was like something a defending Turkish general would have designed in plaster and his obliging God made real. Moonlight shone on a flat sea for fine visibility. The white beach merged with a sharp slope almost without cover which went up at maybe seventy degrees for about three or four hundred feet. A yard out the water was totally flat, it could be three hundred feet deep or three inches, no telling. The boats were supposed to drop us off twenty feet from the shoreline, but into what? There could be barbed wire and mines under that flat surface, the Turks were known to be shipping both into this area and such things were not in sight. The supposedly “level landing beach” was about twenty paces wide before the cliffs and spurs started at angles ranging from about sixty to eighty-five degrees, treeless and shrub less until the tops, which is probably where the snipers hid in trenches and would make deadly work

on that cluttered beach. Behind them were ridges and ravines, ideal for hiding troops and breaking up offensive lines. Above them towered the razor-sharp ridge, ominous under a dark grey sky.

Cuthbert spoke. “We have no maps, nobody below a colonel does, so look and listen closely. That plateau in the centre is our objective. Take it and we have total visibility and field of fire and it will be literally all downhill thereafter for our offensive lines – and the enemy hopes: downhill all the way to the sea! We have them bagged and we have an easy march and sail all the way to Constantinople.”

“We might catch them napping, that’s what everybody else does at four in the morning.” Max trying to cheer us, only made things worse, for he had no sooner finished those words than a flare went up and the distant rumble of artillery drifted up from down south. It was then I instinctively knew that this was a star-crossed campaign. So did Alexander, he had been writing when we came on deck and asked to see me alone.

“Ross could you do me a favour. Read it for the address if I go.”

After taking the envelope. Clearly intended for his rarely seen wife, he returned the favour with my own for Brionny. Soon enough we called the men up; most were naïve enough to be keen, but the taut edge in their jokes and the nervousness in their quick cigarette puffing and other notes being exchanged was a clear sign.

“Hey down there, no lighting up, you give our position away.” Cuthbert ordered.

“And flares and a big dark battleship against moonlight don’t?” Allen called up and laughter among the ranks resulted.

“When, when, when will you Australian troops learn that you never answer back to an officer?”

“Never!” Came the cheery chorus and Cuthbert, with six generations of officers in him, and over thirty years of service, could only sigh, while

Hawkins and the NCO's gave out hot tea and encouragement while doing a final check and then it was over the side. Our platoon was in one big boat with us on the oars.

We floated a long time, waiting for moon set. Finally, Andrew broke silence.

“Just imagine if we knock Turkey out -“

“You'll get knocked out if you don't bloody shut up.” Tom snarled, but silence had been broken.

“Come on, come on.” Douglas muttered. Looking at him I could see the facial sweat on a cold night, the tremulous fingers, rolling tongue and too taut body, the weak eyes were the worst: the fear of guns and ghosts indulged in back home was here now. And he was no good at uniformity or taking orders either. Brother-in-law Rupert was little better, while not fearful he always shirking and asking for explanations for orders and marching in step was beyond him.

“Next man to talk gets latrine duty for a week.” Tom's order settled that.

Hundreds of others were the first ashore and rifles began to crackle, we could even see Turks on the beach, shooting and retreating.

“Never really killed a man, its gonna be fun to find out.” Allen laughed. “Best order anybody ever heard, only bayonets before dawn, bullets after! Get in their guts with a bayonet, yahoo!”

Everybody knew Tom's mate Allen would not get latrine duty.

“Here we are, sixty yards out. Disembark!” Tom barked out the order.

“Looks deep,” Douglas only said what we thought.

“The order was jump.” Tom snarled and one of the men in b squad did and he sank weighed down with his pack.

“Look at those bubbles coming up, just like when we blow them at

the fair.” Kenny said with this horrifying innocence. “Hey now the bubbles have stopped. What does that mean?”

“Tom, would it have been easier to stick an oar down to know the depth is safe and then disembark-”

“It is Sergeant Caufield thank you very much Private Douglas Fisher and you are on latrine duty for a week.”

“Sergeant as a captain I countermand the order and we will row another thirty yards in.” There were light cheers for Hawkins for that one and we rowed, over men swirling at the beach’s bottom. That unsettled everybody, making most quiet, but Allen aggro.

“I’ll get ‘em. I rip up the wog bastards with this knife and its going to be bloody to the hilt-”

“The man who lives by the sword dies by the sword.” Ironically these were Hawkins last words.

“Best way to go.” Allen responded.

“What are you talking about?” Kenny asked uneasily. “Are those stories true?”

“What stories Kenny?” Andrew asked, like somebody who did not know Kenny.

“Is it true that soldiers really kill people?”

Kenny was bunging it on, he knew, but even so a collective sigh went up. The reality of war was hitting - and literally; bullets hit the gunwales and the canvas, sending up splinters and we briefly wondered why Hector Milleran with a stunned face was cradling Raymond, then the dark stain on his chest and the gurgling blood came into sight. Bach, Allen, Trevelyan, and both Van Groendhals winced incredulously as the boat beached about fifty yards from the shore and we hopped out and started running, as much as knee-high surf and kitbags would let us.

We still had yards to go when Hawkins paused, buckled at the knees

and fell face forward motionless into water. Trevelyan and Andrew rushed to help him but Douglas and Allen got there first, Douglas sorrowful, Allen callously pulling on his hair.

“Hey get a load of this! Straight into the middle of his forehead! Those Turk bastards are bloody good shots!”

Even Tom sneered at that one and there was coldness in his voice. “He was a mate, maybe a silly one, but still a mate and generous. Keep on going Private Allen Fisher. Do the bloody great fighting you have promised us loud and long.”

“You bet mate!”

We crossed the white pebble-strewn sand very quick where about three dozen bodies lay lined up. Some had been foolish enough to yell Arab war cries and were shot by our own side. Blankets covered them and there among a few bloodied others was Alexander, stunned and guilty, nervous Andrew treating his arm. Holding it up, it looked like a bad kitchen accident needing stitches. “Bayonet,” he said pointing to one of the bodies on the beach, in a grey-green uniform. Maybe German, but his skin was dark. “I shot him with my pistol. I killed a man.”

Trevelyan, Bach and I ran off to get the rest of the squad going up ahead of me. Allen being the littlest, had the toughest and slowest fight to get to the crest, but he tried gamely, making it by grasping two tufts of beach myrtle at the dune top. Just then two shots sounded closer than the rest and one must have gone through him because I could see the blood splatter on his back. He arched his spine suddenly, threw up his hands and did a high ark through the air, tumbling into a roll down the sand hill that took him almost back to the beach before he lay face up, his legs twitching and blood pouring out from his stomach while he clutched it.

I had not reached the crest, so the Turkish officer did not see me. Judging by his smug, even gloating face looking down at Allen, they had

similar personalities. He put his pistol into his holster and started unslinging his rifle for the long shot needed to finish Allen off, but he never made it, not with my bayonet going up under his ribs towards his heart and then a bullet blasting him off. I walked over, got his pistol out and fired a shot into his temple, then while taking his pistol holster I saw he had documents in a satchel, local maps and lists of some kind so I took all that as well and cut off his rank insignia.

“You just killed the most popular man in Eloura.” I whirled round on Bach.

“All these Turks are in grey-green?”

He nodded, smiling like a cat that stole the Sunday chicken dinner. Trevelyan came up behind us with a pensive face and said nothing.

“What happened to white cloth and turbans?” I asked and Bach responded.

“Germans refurbished them. Poor little Allen’s had his stomach blown apart, his lower spinal column wrecked and he might choke in his own blood if we don’t put a bullet through him.”

The suggestion was on his face, and it was a temptation, but looking down at the whimpering figure, the thought came to let him die in agony and then up ahead where Max, Cuthbert, our scouts Clyde and Cyril and some of the Roydtown platoon were close to being overwhelmed.

“Look let’s go!” Bach and Trevelyan were soldiers enough to follow and on the way we saw our squad and much of the platoon down in a gully and we got them moving. I shot another Turk dead on the way; Bach, and Tom got two, Trevelyan and Hendrik one each and then we were among them, everybody cutting, thrusting, bashing and the Turkish pistol proved handy, dispatching another with it and also wounding and then captured another. Tom did about the same and we had a total of sixteen of theirs dead and seven captured before the remnants ran off.

Trevelyan got a cut face and a bandage.

“Clarke, glad to see you,” Cuthbert panted, his face pale and Max nodded grimly in approval. We looked around; two of the Roydtown platoon were dead, including their sergeant. Cuthbert took the coat the dead sergeant had rolled up in his haversack and tossed it to me.

“Take this, or rather the stripes on it and command of the Eloura platoon. Caufield you’re transferring over to the Roydtown platoon. Bach you are corporal.”

I saluted and handed him the satchel. “The insignia was taken from an officer I killed. Maps and enemy troop dispositions.”

His jaw dropped and stayed that way as he flicked through them for a few seconds then his voice was quick but level.

“Trevelyan you know maps, copy it and then make copies of the copies. Clyde Whaley and Cyril Abaya. You know semaphore, send this.

Eloura Company have captured enemy maps and order of battle, are copying. Current enemy strength at Ari Burnau perhaps four hundred men, Apparently Turkish infantry units with slight artillery support. Apparently second in command killed, prisoners taken. No barbed wire. Main force at Chunak Bar heavily defensive position, barbed wire, a reserve division at Boghali and strong positions at Gaba Temp. Objectives undefended. Original documents being sent by courier.”

“Clyde you are our fastest runner. Give this to General Bridges and nobody else. Take this note. Bach, follow with the prisoners. Take Moon and Alex McPherson, and any lightly wounded as guards. Now Captain Chapman, get the company sorted out, replenish with captured enemy supplies. Cyril, take this first map copy along to the next commander you see. Get them moving along and up. Clarke it will be in a large part your doing if we get that ridge now – and if we do that we may win this campaign, extraordinarily fine work.”



And we came so very close, so very, very close. What was left of the initial Turkish force and their few reinforcements were retreating. We had clobbered them and they were out of ammunition. Our two platoons followed, joined by lost soldiers from many different units. As dawn rose we could see thousands of ours streaming ashore at the cove. It was not the heartening sight it might sound like, for hundreds of wounded (including both McPhersons) and lost were milling about delaying the advance, and the sole Turkish cannon was blasting them. I had thought Cuthbert to be one of those unimaginative by the book upper-class twits who infest our empire's armies, but that impression had started to evaporate when he got the maps and now it went fast. He was total energy, literally pushing and dragging the slower men up the slopes, encouraging, not belittling or abusing, as Tom did, but taking packs for a few minutes from the tired, moving us ever faster. With Max and me imitating him, we made it to the abandoned last Turkish trenches – and so did other groups like ours, but there were not enough of them and the terrain was impossible for a strong defensive line. A few hundred yards ahead two scouts and an officer headed downhill, for from here, we could see the bright blue of the narrows and the Asian shore. We had won! We thought, as we stood there catching our breath and Douglas, Kenny, Hector, (bewildered at the loss of his brother) Rupert and the Van Groendhals starting breakfast with the sunrise, while Alex and Trevelyan tended to his cut.

It got better when four Turks suddenly appeared with their coats taken off and one of them waving a white shirt.

“No Turk! Turk bad! Arabs! Surrender, yes? Hate Turkey? No shoot?”

They came in with hands up,

“No scarlet coat. Engisi but yes?”

“Australians” Cuthbert replied with an English accent just to confuse them more. “Intelligence are just going to love this fellow.”

“What news?”

“One division coming, more artillery, regiments, very fast.”

“Set up the semaphore.” Cuthbert ordered as we watched the sight of the Turks fleeing from the nearby unit. “Max, Captain Chapman, could you get the banner unfurled and waving? We need all the men up here we can get. Best runners, Hendrik and Abaya get those men struggling in those gullies up here fast. That enemy reserve division waits down there, several thousand to our fifty-four. If we advance, they will slash us. We must hold at all costs till reinforced. Arrange a patrol to take these Arab fellows to the beach. If that enemy commander has any brains he will counter-attack soon.”

He had brains and courage and luck, extraordinary luck. Cuthbert asked the Arab with some English who he was: “Lieutenant-Colonel Mustapha Kemal. Very brave, a no mistakes man, fast, very fast, killing to fools, traitors, very dangerous.”

Through binoculars I saw him riding along and clearly, our informant had it right. Later stories had him immediately bolting along on a lathered horse to rally the defeated Turks, maybe that was later, but for now he was just riding with two officers, hawking apparently. It was an appropriate sport, for except for feathers and the hook at the end of the beak he was as hawkish and focused as the bird on his wrist and susing out the situation the way a hawk would. Kemal tensed as he heard the far-off battle sounds and rode towards it, soon bumping into a large group of fleeing troops. He rallied them and rushed messengers off, bringing a fresh battalion up in minutes. They had light artillery and machine guns dismantled and carried by donkeys.

We were not passive observers, but they were just out of range and

when he had them rallied, he had them lie down to take up firing positions. He did the same thing Cuthbert had done, set up a flag to rally and a semaphore to get his men up there fast and he was luckier at it.

“Permission to flank him sir.” Max asked.

“You have to be quick down our slope and quick up their slope.”

Just as we started Kemal diverted twenty new arrivals to snipe and we knew it would be murder. So apparently did the nearest Aussie unit, unwilling to charge across open ground to melee with a swarming enemy force giving new and vivid life to the cliché ‘growing larger by the minute.’ We could see a very large fresh regiment of their reinforcements running up the goat track to join their rallying survivors, while the two previously lost, tired and weakened platoons of the Eloura Rifles and a few others, lost soldiers, all of them led by bloody Eakins, for some reason bearing a Turkish flag, scurried up to us.

“Men, see those four dead pines.” Cuthbert pointed, “Knock them down and drag them back here for cover, wedge them into this rough line of rocks. The rest of you get smaller branches, any rock bigger than a football, any kitbags whatever. Use these rocks and boulders to make a defensive line, these trenches aren’t much, leave no cover out there for a rat, clear that ground for seventy yards out, so that a rat could be spotted and sniped, let alone a Turk.”

We just made it, for just as our nearest units were being attacked, fresh Turkish artillery arrived, and they deployed their infantry for a frontal attack, as Cuthbert said they would, the steep sand and rock slopes precluded flanking attacks or encirclement. Cuthbert took a stand in the middle, Eakins as banner man stood near him. I got my platoon steady, in straight lines, that wasn’t being fussy; there being something about a line of rifles uniform and still and with still, resolute men behind them that terrifies in a way that the same group, if disordered, lacks. It also focuses

the men, so none of those whiney, nervy little comments that the weakest make and that spread fear will start up.

They charged us calling on their God, resolute to win and we met them the same way.

“Come On you bastards!” Tom snarled.

“God! They crowd each other worse than pedestrians in Pitt Street on Saturday night!” Hendrik actually smiled at his own joke and Jan and Trevelyan laughed.

Max giving the orders for our two platoons as the Turks came within range. “Wait for it, wait, wait!” At a hundred yards out we got it.

“Volley, fire!”

The crack of the rifles was near to deafening, smoke obscured everything except the way a line of their weird toupees were no longer there, just blue sky except for five or six and pistol shots brought them down, then more toupees and faces appeared above the gun smoke.

“Reload!”

We did.

“Volley, fire!”

We did, same as before. Six times we did that, the few seconds after fire giving time to keep the Lee-Enfields from jamming. Bullets came our way too. One in Eakins’ makeshift platoon crumpled to his knees and keeled over on his side, his fingers unfurling. Another of his jerked back, hands to his mouth, trying to whimper through shattered teeth with a smashed tongue.

As their attack faltered we stopped firing and the smoke cleared to reveal a front seventy yards wide of jumbled bodies, less than half of them still. Most were writhing, or trying to crawl back, whimpering in bloodied grey-green uniforms, puttees in assorted shades of brown and those toupees tumbled about.

“Hold fire unless they shoot at us. We will need every bullet.” Max ordered. “Clean cool and down rifles”

That was simple enough to do. With a cloth we wiped the barrel, got grime out and placed the rifle in shade so as to avoid overheating, but a Turkish officer on the edge of their casualty tide line saw it, muttered something and with ten others nearby charged forward, several limped or had limp arms.

“Look!” I yelled, my men tried, but only Eakins, Hendrik, Rupert and Tom got rifles ready in time and only Max and I had pistols, and we lost three men to wounds and one dead before I blasted two, Max did the same and Jan got one. I charged the officer, punching him in the gut with my pistol, jack knifing him, then firing three times. Clutching him to stop him recoiling meant that the closeness of his body stopped the Turks shooting me; they had to close in and as they did I shot one in the face. There was a blur of redness, then sky where his face had been and the terrified face next to him got a muzzle pressed into it which opened his eyes with fear and then amazement when I pulled the trigger and there was only a click. Before he recovered I booted him in the crotch and when he jack-knifed I saw the hilt of a Turkish knife in his boot and quickly grabbed it, running it up his outstretched throat from collar to chin and then in the same continuing movement out slashed the throat of the next Turk. Now rifle shots sounded close - theirs and ours. He dropped the grenade he had lifted back to throw to clutch his throat. After catching it before it reached the ground it was returned and exploded under the feet of four more running this way. One of them with a banner which soon had shreds and blood. Once again, I grabbed a dead Turkish officer’s pistol. This was loaded and despite the bullets whizzing around me, I quickly finished off all six who were left wounded or dying, took the banner, brandished it and made it back to our line.

No expected congratulations and cheers came, but everybody was expressionless, just staring at me, excepting Cuthbert writing something down.

“Maybe next time every second man cools his rifle down?” I suggested.

Cuthbert just blinked. Suddenly I could see why everyone was stunned. Max lay propped up, his officer’s jacket open and blood on his white singlet and mouth. I winced and went to him but he could not talk. Cuthbert did.

“His ribs are broken and lung perforated. Bad, but not a death sentence.”

“Where are stretcher bearers?”

“We need forty-four for everybody and more ammunition, more men. I’ll send Hector as a runner requesting.” He handed me a folded paper with something weighty in it.

“This is his idea, but a good one. Now put them on. Men like you are needed today.”

It was a captain’s battlefield commission, with epaulettes inside. This made me Max’s replacement. While trying to console him by saying we would get him out he could only squeeze my hand and point to the company while Hendrik put on a bandage. I saluted and returned to the men. Cuthbert told them I was captain now and not to leave all the fighting to me. This time the Turks tried to wear us down with sniping and artillery; fortunate we were that they had but one gun and few shells for it because they were good shots. One direct hit landed among the forester’s platoon, the next among what had been mine. Jan stood next to me, Hendrik beside him and there was a massive boom that hurled Jan and I down and a shower of red from where Hendrik and the man next to him, a Bega fellow, had been. It covered Jan and he just stared dazed.

“Hendrik? Hendrik! Hendrik!” His face was screwed up and splattered with little bits of blood and he was now half crazy and could go the rest. Rupert put his gun in his hands told him gently led him back to facing the enemy, which is what Hendrik would have wanted and in his dazed state he did what he was told. I wiped myself with the Turkish flag and put it in my pocket. Rupert Dean threw away his gory jacket and fought in long underwear, suspenders and trousers. It was just not wearing us down that made us wait. Hordes of Turks must have poured down that goat track, one very overstuffed division at least and probably town militias as some were in white tops and fezs, some even ate breakfast rolls as they marched and even a few still wore pyjamas and slippers. Others came up the gullies from Gaba Tepe, rallying to Kemal, the gullies now seemed full of them and they had overrun the Victorians under Lalor and pushed on.

They came; bugles blowing, flags waving, artillery fire preceding, yelling their battle cries and this time there was only enough bullets for three volleys and there were too many of them. It was not as if we retreated, more like being pushed back by a human tide and when we were on the edge of the hill it was a steep drop down. I saw Rupert Dean die, facing them as his back was on the trench wall, elbows outstretched as bayonets went into his torso. George Whaley on his hands and knees, suffered much the same, but although stabbed several times crawled to the edge and over. Cuthbert was there, bleeding from wounds to the head, fell to the knee gamely firing on with his pistol while one hand held his midriff. While reloading a pistol a shot downed him.

Douglas with a bandage around his head and bad cuts and blood over much of himself pulled Cuthbert, perhaps still alive, over the edge and with another helper they vanished. Several others tumbled over the edge, with the next artillery shell, alive or dead.

I found myself and a few others gathered around our flag, which ashen-faced Max clutched. If I was going to die it may as well be in good company so Cyril and Trevelyan each got one of the pistols and they used them to good effect. Jan was giving new meaning to the phrase fighting-mad. He actually had found an axe somewhere and used it after running out of ammunition and shattering his rifle butt on somebody's skull. Tom was much the same, although calmer.

"Yer don't smash their skulls with the bloody timber-stock. Snaps the stock. Use the brass butt like this." And he did, leaving a previously wounded crawling Turk dead at Jan's feet for an example.

"Nah the axe is fine."

"Axe, butt, knife or pistol, Makes nae difference! Let a man kill how he likes! It all the glory o' war!" Eakins yelled out and finished it with laughing. They both went back to bashing in their different ways. The ping of bullets sounded off a brass Turkish samovar Eakins had stuffed against his midriff and actually saw him hurl one fully-grown Turk onto the heads of others. Another was picked up by the scruff of the neck and smashed face first into a boulder, another had his neck broken and Eakins's fists with brass knuckles left few conscious. All through this he was grinning and laughing amid a pile of casualties.

"Now this is what a man can call a right proper war!"

When Cyril and Trevelyan gave him some help with our pistols he yelled out. "Fight your own god-dammed battles! I've waited all my life for this and now ye spoil it."

We had over thirty there when at the start and there were only about a dozen of us left alive when suddenly the Turks backed off, staring at us and shaking their heads.

"We held them, we held them!" Max smiled weakly.

"Maybe, but they have the faces of men up to something." Tom



muttered and Jan snarled in agreement. It was simple enough. The first shell fell short splattering us with dirt and body parts.

“No use just standing here to be blasted to death, lets fight another day.” Tom snarled and to my surprise Jan and Eakins and others left with him. Max bit his lips in disappointment, but pointed out to Cyril, Trevelyan, me and the other two I did not know well, badly wounded who remained. He pointed downwards.

“Not unless we can carry you.” I said and then the shell hit, blowing us down into the others. I got a boot in the face, just a boot with a black skinned foot in it and then came the rolling. Images of brown earth and rock came up and my head rang and blackness and peace at last.

\*

Andrew McPherson

Anzac Cove April 27<sup>th</sup> 1915

It was not yet sunrise, just dawn grey when my brother found me. He limped, had half his face bandaged, the injured arm was wrapped, as was his chest. I did not know what to say so my brother did the talking.

“I felt I had not done enough to justify being in a field station, so Hector Milleran found me and I went back into the lines yesterday and within forty minutes the Turks sent me back, with justification this time, didn’t go for a third innings.”

“And I ended up with another unit, took a shrapnel scratch and bruises in the fall... They put me on burial detail. They are sorting them out now.”

“Yes, I am sorting them out for us. I am now commanding the Eloura Rifles or what remains of it.”

“How badly has it gone?” I had to ask because being in the middle of it with everything either confused, chaotic or urgent nothing was clear.

“Five times that ridge the Eloura men held at sunrise changed hands before sunset. The Turks hold it for now. Sixty-six definite casualties out

of a hundred and twenty-five, thirty others missing in action. Two more Eloura men killed by snipers last night. George Whaley was found alive but he might not make it. He wants you.”

Puzzled, I let Alex take me to him. He lay on his own mattress, a sure sign in that overcrowded makeshift hospital that he was dying. Even without that, over the last three days I had seen enough dying men to know one.

“What can I do for you George?”

“I want you to bless me.”

“I am not a Catholic. I am not even a priest”

“Even so, just bless me.”

Enough of the Catholic service came back to help him while he prayed with his rosary, hear him confess and give absolution. Then we said the Our Father, but the poor young man, just nineteen, went before we finished.

The burial detail commander, Lieutenant Curruthers, our only uninjured officer, came up, saw the situation and our same Eloura uniform markings and said there were more of our unit to identify and told us to bury George and Ross, but even after fifty hours burial detail I was uncertain about Ross. He just did not look dead. His eyes were shut (those of the dead seldom are) and his skin did not have the sickly grey white look. I said all this.

“Don’t give me that mate. He’s as dead as a doornail. They all are. I am an officer and if an officer says they are dead, they are dead. Say another prayer if it makes you feel better.”

So while this officer watched hands on hips, Hector, Clyde, Stepan and I dug a grave as deep as we could in that soil, which is to say not five feet. Four bodies would go into it: space was at a premium at Gallipoli. I took him at his word and read the burial service, reciting the names from

name tags. While taking Ross's I could feel warm flesh, not cold and while reading "I am the resurrection and the life" he murmured and we three looked at each other and smiled. "It seems Ross is resurrected."

\*

Captain Ross Clarke

Ari Burnu April 27<sup>th</sup> 1915

*I am the resurrection and the life.* Hearing that in the blackness made me think, 'I am among the saved' but salvation was undeserved, greed, enjoying violence, other men's wives, and threatening my mother. And then the headache, the aching bruises came and Alex saying 'Officer's opinion or not, Ross resurrects' and then some brandy and seeing who turned up at my funeral. They cheered and others soon joined them. I was just able to sit up, grinning weakly.

They hospitalised me at Imbros Island, where mild cases were. With three-quarters of the Eloura Rifles Company casualties, the remainder were pulled out. Over the next three weeks a trickle of recovered wounded and missing in action cases returning built us up, as did twenty-six new Eloura District recruits, even so, we remained a shattered unit, of which I, a corporal three weeks before, was now acting commander.

\*

Reverend George McPherson

Eloura 11<sup>th</sup> May 1915

The church had never been so crowded. Many of the foresters had no mailing addresses, so this would be where they heard. Even those with addresses would experience problems as our telegram mailing system could not cope, even both military and civilian mail had been swamped by the casualty letters, so the lists sent to local churches was the most up to date. Built for two hundred, nearly six hundred crammed in, finally giving me a good idea of how many Anglicans there were in our parish. Other denomination people were personally welcomed in. Six hundred tense faces looked up, but the Anglican service cannot be varied and we

got through the prayers and the hymn, all too appropriately ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ and to notices, where it would fit.

“We have here an official telegraphed list of all one hundred and twenty-five members of the Eloura Rifles Company and their current condition as of May 7<sup>th</sup>. The remnants of the company have been evacuated to the nearby isle of Lemnos. As many are friends, acquaintances and relatives although not of the Anglican faith, all names will be read. Officers:

Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel Cuthbert, formerly listed as missing in action believed killed, he is now listed as severely wounded and evacuated to Alexandria.

Captain Max Chapman, severely wounded, evacuated to Alexandria.

Captain Edmund Hawkins Chaplain and late of Roydton Methodist Church, killed in action. April 25<sup>th</sup>.

Captain Ross Clarke, battlefield commission, now Eloura Rifles acting commander, mentioned in dispatches twice and, twice nominated for the Victoria Cross in one day. Formerly listed as missing in action believed killed, now listed as severely wounded.”

That got a murmur of approval and amazement, even from his mother. His father sat a little straighter and more resolute. If only Alison Caufield had not looked like a worried, loving widow listening far too intently, ignoring her wailing daughter and son, biting her lips, fluttering her hands before her face. The rumours were obviously true and others noted her behaviour.

“Lieutenant Brian Curruthers, formerly bank clerk at Ocean Ridge, killed in action May 2<sup>nd</sup>.”

Somewhere near the back a woman burst into tears.

“Lieutenant Alexander McPherson wounded, evacuated to Imbros.” I paused to catch myself and there were murmurs of sympathy. Karl and

Lynda clutched my wife, while Ruth burst into tears.

“Company Sergeant Major Eakins McKenzie, nominated for the Victoria Cross, wounded in action. Returned to duty May 5<sup>th</sup>.

Scout Clyde Whaley remains on duty.

Scout Cyril Abaya awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Honourably discharged after the loss of his foot, to be returned home.”

I looked around and was thinking what everyone was, one unhurt among the first eight, was the rest like this? A corporal commanding a company, it must have been horrific.

“A Squad First Platoon

Sergeant Tom Caufield, wounded, nominated for the Victoria Cross. Remains on duty.

Acting Corporal Bach, essayer and former Eloura alderman, remains on duty.

Lance Corporal George Trevelyan former manager at Royd town mines; missing in action, believed killed April 25<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Douglas Fisher, thrice wounded, hospitalised May 6<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Allen Fisher killed in action April 25<sup>th</sup> “

I paused and glared at the few smug murmurs. Reg could only sigh and stare at the floor. Murie, Ruth and Barbara looked tense, Alison inscrutable.

Trooper Raymond Milleran died of wounds April 26<sup>th</sup>

Trooper Hector Milleran remains on duty.

Trooper Kenneth Moon remains on duty.

Trooper Jan Van Groendhal, wounded, remained on duty, awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Trooper Hendrik Van Groendhal killed in action April 25<sup>th</sup>

Trooper Rupert Dean killed in action April 25<sup>th</sup>

Poor Katie Dean Clarke, sitting next to her recently returned

uniformed brother Earl, given leave from Langwarrin Hospital for V.D. cases, him shaking, her weeping.

Trooper George Whaley Junior, died of wounds April 27<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Andrew McPherson, light wounds, remains on duty.”

I sighed with relief.

B Squad Fir-”

“Oh don’t worry about B squad reverend, it’s quite clear how B squad will go!” Like many others my jaw dropped, but there was Reginald Fisher, tears in his eyes, anger in his face. “I’ve lost a son, another is hurt, maybe dying. Likewise the son-in-law and nephew and my daughter-in-law has to wonder if her brother will live or die, and all that is left of our men is your silly boy, a teacher, an abo, a German crook and the village idiot! Can you tell us why?”

“Others are waiting to know the fate of their loved ones, please wait.”

I could not go on and handed the list to Karl while I tended the weeping, including Edna. The litany of suffering and survivors went on and on. Seventy-one casualties out of a hundred and twenty-five. Forty of these dead or believed so, three crippled for life. Some excused themselves from the rest of the service, others stayed, but weeping and the list only added to Reg’s question of “why?” After prayers for God’s mercy and comfort to the suffering the only provided answer was in an attachment.

“I have here a letter from the office of General Ian Hamilton Commander of the Dardanelles Expedition.

To the people of Eloura District,

The Imperial High Command of the Dardanelles Expedition wishes to give you the deepest and most sincere thanks for the service and sacrifice of the men of your part of Australia. In the largest expeditionary

force the world has ever known, in a force of many hundreds of units, only one unit, the Victorians under Captain Lalor, achieved more than your militia unit. The men of Eloura, after fighting smaller units, seized vital terrain and information and devastated an enemy regiment about eight times its size, capturing two battalion flags, and only succumbed to massively increased odds and a lack of ammunition. On a field of splendid achievements achieved by the Australian Imperial force, they were outstanding as they number of awards and commendations show.

May God give the grieving comfort, and give England and our empire more such heroes as these men and great victories leading to a lasting peace will soon be ours.”

“But we are Australians.” Reg commented and murmurs of resentful assent echoed.

Some such as Leo and Barbara Fisher, Katie Dean Clarke, Rachel Clarke and my wife and daughter were consoled and strengthened by the general’s message, but some like Murie were obviously beginning to doubt, and others like Alison Caufield and Karl and Lynda Taun McPherson were unimpressed or inscrutable. When Marsha Chapman heard her father’s name read all colour drained from her face and she had glazed eyes and a twisted smile and would only repeat, 'He will be found, he will be found.' A few others, most of them irregular attenders like Reginald, were bitter and hostile.

After the service, many longed for comfort and we gave what we could, but others avoided us; it was clear a community was dividing and perhaps a nation was.

\*

Ross Clarke

Imbros May 11<sup>th</sup> 1915

“You may come in now.” The orderly motioned me in and Cuthbert, sitting at his desk, looked much better than when last seen, despite

bandages. He had four foolscap documents on the table and two medals.

“Max nominated you and the generals wanted to give you the Victoria Cross. I knew better.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that absolutely nobody questions your courage or fighting abilities. Sixteen Turks killed before breakfast, I didn’t see all those you shot in the last attack, how many?”

“I don’t know, after emptying a full pistol clip, with no misses, then the knife...”

His face was expressionless, so I took out the pistol and counted while he stared.

“Twenty-two bullets but some got more than one and six with the knife, but only one died for certain with the knife.”

“Go for the jugular, did you?”

“And got it. Nobody survives that.”

“Certainly. And of those shot? Recall please, try hard, put yourself back there and see if you remember how many Turks you killed.”

He watched expressionless, sipping his tea, while I recalled, counting them up.

“Four definitely. One got a point blank to the heart, another to the forehead, one to the temple and another three to the face and he did not move, being under my feet for some time. Sixteen others wounded at least. Oh - and those in the volleys I don’t know, I nearly forgot.”

“Two that I saw. Twenty-three enemy soldiers killed and sixteen wounded by a conservative estimate. Plus, the capture of vital enemy documents, leading a charge to rescue your embattled officers, capturing an enemy flag and heartily defending an injured superior. So why shouldn’t you get the Victoria Cross and have your battlefield commission ratified?”



“Clearly you will now tell me.”

“You are certainly no stranger to violence, are you? Your cousin, near father-in-law, hired help, even your mother.”

“They all had it coming. And I did not actually hit my mother.”

“Have you heard the phrase ‘An officer and a gentleman?’”

I nodded and he sighed.

“One refers to given rank, the other to expectation. You have the courage and the knowledge for the rank, but you do not meet the expectation. You remember the Sydney Christmas Party? I saw our hostess’s face looking at you. You cannot resist temptation and apparently never do. Your host’s wife? Your sergeant’s wife? Your brother’s fiancée? Your best friend’s wife? Now which of them did you divorce while she was in jail?”

I was about to explain that it was not like that, but his face was set.

“You come from the landed gentry, yet can any of this be the behaviour of a gentleman?”

“It is not quite as you say and there is more to it.”

“More? My God man, don’t you realise that any V.C. winner becomes a celebrity and reporters will ask the same questions of people who know you and get the answers that I did? Do you really want your peccadilloes splattered across the papers? Do you really want these women – and their men, and yourself, publicly exposed?”

“Definitely not. I refuse the medal, and the promotion.”

His face was now less harsh and he sighed, most meaningfully.

“High command have been persuaded that making you a celebrity hero would be a mistake. The Distinguished Conduct Medal does not attract such publicity and approving your commission seems appropriate and we keep you away from the papers. A company in the front line lost their captain to snipers yesterday so you are transferred out till a

replacement comes. Do you want that transfer to be permanent?

“No, a promise was made to a past friend that I would keep her husband alive. He is the type who needs a protector.”

“Very well, Now, my first war was as an ensign against the Zulus. I have fought in three more since then and have seen some battlefield commission fellows. They always try to prove themselves by repeating the type of thing that got them the commission, don't. You inspire enlisted men and NCO's to do that. You observe and direct. Only shoot if the enemy comes in pistol range and Australians expect you to lead from the front. You may also take Eakins. Officers who saw him capture a battalion colour and go on to kill about forty Turks interviewed him and decided he also should get a lesser award. He told them officers muck up battles. To be honest officers can't stand the fellow.”

It hit me he was hoping we would be a pair of dead heroes rather than living embarrassments, but no.

“We are expecting a massive Turkish offensive, probably in a few days. Don't attract enemy fire by salutes, returning them or wearing the obvious accoutrements of rank, such as immaculate uniform, knee-high boots instead of puttees, binocular cases, sam brown belts and holsters, gloves. Dull your escutcheons, your patent leather on your peak cap if you get one and your tabs. Look out for the type of fools who get others killed. Pass on your books and newspapers to enlisted men, share any of the little trifles that come with rank or if that is not possible, do not let them see them. Don't tolerate over-familiarity, rule-breaking, disobedience or attention seekers. Know your men and what motivates them. Do not do what Captain Chapman did and tell men – and others they are up for an award, supposedly these stay a secret until it is gazetted - and so we avoid situations such as this one.”

He paused. “In thirty-two years of military service I have never seen

a more unruly, disobedient but magnificent army than the Anzacs. Anybody else would not have got twenty yards and then left on day one.”

We exchanged salutes. Eakins and I had been back in the trenches near Quinn’s post eleven hours when the big enemy offensive began. The infantry attack lasted two hours and I did not kill a single Turk, but a great many others did. Four or five thousand or more of their dead lay before us, another six thousand were wounded or captured. We lost a hundred and twenty-seven enlisted men and four officers and thought they were light figures for such a victory, until I recalled Alex saying that between the Indian mutiny of the 1850s and the second South African war in 1899 Britain ruled the Empire with only two battles costing over a hundred fatalities. The world was changed. By now we had proper trenches, with barbed wire and machine guns and enough men to form two lines so that rifles would not overheat. I thought my job would involve steadying the nervous and quelling the cowards, but there were none of either: the veterans wanted to avenge past sufferings and wipe out the bitter taste of defeat with the sweetness of victory. The new arrivals wanted to prove themselves. Those in the second rank often paid pounds to be up on the parapet. If anything, several had to be stopped from being too brave, some wanted to charge with the bayonet. Eakins was the worst.

“Cor Rossy boy, forty minutes of nothing but shooting, it’s a target range not a battle! Just like Omurdan, heathen with sword and buckler, worthy adversaries for hand to hand and all we did was shoot them! Fire volley! reload, fire, volley! Boring! Boring! Officers mucking it up! Stay in line! Boring! By the lord a hosts, that landing, now that was a battle and you did right fine, so why not have some fun and send some heathen ta God with their swords in their hands and maybe us go that way to?”

“Eakins that way of fighting was old-fashioned and did not work at Culloden, now stay on the parapet. We have orders.”

Preposterous madman though he was, he had a point. It was soon boring. In its emphasis on depersonalised efficiency through simple task and rotation that battle reminded me of the school excursion Caroline and Alison organised for us when we went to see bricks being made in the Roydtown factory. Eakins was not the only one to go to war with ideas about knighthood and crusades. When sifting through the personal effects of the few casualties, copies of *Morte Le Arthur*, Walter Scott, and Henty turned up frequently. Kipling was the dead's favourite.

And yet after the battle we could see the human cost of the new efficiency. Ten thousand bodies were piled up on a front about as wide as six of Eloura's town blocks and thousands were moaning and crawling. On the landing day we learned that films and plays and illustrations got it wrong, men don't usually die in seconds unless the bullet is to the head or heart, they are reduced to writhing and whimpering or go semi-conscious for some time before dying. Both sides wanted a truce: us to avoid the stench and disease that would result if the Turks did not bury them. The Turks also wanted to save their wounded. After wandering around as an accredited observer Eakins wanted to see me, urgently.

"What is it?"

"Captain Clarke, yer reference to Culloden; do you think the McKenzies were on the Jacobite side? For we Presbyterians would never tolerate a Catholic king and that is what Bonnie Prince Charlie was. Like most Campbells, Sutherlands, Mackays, Munros, the MacDonalds o the western isles, many a Fraser an' a Grant and your namesakes the clan Ross, McKenzies were at Culloden, but fought for Protestantism."

The moans of our own wounded were near and the Turks could easily be heard and the heartlessness and egocentricity of the eccentric personality came through yet again. Even more so a day later when I found him beside George Whaley's dug up, burning body. A couple of oil

cans at his side and worried men watching while he won a debate with a corpse.

“Now come Judgement Day see if ye be judged for yer sins or the manner of your earthly remains being disposed. See God face ter face and see if he finds cremation hard for God!”

Even in the first days, much was being said about Anzac mateship and it was there, but essentially tens of thousands of men and corpses and millions of rats and flies were put into an area about the size of two golf courses. The stench of death, excrement and of thousands of men who bathed once a week if that, cramped together, hardly made for a belief in the brotherhood of man, at least for me.

Others did keep such a belief. Andrew and Eakins did, but in their different Christian ways, but Whaley's strange fate and Eakins' fanaticism, left me wondering and what would Hawkins, the most balanced and decent of our Christians, would have left of his faith after a month at Gallipoli. The last of my small supply went there. There can be nothing like being crowded in with putrefying corpses and desperate living men who spend their time trying to survive or making sure that others don't, to convince someone that Darwin and Huxley got it right, we are just clever animals engaged in a bloody struggle where the fittest survived. All across the globe others were coming to that conclusion and their number would surely grow as this war continued. That was a true thing too horrible to face: it was easy to see what the new religion would be. The warning was a thing in my hands.

It was found on a dead Turk, and it was my job to act as first sifter through the documents found on the dead, mainly to get maps, still in dire demand. This was a propaganda leaflet. Divided in half, one side was written in English and one in Turkish and it had little pictures – of enlisted men in both armies joining together and killing all their officers

and then taking over the farms and factories, peopled with Allied and Axis soldiers' arms around each other, while their smiling wives and children mixed on the socialist collective farm.

Totally impossible and naïve beyond belief, but a moment came when its appeal was understandable, for the pecking order that pervades the army alienates, the grovellers and intriguers trying to advance themselves up so that they could become the bullies and intriguers who were currently trying to keep them down. The stealing of due credit and catty sniping were ways to steal from those who achieved something. Many of those who achieved were only doing whatever they did out of vanity or to advance themselves in the pecking order.

Much of the ballyhooed mateship was enforced by circumstances, you taught the man next to you how to avoid snipers so that there was one more firing gun next to you when the attack came and his rifle might save your life. He might bandage you when you could not and if he shared his ration, you would not starve, and he would not when your ration came in – and there was the common enemy – no, not the Turks after the first few weeks, they were soon respected for their courage, chivalry and stoicism, but the British from Churchill down and his officers, those who planned this one and then bungled everything we achieved. That was a crude view, but like many crudities, it was both overly simple and essentially accurate. The commander in chief, Sir Ian Hamilton, was no coward, having been twice nominated for the Victoria Cross, (not in one day) but he was remote from the campaign, off on his luxurious yacht, drinking champagne out of immaculate crystal while we had to drink caught rainwater in scoured bully beef tins. While we sweltered and swore in the sun in trenches full of sewerage, rats, flies and bits of mouldering mates, he listened to an orderly reciting Homer, making comparisons between us and the Greek heroes with the Turks as latter-day Trojans. Alex swore he

heard one of his staff commenting on the way pretty sunlight reflected on the Aegean.

He was by any accounts one of the most courteous, cultured and humane men ever to be a British officer, epitomising the English gentleman, but I remembered being inspected in Egypt by “Bull” Allenby, a tough, profane man who made his orderlies vomit with fear and our commander was Kitchener, another incisive, short-tempered man who did not hesitate to imprison innocent civilians to help end the Boer war. Neither tolerated defeat. They would have been ashore on day one with binoculars scouring the ridges for our progress and when we and Lalor’s Victorians and others captured those heights, they would have reinforced us with troops running at the double. Hamilton was not the worst; the ones who kept sending us across open ground into barbed wire and machine guns in uncoordinated daylight attacks to get ground of little value were the worst and sometimes the soldiers ordered to do that were British and sometimes were colonials.

After the May 19<sup>th</sup> Turkish attacks Gallipoli was a stalemate until someone left: neither side could drive the other into the sea. If we had been wise, we may as well have evacuated and saved nearly half a million more combined casualties.

The burial and retrieval truce lasted nearly a full day and in it was too long. The generals were not the only idiots, the common man can be his own worst enemy. Without problems, the rests soon became boring and men began to quarrel and look for trouble or cause it. Brawls erupted over who got the largest piece of fruit. Once honest men became thieves for tiny tins of jam. While consoling a weeping boy because he thought his fiancée would drop him because of a facial scar, his squad smirked and exchanged knowing looks and when my back was turned somebody said, 'Well he knows about woman trouble that’s a certainty.' It was clear

that if I turned round they would all deny it and the lot would have to be punished, which would make me hated. If ignored, he had scored a point and made me look weak. Going into the insult trade would make him my equal, not wise considering the army functions as a pecking order. All this was just out of boredom.

“Perhaps when men become so bored that they look for trouble the time has come to restart the war.” Then I walked out.

“Do that mate and you will get a bullet through the bloody back.” That was said to my back. Fortunately, my replacement for that unit came soon.

In July the rested, reinforced, retrained and renamed again Eloura Mounted Rifles was once again sent to the front as part of the dismounted Light Horse Brigade and our regiment took our sector of the front line. Alexander was company dogsbody and I was still acting company commander, technically subordinate to Cuthbert. Kenny came to see me one day, sheepish.

“Yes Kenny.”

“Well Ross, well this war is no fun.”

I could hear the laughter, the first from Douglas since Egypt; an audience gathered for more laughs.

“No Kenny it is not fun.”

“Only a few couriers have a horse, they are rare on Anzac Cove Ross.”

“Along with Parisian dancing girls.”

“Exactly, my point exactly.”

“You want me to supply you with dancing girls or horses?”

“Can you do both? Egyptian ones would be fine, but lor’ get me some dancing girls and well I never done it properly yet an-”

“Kenny nobody can get you dancing girls or horses. Anything else?”



“Well, well it is true soldiers really kill people, that is clear and I do not like killing people, not that I have ever shot one, Turk or Australian. So I am not much good to you am I?”

“Meaning?”

“War is not fun. Even if the food is free, it’s just because it is terrible and I don’t like people shooting at me all the time. I think they want to kill me, even though I don’t know them. I want to go home.”

By now everybody was in stitches. I turned to them.

“Anybody here want to settle on the slopes of Gallipoli and take up farming here? Does anybody here *not* suspect people want to kill them? Anybody here *not* want to go home?”

For once I faced rows of smiling faces.

“Well Kenny, if everybody wants to go home General Hamilton might have to get off his yacht, stop reading his poetry and defend the line so the Turks don’t break through. We can’t have that happening, can we?”

“That is an idea, if we have that happen and all the troops go home then the wars will be smaller and faster, because only the generals will fight them and there are not more generals than enlisted men! I don’t write so good but you do and if I dictate a letter to Sir Ian-”

“Kenny I’ll meet you half-way. A compromise!”

“You mean you will let me get off at Columbo and visit me on your way back?”

Kenny smiled in eager expectation and his platoon were laughing till they cried. Others were glancing up our way.

“I’ll make you a stretcher bearer. You and Andrew, You don’t have to kill people. How is that?”

He nodded and Andrew looked more relieved. I had seen him deliberately aiming to miss at snipers. Nice well-intentioned men like him

and Kenny and Ian Hamilton got more killed than snarly bullies like Tom Caufield and Allenby. Men toughened themselves up to keep sane and to avoid those soft but deadly types.

“Don’t bury the dead or you become one.” Tom snarled to Andrew as he started digging a grave. It was horrible to endure but macabre humour helped. Bodies were often part of the parapets and in one a skeletons arm and hand hung out and Tom shook its hand.

“Pleased to meet you, my chubby cousin Murie back home would love to get your diet.”

After that and the laughs it became the custom to shake the thing’s hand for luck, but Jan and Douglas just stared. Those two were going quieter and odder. Ask Douglas anything and if he replied it was to snarl about when will we go home? Jan kept forgetting Hendrik was dead and would call out to warn him or waking up, say “Hendrik get me a tea!” then realise and the smile faded. With Kenny you never knew when he was bugging it on and when he was really simple. From training on he supplied us with what became known as Kennyisms. A random sampling

“Why is Egypt so far away? If it were closer we would not get so sea-sick because the waves are not so big when big bits of land are close together. Look at Eloura Creek, no waves there. That’s what we learned in geography.”

“Why don’t Egyptians do the tango? I got up when them belly dancers came and tried to tango with one and she hit me.”

“I only smeared the mosque with pork fat leftover from lunch because Allen told me they like it. After they bashed and kicked me and fired a pistol at my head and hurled me in the river I suspect Allen got it wrong.”

“Why don’t we just buy this land from the Turks if we need it so much? Bad land like this would not cost much...if all eighty thousand

soldiers here chipped in...”

At times different men would imitate him calling out “I want to go home” and any Australian song about home would be humorously sung when Kenny was in sight. A certain wisdom emerged in bringing the town dog; intentionally or not he kept team morale up. So did Andrew. His bowling abilities at cricket came in handy when the long-fused grenades came in the trenches. It never occurred to him that hurling them back killed Turks and everybody had enough sense to not enlighten him. At Imbros he captained our cricket team and won. His Christianity took the form of giving away rations and gifts, then feeling great guilt because he felt some little regret. I increased his popularity by setting him up on a high point behind sandbags and corrugated iron with a stack of beach pebbles and defused Turkish grenades which had the exact size and feel of a cricket ball, with his bowler’s eye he skimmed them at anything that went a fraction above the parapet. Thrice pebble-hit men ducked that second or two before the bullet nipped their hats or came close. Nothing works like saving mate’s lives to make a man popular.

He was fine at beach volleyball, usually played a way out in the ocean, even there shells occasionally landed. For us a day down at the cove swimming was almost heaven and if there was soap and hot water and a hot meal we were up there on cloud nine. There were massive condensation tins, but even so in summer water and fuel had to be imported. Hot meals, a cup of hot tea and shaving with boiling water were luxuries, as were letters and parcels from home. They usually contained tins of jam, preserved fruits, vegetables, cigarettes and books. They were more than a treasure, for a diet of rainwater, tinned bully beef and old biscuits will lead to scurvy and malnutrition. Our circumstances were the worst - living in excrement-filled, vermin-infested trenches without good sleep, as maybe one night in three went without a

bombardment or somebody screaming in nightmares. We had scurvy, dysentery, septicaemia, gastric, ulcers, rashes, influenza, hepatitis, rheumatic fever and for that matter almost all known fevers, festering and sores and cuts and probably more. For some unknown reason, perhaps because they often hit at once, these got a collective name, 'barcoo root.' Two words certainly covered a range of dangerous symptoms. By August we were losing near to eight hundred men a day being hospitalised to it.

Max returned as a major in late June. He had lost two fingers, but his chest had healed up and he was unchanged, but my view of him did. With Alexander and Cuthbert present the conversation started on home things.

"My properties and investments are doing well. Zelda has the hang of it. Leo writes that he needs till Christmas to get everything organised and the new personnel trained, then he enlists."

"Everybody else fine?"

"Surely you know that Lynda expects one in September and Evelyn and Helen will make me a grandfather again about the same time."

"Nobody writes to me. Any news of my parents or the farm?"

He just shook his head. "Now I have some important news." He glared meaningfully and nodded to the tent flaps. We could see no legs but took a look anyway. He gathered us round and whispered. "The war and in particular this campaign, are not going well for us."

I waited for more and realised that was it, the great secret revelation that even Kenny could see. I looked into that seriously sincere face and my childhood image of Max as a great and wise man, which had lasted till then, disintegrated and in less than a minute the realities were revealed. He was just a good-mannered, lucky plodder of average intelligence or less, who seemed confident and a winner because he was born into gentry and followed their traditions, never questioning them, and he had enough sense to listen to smarter people.

*My properties and investments are doing well, Zelda has the hang of it.*

Aunt Zelda, I now realised had always had the hang of it, Memories came back seen in a new way: remembering now that he literally scratched his head over tax documents and passed them to her. Aunt Zelda would give them a cursory look and smile and when the first tractors in Eloura went on display and he was oblivious, she was shrewdly assessing them and got him to look at them, all he could do was blink. He was very good at dealing with men, because he could read faces, consider another's viewpoint and compromise. He was fair, strong, generous and polite, but those qualities did not add up to intelligence. I was not so smart either; Alex was studying me and realised that he could see me waking up and that he never had any need to; Cuthbert was the same.

“What makes you think that?” Cuthbert said expressionless of face and voice.

“Good God man, haven't you heard of the Western Front battles of Tannenburg, Neuve Chapelle, or Loos? Costly defeats each one.”

“Actually Tannenburg was on the Eastern Front and it was balanced by the victorious Russian offensive at Lemburg.” Cuthbert was good at the expressionless face. Max's next words only confirmed my reappraisal. After whispering what everyone knew he bellowed out a top secret.

“Well now, they were all big pushes as they are called and when we go into the big one here in early August, I wonder, I just wonder.”

Cuthbert, Alexander and I did not wonder, we all knew. They would balls it up again and we got that right. Until the big push the troops grumbled about nothing happening: by late August they wished they had shut up.

All along the Dardanelles we were on the attack, and we could have driven them into the sea – and without the loss of at least forty thousand for the gain of about as much ground as covered an average Eloura farm. The tens of thousands of English and Irish troops who landed to the north of us and initially faced paltry opposition on vital ground, landed in confusion and were defeated by initially four battalions led by accursed Kemal - and then they did what the British always did when defeated or confused, sat down and had a cup of tea. The Turks were able to reinforce at their leisure and Mustafa Kemal did not need much leisure or tea, just time, which he never wasted. He did it again and their lines in front of us were not weakened, in fact the Turks had been forewarned by British actions and we paid for it. They also paid dearly down south at Cape Helles. Once again the generals indulged themselves in that British tendency to send clustered infantry in daylight attacks across open ground to take entrenched infantry supported by machine guns. The New Zealanders had it worse though. Their column actually broke the Turkish line and had the key to victory when they captured vital high ground, but they were driven off, officially by Kemal's massive attacks, but by latrine rumour by artillery fire – not Turkish, but ours, it may have been, though captured Turks who had been there said we blasted them hard.

Nothing could be worse than that, we felt, but the experiences of the Australian Light Horse came close. Our regiment was fortunate at the Nek - we watched. The Nek was almost exactly the size of two tennis courts and in the same shape – and with as much cover. As only a hundred men could fit into a charging line, they wasted four lines before someone stopped the charges and did not use us. Some people said there were many survivors, but we were close enough to see it happening and if there were survivors, they must have been wounded blown back into their trenches. It was worse at the Battleship Hill fiasco where half of the

twelve hundred and fifty strong 7<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment copped killing bullets for nothing. A former horse breaker I knew went up the hill a corporal and came down a sergeant-major and he commanded hundreds more for a few hours until rare surviving officers could be found. We heard that the Lone Pine casualties came to two thousand Australians and eight thousand Turks, maybe - and maybe we just got the first day's figures.

Our regiment also had our turn. As going into battle with stretcher-bearers demoralises, weakens the unit numerically and makes the bearers slower, obvious targets, the stretchers were left on the parapet. Still there was my promise to Rosalind and I kept Andrew and Kenny close to me.

We were lined up in new advanced trenches with bayonets fixed, identifying white armbands on those with khaki shirts and jackets (in the heat many wore white short sleeve shirts, or long john tops) and full water bottles and rifles. An idiotic order came down that we should charge with empty rifles, just using a bayonet; men stopping to shoot slows down charges. Cuthbert read it and then silently ripped that one up in front of the assembled officers.

Waiting for the attack, the enlisted men looked at each other nervously. A reversal of privileges of rank means that officers cannot behave like that. Nobody was paying to be in the front line now. Not only Max had been downgraded in my estimation. Eakins had always been considered a loud eccentric, but since the cremation of Whaley he was rightly considered mad and today he was again revealing himself as a homicidal maniac. Sergeant Majors are supposed to go up and down the lines, giving encouragement, but he did it with a too-wide fixed smile and gleaming eyes. He focused on Kenny, who had fouled up as a stretcher bearer.

“Ever stuck a bayonet deep, deep, deep into a heathen man's guts,

young Kenny? I tell yer, there is no sweeter feeling in the whole world, than to triumph in battle! But look at yer bayonet, look at this nick, now it will go into a man's ribs right easy, but cor pullen' it out this niche will lock into a rib bone and man, while you're stuck, an' pullen' away a Turk 'ull come an' stick yer. Be sure ta get ano' bayonet or keep yer bullet ready ta blast 'em off."

Kenny wept and then next in line was Clyde, who just stared, as did everybody else. His silence seemed to cause a flutter of unease through Eakins mind. "Well black boy, this be as close as yer ever goin' ta get to payen' whitey back for taken' yer land, so get stuck into et.' Whaley from a whitey heh? Bet yer Gret-Granpa had ta' spen' ae long time in the confessional box fer that one!"

It was almost a relief when the written order came through and Max read it.

"In eighty minutes, advance with other units eighty yards and capture and hold the enemy trenches. Sounds simple enough."

Alex and I looked at each other. By now we knew that the more an order sounded simple the more confusion would appear in the unspecified details – and so it was. Alex and I spent ten minutes looking for the enemy trenches and then called up Clyde.

"Clyde you are our best scout, can you see any sign of an enemy trench? Reconnoitre it." He took thirty minutes and loped from one shell hole to another. We could see fire seeming to come from mud and Clyde had great trouble making it back.

"I got sixty yards out. About there, the clay is newer and from deeper; its about a month old, and although its hard with all the shit and dead, the smell's cut pine, but not too fresh an' mixed in and pine smoke and manure smoke and their strong Turkish coffee and cooking beef. Those guns made a click-tut click-tut sound then with a nearly silent



smooth roll, like maybe bullets being fed into something metallic.”

“Did it go like this?”

I got a captured Turkish rifle and fired into the air a few times, fast. He shook his head.

“That sound was in the background. This was different, smooth roll like and there were seven of them. Not all together.”

“How far apart?”

“Maybe ten yards. They are machine guns in pill boxes, aren’t they? They know we are coming.”

We contacted headquarters, the attack would go ahead and it did. In our company there were no whistles, calls of ‘over the top’ battle cries or shooting: we left giving the enemy a warning to idiots down the line and quickly gained twenty to thirty yards before they opened up, both their trench cover slits under the pine roof and the fire that came from there. Coming from such a low height, ground-hugging did little good until we reached the shell holes, about the depth of a bathtub. In there, Max said Clyde had copped it bad, and Alexander was out of sight now, perhaps somewhere among the falling bodies. Then we reached the point where they were lobbing their grenades into the shell holes and although Max, Jan, Hector, Andrew, Tom, Eakins, other newer men and I were throwing them back, it was only keeping us alive, not advancing. Down the line they were advancing, our bad luck to face machine guns. To advance now would be to be a casualty. Douglas knew it and just huddled there stony-faced. A decent family man, a fine farmer and rural citizen, he was still no soldier. Kenny was worse, blubbing about wanting to go home.

“Andrew can you see the slit, treat it like a wicket, bowl a grenade in, where that clattering comes from.”

He got one of their long-fused bombs and did it. The compressed force literally lifted the roof, a foot and bits of smoke, Turks and timber

were blasted out of the slit.

“And again!” Douglas had the jute bag full of Turkish grenades we had found before their long fuses exploded them. We trimmed the fuse and used them as they were better than our “grenades” just food tins full of nails and stones. From Douglas I got the bag and tossed him another the way as kids we tossed cricket balls fast to strike runners out and it worked. Andrew went into this state where he did what he knew reflexively. He was grinning as if it was Eloura sports field on a Saturday afternoon and perhaps for him it was. I pretended to be back to those days and used the cheery tones and words of those days.

“And another!” His third got another machine gun. Nothing must disturb that concentration of his. Not the sight of his bloodied brother dragging himself forward by one hand, not the loss of two fingers and some of my left hand when he forgot where he was and stood up for a better bowl. Better my hand for a machine target than that precious silly neck I was grabbing down. Nobody else could throw a grenade at a slit ten inches high at twenty yards and score nine hits and only two misses. Others tried many times, but only Tom, Clyde and Max succeeded even once.

“Time to advance!” Max yelled out jubilantly and I had to stop him.

“It is only a hole eight yards wide and they have machine guns to get us in a cross fire; let us do more!”

Andrew knocked out another and his next one must have landed in a little explosives dump, for it set off an explosion powerful enough to lift the logs and tons of earth and put a hole in their line. With a hurrah and a smile Max and Eakins led the charge. Not only our battalion, but other stragglers and units joined us. Eakins got onto the roof and was lifting, then hurling down the pine logs while others shot downwards in the hole he made. Andrew and I were joined by Tom, Stepan, Jan, Hector and new

men but the cordite from the trench that was almost a tunnel stopped us. Inhale cordite and it can be nearly as bad as concussion and eyes become useless. Fortunately, there were four boxes of grenades.

“Andrew mollygrub these down this tunnel as far as you can go! Okay everybody else! shoot Turks!”

Along the line others were doing what Eakins was. It was very like the clichéd phrase ‘shooting fish in a barrel’ Up ahead it was not fort there were snipers behind their lines and reinforcements and we could no longer use grenades as we were too close now; so it was turning into a melee.

“This battle is boring again.” Eakins yelled, “Shooting fish in a barrel.” and with that he jumped down the hole he just made with his knife in his teeth like something out of a *Boy’s Own* illustration of a pirate and he fought like one too. He probably was inspired by such things. Soon enough about half a dozen Turks scurried off down a supply trench like rabbits chased by a ferret. Following him through the charnel corridor of his victims I found him fighting - four at once and joined in - or tried to.

“Ah Ross yer’ mean well an’ all that but there’s no’ enough space for two an’ maybe this is the best fight of my life!”

I sighed and started to make my way when two recovered Turks made for me and had to be dealt with. Just after I finished with them Eakins called “Ross can a man change his mind?” Hector and I rushed to join him at the head of the tunnel and found Eakins facing a Turkish battalion. They were lined up neatly at ease rifles on the diagonal. Before them were those who had fled from Eakins, and their mounted officer. Fortunately, they were puzzled.

“Normally I dislike help, but there be five hundred o’ them and all I have is a knife and it’s been used ta bluntness.”

“Time to retreat and follow orders. We are to hold the trenches.”

Even Eakins had reached his limit and obeyed. Hector was so petrified I had to shake him to get him moving. That type of thing becomes legendary, but the reality was they were puzzled and probably under strict orders to wait before attacking. Perhaps they thought he was the blessed of Allah. Alexander reckoned that under their beliefs madmen are called that and can't be touched.

We had time to reorganise, rearm, reinforce and bind up our wounds. There was even time for a rum ration. I used mine on the remainder of my left hand and kept the rest for that purpose, which was wise as I got a bullet in the shoulder and a bayonet in the hip before the attacks slackened off five days later and it was the only thing we had to stop gangrene. Andrew used his on his brother, who with one arm and both legs splattered with shrapnel was in a bad way. Still, he stayed and Max and Cuthbert knew better than to order him to leave. For after the landing and now here, if he left, he would get the reputation of being an officer who got out of trouble quick with blighty ones.

He was canny enough to sit propped up on a barrel, still in command of his company while Andrew treated his legs. Soon enough he could add a bandage around his head, as did many. The Turks launched counter attacks that night, with grenades to start with and they had learned to shorten the fuses, so those who tried to imitate Andrew often lost a hand, or even a head, as Gerald Whaley, part of the Eloura Mounted Rifles since 1911 weekend training and there at the landing and ever since, showed.

It was nearly a week before the rolling bombs and the subsequent charges slackened and we were replaced.

\*

Reverend George McPherson

Eloura 29<sup>th</sup> October 1915

Not again lord, not again. It was a little different this time. Most of the families who had fatalities already knew, but not all. The faces were sullen, resentful or enigmatic. Rosalind was visiting with Alison, for solace probably. I came to the casualty list readings as I always did now. There was usually a trickle each week.

“This week we have the Eloura Mounted Rifles casualties for the August offensives which include the great victory at Lone Pine, where seven Australians have already been awarded the Victoria Cross and others are nominated. As our district unit has been in the thick of the fighting, casualties have been extremely heavy:

Major Max Chapman, wounded and evacuated, again.

Captain Ross Clarke, thrice wounded and evacuated, again mentioned in dispatches, given his third Victoria Cross nomination.

Lieutenant Gerald Whaley, killed in action August 9<sup>th</sup>.

Lieutenant Alexander McPherson once again severely wounded, evacuated.

Company Sergeant Major Eakins McKenzie, once again nominated for the Victoria Cross and once again wounded, evacuated.

Scout Clyde Whaley wounded. Awarded the Military Medal. August 6<sup>th</sup>.

Bugler James Munroe also known by his enlisted name, Edward Brown, died of wounds August 18<sup>th</sup> age 15 years 194 days his real age

A Squad First Platoon

Sergeant Tom Caufield, remains on duty awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Corporal Bach, remains on duty.

Acting Lance Corporal James Aldis remains on duty.

Lance Corporal Jan Van Groendhal, critically wounded, suffered amputation, evacuated, to Egypt recommended honourable discharge and

perhaps back to Eloura.

Trooper Douglas Fisher, died of wounds October 9<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Private Albert Cullen, killed in action August 6<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Henry Rains, of Ocean Ridge, killed in action August 9<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Robin Mackay, formerly of Stirling Scotland, now of Roydtown, killed in action August 7<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Casey O'Hara formerly of Howth, Ireland, now of Roydtown, died of wounds August 28<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Hector Milleran of Ocean Ridge remains on duty.

Trooper Martin Collis of this parish remains on duty.

Trooper Moreliss Milner missing in action believed killed August 8<sup>th</sup>

Trooper Kenny Moon formerly of Cornwall, killed in action August 8<sup>th</sup>

Trooper Joe Lang, killed in action August 11<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper Alaister Mechecknie formerly of Inverness. Missing In action August 18<sup>th</sup>.

Trooper George Fiske of Roydtown, formerly of Cornwall, remains on duty.

Trooper Andrew McPherson, mentioned in dispatches, nominated for the Victoria Cross, wounded and evacuated.

Lance Corporal Sandy Parkinson wounded and evacuated.

The other units were about the same, 91 casualties out of a 129, worse than the landing. Reg just sat there, staring at the plaque to Allen, with its title we had to tolerate. 'A Hero of Gallipoli.' Maybe in eighty years somebody who never met him would believe it.

After service, with Alison (still stunned herself) I had to approach Reg, and still sitting there. He had heard it days back.

"Well Reverend, suppose you are expecting a hard bitter time. I don't have it in me for a man with two wounded boys over there who are

doing their duty and more. But why won't they give one of ours the V.C.? Haven't they done enough?"

That I could not answer, like so much recently.

\*

Andrew McPherson

Imbros 27<sup>th</sup> October 1915

Still not being able to walk all that well an orderly got me a lift to general headquarters two hours before for the interview. I was not worried, sitting quietly with my bible and thinking that the way scripture seemed unalive to me in hospital would be different here, away from the shrieks and bustle and horrible smells of the hospital - but it wasn't, my attention wandered here just as much. The words usually seemed dead and when one came alive, I wish it hadn't. The word was mercy and it brought back Kenny tearfully screaming it as he crawled round a trench corner, trying to scramble ahead of the Turks coming behind him with his arms pawing the earth as his legs were broken. He frenziedly calling our names while we were fighting off those to our front. He got no mercy, just several bayonets through his back, blood in his mouth, and his face pushed into the mud by enemy boots. Kenny, so gentle he would not eat meat or say anything cruel about anybody, always sharing, never asking for himself, except for that last word he spoke.

Clyde Whaley made his own mercy. We found him cowering in a shell hole, clutching his face where shrapnel had removed the tip of his nose. Douglas, wounded the day before, gave the only mercy anybody gave anybody that week, including God. He gave it to Kenny and I. Being stretcher-bearers, we were supposed to take him down to the hospital, but casualties among the bearers were extremely high. "Don't take me boys, this one has done for me: the trip down cannot be not worth the risk." When the sniping lessened we did take him that night and the hospital was a nightmare: many thousands lay in a hospital meant to take a few

hundred and most of them having stayed to fight, had bandages up to five days old and bodies and clothes long left unwashed. Men with highly sensitive wounds had to endure vermin crawling over them.

The hospital rapidly ran out of supplies, including anaesthetic. Screams reverberated, drowning out moans. Men lay and died in their own excrement and that stench mingled with that of gangrene and the stench of death. In the brief time we had in there I did what was possible for Max, lying there with his shoulder and arm broken by blasted pine logs, but among those cramped thousands I could not find my brother, Jan or most of the Eloura men. I wish I had not found Douglas, no mercy there either. It took Douglas days to die, and I felt that a mercy would have been to put a bullet through him, for the gangrene had spread along his arm, along his shoulder and neck and into his face.

That is not to say those poor fellows did not get any mercy. The biting cold may have left them shivering and the blessed ones jealously clutching blankets, but cold slowed the infection rate as germs need heat and cold lowered the body temperature – except for those with blankets, who by staying warm, kept their body temperature up and frequently bled to death or from fever. Despite our warnings they were most determined to keep their blankets and positive that we were tricking them for their blanket. As a few who died without blankets died of exposure, so perhaps they were not far wrong. Soon, bearers noticed how the worst cases were put on the line edges without blankets and taking the wind blast first and without the body warmth from another on one side, and usually already weakened by barcoo, they did not last long. When Douglas begged me to move him there rather than die of gangrene, was I being an angel of mercy?

We actually got one such, an officially approved famous angel of mercy. A lackey announced the name we did not catch but we heard him



say that she was known as ‘The Angel of Scutari’ and she was no longer anything like Millais’s Pre-Raphaelite depictions of her in youth or Evelyn Chapman’s reconstructions. For starters she was in a pushed wheelchair, with her own nurse, when lives were dependent on them and three correspondents and a photographer were also with her. She was a bent old crone with false teeth and nasty blue eyes and a handkerchief to cover what a few strands of hair could not. She must have been eighty at least and her main topic was herself when she came out of her half-senile thoughts and she took the scented handkerchief away from her face.

“How are you finding it?” She asked Jan, ignoring Alexander next to him and curious Cuthbert on a visit to the Eloura men, sorted out and put together as most units were when we had some time, in early September.

“Finding what?” Jan responded puzzled, looking from his floor viewpoint at the coagulating blood on her wheelchair wheels with his one good eye. With the left side of his face slashed by grenade shrapnel to the extent bone showed and his left eye and left ear both gone and his left hand blown off he was obviously not finding things too pleasant and she had got him surly. “Finding what?” he repeated himself more aggressively.

“Oh, all this.” She waved her hand with the handkerchief about as if it were a vaguely protective banner to encompass the many thousands there, the corpses, the ones so barely conscious that they seemed dead, the screamers, weepers, stoics, the self-pitying, the exhausted hospital staff with black circles under their eyes, piled up stinking rags taken from men who had used them for a week, the amputated limbs and puss, blood, piss and shit on the floor.

“I find this to be hell and am looking forward to going home.”

“Ah but our duty can never done, young man.”

“You expect me to kick the Turks to death? Or perhaps I will serve

as a half a stretcher bearer, always on the right side?”

“‘Duty never ends’, as my father told me. ‘You have already scandalised this family and yourself by posing for that Italinat wog Rossetti and that adulterous Millais and speaking with that swine Swinburne, no man will have a child with you now, so you may as well go a nursing with Miss Nightingale, who at least has a great if somewhat misplaced sense of duty. If you don’t you will be cut off without a penny and see how those cads like you when your looks fade! Redeem yourself as much as possible! You can serve the empire, not your desire for pleasure. Perhaps under her tutelage you will also develop a sense of duty and stop thinking of yourself and be ashamed of your romances.’

And I did young man, I did. For my beauty which I and others so foolishly loved, faded and handsomeness such as we can see on one side of your face can be cruelly wiped out, as your other side shows. Clearly a sign from God for you and any you may meet. Duty however, never ends, as I found out, when at the age of eighty-six, the war department took me away from my comfortable house and cats and church socials to come here.”

“Why?” Alex asked.

“They want a story comparing these hospitals with those we served in sixty years past in the Crimean War. They want to show how things have improved.”

“And what has improved? Pray tell.” Jan snarled.

“You don’t wear those red coats any more that hide the blood so well that people thought that was why they were introduced. A fallacy. Cromwell equipped his army with red dyed jackets because red was the cheapest die. That improvement has been around since I worked in a ward in Capetown, fifteen years back. How horrible for us women to have to get blood on our hands! Also no beards anymore and short hair

these days, a vast improvement and for similar reasons, making the wound easier to find. It was so wearying, cutting their filthy hair and getting rid of those horrid lice, so time-consuming. No servants! And no straw beds, supposed to absorb the filth and the stench, absolute rubbish! Spread it, in fact and mouldy straw caused more disease than many a Turkish – no then it was a Russian bayonet! Ah then we were protecting the Ottomans from Russia, now we protect the Russians from the Ottomans and try to seize what we once held. Colonial wars are so much easier.... Darkies are so much easier... The Boers put up too good a fight. The empire has never been the same since, but still must be served to endure...”

She drifted off in thought and then lost it and came back to now.

“Oh well young man we can all see that all you can think of is your missing parts and that pretty face, God hates deluded vanity and selfishness and when you meet him face to face, duty done in a surly manner will count for little! Be of good cheer and conquer cowardly self-pity by courage and duty! Duty! Duty! Duty! God will reward you with a place in heaven, your face will be what it was, your arm will grow back, and the weak find comfort because they find no suffering there. The succour I have given you is a little taste of the heaven to come!”

“Then give me hell! You sanctimonious pestilential, crabby pitch!”  
Jan was panting in anger.

“Bitch, Jan, the word is bitch.” I added and wondered why she snarled and Alex watching carefully like she was a witness testifying, smiled.

“Five months we have been fighting and killing in this hell hole, five months of pompous stupid generals, lice.... !”

But as soon as she finished with the word ‘courage’ we no longer existed. She did not hear him yelling, not from senility or deafness, but

because she had used him as much as she needed to, nothing he could say was useful to her, he was like the used-up handkerchief she crumpled and threw on him so she blocked it out. I did not like the predatory glittering eyes either, searching for something as it roved across the wounded and finding it with a swift, nasty, triumphant smile in a weak, weeping teenage boy. She tapped the wheel quickly and assuredly three times with her riding crop, in a way probably learned for the aristocratic fox hunts and sighing, the embarrassed nurse pushed her, hunched over like a vulture, with the expressionless reporters following.

“She certainly loves the empire and duty.” I commented, shaking my head, uncertain about something.

“No she hates it,” Alex interrupted; his face was sardonic. “And she hates the war department, nursing, and Daddy.”

“And all of us.” Jan added.

“Sort of.” Alex contributed, “We are a replacement hate for the dirty smelly, Crimean soldiers Daddy forced her to tend, his punishing replacement males for her handsome artist suitors or lovers she loved. His tactic meant to turn her off males for life and probably did. You can’t pay Daddy back directly, but you can pay back other men and you can even enlist big Daddy in the sky on your side. Better to be the hammer than the nail.”

“I am not following.” I blurted out.

“You never do younger brother, you never do. Realise that all women have sexual desires and thwarting them leads to twisted behaviour and you might start to.”

“But good women do not suffer from that.”

Everybody looked at me like a teenager still believing in fairy tales and then looked at each other, like playground kids sharing a secret.

“Good news Private Van Groendhal!” Cuthbert obviously changed

the topic.

“My hand will grow back after I am dead?” He was joking.

“Nearly as good, for you, duty finishes today. You get a berth all the way back to Australia. All the way back to Eloura where a new hospital starts up soon. Scientists are developing mechanical hands.”

“Like Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*?”

We did not know how to take it, sarcasm or self-deprecating? Then he smiled. It hurt the other side of his mouth to do it, but he managed and winked. “This hooked hand will win me the pub fights, slash ah! Parry yes!”

“Well don’t win too many or they will send you back here!”

We all laughed and he joked about playing Hook in the Peter Pan pantomime we staged for the kids every Christmas in Eloura for the last few years.

Our own laughter was our own mercy. The more I thought over it the more I thought about that woman, the more I thought that. *You know she is paying us back. She is like Rachel Clarke. God is just a construction she uses and she picked it up from her father, just like he probably believed it because nobody ever questions.*

I was questioning now.

Theologians may argue that the way shrapnel hit me in the bony part of the thigh was an act of mercy. Maybe, for if it had gone two inches lower and to the right it would have sheared off my sex organs, just as it did with the new stretcher bearer on the other side of the stretcher. He gave himself mercy by grabbing a rifle and putting it under his chin. Perhaps the shrapnel spread meant nothing, a random act in a random universe that we read meanings into. Maybe humble Turkish artillerymen have more power than God. Or perhaps I am alive because their spotter was tired or had forgotten to dust his binoculars.

After lunch while sitting in the nearby office I heard my name mentioned and thought it was to call me, but it wasn't.

“Most commanders push and push to get their men the V.C. in three cases witnessed by your superiors you wish to deny them.”

“For their own good.” This was Cuthbert.

“We have investigated Eakins McKenzie and find your descriptions accurate. Putting a hero under consideration for the V.C. in an asylum however, raises more problems than it solves. We agree there, but why Clarke and McPherson?”

“The publicity given to both men that the V.C. entails will lead to investigative reporters looking into their home lives.”

“But McPherson by all accounts lives as a saint.”

“His wife does not. Likewise Clarke's wife. She lives in an Irish jail, McPherson's wife just evaded jailing - twice. The two wives were all too close. Do you follow? McPherson's has made a good attempt at self-reform, but the publicity will wreck her – and him.”

“And Clarke? The wife in jail sounds bad.”

“Other men's wives sounds worse. At least four of them, including McPherson's and also an NCO in his unit. Add attacking his mother with a poker last year. With no military training beyond weekend militia, he has made himself a superlative battlefield officer, but his well-deserved nickname is Cold Killer Clarke and when it comes to women...”

“You realise that if we reject them, people will wonder why and that could cause the investigative publicity we wish to avoid? Nothing could be worse than a government-developed hero being exposed as a villain.”

“Except heroes revealed as a madman and a naïve boy of twenty-three. He seems vaguely aware of the fact that his tossed bombs killed ninety enemy soldiers. Captain Clarke got him thinking it was cricket and he still thinks so.”

“But this war is just not cricket.”

“No reward might arouse the curiosity. Perhaps best to give Clarke and for that matter Major Max Chapman, that new officer’s medal, the Military Cross, and the DCM to Eakins and McPherson?”

“Done, Thank you Colonel Cuthbert.”

“Oh Lieutenant-Colonel Sir.”

“Thank you Colonel Cuthbert. Your regiment is now among the most highly rated unit in this army. Get more of these type through reinforcements and build it up. Keep earning that promotion.”

His footsteps drew closer and he saw me and gave a guilty jump. He looked into my face and saw that I had heard.

“McPherson! What on earth are you doing here?”

“Listening to every word. How do you know about my wife?”

“Now look, I am a colonel and you can’t speak to me like that.”

I just stared and he knew it could not just go.

“Look it is all just old stories, a foolish teenage romance, if it was anything. You two have been married for years now, and your wife, she worries about you, tried to get your enlistment cancelled so you could be together. Hardly sounds like an unfaithful wife, does it?”

“Give me a transfer out, or he will get his head punched in next time we meet, wounded or not.”

He excused himself and left me with time to think. Her frequently bored face, bored in church and out came into my thoughts. The time she lay across me to give me relief while absent-mindedly glancing at a magazine while spending myself. The way Alison the teacher would speak to me at the chestnut school and the way Rosalind would, the same. The way they would both look at Ross or speak to him. The way Ross and I were inseparable and the love of cricket, the poetry in the reverberating sound of the bat timber, in the parabola of the ball, the

chants of “go for six” repeated so fast that it became one jubilant word, the hard dark red polished surface of the ball - and that moment when the bat met it. All that died that afternoon.

On the way back they were flattening some of the blood-won land – “a cricket pitch to raise morale” Cuthbert said, like you would give a bauble to charm a sullen child. All their medals were also baubles, but I went through the interview politely and took their medal, at the ceremony, going through the propaganda interview with Ross talking about our childhood friendship, cricketing and how we married friends. The idiot reporter made the obvious joke that 'Some say the empire won its wars for empire on the football fields of Eton, but you two show it is the cricket fields of Australia.' I played their game, literally and figuratively, playing cricket, but Ross with his wounds and barcoo root was too weak to do more than bowl and running reopened the hip stitching with the first run and I grinned and bore it till enemy shells from another game ended ours.

The army was a hierarchy and only little things kept privates from the nadir, medals, being good at sports, a promotion to lance corporal, not punching officers. I should have punched Ross’s head in, but he was pitifully weak and he could see something was wrong, but said nothing. When at mail call, Tom asked me to pass a letter and a parcel from Rosalind to him I left the parcel beside him while he slept, hopefully some needy person probably stole that parcel. Kicking his deceitful head was a meritorious if dangerous idea, but instead she got a letter.

\*

Rosalind McPherson      McPherson’s Guest House 24<sup>th</sup> September 1915  
Eden, New South Wales.

Dear Ross,

Please find enclosed:



six tins of jam,  
six tins of sardines  
six chocolate bars  
six tins of carrots  
six tins of corn  
four recent copies of *The Bulletin*  
four recent copies of *Eloura Weekly News*  
eight pairs of winter socks  
a pair of winter gloves  
a copy of *Sixty Great Australiasian Short Stories*

Hopefully this stock will help get you through the winter and that you are recovering, we do worry about you and regret the sad if noble death of your cousin Douglas. Your father, Reginald, Barbara, Alison, Murie and Ruth are coping and like so many here, long ago gave up on automatically expecting the safe return of their loved ones. New Albion will soon be turned into a hospital for the war's duration, two dozen cases from Sydney have already arrived.

Now there must be another matter to discuss.

You promised me that you would look after Andrew. Can you please explain how jocularly throwing live bombs to him could possibly be looking after him? As you can see a copy of the citation for your joint exploit during the August offensive was telegraphed to the *Eloura Weekly News* and printed verbatim.

I have already promised you four thousand pounds from my account and the sale of our guest house should you bring him back alive. He remains dear to me and needs our protection. If you feel that this amount or for that matter money is not enough, I will entertain any further reasonable demands such as I have previously accommodated if you still find such things desirable. However they remain strictly confidential.

I remain your obedient servant,  
Rosalind Jervis.

\*

Lance Corporal Andrew McPherson 8<sup>th</sup> November 1915

Imbros Hospital Staff

A.I.F. Field Medical Team Company K

To Rosalind McPherson,

If you ever write to Ross Clarke again I will divorce you and shoot him.

You will not give him any of our money. As my rank and medal shows I can look after myself and have been doing so for a year now and have done better at this than most who marched away. I have transferred out of the Eloura Mounted Rifles to the medical branch to avoid Ross and to avoid being killed, they are idiots who think it an honour to take the highest casualty rates fighting for the toughest places just because some general flatters them and says that they are the best. You can talk of the noble death of Douglas Fisher because you do not know what it can be like to see a mate die of gangrene.

When I get back things are changing.

Andrew McPherson

\*

Ross Clarke Imbros 16<sup>th</sup> November 1915

Something was up; although Andrew walked past me in the hospital every second day at least, it was as if I never existed, even when I spoke to him. His face became hard and bitter, but it often was now, even when we did not make eye contact. Max told me he left a parcel from Rosalind that somebody stole. He soon transferred out into the medical corps. The next news from home was from Helen who sent a parcel, a letter and a photo.

Helen Clarke  
 The Painters Hotel  
 Sydney New South Wales

4<sup>th</sup> September 1915

Dear Ross,

Here are a few little things to make life over there easier. Returning veterans continually say little things we take for granted here such as paper, pens, tinned fruit and vegetables are treasures; apparently 70% of you are seriously sick with diet and hygiene-based problems. Evelyn could be right to avoid this war. He also avoided having his photo taken with Clarissa, our ten-day old daughter, being too busy painting other people's portraits, silly schoolgirls and knights in armour from wars not less than two hundred years old. As you can see, she has her mother's eyes, hair, face and nothing of her father. Lynda Taun Fisher has also had a healthy one, a boy Charles, this time.

Regards to father- in-law Max, the brothers in law, Andrew, Alex. Stepan, Clyde and any other Eloura boys still there. May you all come home soon and hopefully be here for Xmas dinner again.

Helen

\*

Ross Clarke

Lone Pine 15<sup>th</sup> December 1915

After the sweltering heat of early August I returned to the biting cold of late November. The mood of the troops was also chilly. There was no more victory talk, no enthusiasm, no more grumbling either, which was the worst as it expresses a hope that bad things can be fixed if complaints are heard: silence is sullen acceptance. The demoralisation was not so much because we suffered, but because we knew what Hamilton's replacement with Munro meant. Munro was everything that Hamilton was not: bold, quick, decisive, tough and efficient, with a knack of

seeming to know everything happening.

Unfortunately, Hamilton had one crucial advantage over him: he believed in victory and strove for it, however inadequately: Munro believed we were defeated and used his virtues to organise the best possible evacuation, for we did not lose a single man and the Turks did not know we were gone until two days after we left.

Despite all the hell that we had endured, the claustrophobia from crowded trench life, the violence, the disease, insomnia, horrid food and an inadequate diet, the deaths of so many, we did not want to give up: Munro had our respect, but Hamilton had our loyalty. Many of us wanted to capture that barren, stony strip of coast over the other side of the ridge that would get us onto the road to Constantinople more than we had ever wanted anything in our lives. Hamilton was considered a fool by many for making his comparisons between us and the Greeks besieging Troy and between us and the Medieval crusaders, but he had a point, for we were also bogged down in our siege, and thought of capturing Constantinople with the same intense longing that Christian knights had thought of conquering Jerusalem.

And yet something had changed: with much cynicism all knew why Kitchener toured Gallipoli; it was just a formality to show that the high command cared and were in charge, he was sharing our suffering and endurance by briefly being a part of it. That was a big mistake: familiarity breeds contempt indeed. From posters and old photographs, we knew of the 1898 Kitchener of Khartoum, ramrod thin and straight, unmarked chin like an axe, clear, cold blue eyes that stared so directly that you could not avoid them and everything about him unblemished, angular, conveying the resolute commander, the saviour-hero whom we should follow to victory. So who was this portly, red-faced, jowly old man with the watery eyes and ubiquitous cane, hunched from trying not to be shot by snipers,

puffing for breath as he just avoided stumbling when among sand hills, occasionally grimacing from the too-tight uniform meant to hide his now considerable girth?

Like the image of that most imperial man, the imperial world was also fading fast. That world of royal red covering a quarter of the globe, of proud union jacks fluttering in far off places where we took up the white man's burden, of Kipling, Haggard, Henty and the *Boys Own* annuals, of immaculate white uniforms in cricket and imperial balls ending with 'God Save the Queen' – if it was not as archaic as the world of the Trojans and the crusaders, it was in the process of becoming so. Even the most hearty, simple, believers in empire were losing their faith at Gallipoli. Max almost literally put a brave face on it, trying to instil cheer and optimism into his face and features, but he was too honest to be good at pretending. Andrew also put a face on it, one more honest.

The last conversation Andrew and I had at Gallipoli was on the day of the great duck hunt, the one bit of good fortune in the whole campaign. We awoke thinking we had been overrun by Turks as hundreds of rifles were being shot at once, and sitting up, found a duck between my knees and another plopping on my head, much to the derisive laughter of my troops. Everybody started shooting at the hordes of duck flying south to Egypt for the winter. They had used that migratory flight path for thousands of years, but never again after that day. Among the laughter and glee at the sudden food supply two full stretchers came by and Andrew was one of the bearers. His face had lost all its habitual cheer, naïveté and youth. He was tired, drawn, seemed two decades older, and more than that, he was someone else, more like a Tom Caufield than the cheery boyish cricketer; these were not temporary changes.

When he saw me those dead blue eyes flickered, but it was with a deep sullen hostility, not hot, but Turks in the ferocity of battle staring

into my face with less hatred, and while trying to stick a bayonet in me.

Approached him just started off snarled and muttered obscenities; nobody had never heard him swear before, and the thought came that he had given up on his Christianity. With that, the next thing that came to me was Reverend Hawkins in Egypt talking indirectly about George Whaley: 'Many hundreds known to me have given in to the doubt that comes with living in this world or of scriptures complexities, but not one has become a better person for giving up on Christianity, and after a brief time of indulgence, none are happier.' Looking at Andrew departing, Hawkin's words certainly applied. The anger and surliness were apparent from his back from forty yards away.

Soon the weather changed ominously with a rapid temperature drop, and a massive cloud build up. For three days we were hit by a combined blizzard and flash flood, the great storm was so bad that we were reported as being at hurricane level. As many were asleep in trenches, they drowned and some sentries were found erect, frozen to death. Frostbite and flu were the most common casualty causes and when those casualties were totalled, we had lost over ten thousand, a tenth of our total strength; the Turks also copped it, and the campaign looked more like a masochistic endurance test than a war, as the great storm led to a truce for a week, then it was back to random sniping and shelling. On December 13<sup>th</sup> we officers heard of the evacuation, and for the first time at Gallipoli everything went right.

\*

Max Chapman

Anzac Cove 19<sup>th</sup> December 1915

We were leaving more than debris, destroyed supplies and abandoned trenches behind. My good friend and exemplary Christian Chaplain Hawkins, the father of my daughter-in-law Trevelyan, hardworking, laconic Hendrik, Rupert Dean, my nephew Allen, all five

dead at the landing, another nephew, Douglas and poor simple Kenny, Lieutenant Curruthers, George Whaley who wanted to be a priest, all of them buried on those dirty white snowy hills that were receding, while the cleaner white wake made soft surging noises. Another Whaley, our tracker Clyde, and also Ross, Cyril and Jan would leave parts of their bodies buried there with the others, the last two were now incapacitated, and excepting Ross, perhaps they were broken men. Two good men, the McPherson boys, may also be like that, Alexander had been so badly wounded so often, he was sent back to Eloura on extended leave, and in another way, Andrew, who was even transferring to another division, had been a casualty. Others may have left behind their bodies or parts of them, but he had left something worse, his soul. On the deck with a bitter face he tossed his Bible over the side.

All those thousands of us had left behind the soul of what we could have been as a nation; for we had done everything that the highest levels of courage and determination and skill, sacrifice and mateship could do, so that the world marvelled, even our enemies – and we had failed dismally. If it was our first test as a nation it was a sad one, one that had knocked the hope out of us, made us distrust optimism, leaders and the mother country, and made us who survived think keep your head down and you will survive, do brave things and you won't. Stoney Tom, Jan and Andrew started off brave, but went like that after the August battles; Cyril was perhaps another, always looking at his face in a mirror until Tom asked him if he thought his nose would grow back. That left Bach, Eakins, Cuthbert, and Ross, in order a Germanic crook, one war-mad, another a professional English officer and the other a genuine hero and a leader of the future – if he lived.

\*

Book Four

Cavalryman

February 1916



Helen Chapman

Hawk's Nest, Port Jackson 21<sup>st</sup> February 1916

While working on the top veranda putting another parcel together for the Eloura boys, low and behold, one of them starts winding his way up our steep steps, in uniform and his emu feather in his slouch hat, the emblem of the Light Horse. He wears a swag of medals with a sergeant's stripes, Tom Caufield. Evelyn is slower to recognise him than I. He turns from his painting, sighing in annoyance at the footsteps and snarling at seeing the slouch hat, but the walkway up from the first- floor kitchen being so steep, he cannot immediately see the face of his old primary school friend and Boer War comrade and even when he does, he relaxes only a little.

“Hello old Stony Tom. You came at a good time for a cuppa.”

Hubby gives me an enquiring look, wipes the paint of his hands, shakes Tom's and chats about the safe topic of Tom's voyage back as we get the water boiling. Clarissa rests in her cradle at my feet because he never helps with her. No Matter What. Making the tea serves as a replacement: one of the many household tasks he does to cover that. Tom also covers; he usually avoids small talk, but tries now as a cover for something, starting with those predictable things people say with newly born babies. Half way through his cuppa Tom gets onto his task.

“You know the war does not go well for us.”

Evelyn wipes the tea out of his moustache as he settles down to discuss a disagreeable topic.

“Us? Doesn't affect us; we can't let it.”

“I meant our side, the empire and our allies.”

“So, war has gone a dumper for the Allies, you are saying.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, we heard about the Gallipoli evacuation.”

“Oh, really you heard; maybe a few Himalayan hermits haven’t.”

“Got a letter from Andrew; he told us, said pretty much the same thing as you and was heartily tired of it.”

“That would be Andrew.” Tom started to say something nasty about him and stopped. “But ask yourself, why the war does not go well for us/”

“While not following the war all that closely and finding it all rather boring, the answer to your question would probably be that idiot generals are unable to adapt to the new technology fast enough, combined with too many Germans-”

“And not enough Australians at the front!”

Evelyn probably already suspected what Tom was up to, and now that he knew, a mischievous glimmer came to his eyes and mouth.

“Ah - and you want me to do my little bit by enlisting!”

“Too right! Fair enough with the Missus expecting the first, but she’s over that. You are wasted here! I’ve seen you ride and shoot and saw how you won that medal sixteen years back! You are among the bravest of the brave and you would be invaluable!”

“Tom, you ask, albeit rhetorically, why the war does not go well for us? Surely you would be wiser to ask why it started.”

“That’s ancient history, it is bloody on now and Germany must be stopped!”

“From?”

“From cutting off the hands of Belgian women so they can’t defend themselves against rapine and looting and plundering cities and taking over the world!”

“Sixteen years ago, while we helped the empire grab the Boer lands, gold and diamonds, all the major powers looted China in the Boxer rebellion. Tom a decade back, Belgians in the Congo regularly cut the hands of black slaves as a punishment.”

“What has all this to do with anything?”

“Quite a lot. The scramble for Africa was the last world to conquer – without clashing with another European empire. Everybody with prescience was expecting war to begin with one of those colonial clashes, Aquidar, Morocco, Fashoda, but no, silly students killing a crown prince was the unexpected match in the powder barrel that went off. Oh well.”

He had been absent-mindedly sipping on his tea and now stared into it, realising with annoyance that it was empty and with rationing and scarcity, another was not coming. “Ah, Tom, could you chat with Helen for about forty minutes or so? Midday light should last at least this long and afternoon light isn’t the same, leads to stronger shading patterns coming in at different angles.”

He left for downstairs while Tom just stared blankly while Clarissa started waking and the explanation was left with me.

“He means his painting, a forest scene for his Robin Hood painting.”

“Robin Hood.”

“In the Pre-Raphaelite style.”

“Can’t work him out. He has a wounded father and a brother just enlisted, doesn’t he care? He’s no coward, so why does he stay at home while brave men die?”

“One war was enough, the one you went through together.” I lowered my voice. “And something else affects him. Have you noticed his left hand?”

“The one with that mad African bracelet? How could anybody not blind fail to?”

“It covers scars, but watch how he puts down his paintbrush held in his right to pour paint with the same hand when it would be easier to use his left.”

“He was crippled in his left arm?”

“From the elbow down, a bullet chipped the bone and wrecked the nerve. Do not tell anyone: he hates pity.”

“So all this war bores me talk, he uses it as a cover?”

The meaningful stare let him assume it was so, and that I was a loyal wife who could not say too much, just as this game had been played with many before, whenever others would discuss the war and Evelyn would respond with his line. Mercifully he announced that the one public meeting against the war that he did attend bored him. Max’s allowance and secret painting purchases meant that he had no idea how much an artist must be financially dependent upon patronage and that patronage depends on the artist not taking controversial or unpopular stands. Max would not be around forever and considering that he had been very badly wounded twice in less than four months, might not be around at all very soon. I would have to protect my baby girl – and my boy. The regular parcels to the boys signed Helen and Evelyn and our seclusion from the world were part of that protective process.

Tom was uneasy with small talk and realising that he was not getting a recruit or the bounty one would give him, left. Evelyn was right about wars, they are about money, misery and power, but we were almost powerless people, in our secluded, pretty little paradise, where the only battles fought were between knights and robbers on canvas, or for enough milk.

\*

Alex and Debbie McPherson and their toddler arrived a few days later. He was sallow, impossibly thin and limping. We quickly came down to the garden table near our gate as the uphill climb would have been impossible. It would not hurt us to be seen by passers-by entertaining a be-medalled officer obviously back from the front. Something was clearly wrong, not just that range of diseases they called barcoo root that had left

him as someone who should be in hospital, but between them. She was just too eager for our company, with the facial expression seen in bars many times before, the face of a woman who wants to get away from unwelcome attentions. His face was also from those times and a perfect match. He was the male so dominated by his lust that he could not see the woman's distaste. Fortuitously, a grey cumulus cloud build up came and rain over the sea was moving in and served as an excuse to get rid of them. Evelyn's dislike for people in uniform was spreading and after seeing what the war did to Alex and reading the casualty lists of the Eloura boys, my apathy towards for the whole war thing was hardening into at best weary dislike, even increasingly into oathing.

\*

Tom Caufield

Caufield's Farm 27<sup>th</sup> February 1916

Never thought I'd see it again, an' it made my heart real glad, an Indian summer day with a breeze rattling the gum branches an' greenery everywhere, under strong cumulus clouds, Good late summer rains? They must have had them. Nothing like haven' yer stomach contract, an' yer balls expand, both from no usage, while yer get yer arse half froze off in some silly bloody Turkish hillside ta make home look good. I caught the train to Ocean Ridge, then the stage to Eloura, go the other way an' at the station old mates an reporters won't let yer go an' the wife gets warnin.' Surprise them an' this way I know, for bloody better or for worse.

At the fence gate, there was Jack, cutting timber like a champion, and thin yet, but he would develop muscles. He looked to be a boy who would turn out alright and the farm was in good nick, I'll give her that. His ears picked up when I clanged the gate and in four seconds he went from puzzlement to recognition to a loud "Whoho!" and a rush my way.

That brought her out, toddler Esmerelda following and hiding behind the dress, in apron hair pinned back and flour to the elbows and a smile

for visitors that faded and then ignited again in pretending for the kid's sake and maybe hers. The stuck-up bitch who would always be a bloody schoolteacher did not want any bloody trouble and neither did I, come to think of it.

Hours after Jack had his say and his showing off, and we were alone she tensed up more than before and was more open about it, them smiles shooting through with Jack out the kitchen door.

“I'm not back for all that long. A month here an' then I'm supposed to wander about this district and all the others to the Victorian state border, recruiting for the Light Horse. Twenty-five pounds per man, forty for a horse an' rider, forty-five if they have their gear, fifty if they are re-enlistments. They gave me a year off for this from New Year's Day this year to next, then I'm back in action.”

“You sound as if the war will last that long.”

“It will. Them Axis bastards have the good generals and we have dopes, but we have the better troops and more of 'em, but they have German science and weapons. It's gunna be a stalemate until something breaks. And in that stalemate, well we can rake in money and become rich, live like kings. There is no end to the supply of fools in this world.”

“I am not so sure of that.”

“I bloody am. Got four of them between disembarkation and here. Not even trying really. These three stripes and the medals do it. People see them and trust me straight off. Want to be just like me.”

She just stared expressionless for a while.

“Now what do you bloody expect? In war there are opportunities and there are fools. Fools divide into two types, them who don't see opportunities and those that do, but don't take them. I'm neither. We are going to stock up enough money out of this war to get us through all the

droughts and price gluts that come in our lives. Maybe even pick up another farm or two. Should be plenty with all the casualties.”

“You mean men like two of my brothers?”

“Allen died before he had a chance to prove himself. Douglas made a bad show and a worse end. Can you see silly bloody Murie being a success on that farm? If you don’t get it in the will, we might have enough to buy it and then the squeeze starts on the Clarkes. Uncle Frank and Aunt Rachel are not getting any younger and Grahame’s a balmy nit. That leaves Captain Ross Clarke, who fights like a man who won’t live long. If he dies, we can buy. Combine the three farms and we own everything from the edge of town to the ridge. That makes me top dog in this district.”

“While we are off to see Dad, Murie and Ruth, please make yourself at home.”

“You are back tonight?”

“No. Day after tomorrow.”

“I’d like my marital rights then.”

“Not without a venereal disease check-up.”

“Knew you would say that. Got one fer yer.”

I passed her the issued paper. She glanced, then tossed it back.

“Something more recent thank you very much and it would be preferable if you just spilled out.”

Then she was out to saddle up and took off with her face hard and without a backward glance. Maybe another baby or two would keep her happy, and maybe good as Jack promised to be, we should not carry all our eggs in one basket. The girl was a girl and more sons was the way to go. The rest of the day went on looking round the farm, chatting with the help, got two more to enlist, even donated the horses, and livery, that might make me popular among the pen pushers who keep some of us

recruiting sergeants here at home. Seeing the world was only half the story. Let some other silly bugger take the bullets, the sweat and the misery. Even professional soldier Cuthbert talked a bit like that, saying we veterans had done our share. Even saintly bloody Andrew McPherson gave up on all his empire and duty talk and his saintliness. He tossed his Bible over the side and maybe doing that might make a man of him, but nah, when others did that type of thing an' ditched religion, they were contemptuous of it and smiled at the thought of the women and drink they would soon have. Not him. He tossed it like that was some religious ceremony and just stared at the ship's wake like it was somebody's ashes. That one would find a new religion somewhere. Maybe worshipping his wife like she was the Virgin Mary, not a silly bangle girl. I dunno, but I know treating women good only leads to trouble.

Tomorrow she would get her bloody certificate, I would turn up at the pub in full dress, medals, not just ribbons and buy a few more rounds, tell a few stories, listen to more an' rope a few in, easier than cattle or brumbies an' more money in it – and we do the empire a favour and they do their duty.

\*

Reverend George McPherson

Eden 20<sup>th</sup> March 1916

It was one of those situations where I pray for strength, but even so, wish I that had struck with my apprenticeship as a draper. Their guesthouse was prosperous now; her hard work had obviously made it so. The bevelled lead light that held grime before shone immaculately now. The previously unironed, stained whitey-grey tablecloths now gleamed nearly as bright. She had it all neat, bright and cheery, as she was – until she saw me. The smile went away like a startled bird, and before I could relieve her of the fear that she obviously expected by my presence, her body tensed and she grasped the table corner, to keep herself upright.



“He is not dead Rosalind, but feels dead to you.” She gave the sigh of relief, the collapse into a chair, and then of course the puzzlement. “He files for divorce and names Ross as a co-respondent. He has a letter you wrote.”

“There has been no one, absolutely no one!”

“We all know that; he remains the only one that does not. He has sold this place for a little. You get half, meaning eight hundred pounds, if you do not contest.”

She was too shaken to say much for a time, trying to do the things she usually did, washing the breakfast things, but faltering at it. This was every bit as ghastly as expected, and now why we should obey the commandment ‘Thou shall not commit adultery’ was obvious. For her teenage foolishness in those matters had doomed her, despite three good years of being a dutiful wife. It had also doomed my son, for he was becoming a very bitter man, so bitter he would not come home, but spent his leave visiting relatives still in Scotland.

“You will always have a home at my house, we have spare rooms.”

She nodded and composed herself quickly.

“And Alex?”

“Recovering slowly, he got prolonged sick leave and he talks of returning to the front, he feels he has not done enough.”

“And Ruth and Murie are coping?”

“They are overworked. Barbara now works at the hospital there, says it takes her mind off her personal problems.”

She picked up on the hint and was not hostile.

“They are screaming for trained nurses all across Australia. You could work with Karl and Lynda or at New Albion as it will soon be a hospital. Free accommodation, and with a year’s wages and the eight hundred you have you could buy yourself a cottage...”

I was about to say something along the lines of 'and meet somebody else' but that was hardly tactful. She was thinking of something and when she spoke her voice was as composed as her looks.

“And how long do I have before compulsory vacating of what was our home?”

“The buyers are decent people, perhaps you would like to stay on as manager-”

“No thank you.”

“If Edna or I can be of any assist-”

“No thank you. Your son has left you an unpleasant task and you have carried it out as a gentleman and a Christian should. Has he specified that all furnishings, furniture, clothes, tools and other accessories are included in the sale?”

“Apparently not.”

She took the sale document and perused it expressionlessly.

“This sale has been made by a fool. It is worth six times the sale price and he has not even mentioned all the extras, included or excluded. Absolutely everything else remains unspecified – and I will sell it all at auction within the next forty days, excepting the horses and buggy, which remain mine as he has not specified. If he disputes, I will swear in court that it was only flirting in that letter - and to save his worthless life.”

After leave taking, for the first time I was ashamed of my son and prayed for them both.

\*

Ross Clarke

Alexandria March 30<sup>th</sup> 1916

My leave was delayed until training new recruits who had not been at Gallipoli was completed, they were about seven out of ten of the regiment now. We were the Eloura Mounted Rifles Company again, part of the Light Horse Division in training for the Palestinian campaign, but

Cuthbert, Max, Eakins, Hector, Clyde and Bach were all that were left of those close to me who had enlisted in 1914. Jan was honourably discharged and back in Eloura, Tom and Alex were also back there temporarily, one to recruit, one to recuperate. I hoped to be back there soon. Andrew was among those sent to France, as was Leo, who in March would drop in to have a drink with us when his ship docked at Alexandria for a few days.

Amazingly Leo was, as Max cheerfully said later, ‘bright and cheerful, the same level-headed man he had been back home, except now he was in uniform.’ And that was exactly right, but like so much that Max said, there was more meaning in Max’s statement than Max understood. Leo was indeed a civilian in uniform, just as his best friend Douglas had been. That meant he would probably be a disaster in war. Sitting there watching him as we shared drinks, with his cheerful, even optimistic blue eyes, Stepan and I looked at each other in secret knowledge, knowing that the war had not touched Leo yet, but it would. We knew, for we had seen so many innocents killed, maimed, embittered, turned into killers, but few could imagine his future that pleasant morning on a hotel veranda on the beautiful Egyptian coast. Oddly Douglas’s death did not affect him much.

“Douglas was a believer who had a good soul and laid his life down for others. If we go to our maker the same way we have done good. More years leads to more sin.” Faith still sustains some.

Soon enough it was back to the war, but this time we were winning and it was like war should be. At the battle of Romani we charged across desert sand-hills and the men used bayonets like sabres; being a captain I was one of the few to have a real sabre. We inflicted sixteen thousand00 casualties for only 1,100 and came close to capturing their whole force, who only escaped because they routed. The only thing that I did not like

about that battle was that I was one of those eleven hundred casualties. My horse, Marengo, being used to pounding sand, skidded on a sheeny, discarded rifle and rolled down a sand hill, four times. That memory stays very distinct because with each roll my leg went under Marengo's weight. That meant a long stay at Alexandria hospital, while doctors debated over me about amputation. Months went in therapy, but it was healing. With nurses around me for the first time since the Christmas embarkation back in Sydney thoughts came of romance and sexual things: Gallipoli was something less than moonlight and roses, and rather oddly both were in the officer's ward, but to no romantic reawakening. What few thoughts did come went the women who had already been in my life.

\*

Rosalind McPherson      New Albion Military Hospital 31st May 1916

Things were not so very bad while starting as a trainee nurse. The casualties were usually almost recuperated cases and amputees from Gallipoli, a few malarial cases from the Middle East, and many with blistered feet or accident victims from the training camps. We never saw the sexual disease cases; they went to a special hospital in Victoria and the confirmed mental cases went to Sydney. Both the McPherson's surgery and New Albion were very under capacity. The work was easy, bandaging blisters, writing letters for them, teaching amputees how to use their wooden limbs. There were actually pleasant times, particularly when reading and chatting among the sheeny green agapanthus in the surgery courtyard where we used to swim only four years ago.

After ten weeks intensive training there was even plenty of time off and while Saturday shopping Alison came along the duck boards. I was unsure of how she would react, but when she saw me, her face broke into a spontaneous smile.

“She's back! Off we go! Drinks are on me.”

Drinks were tea and muffins at the railway station café, very pleasant. I started the conversation.

“Returning, it seemed a certainty that I would be notorious, pointed out in the street, but nobody seems to notice me, not that their attentions were wanted.”

“Some speculated for a time, but most of it never came to light. There was a general feeling that you were naïvely unwise in your choice of friends and when Jenny named nearly everybody, people suddenly shut up: gossip became unpopular when they realised that they were fuelling a fire that might burn them.”

“Well four years have passed and they have other things on their minds now.”

After explaining my job, it was her turn to talk.

“So! Frank and Rachel Clarke should divorce, Reverend Hawkins was effectively divorced, Keith Anstee and Jenny Doyle divorcing, Ross and Brionny are definitely divorced, you and Andrew are going through one and I wish I was! Do you sometimes get the feeling marital bliss might be a myth?”

Kind Alison, able to take away the pain with humour.

“Andrew’s letters suddenly stopped talking on that subject: instead he writes on the merits of peace and the horrors of war, when he does write.”

“Since you have been back have you seen many of the old crowd?”

“Karl, Lynda, and Zelda I see daily due to work, but of the others, only your boy Jack looking mature beyond his years, driving the surrey into town for groceries, comes into sight. Last Saturday both Rachel Clarke and Reverend Jervis were off in the distance and fortunately stayed there. The still in laws see me and that is it. Murie and Ruth, Alexander, Reverend and Edna McPherson, well they all tell us not to

divorce.”

“Good advice. You will lose respectability the way anybody does when they divorce, but that will probably be compounded by dredging things up from your past...”

She sighed and as she did so, memories unfolded the past. Included in the rush were my jailed mother, Lord Bee’s stolen money, lesbianism, the affair with Ross, the near arrest and rumours of prostitution... The daytime moralistic denouncers at the guest house who would try to sneak into my room at night, the clock watchers gossiping me into a pretext sacking.

There was a certain respectability to being a wartime volunteer nurse: a respected husband at the front only compounded that. He stopped writing to anyone in August, but was not a casualty, apparently. That talk with Alison in early spring was the last for some time. We were on a hundred and twenty hours a week soon after and it was no surprise. Reading through the newspaper reports on the Somme offensive, hospital staff could sense what would happen.

Until July most of the wounded were kept in Europe, but with hundreds of Australian casualties just on some days in this Somme offensive and the British hospitals overflowing with the Empire’s tens of thousands of casualties, the numbers poured in until we were cramming. Bunks were installed and single beds were in the wide corridors. Eighty beds full of groaners were now crammed into what had been the ballroom where Ross and I first met. The riverbank where I had lost my virginity in a different world was now where we wheeled convalescent cases out to sun themselves. We removed bedpans from the now overcrowded, smelly room where we put all the worst snorers and those that screamed in their sleep. Brionny and I first made love in that room. What had been the

stables was now a garage for Red Cross trucks; many of our cases could not walk the quarter mile from the railway station.

All those events from seven years ago or less were faded, unreal, like a happy dream. Already many were making the Edwardian era into a lost golden age. After yet another week of cleaning gangrenous sores, hearing the screams, smelling the stench and burying amputated limbs we had a new horror. This worst of the worst left us dealing with his weeping and screeching, an eighteen-year-old shrapnel victim who had just seen his nose-less, mouth-less face in a mirror, Such egregious cases was why some people have happy memories of peace and why my husband for now might hate the military world and be covertly working for peace.

Amazingly relief came during the worst of the Somme crisis for us. Near Christmas, six weeks after it ended in Europe, the hard cases were still arriving. Zelda, now manager of what was once her home, came to me. "You need two days off, we can't give you Christmas, for we should all work for their party, but you can have all tomorrow."

"But I have to-"

"Have two days off." She smiled and there was something enigmatic in the smile, pity, perhaps? "You usually work twelve to eighteen hours. And you have worked every day since May first, and it shows, look at those black circles under your eyes. Take my upstairs room."

So I did. It was like sleeping in a museum or a period play set, one of those Galsworthy or Wilde plays; even one of Evelyn's romantic Pre-Raphaelite paintings hung there. It seemed a still, quiet museum from the 1890s where elegance dominated through art nouveau decorated teak furniture, the swirling floral William Morris wallpaper and bed-cover and decorated inlaid tiles and serene quiet, all very welcome. Staring at them for so long left me loving to delineate the shapes with my fingers, to rub

the silk and feel the texture, to gaze out at a leafy oak and a summer blue sky, knowing that there was still havens of peace in this world. The sensual world was returning in there and it was then I knew what was lost, lost imperceptibly, starting with Donal's terror and worsening on the night of the train ride to Sydney and the next morning my nice deliverer Andrew, started to put that part of me into decline and dealing with dead and maimed men had put my sexuality, my sensuality, my love of life into something like the coma we saw some go into.

So why in this haven, when sensual feelings came into my hands, did sad thoughts come up? The puritanism of Reverend Jervis and the equally repulsive libertine ways of Lord Bee, the fate of my mother and my treatment as a child all came into it. What happened with Ross, Brionny and Jenny was supposedly a hated abomination, a low thing. It was not logical, but it was ingrained. Now the way I had been a lesbian seemed unreal, like a long ago seen play performed by someone else; like the medieval painting in front of me. Being Andrew's wife was as remote. At least the girls made me smile. Now I felt sexless and was unworried, realising it had been over a year since a sexual thought came about anything, the dead and maimed may make men look pathetic and therefore raise no fear, but they also alienate sexuality.

Sixteen hours sleep went quickly as did the arranged lunch with Alison. She was also overworked; inept city women and ten-year olds and septuagenarians were working as farm labourers to replace those men off at the front, or the ones who would be at the front forever or with us in New Albion, now also known as NSW Military Convalescent Hospital No 3. The sight of an unmaimed young man out of uniform was becoming a rarity: women like Barbara Fisher were not. She walked past like some automation in her wide brimmed feathered hat, veil and clothes, absolutely everything black and she seldom changed out of this



outfit. She was more extreme than most war widows; her unwashed, untended body smelt two yards off. She seldom spoke and even her own relatives lost patience after she went back to them at Berry because she preferred not to be reminded of Douglas. With nowhere else to go, Zelda gave her a room at New Albion, hoping that war work would take her mind off her widowhood, but she would go mentally vacant and now wandered round with that stare, being useful only as an example of what happened to women who mourned too long and too intensely.

Not all were depressed by the war. There at the veranda table was Jan in his lunch break with Cyril, his usual straight man and their target, betting the new man a shilling that he would not shake hands with such an ugly Dutchman. Out came the grin and the hidden hook with the serrated edge, and the shilling went for three beers. The targets usually laughed loudest, often ordered another and never objected.

Being there before Alison, I concentrated on the sweetly jaunty violin music and the accompanying clear, jolly Welsh voice coming from the Railway Hotel with its open windows.

*Ten recruiting sergeants came home again*

*Prosperous in their service to Lord Germaine*

*Happy and Healthy! Each with medals three!*

*Oh come along be brave, lads and now follow me!*

The words made me sigh and looking across made me sigh again. Two board backed posters, each three feet high, were hung up by leather straps, as if they were regularly moved around, just like film posters for the travelling film shows. One was in unity with the song, showing cheery, immaculately clothed and muscled Anzacs heartily marching off to war. Nursing made us sick to screaming of sad-faced men telling us war was not really like that; always saying it like they were confiding a top secret. Staff were reluctant encyclopaedias on what war was really

like for Anzacs, making us two-legged repositories of disillusionment.

The other poster seemed based on Goya's famous painting 'Saturn devouring his Child' for it showed an apish, hairy, blue-eyed, blond-haired humanoid in a picklehaub helmet actually cannibalising the arm of an apparently just-ravished woman in a half-shredded dress. Under the Hun's heel were her blooded, squashed babies, nearby a dead kangaroo and in the background the corrugated iron water tank and equally corrugated roof, both being devoured by lurid flames. The caption was DEFEND THEM THERE - OR SEE IT HAPPEN HERE!

"Something that has always puzzled me about that poster..." Alison was suddenly standing there, over me. "Why on earth doesn't the Hun eat the kangaroo, store the kids for further use in the larder and keep the Mother for future ravishing?"

"And how on earth you set fire to a corrugated iron water tank? Anyway, let's leave the war behind, just for today." My gay tone and smile were enforced, but conjured up because they should be real with encouragement and Alison smiled quickly and brightly in agreement, but the music stopped. At that instant we could hear Tom's booming voice starting up from across the road and at the sound of it her smile held, but the eyes went from glittery to weary and vexed and the briefly happy spirit quickly went out of sad flesh: over the last seven months I had seen much of that.

With her, it was easy to see why. He was nearly fifty yards away but it could have been one, and he was another of the martinets we often had in the hospital and he started hectoring some young man at the bar into enlisting. Alison read my mind.

"He calls it doing the tough patriot just getting others to do their duty. He buys them beers to start with so they feel obligated to listen."

"Is he always this loud?"

“No, when he mixes with superiors his ‘grim Aussie battler’, the man on the land routine, actually goes quiet. He does that one by face and body actually. And when he wants authority or something from someone, he presents his wise bushie bullshit as the sweet voice of knowledgeable reason, but he will not get his extension for home front recruitment, promotion to sergeant-major and the corresponding pay rise if he does not meet his recruiting quota by five o’clock tomorrow, so he has to get three more. He really is cranky and yet really bunging on the act.”

He certainly was bunging on the act: he was loud moral outrage incarnate. Poor little babies dangling on the German’s bayonets, the Huns rampaging across Europe led by the new Attila, the Kaiser, French toddlers boiled alive to be made for soap, valiant Anzac contingents being overrun by “barbaric Turkish barbarians” because we did not have enough men at the front due to cowards, slackers and malingerers and sissies and poofers and unbelievers who would have to wait to see their farms burned, their pas murdered and their sisters raped before their eyes by them fiendish Hun invaders before they woke up to their duty. Or were they them type so gutless as to stand and watch as that happened? Were they the ones who voted against conscription in the recent referendum? All this emotionally blackmailing propaganda and rubbish made believable by Tom’s loud assertive “this is the way it is and you’ll get yer head bashed in if yer disagree” manner which included waving clenched fists and blazing eyes.

Colonel Cuthbert, also supposedly home on convalescent leave from malaria, but also to resolve marital problems, was sitting drinking with other convalescent officers and tolerating Tom’s performance, perhaps because his wife had recently run off with an able-bodied civilian.

Tom's target sighed, and turned his back and started drinking. Tom with his hands on his hips, balled them into fists. "Hey fella, I am talking to you! You so gutless you won't fight Germans then you will fight me!"

Before the man could speak Tom had him doubled over with a stomach punch and then kicked him in the knee. One wooden leg went hurtling in an arc, landing near a table, the other was at a right angle at the knee and caused the man to fall gasping. Tom looked both stunned and alarmed for maybe five seconds, but he was quick.

"Well he could of either spoken up or be wearing his medals, if he has any." He nodded to himself obviously and moralistically, to make sure the crowded onlookers got his point. They did and the looks of disgust showed how they had gone beyond it, including Cuthbert.

"Heroes such as yourself Sergeant Caufield, are wasted here on the home front, so let us pity the Germans."

"But I am a light horseman."

"Major Thomas assures me that the AIF second division has several light horse contingents now and many an NCO vacancy within them."

"But-"

"But you prefer a court-martial for assaulting a crippled officer?? We have about fifty witnesses, civilian and military Your home front assignment finishes on January First. You join the reinforcements at Sydney Quay to embark on the eighth or you are to be prosecuted, clear?"

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Either through bribery, blackmail or servile service Albert Moon had become inspector and censor for Eloura district and neighbouring parts of the state and he put together his auxiliary force that quickly became known as moongoons. Some were layabouts from the Railway Hotel, a few were crippled veterans, others were school kids who seriously thought they were patriots. Some activities, such as rallies and

entertainments for our cases, were beneficial for those who believed in the war effort. Other things were not. They collected scurrilous gossip, acted as spies, harassed and blackmailed those who did not volunteer, donate or campaigned against the conscription referendum and pressured those who employed such ones to get out of the district. We heard rumours of special camps for the Germans or those of German descent. Some returned talking of what a disaster Gallipoli was and their physical state revealed that war was not the sporting fun Moon's and Tom's propaganda shows depicted. Cyril Abaya was one such, and as a black was going to be an easy target for a faked arrest by the moongoons. Tom boasted of it to Alison and she warned me.

Cyril had gone to pieces, in a sense almost literally with the loss of his foot and a badly healed broken hip and ribs, which meant he could not ride any more or return to his police tracker's job. In Australia it was illegal to supply Aborigines with alcohol, but many a new chum or even those Australian born did not know that and Australians are not respectful of petty tyrannies. So Cyril sat on the pub steps with his crutch beside him, not quite drunk in public, but so incautious that he was giggling at his recounting of what happened to Tom. At least that was a change from his snarling at our idiot generals. I walked over, forgetting that Cyril was one of the few who knew most of my scandalous past.

“Cyril Abaya you are a better man than this!”

“Yes Maam.”

“You know the law and if you end up in the jails you used to guard, you have sunk so low there will be no hope for you.”

“What can a man with one foot do?”

“Retrain. We expect you at our retraining section with the other amputee enrolments on Monday at nine. Look at Jan Van Groendhal.”

Jan was in view at the bakery. From his unscared right side he

looked cheery and smiled as he grabbed the loaves out of the roaring oven with the hook he insisted be made for him: sixteen inches long, sharp bladed, serrated and pointed.

“Well miss, nobody tries to sell me a spatchel or a breadknife and nobody worries about dirty hands. Watch!”

He did what Zelda told me the kids came regularly to see, him do, slicing the bread with his hook, rapid fire. He had already made Hook in the annual Christmas Peter Pan pantomime his role, even if in review Keith wrote that it was “ham, oddly sliced.” Shaking hands was a standard joke and yet he seemed so much happier that he was in peacetime. He was dimming the memory of the dour, earnest, religious, young man of only two years back - or was Hendrik really like that and Jan just tagged along?

“Life is too short to waste on misery and failure, especially when you self-inflict it. Yes?”

I nodded, puzzled still and wary, but suspecting what was to come.

“If only Cyril would realise that.”

“I try miss, I try. To cheer him, but the beer - one's good, for cheer but-”

“He needs to think of other things. He is good with horses.”

“His legs miss.”

“The milk and bread wagon, you have not motorised yet?”

“Thinking of it. Much money comes from supplying your new hospital, and the recruiters and the board are at me to sell the horses for the front. Like they do with everybody.”

Nods came with sighed sympathy. The only sight rarer in Eloura than a full-bodied young man was a full-bodied young horse. The district was proudly and loudly committed to maintaining the Eloura Mounted

Rifles or whatever they called themselves now. That meant that around here horses were becoming another nearly extinct Australian species.

“If I could find somebody with a license Miss, I would swap over-”

“Ponies. We do not send children or ponies to the front, yet. Get a light cart that ponies can haul, not a big heavy wagon, so you do two trips, not one. If you have morning and afternoon deliveries you make more sales; those who sleep in, or overuse at breakfast, get a second chance.”

“And so will Cyril. I get your good idea. But he must stay on the wagon, literally and -” His face was vexed as he looked for the word.

“Figuratively.”

“Yes, you are a woman of good ideas. You did well with your guesthouse in Eden.” Then came a look. Almost expressionless. Almost. It happened on average thrice a week in the wards. He got a look back which worked on average, ninety times in a hundred. Not today.

“It seem we are both once very young religious, yes? But no more. We are good people, industrious, helpful, and friendly, but no saints. Not sanct -sanctimonious Yes?”

“My husband and my in-laws are very religious.”

He paused, uneasy as if unsure how to say something. “Andrew and you still? Urh...”

He went into a recollection how of a cranky old Gallipoli nurse actually sacrificed her whole life to duty in nursing to supposedly atone for some exposed love affair, and this made her bitter and tyrannical. When asked for the point he just stared and sighed. They often rambled like that and on my day off I was not feigning interest. Then when I stayed expressionless, he used his good arm to grip the counter, letting me know that I was a customer again. “Both Andrew and Ross are very brave men, very lucky so far, in a very long and terrible war.” Part of my appeal was

not noticing the scarred face that must repel most women, but nursing for so long made such things seemed normal.

After the bakery came the newspaper and Keith was with my brother-in-law, sad Alex, back in uniform and off to the seldom seen wife in Sydney soon. They welcomed me, and the smell and sight of freshly baked bread, salad and ham added to the mood. Alex talked first.

“Eighty Somme Offensive casualties arrive here tomorrow. Here’s the press release and the casualty list.” Alex gave Keith me a spare copy and. Keith replied

“And I am supposed to write it up as a great victory because we advanced nine miles in places. The Somme cost the empire about half a million casualties. Did you know that between the 1850s Indian Mutiny and the Boer War over forty years later you conquered and ruled a quarter of the earth’s surface and population with only two battles that took more than a hundred fatalities?”

“Victoria and Edward’s Pax Britannia.” Alex mused. “Seems as remote and irrelevant as Caesar’s Pax Romana.” He shook his head and sighed. “Rosalind, finally here's news of Andrew; he was captured in the last weeks of the Somme campaign. The family must hear of this. Coming?”

“No.”

He raised his eyebrows and left. We waited. I felt sorry for Andrew, so terrible to be starving while wounded in jail, doubtless a target for bullies and sodomites, but enough was enough.

“Keith I won’t tell, but do you ever hear anything of Jenny?”

“Not a word. She is as remote as the Pax of days past.”

But she was not, as I alone was soon to find out.

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Peace on Earth. Goodwill to all men. The old Christmas clichés I once believed in took on a new belief here. The snow-capped mountain range, the winter sky so bright and the lake reflecting it without a ripple, the twittering of birds in a few evergreens, was the only sound. It was not because there were no people, the little village was like a Christmas model – just like it, with cute little stone or log cottages with slated high-angled snow-covered roofs, brightly painted doors and shutters and rooks nesting in chimneys. Their trees internal and external were decorated, the Christmas tree custom started in this part of the world. The people here were very nice, wanting only to go about their lives in peace, counting time by the village square clock and the chiming of the bells in the church spire, not by summer offensives and daily casualty lists. They had a commemorative plaque up for their most important event, an uneventful 1879 visit by the emperor Franz Josef, dead these last five weeks, after ruling sixty-eight years. He was a living fossil figurehead for a fossilised system that most hopefully and very likely after the disastrous Lemberg and Brusilov campaigns, would soon follow him to his grave.

It was healthy to chop wood, keeping warm in what everybody said was the coldest winter in over forty years. The Christmas dinner, so paltry compared to those we had at home, looked like a luxury both to the locals and to me. The Allied naval blockade and wartime rationing meant that we all lived on backyard crops, turnips mainly, but here there were fewer people and more land, the lake to fish, the forest to hunt in and we could trade salt from the town mine for much. Few in any of the nations at war were as lucky as the people in this placid, forgotten town.

It was quite possible that I was the luckiest prisoner ever in this worldwide war. It happened easily enough. Magda was an Austrian recruiter who came to our camp six weeks after my hospital unit was captured. She said there was a shortage of medical workers among some

Russian prisoners and were there any volunteers, so I did. The former Siberian salt miners turned soldiers turned captives were also volunteers for the Halstatt salt mines as the Austrians also had a wartime manpower shortage. So here I was, looking after Russians, learning bits of medicine, German, Russian and socialism all at the same time. Many Russians were radicals, for the Czars exiled their radicals to salt mines and then conscripted them, so working for the Czar's enemies was fine with them, they had more freedom and rations here. Discipline was easy. The train track and road in and out of the narrow defile were guarded and the nearly vertical, slippery-sloped mountains only lead to more slippery-sloped mountains and escape to what, the trenches? Ha ha ha to that and ha ha ha to all bourgeois phoniness, like my marriage. Magda would post the divorce documents next time she was in neutral Switzerland.

“Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes, time to clean up and sing.”

Magda, who recruited me in more ways than one, came up behind me, putting her arm in mine and off we went. She and her mother were local nurses to her father the doctor, the town Marxist. Her husband was killed in the Lemburg campaign early last year. We had been working together with the medical side of things and the more I talked against the war and the officers and the way nationalism divided people the more she liked me.

“Your ideas are good as far as they go, but what shall you do about this war?”

“What can be done?” I asked soon after arriving and she smiled.

“Understand the world to change it. Study. Borrow my books.”

So I studied and so much became clearer: why there are rich and poor, shortages and war, rulers and ruled, how religions keep people complacent – and better still, how it could all be transformed: there was no need for hovels and wars, the world could be full of happy Halstats.

\*

Magda Rosenthal

Zurich 28<sup>th</sup> January 1917

“To paraphrase Engels on William Morris ‘He is a sentimental socialist, who needs much time to straighten him out and he may not be worth the time.’

Lenin’s face showed neither disappointment nor disagreement. Being in contact with those expressionless, but penetrating eyes made one honest and succinct.

“Be more concrete Comrade.”

“He is naïve beyond all belief, the religious son of a minister, growing up separated from the ugly reality of how the bourgeois make money or rule. Now he sees socialism in the same idealistic way.”

Lenin repeated himself so he got an account of how Andrew had won his medals, blowing up machine gun nests because his philandering friend convinced him it was like a cricket game – and how Andrew was still unaware that he must have killed many Turks.

“Perhaps one day he will blow up capitalist machine guns for us, perhaps in that same naïve way, perhaps with more certainty in our cause. Does the motivation really matter? Or does the achievement in itself become more important?”

He leaned back in his chair, thumbs in his waistcoat, the same one he had worn for a decade now and I was being judged for signs of petty-bourgeois idealism, not Andrew. Since about nine out of ten German and Austrian Marxists had gone over to the war effort in 1914 Lenin never really trusted us.

“How do the local workers react to him?”

“Everyone likes him, townspeople, soldiers, Russian exiles, mine workers.”

“So, in his small way he provides living proof that the capitalist propaganda campaign of hate is a lie. Sometimes a lie functions like a massive brick wall that conceals truth and only petty-bourgeois idealists think that one or a few can demolish such a wall, it is demolished perhaps with a mighty crash - or perhaps by a brick at a time. In his small way he does the latter. As a translator he seems weak at present, but another Russian-German-English translator of any ability is invaluable at present. Boorman and Kast were arrested a few days past.”

“When the mine collapsed, he wished to be listed among the dead. He wants a new identity.”

“And clearly to break with his petty-bourgeois past. You say he works in the mine to learn worker’s ways and to develop his language skills. Has he persisted?”

I nodded and once again Lenin was assessing me and twitched his lip, awkwardly searching for tact. Awkwardness, uncertainty and tact were previously unseen quantities in my few dealings with him.

“We do not expect, well we-.” He paused pressing his tongue against his teeth. “Comrade the personal side does not interfere...”

My words were nervous while he nodded with relief.

“Now the Russians in the mine; how are they developing?”

The conversation went elsewhere. Lenin regarded revolution in Germany as the key to world revolution and like many, saw Austria as Germany’s soft underbelly. Consequently, my nationality and placing, rather than my party rank, made me valuable and he gave me an hour of his time, most of it in listening, which went with more murmurs, requests to be concrete and assessing glares.

Afterwards I sat in a dreary Zurich park, where even the grass was, like the pond, and sky and even passers-by, some shade of grey, sighing to myself. The morning after the first disappointing lovemaking with

Andrew was one of the worst moments of my life. He had no idea what to do, thought I should not experience pleasure (and I did not) and was in a mad rush. He even seemed genuinely puzzled that no smiles came his way next morning and suddenly it became painfully obvious how his wife, that supposedly 'slutty devious bitch' must have felt. He had a month to listen and learn. A post box directly in front of me was in need of use ,so his divorce was mailed off.

\*

Rosalind McPherson      New Albion Military Hospital 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1917

The two letters arrived together just before breakfast break. The Zurich postmark and the Swiss stamp caused wonder. The top document was a final divorce and was dated 21st September 1916.

Next came the photographs and letters. Enough final effects had gone through my hands for me here to know it was now my turn. The letter still hurt and puzzled.

Magda Rosenthal

28<sup>th</sup> January 1917

Supervisor of Prisoners

Halstatt, Austria

Dear Mrs McPherson,

We regret to inform you that your husband died yesterday in a mine shaft collapse. He was bravely attempting to carry out his duties as medical officer among Russian prisoners. Everything in his possession is enclosed. That section of the mine has been closed and now serves as a tomb to the six Russians, two Austrians and one Australian there.

\*

Lynda found me there blank faced and clutching the documents. They found me staring at the patterns rivulets of rain made on the window pane. She was experienced enough to know and I could motion

to the church. She helped me there in a carriage and their faces meant that nobody needed to be told. Alex sighed, shut his eyes and had to steady himself. It was his father who went like a man punched in the midriff and winced in the same way. Zelda went to my mother-in-law while Alison and some nurses steadied me and took me to a pew. Enough self-possession remained to withhold the divorce document while they took the others. The curate read it next service. He was the only fatality read out that Sunday service, but with the new Ypres Offensive starting soon that would change.

Death pared away the worst side to him, and we could remember the best, the sweet unselfishness, the unpretentious sense of duty, the generosity. saving me in Sydney. In a sense he saved me again as the last five years old murmurs about me seemed to die with him. The black armband on duty and widow's weeds made me the epitome of respectability. Nobody tried to seduce or romance me now, a relief. Even Reverend Jervis knew when to shut up and tipped his hat in passing.

\*

Zelda Chapman                      New Albion Military Hospital 24<sup>th</sup> April 1917

When a Major General requests an interview no matter how busy one is, one complies, even if the request comes at ten at night.

He was impressive, around sixty, with iron grey in his black hair brushed back, a knife of a nose, bemused flashing green eyes, a mouth used to command and a graceful, ramrod thin body and a uniform that showed it off so well it was a wonder how he got into it. His voice epitomised courtesy and breeding - and yet clearly nobody should be his enemy or a failure under his command. Unlike the other generals who visited twice or thrice a year, this one looked the part.

“Major-General Horace Jervis.” He bowed. They never said why they were here. Usually this was to kill time before returning home

because blunt Prime Minister Billy Hughes came to the point immediately. Those were the rumours concerning what English politicians and some amongst our generals wanted.

No! He could not enforce conscription for overseas service without a referendum. No! He was not willing to lower soldier's pay and give it to Britain's treasury. No! He was not willing to conscript the remaining horses, hand over all Australia's gold reserves or go along with whatever madness they wanted now. Then they got the door and hospital inspections filled in the time. In their conceit they actually imagined their visits were good for morale. The reality was that I had to warn the patients that one smart word, one snarl, one hostile glare would get them latrine duty and slops rations.

“Would you like to arrange a time for your hospital inspection?”

“No.”

“Oh?”

“I am in this town on a personal matter. It concerns my daughter, although we have never met.”

“She goes off duty, in a few minutes.”

I took him off to the ward in what once was the ballroom, and then the doubts started. There were hundreds in there and one with an English accent yelled “Bernie, Bernie Tate! Giving us an Anzac Night performance?”

He was not startled and seemed genuinely puzzled as he turned to face the smiling English-born convalescent, who rattled on about seeing him in vaudeville and “many a Shakespeare an' Galsworthy and Maugham and Wilde play, but e' did the major-general in *Pirates of Penzance* best.”

General Jervis gave him a look that would have frozen the entire Fijian Islands, but the private was oblivious. “Aw come on Ernie give us

a song now. You got many a pound from me at the ole hippodrome and the Swansea.”

“Something like this has happened twice before, *private!* Once in Oxford Street in civvies a fellow calling me Bernie approached, and a seller at Harrods insisted on my autograph and was amazed at my signature, wanting that name, not mine. Even so, if you do not stop this insolence I will press charges.”

That silenced him. I found Lynda, who just concealed her annoyance at another time-consuming-for-nothing general. They both noticed the lack of introductions.

“Is Rosalind here?”

“When she fell asleep twenty minutes back, I sent her off. Anything that cannot wait?”

“That Anzac Day Gala Ball. She must be there, extraordinarily important.”

Lynda could see it was, so she nodded and went back to her duties. We made what was our old ballroom into a ward for those recovering from wounds and injuries so it was easy to turn it into a ballroom again occasionally. We would do that tomorrow. I invited the general to come and meet his daughter there and he seemed pleased.

“If that man has caused any doubts here is my club card in London and my listing in *Who's Who* is on page 662. Please do check.”

I did, on the phone all the way to England and he was verified well more or less. His club, the reputable Athenaeum, said he was in Australia with his granddaughter, visiting relatives and in *Who's Who* he was listed as being in India 1878 to 1912, over the time Rosalind was conceived and born, and he had a wife who died there in 1896, but he looked young for sixty, let alone *Who's Who* listed birthdate making him seventy-eight. If the documentation there was correct his wife must have given birth the



year she turned forty-nine, and they were stationed in Madras, hundreds of miles south of where the Jervises were. On the way back the English private was waiting outside my office.

“I don’t know for sure why he pretends to be a general, but if I were you Mrs Chapman, well, I would put an extra lock on the silver.”

“Oh why is that?”

“His last company, them being The Strolling Players, sacked him for embezzlement.”

The private’s story also checked out on a call and a description of Bernie proved to be a rough match with the general. A consultation with Reverend Jervis only revealed that her father was a black-haired soldier stationed in Northern India and that was from his memsahib’s description. That English private was proving to be as much of a problem as the perhaps general, for the gossip blabbed up and down the wards. When I had to be checking the Anzac Day march organization time went with underlings asking about locks for the special silver, should we call the police for the mad general and Rosalind, who was placated with a promised meeting at the Anzac Day Ball. During the morning parade for the second ever Anzac Day march she wheeled a case among the marchers, warily looking up at the podium and she was uncertain.

At the ball he insisted on speaking publicly, he had everyone’s attention - and their doubts.

“There have been rumours circulating that I am a confidence man out to take your money, therefore I must do publicly what anyone would do in private, which is to settle her portion of my estate on my daughter, but before doing that let me make a donation to our Red Cross.”

“The cheque will be valueless.” It was Reverend Jervis, his voice could echo. The general counted out five hundred pounds in British notes.

He then opened a crushed velvet case, full of neatly piled gold sovereigns.

“Just so there cannot be doubt, could someone who handles currency on a daily basis verify that these sovereigns are genuine?”

Marsha stepped up and made some random choices and nodded and Major General Jervis handed the case to her and opened others containing heirloom necklaces. He got a jeweller to authenticate and almost had the audience convinced, but Jervis yelled out,

“They will be from the Irish harlots’ robberies!”

Mcphee sighed and said now he would have to check and while he was away General Jervis explained.

“While away on duty in India my wife had a difficult birth and was not expected to live, nor could she nurse her daughter, so the nurses, finding the family of Reverend Jervis and thinking that the same name, rare to them, meant relatives, left the baby with the wife of Reverend Jervis who was recovering from the recent death of her baby, while her husband was away. Returning from a spell of active duty on the North West Frontier, I found that is preferable to face a hundred savage Parthians than take a baby from a mother’s arms – and how could I, a soldier on active duty with a dying wife, look after a child? They got gifts and money from time to time... And now, with a classified task in Australia and perhaps not much time left....”

I was watching Hilton Jervis and his face began to doubt. He had absented himself from the birth and perhaps his wife had presented him with a changeling and kept it secret. This story would put him in a better light than the cuckold one or marrying someone else’s, pregnant cast off. His considerable vanity was luring him and everyone else in, Rosalind excepted and me. “Facing a hundred savage Parthians” was just a bit too stagey and changeling stories? It sounded like stock fiction. Seeing

McPhee back I introduced him to our perhaps General.

“These necklaces are silver and the stones are emerald, ruby, garnet and blue diamonds, all missing necklaces are gold with amethyst or white diamonds many with hallmarks and names. These have no identifying marks, initials, clasp designs or cut or number of stones that match with what was stolen, not a one.”

There was hearty applause and after handshakes and pleasantries the general was left alone with his daughter to watch the dancing.

\*

Rosalind McPherson          New Albion Military Hospital 25<sup>th</sup> April 1917

It was best to keep my glittering smile on, and wait till the dancing distracted gazes and my low voice could not be heard above music.

“Who are you really?”

“The very model of a major general.” He sung it softly.

“So the English private was right.”

“Oh, a decade out of date, Character roles are more my line now, detective inspectors, colonial authority figures, many an officer.”

I sighed and knew.

“They are nothing but trouble. Which of them is it? Or did they get back together?”

“Brionny remains in some Irish kip and will be until the nineteen twenties. Jenny escaped to America, went on the game, married some Irish gangster client and manages his accounts.”

“Are the necklaces or the sovereigns stolen?”

“She collected the necklaces from some old Baltimore family in lieu of legitimate debts. The money is hers. Amazingly she became an astute businesswoman.”

“Amazingly?”

“You know that this whole thing we are enacting out derives from

pure melodrama, Dickens keeping the readers happy, vaudeville stock, the neat tied up ending that confers respectability and opens the way to a rich husband and officer-hero?"

"Enough of that past world thanking you." My thoughts went to Lord Bee, briefly.

"You prefer to be the illegitimate daughter of an unknown father and a jailbird mother who ran off after nearly getting you arrested?"

He had a point, even so I did not wish to live a lie and told him so.

"Live a lie? The generals, politicians and writers insist that the Somme Offensive was a great victory and that the land of Beethoven, Mozart, Heine, Goethe and Luther has become a fourth century Barbarian's paradise? Steal? They just paid several hundred thousand lives for around twenty square kilometres of French mud.

Fraud? Really my dear, if this fakery got me into a real general's headquarters I could do a better job, just by insisting on no more useless offensives. Now what were you saying about honesty and fraud?"

"I do not wish to live in deceit with any future husband."

"Are you really going to tell them the truth? About your parents, just for starters?"

"And?"

"And Jenny and Brionny, uhm together? Sexual triads? And the second near arrest and Ross Clarke..." He sighed with genuine embarrassment and he had a point. "Oh well my girl, surely you can see you are too late now, expose me and Jenny and I are jailed, and the old wound reopens."

And another, including why this was done. He was sharp.

"Jenny felt you also needed a lift up in the world. She dreamed it up and by great good luck when we looked for some senile old duffer sleeping away his officer's retirement in his club chair we found one

named Jervis, ‘Come on grandpa, we are off on a holiday to Australia, for the fishing and to visit your daughter.’ *Who’s Who* said it was his hobby. She took him off on a Donegal fishing trip, being so far gone he doesn’t know the difference and with both sons making parts of the Flanders fields forever England, no relatives are there to check.”

Just then Zelda, Marsha, Frank Clarke and his wife, Alison, and Karl and Lynda came up on my side to see the general. He did not notice and I was not going to give the game away with a nudge.

“Someday soon the Athenaeum Club will send you an obituary. So now for the good advice, your work and your widowhood, seems to be turning you, well into a matron, before your time. With the casualty rate what it is, prospective husbands will be rare and demand high with the gender balance and young widowhood being ubiquitously common...”

“Please.”

“Do not forget to be happy. This war just might be over by Christmas with the Americans pouring in. They will need six months, both to train and to rid the Atlantic of submarines and then if they are sensible, they will reinforce Italy, Exhausted Austria has weak defences, they could sweep up into Bavaria and once they are on German soil watch the Germans beg for peace – and watch as the Americans become the world’s greatest power.”

“But England-”

“Has already lost virtually all its Latin American trade and markets to the Americans and within weeks America will be the world’s leading financial power, with us and all the Allies in war debt to them. When they become the deciding factor in this war that will cement their position and imperialism, at least of the kind England represents, will have had its day, and money, that vulgar stuff, not aristocratic titles, will soon decide

everything. So my girl, watch the gold carefully and do not make too much or too little of the Jervis name and fame.”

We looked up and for the first time he was startled, not realising with the people watching, what a fine job he had accidentally done of dispelling any remaining doubts.

He asked me to dance and we did and I waved him off at the station in the morning. “Jenny gave me one last cryptic clue for you. I am supposed to squawk it like a parrot.”

“Oh?”

“Pieces of Eight, Pieces of Eight!”

*“Whu – oh. Too right! None must know about this place! That is a certainty!”*

He waved me off, the fraud earning a few thousand for the performance of his life and in the crucial scene, which he did best, he was unaware of his audience and was not even acting. It said much about the war and the empire that he unknowingly convinced everybody that a fraud who knew of military affairs from acting as a general in music halls could be a better general than the real ones. For instead of waiting for the millions of Americans, they had already just fought and lost another disastrous Flanders offensive at Arras and were planning more.

Now I knew where the jewellery from the robberies was hidden, or at least much of it. Frank had sealed the cave and then cut down stalwart gums over it, it was safe, and now so was I, from the world, just as Jenny in a rare moment of insight and compassion, intended.

\*

Ross Clarke

Alexandria 25<sup>h</sup> July 1917

Soon after release from hospitalisation and while at the same hotel where we had been drinking with Leo the year before, another Eloura man with an unexpected fate turned up there, my brother Robert. He was

now also a captain, stationed at the Gaza front in the aeronautics wing, and he had just shot down two enemy planes. Lyons who shot down five planes were designated aces and aces were automatically heroes: he was coming close to being that. Behind him followed a herd of journalists, officers and a cameraman. Cuthbert read the note and did the talking.

“It is a certainty that you two fellow officers, very literally brothers in arms, would not mind posing for photos and an interview as part of the war effort.”

His tones said something else. *Go along with it or else.*

Nobody could miss the way that meant both photographs and interviews, where it meant lying. We let him draw in pictures of happy families, but judging by the journalist’s faces, most could smell a rat, but Go Along With It or Else (the acronym GOAWIE or “going to Goa” in cynical army code meant a transfer to somewhere remote and horrible) had apparently also been given to them. Heroes were needed to shore up the war effort, and brother heroes who had both won the new Military Cross were immediately a particularly desired novelty and valuable publicity for the medal, giving it status and a high place in the medal hierarchy. My three V.C. nominations and my Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Military Cross with a bar already, my battlefield promotion, being twice mentioned in dispatches, all emphasised that. Even so I sighed with relief when Robert and the journalists left: Robert left me wondering if he was being arch or stupid when he mentioned to the reporters that we had both married Irish women. Robert had a baby son now, named Eustace Hughes Clarke for his eminent father in law of course.

Yet we were soon glad that we had done that interview, for on his last trip to town Dad was proudly showing the article around the Regent Hotel and Saint Paul’s and at his sixty-fifth birthday party. Soon after

tragedy struck. Two weeks later Father died of a heart attack while calmly reading the paper on the veranda, Somehow she had the will changed, Robert was now sole owner of Clarkestead. I swallowed my pride and wrote to his base, imploring him to maintain the family home, recalling it as a link to our heritage. For once he did the right thing, writing back that he had already rejected Tom Caufield's extremely fast offer and that his intentions were already in line with mine and he had advanced mother money for maintenance. If only he had not signed the letter Captain Robert Clarke, M.C. Master of Clarkestead.

There was now no home for me to go to and therefore no reason for using my furlough to go back to Australia. That decided me on another destination, another priority. Like Leo, I was also for Europe. Forty days overdue leave gave me six in Dublin; but perhaps six minutes at Kilmainham Gaol was enough. They gave surprised stares as I walked Dublin's streets, seeing where the rebels had made their stand at the besieged Post Office and the prison courtyard where the madder British had made them into martyrs by executing the leaders and then rampaging through a peaceful pub while firing to kill. Those stares continued in jail as I was allowed visiting rights. Amazingly my sister-in-law Alice Hughes Clarke, had recently signed in and out. The consulting area consisted of a table and two rickety chairs in a stony room where nothing else but cockroaches existed.

She was marched in with two uniformed guards, one on each side. Brionny was wearing what looked like a grey nightshift, all three had expressionless faces. Her hair was still long, she was weighing many pounds less. Like the guards she turned on the corner with military precision. She did not look older, keeping her age the way a corpse does after embalming. There was no register of surprise, liking, dislike, curiosity or anything else in her face. She did see me and her assessing



gaze went quickly over my uniform, to the escutcheons, medals and the cap on the table. She spoke first, in a voice devoid of any emotion or tone.

“Almost from tha first time I saw tha handsomest man I ever did see, I always knew tha I would see yer somethen’ like this one day, as yer really are.”

“What can be done to get you out of here?”

“Thank yer. Perhaps a personal appeal to tha military authorities. It seems they already know about us, so a goaled Fenian wife is in yer way ter a colonelcy.”

“Clarkestead remains the ultimate aim. Or if you wish another attempt at Ame-”

“That bein’ nert possible by American laws, at least nert now an’ at least nert with me.”

“Why, if we can free you, why not?”

She sighed, and looked at the floor, biting her lips as she formulated the words.

“Yer sit there in that officer’s uniform, oblivious ter what et means ter me, oblivious ta tha fact tha this country, well yer are in tha enemy army and we are en another. More and more Irish see that with every passen’ day. Do yer really believe the bloody Somme offensive was tha great victory everyone says? Have yer seen tha casualty lists for just tha first day? Sixty thousand a day! And fer what? Go tell me fer what? A great many are asking, especially across this emerald isle.”

So was I and no soldier could disagree about the Somme, and there was another equally big spring offensive on at Ypres of all places, it would go the same way as the early Ypres battles and the Somme.

“The enemy are them who wish ter destroy us an’ yer army tries ta destroy us. Yer execute tha Easter Rebellion leaders an’ they took their

chances, knowin' et. Yer talk fools into walkin' inter barbed wire an' machine guns an' surely they made a choice, but there were na choice for those fellows in tha Dublin bar when tha British walked in and gave them summary executions ta make an example. The conscripts don' have much choice either-

“I talked nobody into anything. I started out as a militia corporal with a sense of duty, and now look at us. If we have choices let's go back to West Virginia.”

I waited for her to agree, but it never came: instead there was this sigh and something enigmatic fluttering across her face. An odd suspicion fluttered around my mind.

“When Moon turned up why didn't you tell me?”

“So yer could totally kill him this time and end up danglin'?”

It was a very logical answer, very true and it even contained a little of the real truth.

“If I can get you free and if resign my commission we can migrate to Canada or America and try again, my mother is under control now.”

“Et did not succeed last time. Et did not succeed fer Deirdre of the Sorrows either. That were what I was doin', acting out her story, we were both hidin' in a foreign lan' and thinkin' et could work. Our fate suggests that life's patterns change little an' tha odds are against two people finding happiness alone together, tha world always finds 'em.”

“Something else? There's more to it than Celtic prototypes.” In response she became sharp, assessing me with glittering eyes.

“Indeed there is. Like most living their childhood fourteen ter a dirt floor room I craved space, privacy, quiet, fine clothes and beautiful food, a handsome husband an babies – and in tha cave, Baldwin's house an' then America I had found 'em and was in heaven - until a month before Moon turned up, when I found et all suddenly hollow and myself longin'

fer tha peat fire, tha sing along and the crowded bed, tha thirteen others and friends...”

“But it was a paradise.”

“Were et now?” Her face became sharp and smug, with glittery eyes. “If et was such a paradise, why pray tell, did yer go off on those five-day hunting trips once every month? Even when the snow was knee deep and all the animals ware en hibernation? Even when the larder and pantry were fit ter overflowing? I know I was usually worse than most women, but even here they hesitate ta inflict five days solitary.”

Her face became softer, more fearful of hurting me.

“Ross, take away the passion and tha shared past, and what der we have en common?”

The reality of that hit me while trying to think of something and slowly becoming desperate and realising: now she just looked bored.

“Can you tell me why Alice Hughes Clarke visited?”

“Nah. Sworn ta secrecy.”

“Do you want any food parcels, any books?”

“They just cause knives in tha back from tha envious.”

“Let us see what an officer’s personal request can do.”

“Good luck ta yer, fer I’ll be guessen’ it will not get me a brass farthing.”

It was not successful and more her fault than mine. If she had volunteered to be a nurse or a land girl and renounced political action they probably would have paroled her, but with the guerrilla war she supported starting up and the Germans supporting it there was no way they could release her.

\*

My sister-in-law in Ulster requested an interview. Seeing her young but strained, sad face made it easy to see something was wrong. Although

she stood to greet me, she soon sat gingerly into a wheel chair. A nurse was soothing howling Eustace inside. At first when upon seeing the black armband and the many black crosses on the door. I thought Robert had copped it. She read my face.

“The crosses on the door are not for him. Two brothers on that first horrible day of the Somme Offensive, six weeks later another brother at the glorious victory at Romani, in which you took part, a glorious victory and the cost was only eleven hundred of our boys being casualties. Just last week the youngest of the four was shot down near there. Robert taught him to fly and said it would be great fun and he would look after him. Well, he did we suppose. Enlisted in 1914 but lasted until this month and the average life expectancy for a flying officer being two weeks now.” She shrugged her shoulders and stared around as if she did not live here.

“Oh these two here, are for cousins at Ypres and Mons. The third goes to their brother. He died putting down that stupid Easter Rebellion thing at the Dublin Post Office. After the first two his mother implored General French for garrison duty here in Ireland where he would be safe. If you think I’m nervy now you should see her. Then there is – oh was, the nautical Uncle at the Falklands and his son at Jutland. Another cross is for my French teacher who said I was hopeless and went back to Paris, he was an early one. He actually charged with sabre outstretched into barbed wire with his waving plumes in his brass helmet on a brass head and his beautiful golden braid on his beautiful sky-blue jacket and scarlet trousers got ripped up and bloodied by the machine gun. He was my puppy love at thirteen, but he was so conceited that he could not see it and, oh the cad who jilted me, my poor cad. He is last. The alpha and the omega, beginning and end. He will get a cross soon to, dysentery in a

Mesopotamian prison camp will finish him off. He wrote that two weeks back, gives himself months at most.”

She winced and offered me a bench. This was a very different woman to the warmonger Helen and Evelyn described.

“Do you know what I really hate, apart from this horridly morbid door that must be maintained to prove a point? I really really hate those people who say we rich and powerful people caused this war and live in luxury while others suffer. I hate that so very, very, much. “She bit here lips and swallowed reaching for the hip flask in her pocket, but stopped herself and went into a daze, apparently a reverie.

“The sun is rare in Ulster. It was amazing how quickly we got used to the sun out there...”

She forced a wan, apologetic smile and it was evident what she was trying to be apologetic about.

“For a farm boy Robert seems to know little about farming.”

“He went to boarding school. Even at home his mind was elsewhere. The army and the life of Ulster gentry were what he was born for.”

“Perhaps not.”

I was supposed to know or sense something, but could pick up that the wheelchair was the type used for those with injuries between the top of the legs and the lower spine.

“He has irredeemably made himself an outcast here. First the 1914 Curragh mutiny, officers refusing to operate against Ulster Protestants, not so bad among local circles, then strafing Turks a year back, when people still believed in the knights of the air. Now this.”

“He hit you?”

“No.... Oh... the doctor who had to sew me up or the nurses in attendance .... Somebody talked. It is barracks gossip now. Back on leave impatient... He... he tore me. He did not mean to, but he did. He is a

sodomite. Is that cousin he went to school with, that Evelyn with the long hair and the Oscar Wilde clothes - are they....”

“Evelyn is a womaniser.”

She was surprised, asked me again and had to be reassured that I had known Evelyn from first memories and he was voraciously heterosexual.

“Do you know about Robert and men?”

“No.”

“Your former wife had not heard anything from anyone in Eloura. Do they know there? We hear little here.”

“Neither do I.”

“If we were to offer you the position of manager? She says you love the place and are a good farmer.”

“Thank you, but no.”

“You have plans.” I shook my head. “Then what will become of you?”

“Judging by the crosses on your door, nothing good. I have given up on good news.”

And rightly. Back in Alexandria the first opened letter told me that Andrew was dead, the latest war casualty.

\*

Keith Anstee

Eloura 4<sup>th</sup> December 1917

Trouble was coming, and had been since August 1914. It started with the Van Groendhal’s bakery and Bach’s essayer’s both being boycotted and their windows smashed and “Huns out!” being scrawled on their door. This was in spite of all three volunteering, Bach being Australian born and the Vans being Dutch. Then Douglas had to hide his almost brand- new Daimler in a spare disused stable after the Whaley family’s model was slashed and bashed. After the Germans burning of the beautiful Belgian city of Louvain, the shooting of civilian hostages by

firing squad and the more fantastically lurid stories of Belgian orphans being boiled for soap and nuns having their hands cut off so that they could not resist rape; across the world people went mad. Gleeful children actually tortured a bashed up, half-blinded German shepherd. It was on a leash and the thing was either so timid, so cowed, or so pulverised it only yelp piteously and couldn't even stand. Jack Caufield was Daddy's boy alright.

Even in the Transvaal eighteen years back when the Boers found themselves invaded by the British and near to half the people round were foreigners, and many of those British Empire people covertly loyal to their enemies, paranoia, intolerance and bizarre fanaticism never equalled what was unfolding before me in Eloura, and this district was typical of Australia, and the madness was global.

After that incident and a similar one where a German shepherd was found hanging outside Murie's gate with a hate note saying "volunteer or suffer the same just consequence" I refused to print any further atrocity stories and questioned their veracity: Warnings on that came from none other than Albert Moon, now coming further up in the world. Starting as a right royal toady and spy for an English aristocrat, he had become a detective and now combined both roles as some type of official inspector empowered by the government to hunt down disloyalty, espionage (not that anybody in Australia had been ever convicted, or even tried) and enemy aliens. He was not always as unobtrusive as good detectives are. In late 1915, after two mad Turks out at Broken Hill shot up a train full of picnickers, Rachel Clarke and Marsha (who lost her father at Gallipoli) lead the public burning of all things German (as not that much that was Turkish was around) I had a front-page editorial. They actually did house to house searches for sheet music by Mozart, Mendelsohn, Wagner, Beethoven and Brahms. Then they got biographies of Luther and Calvin

and and even a children's adventure writer (the German, Karl May, who died two years before the war began) expunged from the library. They collected all these things in the park and made a bonfire of them. I half joked in my paper that if any Germans resided here they would have been burned at the stake, so somebody anonymous wrote in saying what a good idea. If they were caught they would say only joking, but After seeing what happened to German shepherds I am not so sure.

Each time I wrote of the stupidity of the endlessly failed, endless offensives rocks went through the window and at my back, I got hate scrawlings, attempts to pick fights, and official warnings. Reverend Jervis denounced me from the pulpit. From early 1915 on circulation and advertising were dropping and my only friends were among disaffected veterans such as Jan and his offsider Cyril, the Irish and the unions, Zelda, Reg Fisher, his boy Murie and Ruth. They all seemed to treat the war as something like drought. One day it would go away and peace and prosperity would come again: meantime they always kept business going. Even in that extended family my enemies were considerable. Rachel Clarke had it in for me over Jenny and Brionny, and used the war to publicly spit in my face. Marsha Chapman, neè Trevelyan was another and if not so obvious, worse. She came in with a false smile and her usually bratty sons were well-behaved, but as if well-rehearsed.

That was a warning, for her husband was back, a hideously disfigured casualty, so why the smile? She supposedly came to chat about accounts owing, but her eyes wandered around, she asked too many questions about how the presses worked and deadlines and work times and wanted my thoughts on the Passchendaele campaign and the latest vote for conscription would go, as if collecting information - and she was not very good at it. For years she had been sneering when she saw me on the street and was among the most vociferous war enthusiasts. She



designed the Chapman employees' dismissal notice if they had not volunteered. "Your country needs your services, we do not."

A shady character lurked about, watching while seeming not to, and it came as no surprise when two weeks before the latest referendum to legalise conscription Albert Moon and six of his hefty "moongoons" including the shade, turned up. Moon was well dressed, amazingly in good taste, and the car was not flash either, just a new Ford, but recently polished and belonging to a person of consequence. He was tacky nouveau rich if anybody was, so somebody was advising him, a mistress probably and as that thought came a uniformed moongoon chauffeur moved forward and I briefly saw Marsha, sitting smug faced in the back, but with her children. And there was Inspector Travis and Reverend Jervis.

All in that tightly packed car looked smug, even her boys. Behind them came a truck with moongoons. And as they pulled up bystanders came and judging by their sneers and knowing looks, I was the only person ignorant of what was unfolding. When newspaper people in Brisbane were sentenced for breaking censorship laws such an uproar started that they were released. Like everybody I was careful to follow government instructions, not printing anything about military locations or movements.

The moongoons surrounded me and Moon did the talking, officiously introducing himself, and then holding up copies of my paper.

"You are Keith Anstee, editor of this newspaper?"

"You know who I am."

"Here we follow correct procedure. Yes or no and the penalties for false or misleading statements are quite severe. Now are you Keith Anstee?"

"Yes."

“Are you related to or in contact with the author of “Hughes and his Views” a Mister F. Anstey, spelled with a y?”

“No!” I smiled with relief. That Anstey was a Labor politician in Victoria who had somehow got confidential leaked documents and used them in the article Moon mentioned. He had created a furore and a witch hunt, but they had not found the culprit.

“Was your father Eamon Anstee, an aide to Sean MacBride and your mother German born and did she die in a British detention camp on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1901 in South Africa, during the recent war there?”

“Yes to all questions. My mother was four when they migr-”

“And did you serve with your brothers in MacBride’s Irish Brigade for the Boers and against King and empire in that war?”

“Yes.”

“And did you know that one of your brothers served in De Wet’s rebellion against the King at the outbreak of this war?”

“No.”

“Or that your wife, who incidentally was arrested in America as a common prostitute, finances rebellion against his majesty and the Empire?”

“No.”

“Gotcha.”

“We checked your letters about divorce over the last year an’ a bit and she specifically mentions financing Irish rebels in those letters an’ it appears unmistakably clear you have been withholding information about an absconded felon wanted for many a robbery. Inspector Travis was there an’ knows about that. Inspector your turn.”

Then came Travis’s questions about the robberies and I could truthfully say I did not know where the treasure was. He could not link me to the actual robberies and knew it and Moon could see that

prosecuting me on that would open the old can of worms most of Eloura dreaded. Another factor he apparently knew to avoid was that prosecuting a husband for not dobbing in his wife would alienate his public support. His power depended on that public support even more than his official position, the special regulations and paid informers. If a community clamped up in hostility, he would get nobody. He tried a different tack.

“Under Regulation 27A it is an offence for any person by word of mouth or in writing, or by any act or deed, to advocate or encourage disloyalty or hostility to the British Empire or the cause of the empire during the war. Now Reverend Jervis, would you please read his 1914 article dated August 11<sup>th</sup>, the one that begins 'This war has already revealed itself as a folly which will leave only vanquished, not victors.'

When Jervis finished reading Moon asked who signed it. Travis took the notes and then moongoons read similar articles with the process being repeated.

“Five violations of Regulation 27A! And now we come to Regulation 28I which, ‘makes it an offence to spread false reports or make false statements likely to cause disaffection or public alarm or likely to interfere with the King’s forces, or likely to prejudice the recruiting, training, discipline, or administration of the forces.’ Uhm.” He looked around smug. “Now who will read the first false statement that claims that Gallipoli, the Somme and Passchendaele were three of the worst defeats in world history?”

And so it went on. I had also broken other assorted regulations by stating support for the Irish rebellion, mentioning that ethnic Germans were being interred, by quoting from Bolshevik documents, and by saying my paper had been censored. Each point he proved by numerous examples. At first I thought he was just doing it for his relish, but no; he was much cleverer than that. The usual punishment was a fine and a

editor in the office, but with so many violations he was making me out to be a hard case to get me removed and probably jailed and with the prostitute lesbian wife, the robberies, Irish violence, fighting Australians in South Africa and a German family connection, nobody would rush to my aid.

“Under Regulation 28AC we have no need for search warrants, it gives us power to enter if need be by force, and search for any suspected material injurious to... the war effort. Go to it boys!”

They did and came out with leaflets against the conscription vote and planted evidence they did not bother to conceal on the way in while Travis and Jervis, who were sticklers for correct legal procedure, were staring at me. Shares in German munitions companies! Don't look at this, reverend! It is pornography and involving children!”

Marsha could barely keep a straight face as she spoke.

“Oh well that is it, Keith Anstee, off you go.”

She shrugged her shoulders as Moon gave her my office keys and Moongoons threw my spare clothes into the bin while others handcuffed me.

“You cannot handcuff me without arresting me and I want a lawyer.”

“For?”

That was Marsha, setting me up for Moon's punch line. Travis and one moongoon had the decency to be ashamed.

“You are not the judge, jury and executioner-” I started and Moon grinned.

“Oh yes I am actually. Internment without trial for ethnic Germans – I can do that. We do it all the time. German mother. Gotcha!”

“This is preposterous.”

“Obviously. Now here are your choices. Internment as a German

sympathizer, or a trial in which these debentures in German writing and pornographic images of young boys are evidence. And Johnny Chapman here will say what happened won't you Johnny?"

On cue Marsha's seven-year-old recited the words in a rush, just like kids do in the Christmas play.

"This is the man who tried to pull my pants down when Mummy came to see him in the office, on December second of this year."

"And I saw him." Marsha added and Moon went on with what had obviously been rehearsed.

"That type get hot treatment in jails, rest assured, and people, well they really love the Germans at present, especially those we can prove shot at Australians and make money out of munitions that kill our brave boys at the front. Now who do you think people are going to believe? Fine upstanding citizens like Marsha Chapman of New Albion hospital, a mother with a father and husband as war casualties, a Reverend and a police inspector - or - you?"

"Why did you bring the children?"

"To let them see what Mother does to traitors."

"Why do you all hate me?"

"Work it out yourself."

Moon actually beamed and smiled and gave a cheery wave as they loaded me onto the back of a truck and handcuffed me to the railing and put leg irons on and chained them to the railing so I had to stand, under a furled banner that said

GERMAN PROFITEER AND PERVERT. While smugly grinning guards on either side held guns at the ready the moongoon who looked embarrassed before was not too bright. "Don't try to escape." He spoke quite seriously, "One fellow was shot dead for that at the camp where you are going."

As the truck drove out for my display through town, I could see her smiling as she was trying out the printing press levers, the ones she had asked about operating on that suspicious visit.

\*

Marsha Chapman Moon's Farm. Ocean Ridge Road 4<sup>th</sup> December 1917

He was not making me editor of the renamed *Eloura News* just to pay back Anstee or to show his power or even because he liked tormenting people, although they were all ingredients in today's surprise lunch of roasted radical.

Being here was no surprise and I drove my Oldsmobile to where he said to be, thirty miles from Eloura on his farm that nobody else knew about. It was dark and he had the canvas down. I was over a foot taller than him, heavier and heftier. With shot put as my sport and the proverbial hatpin in reserve I would win if he did not take no for an answer, not that I was going to rush to do so, for he was clearly the worst possible person to get on the wrong side of.

"So here we are." I started. "A very profitable day for me I can see, and for you it appears so, but I cannot see how."

"Ah if we don't make arrests and find profiteers then we don't stay employed, or at least in this fine job. I not only made my quota, but made him into the biggest fish ever caught in these parts. Now you turn what was a propaganda paper for peace into a law-abiding patriotic journal that says fine things about me and the boys and I am one happy chappee – and of course you will be in a fine position to help with information about those who are not patriotic. Favour for Favour."

*You could have said this in my office, so why are we sitting in the dark in such total secrecy?*

"Is that all you want?"

"Oh no." He just smiled at me, very smug with those red-rimmed

blue eyes. “The war will give us many more opportunities. Already you must have some ideas.”

“Certainly! My father left me many shares in the Roydtown mines and with this war, well coal should certainly be worth a fortune, but so far there have been stop work meetings against the war, and now gripings and sudden stop works about women replacements for the volunteers...”

“Nothing easier. A few legal cautions for ringleaders, a few reclassifications from essential service to unemployed.... After parading Anstee round town today when I say jump; they will say how high? There probably will not be a need for a few night visits from masked patriots with a cricket bat....”

“And the sawmill for Chapman industries has similar problems-”

“And similar solutions. Consider it done Mrs Chapman.”

“And what do you want?”

“You Mrs Chapman.”

I took out four hundred pounds for him. He did not take it.

“What is wrong Inspector Moon? Enough’s there to buy the prettiest women in Sydney every night for a week. I hear you do.”

“I prefer you to any such woman. You are virtually a widow and too young to wave goodbye to the world of romance.”

“Romance? Surely it was not romance when that woman in Nowra had to fall on her knees before you, so to speak, so her remaining son would not lose his essential services classification and get a nightly visitation by your moong- patriots for not joining his brothers on the Flanders fields barbed wire?”

“No that was not romance, that was a special case. She looked incredibly like Rosalind Jervis. I would count it a great favour if anything you found out about her was to come to me. I know about her current saintly reputation and popularity, the aristocratic father who is a general,

even so.”

*Just as he seemed so intelligent he shows himself to be like the rest of them: balls rule his brains.*

“Be careful there, inspector.”

“Of course, but hear this now. We both know what she really is and that will emerge sometime and when it does then I will strike. Nobody can be invulnerable, nobody never makes a mistake and when they make that mistake, I merely take advantage. Intelligence is not putting little coloured blocks of wood together fast, or using fancy French phrases that few know or even just seeing opportunities. Intelligence, Mrs Chapman, is seeing opportunities and knowing precisely when to take them and how.”

“Now is not the time to take me Inspector. What else can you take as a favour?”

“The Chapman Rolls Royce Silver Ghost.”

*He was serious. Smart talk, stupid desires. Like a clever kid angling Mommy to get a new toy.*

“I always wanted one. It says to me that here is a successful man... that I am a clever fellow; I have got my toy. It says that to the people of Eloura, to the simplest six- year-old. This was Max Chapman’s car; he was the big man in this district, the only one who could afford a rolls. Now Albert Moon has it, he has become the big man in these parts. No more patronising me, no more servile grovelling.”

“Won’t it seem like an obvious bribe?”

“Not when you and the Chapmans publicly donate it to me for the war’s duration, for my patriotic work. Make it clear that the ford is not up to the job. This will be at the rally for the conscription vote next week.”

“Zelda may not like this.”

“Give me a list of all rivals to Chapman Industries in your various



fields and watch me clobber them. Your profits will rise enough to buy a dozen Rolls-Royces.”

“And we get ours back?”

“Nope. At war’s end I will have found myself so fond of that auto that by golly, you’ll sell it off for a small sum.”

“Why not just take money?”

“Because both my superiors and my enemies are not total fools and they are on the sharp lookout for bribes, either cash or goods. After the war ends, but not till then, give me ten per cent of all the additional profit you make from wiping out the competition from here on in.”

“Set them up as spies, will you?”

“Nah! There aren’t any Missus, and everybody in internal security knows it. On the other hand, trade and migration with Germany was big before the war and many try to smuggle profits in an’ out like, likewise personal letters, that type of thing remains common and illegal. Well at the start it were direct, then mainly filtered through Germans in then neutral America, now mainly Latin America. We find a company doing that we blacklist them.”

“This happens often?”

“Cor! We got over two thousand companies blacklisted! Big ones to! Reich’s brewery went. Fifty years out from Germany old man Reich was, didn’t save him though!”

“You can wipe out Chapman Industries main competitor here?”

“You mean Katz Beers?” I nodded, smiling.

“Oh for a certainty miss, nothing like a second look for finding enemy connections.” His grin went lecherous and fixed. “And my reward?”

“Ten per cent.”

“And you.”

“Memories of you at the Boxing Day Ball eight years back come now. You and your brother seemed the biggest pair of fools in that room, prancing around on stage in your underwear, singing that silly song and mucking about with the kangaroo, but really you were the smartest man there.”

*And I was the silliest woman, getting engaged to Leo without testing him out or even seeing him naked. A virginal foolishness and he was always too quick.*

Albert moved over, too close.

“There are matters for consideration Mister Moon.”

“Oh what would they be?”

And then I was saved, from him and myself, by a fluke. I saw our reflections in the mirror, him for the nasty ferret he was and what I was becoming. My fresh happy face at that Boxing Day Ball flashed in my memory a warning contrast. I could see now I was horrible. Perhaps Leo was oafy in his goodness and a clod, but he was always loyal, generous and adoring with me and why was I doing this? What need for more wealth?

“Mister Moon, thank you for your help in ridding Eloura of a traitor. Surely in future we can work together for king and country, but we should not be too close. I am a respectable married woman with children and must be home soon.”

“Mrs Chapman, I have had you investigated and found much of interest, now do not feel blackmailed and do take this the wrong way, but this war has already shown that the only victors in this war are people like me. Well maybe the Americans, who being last to get into the dogfight will emerge with less blood spilt and more energy and bite than them silly enough to start such a silly thing.

Now everybody knows that Gallipoli, the Somme and Passchendaele

were indeed among the worst defeats in history. Everybody knows about the detention camps and the Bolshevik documents. Everybody knows about the censorship. Nobody knows where that bloody treasure from that robbery is, least of all Anstee. If anybody did the boys would have heard something these last three years, we know every bloody other thing in this 'ere district. And we both know that you used a child and your own statements to frame an innocent man. So why respectable Mrs Chapman, did you do it?"

"He would not listen to sense. That paper serves as a vital part of Chapman Industries, it was our main source of advertising apart from being profitable and the more he ranted against the war, the more our profits sunk. Then people began to boycott our advertised products.... Four severe warnings from us and his response was to threaten us with union strife if we sacked him. He had it coming."

"Indeed he did."

"Well money is survival."

"Indeed it is."

"And who wants to end up in the gutter?"

"Only my good-hearted simpleton brother Kenny, happy he was to sweep Eloura's dust for pennies. Anybody with half a brain in their head wants comfort, security and power and the world divides between them who are willing to do whatever be necessary to get them things and them that don't. And we, Marsha, are in the first division and chance and connections and this war give us opportunities. You just have to realise that and what you are and take them."

"And what am I?"

"Somebody very like me."

"Oh?"

"You say true things about Anstee, but isn't it also true that at school

back in Cornwall you really campaigned hard to get to be student newspaper editor and loved that work, uhm?”

“How could you know that? We went to different schools.”

“Those posh schoolgirls gossip as much as poor ones.”

He gave that ferrety smile of his and looking at the glittering eyes and the sharp teeth behind that almost lipless mouth, My throat and stomach constricted with revulsion and did not realise my legs were going up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them.

“Your family were strict Methodists, decent people.”

“Who accepted their lot in life because God so ordered their estate and therefore eight kids had to fight for scraps and it was even worse after Pa got black lung and went to his heavenly reward, though seeing him in his box he looked just as dead as the dead dog I saw in the street that day and they told me dogs don’t get heavenly rewards, just humans. That is the difference between us and animals, but there seemed to be no difference, we get one shot at life and make of it what we will and maybe dogs don’t know that. So, what happens with that one shot?”

Well then, I read a story about a poor stranded sailor in London who for a bet between the rich gets a million-pound note and though he does not spend it, absolutely everybody gives him what he wants and suddenly he has pals galore. Well, that opened my mind up, but nobody gives away million-pound notes. There are no caves that open their riches when you call for sesame, or gold at a rainbow’s end or harps in heaven, or a Valhalla for mighty warriors: it is all guff to keep fools obedient and hoping. There are faces to read, gossip, caution, keeping your mouth shut, flattery, being loyal an’ useful to them above you, the law and opportunities. Now you put them together in the right combination and they are almost as good as the rewards in fairy tales.”

“I see.”

*I see the reward you perhaps do not see. A face that would make any woman desperate enough to get involved with you vomit. A face that no man will ever really trust once they see beneath the act. Kenny was your only real friend and he was a fool.*

“Together we could do so much...” He scanned my face. “But perhaps with the wounded hero husband coming into it, the scandal... and it seems the attraction goes one way.”

“Yes it definitely does. I am a respectable-”

“Can I at the very least, get that rolls?”

\*

Alison Caufield

Caufield’s Farm 18<sup>th</sup> March 1918

“What happened to you?”

Tom got off the stage in civilian clothes limping, and badly, with a red gash across his forehead that went through an eyebrow and down a jowl. Lucky for him he had a heavy brow or an eye would have gone. The self-confidence was definitely lessening, but not the bitterness.

“Took shrapnel at Passchendaele, in the knee and head. Last month we talked a mate into getting me back to recruiting in Brisbane. Didn’t last a week, they even said my face was an advertisement for not going, interrogated *me* as a suspected Bolshevik out to wreck recruiting, so then they wouldn’t even let me guard Anstee and his red and Hun mates in that internment camp, they reckoned I was a trigger happy and a bully, so they honourably discharged me.”

“Well, that will teach you not to pick fights in pubs won’t it?”

“Ten months on the Western Front and you tell me that!”

“How did you survive?”

He winced and evaded my eyes. A mate got him a cushy job or a safe one, for a time: that would be the safest bet around since Grahame got caught. One look at him and any fool could see how he and we would go.

Obviously nearly useless for farming, he would battle on, never giving up. Decent men like Douglas, Reverend Hawkins, Trevelyan, Kenny, Andrew and Hendrik were dead and Cyril and Leo better off that way, so why couldn't the shrapnel go an inch deeper into that extremely boney forehead?

*Oh come back Ross, Come back, come back.*

\*

Robert Clarke                      AFC Squadron 4 Base Samaria 9<sup>th</sup> September 1918

My crew made everything ready for a dawn flight. Being good chaps, they did their usual conscientious job. The dawn time was lovely here and just before the pestilential flies and mosquitoes were not up yet, it was so peaceful and beautiful, the hills dull orange from rocks and purple from lilac or lavender or whatever plant it was, I was hopeless at identifying plants, at home, at school, here. Two hours before breakfast, gave me plenty of time. The motor coughed, spluttered thrice and then purred and it was the usual easy take off, the figures suddenly becoming little, the mountain range suddenly under me and then the tranquillity of total blue, the purity of it overwhelming, made so by the absence of anything else – except the motor's purring; there were days when eliminating that was an incredible risk, gliding for just minutes just to have that serenity, but Oldsham noticed and had given a warning. He had a point: twice the keys had failed and gliding landings are always so very chancy.

Supposedly some justification must exist for every flight, so propaganda leaflets fell over enemy lines; they did have their effect. Deserters were commonplace of late. The Turks knew that we would launch a big offensive soon, but we had done a fine job of convincing them that it would be on the seaward side. Scouting flights and dropped propaganda like mine, troops marched backwards and forwards and West

Indian detachments dragging sleds to knock up great clouds of dust simulating troop movements were all part of Allenby's great ruse.

Before me was a danger. The approaching plane had the dun colour and profile of an enemy albatross VII with the star and crescent of Turkey soon certain, odd. The few enemy aircraft left were usually German from the Jenin squadron. He did not see me approaching because he was looking at the West Indian labourers, able to see beneath their induced dust clouds and working out what this meant. If he got back the whole cover would be blown and the offensive could fail... There was no time to turn and use my fixed machine guns. He had heard my motor, at a hundred and fifty yards my pistol was at the end of his range and his head was a small target... I fired the full clip off and then with one hand reloaded awkwardly and as he was coming to attack. That meant I was able to reduce range by sixty yards; fortunately they had very little ammunition and had to be careful with it. It was the fourth that got him, for his head recoiled like a boxer's taking an invisible blow and his body followed, he then lurched leftwards and his plane followed that way, tumbled four times and then spiralled without smoke and crash landed in soft sand.

After landing close by a platoon of Indian cavalry who were almost there at the crash site and after cutting off insignia and identifying numbers and searching through his papers, I left a written statement with the officer in charge and got a written statement in return and flew back to base, a little late for breakfast, but what oh! Downed behind our lines, a platoon of witnesses, written confirmation and insignia! Not even my total bastard of a major, Ollhdesham, could deny me this one as he had denied me the last four, giving the two of them he could plausibly give to Betham, because he was servile, handsome enough to be a hero and a general's son in law. This was my fifth for sure and five made me an ace!

Ace! Ace! Ace!

That was a triumph that many thought would never happen, including me. Enemy planes were becoming rare and it wasn't like the Western Front, where with so many enemy fliers as prey Mannoek with his one eye and habit of setting up easy targets for neophytes, could still score over seventy before recently going down. Australia's Majors, Dallas and Little, similarly located, able and similarly generously minded - and equally dead, could score nearly fifty kills each and so would be our nation's top scorers. No chance of that now, but even so I had made it into the pantheon of aces.

In the staff room they had finished breakfast early and were gathered around the blackboard. Old Major Ollhdesham paused in his pontificating and gave a malevolent glare and some of his suck-ups turned around sneering, knowing that doing that was how to get promotions and favouritism in the forces. His name was actually pronounced O'dee 'zsh'ammaye. The double ll was pronounce as a double ee, the h was there for no reason and the aye had no existent indication in the spelling. How much pretentiousness could he fit into one word? He played the pronunciation game to gain superiority very successfully: regularly pretending to lose his temper with juniors over mispronouncing his name, but Oldsham was singularly appropriate, as everyone soon realised, so he insisted on being called Old Major.

Like Old Major, they had an obsessive hatred of my kind and a garbled version of the terrible accident that happened to my wife had reached here. Nobody mentioned that I was the one who immediately called the doctor while in tears.

“We know where you have been, and where you should have been. We are having a debriefing-”

“You will have to credit this kill!”



“When captains outrank majors, certainly. Until then credit goes whoever I so please. Lieutenant Betham also went up, but on an authorised dawn patrol this morning.”

“He would be a damned fool if he flew dawn patrol in the afternoon.”

That actually got a spontaneous laugh somewhere, probably from either surviving MacKinnon brother, brothers in law to Betham, but not friends any more since Betham’s incompetence cost the third brother his life. Whoever it was, the pilot quickly stopped himself. Old Major was a forty-nine- year-old lieutenant in 1914 and was actually a terrible pilot who had never shot down an enemy plane. He had a stupid plodder’s mind, being totally devoid of imagination or any military knowledge beyond the rudimentary levels. He would talk about killing the enemy until they were dead and give weather reports were the sun rose at dawn and the rain will make the land wet. His flight plans were laughable here in a staff room and a nightmare in the air.

The exception to his idiocies was his cunning in dealing with subordinates and not just with the name game pronunciation trick. He knew how to pull rank, Through gossip and innuendo and giving them repeated dangerous missions he destroyed those who did not disguise that they had more abilities than himself. He was also very good at setting up situations that benefited himself. One was going on now as he exchanged a glint and grin with Betham and the watching toadies responded with exchanged gleeful smirks. Most had been in upper class boy’s schools and colleges and could fit into this hierarchy at Oldsham’s allocated level.

“He says he shot down a plane, but he did not bother me with the details, but as we have been interrupted let us assemble the evidence.”

He sneered as I held up the evidence and suddenly the realisation came: this was a double trap, giving him information about the kill that

Betham could use to fabricate the proof and get the reporters, who were keen on aces, around. There had been a time when the reporters congregated around me with their eager smiles and fawning, but old major put an end to that in last year after the scandal broke, calling them in one by one behind closed doors and they would emerge, not looking me in the face and he gave them Betham as a new wax model.

“No, not that rubbish!” He looked out the window. “Corporal Allan, check Captain Clarke’s machine guns and tell me if they have been fired.”

That wiped some of the smiles off on the toadies’ faces. A clever way of communicating to the enlisted men that here was a boaster or a liar, my word was not to be trusted and that Captain Robert Clarke was fair game for their hatred of officers. Although he had not technically broken the unwritten rule about inciting enlisted men against officers, contempt was in their faces then and doubts about him arose, but also fear, for he was communicating *always agree with me or I know how to bend the rules and you have no protection*.

“Actually, my machine guns remained unused.” He laughed and the toadies followed. These were the brave knights of the air, the return to chivalry.

“Shoot him through the heart with one pistol shot, did you?”

“A full clip and one got him in the temple.”

“Clarke you live in that *Boys Own* magazine world and that the only place that happens any more. It happened sometimes three years back when planes were much slower... you make up such stories because you are still a boy, perhaps that is why you associate with boys? Or does the alternative explanation for your love reveal itself as something even worse?”

“I request a court of inquiry, an autopsy on the dead Turkish pilot

who will have a pistol bullet in his head and that Betham hand over his unfired pistol so that he cannot claim he shot the plane down and falsely claim yet another of my kills. My second request is that I be allowed to obey orders from general staff and immediately fly these captured Turkish maps with troop allocations to headquarters, they are immensely valuable.”

“You are heading for court-martial.”

“Please. Unravelling this whole behaviour would be wonderful.”

“You need to hear what Allenby plans for the great offensive.”

“We are to take out the communications centres at Afule, Tul Karm and Nablus. We must strafe and bomb machine gun nests, airfields, road rail and lorries on the line from Jaffa to the Jordan. We must prevent the German Squadron at Jenin Airfield from reconnaissance flights over Allenby’s armies. That incidentally is what I have just done while you lot sat drinking coffee -”

Betham got up, fists clenched, snarling obscenities about sodomites but Oldsham waved him down.

“And now that I have downed an albatross you are going to denigrate this into a non-achievement by ordering us to avoid aerial duels unless actually attacked. You wrote it on the board, so must we sit here pretending to be stupid or illiterate so you can thunder on those three points for hours. I am flying to Allenby sooner or later and if he hears that this vital information was delayed you will deal with him face to face.”

The threat of Allenby angry scared him, with reason. I saluted and walked out. While not actually speaking directly to Allenby on the matter, his intelligence officers listened carefully and relayed my news. The documents, written in German, said spies claimed the left movements were a ruse and to investigate. The result was that every available plane was in the air within hours, keeping their scouts away. They accepted

elaborate details of my kill, confirmed it and that I had saved the ruse that this decisive offensive depended on. For all this they nominated me for the new Distinguished Flying Cross and a promotion to major. Both nominations were confirmed behind Allenby's door within ten minutes. Everybody could hear Allenby, nicknamed "the Bull" for good reasons, from thirty yards off.

"Yes yes by all means, got a spare one? And the escutcheons?"

"Bring him in."

The intelligence officer came out with a smile and a whisper.

"The bull does not waste time, especially before an offensive – and you get command of the new squadron."

This was to be the greatest moment of my life. Then the phone rang. The intelligence officer answered and old Major's booming voice was more than audible, and the listener's face screwed up in scepticism at first, mixed with distaste for old Major and a sense he had an axe to grind.

"Paid Arab boys, sodomizing his wife, oh this had best be backed by evidence."

He swung a friendly glance my way as much as to say 'who is this nutter?' and then the grin turned to puzzlement for maybe two seconds and then revulsion and sadness came into his face.

"He definitely was correct to fly here with the documents. We cannot court-martial him for that." He sighed and now would not look at me with even the contempt or pity they usually gave. Now the hostility took the form of pretending I was not there.

"No court martialling him, for that just is not done. If they don't take the hint by being locked in a bare room with a loaded pistol in clear sight they are put in the front lines and never withdrawn."

"What of my achievements?"

“Yes the medal and the escutcheons will go back in the drawer, but no, we are not going to lie in an official report and no, he has been credited with the kill, on overwhelming evidence being witnessed by an Indian officer who may indeed be a stupid darkie, but he is still an officer - and so are Allenby and his staffers who also saw it. Even more important the official report has its red confirmation approval stamp on it, can't scrap that off. Now get on with your war effort.”

He slammed down the phone and gave me that stare, so much a part of my life.

“Can't stand that fellow; has so much to say about decency and propriety, does not stop him pilfering from the officer's mess, selling it on the side and then smiling with the glittering eyes and saying 'prove it.'”

Now you be a good fellow and go and get yourself killed. If you can't manage it, be demobilised and take up lighthouse keeping. Really with the exception of the ministry, the regular army has to be the worst possible place for your kind.”

On returning I walked in to Old Major's briefing where it took him three hours to say that starting when the sun set in the sky at twilight today, over the next week our squadron would patrol on the left front, to keep their probing scouts away from the ruse. While the others chatted, I made my ammunition into dum-dums and put purple, orange and gray paint in stripes down the deep grooves and had ground crew witness it. Nobody was claiming my kills any more although they would clearly try. While doing that Old Major and Betham slowly come up behind me. The protégé started.

“Well ace, even for a boy buggering nancy boy, you are a strange sadistic shit, Clarke, you do know that don't you?”

“I do know that with this paint on my bullets you are not claiming any more of my kills, and that even new arrivals are better pilots than

you.” Old Major, hands on the hips, went in for the attack.

“You are definitely not a team player Clarke and as of breakfast tomorrow you have your own table, I would transfer you out but nobody wants you, here, there or anywhere.”

Patrol was in its usual silly and dangerous formation. Other squadrons everywhere flew in broad arrow formation, with the squadron leader being the front tip, the most experienced being the equal lines back and the neophytes furthest back and highest at the back tips, where they were safest and could watch and learn. To show them what a clever fellow he was Old Major totally reversed that, so we flew in a V with him and his mates at the nadir (in more ways than one) and the new boys out in front, so that they not only were they sitting ducks but if those of us behind them tried to help there could easily be a pile up. That was how my brother-in-law really died last year. Old sham faked his death report.

Betham had the sense to get me with him on patrol next morning when he charged a Turkish two-seater observation plane and firing too quick and too long with an unaimed burst, found his machine guns jamming and then lacked the sense to steer away. Instead of flying into the vacuum which a downed plane should have left he was creating a collision. Fortunately, just as I hoped, the Turkish fellow had the good sense to veer up – but into my tracer fire, which left a beautifully straight line from carburettor to tail and down, down, down he went, spluttering a trail, a beautiful grey blue plume and me hot on his tail before Old Major, Betham or any of the toadies could tail him, shoot him and claim a kill: they were all hot for it, if not the work and danger and artistry the kill entails. Just as I was lining him up for the final burst the two Turks quickly conferred and the observer took off his white scarf and waved it. I pointed to the left and imitated waving a white flag with my white scarf on the way down so they would not be hit by ground fire. They were not,

but another danger soon became apparent.

Aircraft were extraordinarily rare in Palestine and many a downed plane which could have been repaired was shredded by souvenir hunters: not this time. Officers were there with pistols. We had landed within two hundred yards of Allenby's headquarters and there he was. I was borne up by cheering Tommies and Indians and sipping from a goatskin of proffered milk before they put me before him. From his face it was blatantly obvious that he would have loved to say something like 'I told you to bloody bugger off!' But in front of cheering troops, he could not and just grit his pipe harder in what could be a smile. There was also something else. I had raised their morale with something like duels between champion warriors before assembled Medieval or ancient armies, and given what would have been an omen of victory for the coming offensive in ages past, but was now, oh merely something like it. He knew he had to say something congratulatory.

“Ah yes, the captain who became an ace yesterday. Go for six did we?”

“With permission, a go for seven?”

With a put-on smile for the audience he made an assenting twist with his head and a sweeping gesture towards the plane. To well-wishing cheers and laughter from the troops and calls of “go for seven” I refuelled from rushed over tins, took off and knew that Allenby appreciated my quick departure and that this moment was as close to acceptance as my kind would ever get.

My initial longing for duels in the sky evaporated with the dawn mists after a few days of team flying. Betham was unaware of others whilst in dogfights and flew like a lunatic. When one of ours crashed into a Turk while trying to avoid Betham's close proximity he had the nerve to claim the Turk as a kill. He had the audacity because he knew Old

Major would give it to him, and he did. By a miracle our fellow MacKinnon senior survived and gave Betham a black eye.

It was a relief when we heard the offensive was going ahead and that we would be doing bombing and strafing.

A recollected conversation with Evelyn and Alexander about the merits of the British class system and military affairs came to mind and I was defending, declaring the stock defence: “It produced the genius of Marlborough, Wellington, Kitchener and Roberts!”

“And?” Evelyn lounged with folded arms and a sardonic smile. “They have had four hundred years of modern armies and their only other genius was Cromwell, who had no military training.”

“Well give them a chance and they will show what they can do. We have won an empire you know.”

“Against fuzzy wuzzies armed with sticks. One day it will all show up.”

Evelyn was not the fool his appearance suggested. They had their chance and among their hundreds of commanders only four, Allenby and Lawrence here, Plummer with his tanks in France and Australia’s Monash, were really fine commanders - and two of these four were not regular army. There would be no return to the innocence of nineteen fourteen not for me, not for the world.

\*

Ross Clarke

Megiddo 18<sup>th</sup> September 1918

After the Irish disaster came the Palestinian front, and the war there was more like the childhood storybook images, there were even cavalry charges with bayonets and swords, not many, but a few: usually we rode to where the fighting was, dismounted and fired, seldom experiencing that hand-to-hand fighting, sniping barrages and sense of being at war twenty-four hours a day that characterised Gallipoli. There was much less



disease, hunger and demoralisation and consequently fewer casualties and all the Eloura men at Gallipoli landing lasted until Megiddo.

Survival rates in Palestine were nothing like those on the Western Front. The manpower shortage there was so bad that by 1917 even Kedda was enlisted, albeit as a staff sergeant, so he was safe. Andrew was killed in early 1917 in some POW accident, but he was mentally dead long before that and the fatal accident may have happened due to his mental exhaustion. Even indestructible Tom was invalided out after Passchendaele and back home. Leo was in that same horrible campaign and horribly gassed and shot up and so back at New Albion as a patient. Who would take over the Chapman estates? Evelyn?"

Since Gallipoli Max, Eakins, Clyde, Milleran, Cuthbert and Alexander McPherson had healed up and rejoined Stepan and I.

Now we stood on the ridge overlooking the valley that would be the last great battle.

"The Biblical valley of Meggido." Max intoned. "In the Bible concordance it says it means 'place of soldiers.'"

"Well Biblical prophecy got that one right." Alex smiled wryly as he lit a pipe. It was surprising to hear the minister's son ever refer to anything Biblical, even here in the Holy Land.

"Oh yes," Max added "There are two Turkish armies down there, thirty-five thousand soldiers, and seventy-thousand of us up here. Good odds, Even so, Kemal commands and they are the best troops Turkey has left and Liman Von Sanders has brought up crack German units and specialists."

"Even so, we have double the numbers, the best terrain, equipment, morale and surprise," Cuthbert added, "Perhaps, perhaps this big offensive will succeed where so many others failed. Perhaps, just perhaps. We will break through this time."

And we did, with surprising ease. For once a big push went as planned, with perfect weather, the advantage of surprise and no foul ups or bad luck and initially little resistance. Max told us to sleep in our uniforms and by our horses, with them ready to go on two minutes' notice. At dawn we were woken up as much by the reverberations from the ground as by the roar of nearly four hundred guns in unison and the sky of red light that they briefly created.

“That is the signal, the offensive has begun.” Max roared, probably thinking we needed waking and telling. “The Turks are probably awake now, so let's move fast.” He was so likeable, generous, fair and rich that nobody ever told him he was thick. We did move fast and the creeping barrage devastated the Turks – and their defences as wire cutting scouts moved in on what was left of their lines. As we rode up the flying corps moved in to strafe the soldiers and bomb any fortifications while a second line of planes were to wreck the roads and telephone lines, and shoot couriers. The longer we could maintain surprise and then replace it with confusion, the greater the victory. Among the planes we could see one with a red hand of Ulster insignia and the name Alice inscribed.

We lined up and nine thousand horsemen, with sabres, lances, pistols and bayonets at the ready, charged forward. We knew then that it was the last and largest Imperial cavalry charge and could already sense that it was to be the most successful. By breakfast we knew it. We only stopped to lather and feed the horses. We had already gone twelve miles and would have gone further if taking thousands of prisoners and the needs of the horses had not delayed us. Officers were called for a conference.

“Casualties?” Cuthbert asked us all and we agreed that one trooper had got a bullet in the shoulder and another had gone down pinned under his horse. Two dozen more were straggling with lamed, played out or

wounded horses.

“If only Allenby had commanded at Gallipoli.” Max added.

“We are getting our revenge now. Look at them flee!” Alex smiled and asked, “Where are we on the map?” Eakins gaped as he saw the name on the map.

“Meggido! That be Armageddon by another name where the races of the world shall gather-”

“You got that right.” Merciful Max, wise to butt in and extemporise on a list so Eakins could not start up. “So far we’ve seen cavalry from Lahore, New Zealand and Arabia and infantry from near to everywhere between Egypt and England. We got French and South African artillery, Maltese, Scottish, American and Irish pilots, West Indian and Chinese labourers, battalions from Italy, Algeria, Singapore and Hong Kong, reporters from Sweden, Japan and Brazil, three Jewish battalions which means everybody from everywhere and even canoe transporters from poor bloody Rarotonga!

Eakins was not going to be put off.

“An' Satan's spawn, Germans Austrians Turks...”

Shrewd Alex moved in.

“Same with the enemy: we call them Turks but ethnically they have Creeks, Jews, Armenians, Arabs, Syrians, Circassians, Bulgars and Anatolians.”

“Aye! For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day almighty. Revelation Sixteen, verse fourteen.”

Cuthbert’s smile froze and he gave Eakins a weary angry look and a loud sigh that would have got through to anybody else, Eakins continued..

“And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon. That be Revelation Sixteen verse sixteen!”

“Most enlightening Sergeant-Major McKenzie.”

“Man, man can’t yer read the signs, the words match what exists before yer! We live in end times! And we are in the place! The very place! You watch the four horsemen of the book will appear!”

All of us, Cuthbert, Alex, Max, Alex and the junior lieutenants burst into uncontrollable laughter, some of us had tears running down our faces. Cuthbert recovered first. “We will see more than four, Sergeant-Major. In fact nine thousand have moved into position today.”

“Nae! The four horsemen of the apocalypse! When the seal becomes unbroken they ride and they bring war, plague, famine and death, yea “behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger and with death, and with the beasts of the earth! Rev-”

Cuthbert seethed. “Sergeant-Major! Please check that all of our troopers have tended to their horses. God and or Satan are both quite capable of looking after their angels turned troopers and their mounts.”

“Even unto the horse!” Max yelled the old Eloura battle cry to the amusement of Eloura troops and the puzzlement of others. Eakins would not leave Cuthbert alone and started up on the Bible again.

“Man do yer think I be impervious to yer sarcasm? Can yer not see that this Spanish Influenza must surely be the promised plague? That we are in the middle of the greatest war the world has ever known? Death! Why man it be all around yer and famine - do they not have that now in Germany, Poland and Russia? Must yer wait till the sea turns bright red with blood and the mountains are fallin’ on yer before yer repent and gnash yer teeth?”

“Actually, I feel like gnashing my teeth now. And in any other army on earth Colonels are not defied by sergeants or addressed as man. Now

be a good fellow and look after the command.”

After he left Cuthbert wiped his forehead and looked skywards, partly in vexation, partly because we could hear the aeroplanes coming our way, so we gave them a cheer.

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Robert Clarke

Megiddo 18<sup>th</sup> September 1918

Even in the few seconds we had them in sight I could see that it was Ross, Uncle Max and my old school friend Alex amongst an officer's gathering. They got a wave and a wing dip and we made for the Turkish base. We had gone back to base to refuel after helping blast the lines open; now we had to reach their base to advance. There it was, twenty planes lined up and by pushing the accelerator. I got ahead of the squadron. Old Major glared and at the edge of his temper signalled me to get back into those stupidly tight, uniform, reverse arrow formations he loved so much, where the wingspans were eight feet apart so that any wind gust, any slight shudder or unexpected movement would send wings grazing each other, like they did at twilight patrol, day before yesterday. Our planes were not built for even little grazes and the pilot with the splintered wing struts saw the pressure change a splintering into a snap, the wing's end wobble and snap and he lurched to the broken side, went upside down and spiralled. Fortunately, we were over sea, so he survived, with broken legs and ribs. No thank you Old Major; I would charge ahead and get them: and so I did. Each bomb got a plane, almost all landing in their cockpit, and a neat sequence of explosions followed each other – and my plane, seconds apart. Music hall performers would have loved to have had that timing. Six of them, I had gone for six and just to make my glory day the crews and pilots ran out and as Old Major was in plain sight they got a six clip off my pistol and saw three bodies fall. One bullet must have hit a main artery or vein with one, for his head lay in a massive pool

of blood, another lay writhing holding his abdomen and another clutched a bloodied knee. Just then another plane at the end of the runaway took off and he was about twelve feet off the ground when my long burst must have killed him, for he suddenly veered off straight into a hillside and without flames. His plane just disintegrated on impact. I was able to land and quickly cut off insignia and identifying markings. On my return Old Major was red-faced, eyes blazing with clenched fists. He was angry about seven kills to me and a squadron full of witnesses. I held up the other proof.

“Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! As you were told at debriefing, we could have captured and used those planes, siphoning off their petrol at the very least, and those explosions of yours set one of their fuel tanks a fire! You were told that every bomb was precious and needed for their convoys! And you broke formation to wreak this havoc!”

“Court-martial him Major!” Betham put his bit in.

“If you do your food racket rather like that fuel dump, will also publicly explode.”

He froze for a few seconds and then his eyes squinted and for a minute he was deciding and mock-calming.

“Clarke be a good fellow and see if you can find some fuel and bombs to replace those you wasted.”

“Seven kills cannot be a waste.”

Betham laughed outright and Old Major had a smiling glint in his eye.

“War office policy states that planes on the ground do not count.”

“What?” My dismay must have shown on his face for now he was enjoying it. And repeated himself, offering to show me the official documents back at base.

“But they were my kills!” I sensed that was useless. “Even so, I still

got one! Everybody saw it, my paint pattern shows here on the canvas and you can't deny me that one, it went in the air. That puts me at seven!"

"Clarke stop waving those silly canvas bits! Just do as you are told."

We caught up with a fleeing northward bound convoy of horse drawn wagons within forty minutes. The screaming of the horses as they rolled their white eyes in terror and pain as their blood gushed and their manes caught fire was more vivid than the dying men. The triumph was essentially what I felt when hunting, the feeling of extreme glee followed by superiority that every worthwhile hunter feels at the moment of the kill.

War often becomes a hunt and it was now. Yes, it was enjoyable when they suddenly convulsed repeatedly like rabbits getting a blast, their arms flaying upwards and their eyes white and intense, mouths open, the explosions of red on their arching chest, which serves as part of the triumph of war. So many would die like that in the strafing, the bombing was more impersonal, more total. The glee of war was also like something else, as I realised when returning to base after the strafing and was losing some of the sense of elation. Ecstasy had also become sexual at the point where while strafing, and I had creamed my jodhpurs. I knew what to do about that: they were always young, but not boys as alleged and it was apparently common in this part of the world, or poverty made it so. That night we made the captured base our new forward position and with so many of our fellows away moving our things forward, I found one among the prisoners who was willing. The first time Mustafa cried afterwards, I do not know why.

It seemed that the others soon knew, they kept on giving me snarls and contemptuous glares, but that had hurt at school, much less since. I would have been feeling guilt about Alice, but after the accident while on leave last year, she had given me permission. The contempt may have had

something to do with the strafing and bombing, for after the first fortnight there was a virtual mutiny which Old Major was trying his best to conceal. With four bombing raids a day exhaustion was a problem and after Damascus fell some felt the war was over.

“It is just bloody murder, most are sick, wounded or unarmed, and they are heading north to go home, where we should be.”

That was from a MacKinnon, a general's son. Old Major had his red face out for that one and with reason. My response for once gained his approval.

“No, north is where we should be. Like jackals or wolves, we savage the retreating convoys so the Turk cannot regroup and form another defensive line that will prolong this war and cost us casualties: every Turk killed means one less that could kill us.”

With half the pilots refusing to fly and me doing half the work in the raids he could not haze me so much: in fact he had to pretend Mustafa did not exist, credit my seventh kill and more and generally shut up, wonderful.

I had learned the off the ground trick and circled the enemy bases, giving the pilots enough time to take off and then a burst, easy targets. Before the final surrender at Aleppo in late October three more kills were gained like that, two of them in a few minutes and one more, the last, in a classic dogfight, bringing me up to eleven, nothing very remarkable considering the whole war, especially since my wartime flying began in 1914, Dallas and Little had their reputations safe, and others held better records for the Middle East, but even so, I had achieved glory and quite a respectable score for the Middle East, where planes were rarer.

In the process of becoming a hero I had learned to hate what I had once loved, the army. It was not just that they despised “my kind.” Anybody who did not have the standard behaviour and mentality copped it from the herd. There had been a bit of that at Duntroon, but we were



not competing for rank and glory back then. Now there were the backbiters who were usually also grovellers, both to those higher in the pyramid and to those of lower rank. There were also usually liars and manipulators out to get rank and glory, both usually undeserved and their games and mates got them out of the blame that they did deserve. With these types fun usually consisted of humiliating people, bashings, hazings, slanders, gossip to destroy, and needling. They were what they said homosexuals were, beneath the hearty ruggie rubbish they were pretentious, narcissistic, treacherous egocentrics.

I intended to resign my commission on the day peace was declared anyway. They asked for it on October 27<sup>th</sup>, the day Aleppo fell and they got it with an eager smile, and with it the official complaint about Old Major's pilfering, Betham's false claims and the evidence to back both, went in on official documents. Not written up but common barrack room gossip concerned his wife and how he exploited her. At least with Alice it was an accident and I never forced her. However, anybody should only submit such documents if they intend to wipe out their own career as well: no matter how justified, complaints only cause mutual destruction. What to do now? Fly, I love it more than anything.

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Ross Clarke

Damascus Road 4<sup>th</sup> October 1918

For thirteen days the charge that began at Megiddo never really stopped. It was becoming known as the great ride and it certainly was. There would be some points where resistance would gather, but artillery and aircraft usually pulverised them and then armoured cars and tanks would move in first: sometimes cavalry were used as cavalry, there were a few sabre fights. More often we served as dragoons or to secure vital points to make sure that the retreating Turks did not get their supplies or make it to transport hubs. The infantry followed securing everything. This

campaign was going brilliantly; for just under six thousand casualties, we had faced a total of 104,000 enemy soldiers, destroyed two of their armies, taken nearly seventy thousand prisoners, killed or routed the rest and captured Damascus. In our regiment the cost was two dead and a dozen wounded and of the Aussie cavalry only around five hundred cavalymen were battle casualties between Megiddo and Damascus.

Everybody was happy – except Eakins, who did his perennial moan about the paltry amount of hand to hand fighting so far. We were about to learn how dangerous a madman could be.

As we rested our horses by the side of the road we saw the dust and then the horses of a company riding towards us. As the dust settled we saw the green Islamic flag – and a white one. The troopers did not have to be told to go to the horses and ready their weapons.

“Friendly Arabs?” Alex asked.

“Turks. Probably some stragglers wanting to surrender to us rather than be butchered by Arabs out to settle scores. HQ has reported such massacres and also such surrenders saying take them in. Major Max, do they look like a tired bunch willing to surrender?”

“White flag and a chat hey?”

Cuthbert nodded and with Clyde holding the flag, Max rode out, they were clearly downing rifles – until bloody Eakins, wide-eyed and laughing, swinging a clenched sword raised over his head charged them.

“The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!” He roared, having a great time as he slashed open a Turk’s throat as he was about to surrender. Clyde was now clutching a wounded shoulder, so he must have taken bullets as blood dribbled from his mouth. The flag of truce fell from his hands and he swayed, still retaining his position, but Max was somewhere in the dusty meleè that was forming around Eakins as the Turks rushed in to kill him to avenge their dead and our men dribbled in to save ours.

Sighing, Cuthbert blew the whistle and we were all in. There was acrid dun dust everywhere, a frenzied grey-eyed face under a woollen cap and I slashed it, hurtling figures, whinnying, lathered white-eyed horses darting round, tired men in grey uniforms with red collars, cuffs and stripes, ours in khaki, dull yellow trim and slouch hats with emu feathers and everybody trying not to shoot or slash their own. Alex actually took a bullet in the shoulder from one of ours and went down in the meleè. Stepan and I found Max coughing and spluttering blood and protected him. Being out of bullets meant hacking anything in grey and red, I saw a slashed off arm on the ground with their uniform and realised I must have done that. Maybe twelve feet off was Eakins, looking like he had woken up at last and was no longer mad, but bewildered as to why he was there and fearful for himself at last. He was on his hands and knees, covered in slashes, blood pouring from his mouth and nose and the tips of two Turkish lances sticking out of his bloodied chest, the rest in his back. Clyde was in nearly as bad a way, His face screwed up in distaste and disillusion. “You’re mad, mad and silly!” Then the blood gurgled up and he could only pant as his horse veered off dragging him.

Suddenly the Turks, the yells and the shots seemed to be thinning when they suddenly stopped, a company against a regiment had little chance, they knew it and fled.

“Max, are you badly hurt?”

“Only light, my horse trod on my head. Some scratches. Clyde?”

Stepan pointed to the rider less, meandering, calming horse and what it dragged over dusty bloody bodies. Clyde had one foot still in the stirrup. His sightless eyes seemed puzzled. Hector Milleran’s horse had landed on him, his hips looked crushed. Cuthbert came over.

“That makes nine dead, and Eakins has finally gone to his maker.”

“Then he resides in Valhalla.” Max could half joke.

We looked around at about thirty dead or dying Turks. A dozen more were on their knees begging for their lives. Forty dead so Eakins could have his fun. We rode on to Damascus with some stretchers for the wounded. Max could ride, it was Alex who tried and fainted.

We had seen so many ancient cities: Damascus was no different except for the tension between the different groups who occasionally shot at each other. Arabs were feuding with each other, Jews, and Europeans. They had their vendettas going against disarmed Turks. Europeans squabbled with each other over who would take over what from the Ottomans and power and water were held by different groups, who cut their services off in protest. The hospitals were crowded to the extent that there was even a lack of floor space, with bloated flies so thick you dare not open your mouth. Staff and medicines were rare. Law had broken down and robberies and looting were endemic. Damascus residents subsisted to the sound of sporadic gunfire.

I crossed paths with the man supposedly in charge of all this, but he was not: the even then legendary Lawrence of Arabia. Having heard so much I was expecting another Eakins in Arab clothing, probably with a big black beard, a scimitar in his belt and a harem in tow. He would be loud, glory mad and raving. The clothes were as expected, but here was this exhausted, little, slight, almost mousy man with blond hair, frightened blue eyes and sunburn. He gave the impression that he was vaguely aware of where he was, even if he did not know why and this man seemingly would have trouble summoning up the nerve to order a cup of tea from a waitress. So why was he almost worshipped by the tough warrior Arabs he commanded for three years? How had he captured the impregnable port of Akaba, after crossing an uncrossable desert and then go on to victory after victory? Like Eakins, who was already legendary and my brother Robert who was well on his way to

being a hero until his penchant for buggery was revealed, this hero was strange and like the other two and Kitchener also, the strangeness had something to do with women. I explained the situation with our wounded and the city's three overcrowded, rat-infested hospitals to him.

“Of course, they will very probably die there. You are in luck, I have here the address of an Ottoman official. He offered me his villa for whatever purpose the great Lawrence desired.” He smiled slightly, the smile was like his voice and everything else about him, slight and androgynously elegant. “My Bedouin threatened to cut his throat and bash his children to death if he did not, wild fellows.” The smile stayed fixed. “Oh, if you see any other Imperial fellows in the same situation, please do take them in.” The voice was unchanged, as if summoning up the nerve to ask the waitress for just a little sugar. “Oh, yes Australians, you fellows must learn to salute.”

*Salute anybody in Arab clothes?*

At the bureaucrat's villa Cuthbert called an officer's conference.

“Maybe Eakins had it right or half-right: there was always some truth in what the poor madman preached.”

Max mused, “There is not going to be any peace even after the surrender. Maybe nowhere in the world, civil wars in Russia, Mexico, Ireland, China, Poland, Finland... Revolutions, mutinies and strikes every elsewhere and this influenza plague likewise. It is a troubled new age, the Empires are falling: Russia gone, Germany and Austria-Hungary not far off collapse and the Ottomans are collapsing right now.”

“Which is why we are pushing on in the morning.” I responded. “To make sure. We do that Major Max you can see that your injuries mean that you must stay as you cannot use reins with an injured hand and you seem concussed. Alex, you riding, well it is also absolutely impossible. With our wounded rest up here.”

Max nodded and smiled. He looked tired, but indomitable in the candlelight. Alex was the one who suffered from his severe wounding. He looked wan, weak and strained; he could barely shake our hands. Hector had taken so much morphine he could not do that. The doctors were optimistic about his life, but not his legs. And yet after farewells Cuthbert and I did not go north either, or at least in the way we expected. The gallop north was going to be an invasion of Turkey but was not needed now as they were negotiating their surrender.

“The Ukraine is our destination, if you volunteer. Training our cavalry recruits for our Russian allies against the Germans, massive brigand gangs and these bloody pestilential Bolsheviks, who many suspect, will soon prove themselves to be more of a menace than the Germans. They want global revolution and they promise the poor the riches of the earth and total freedom and equality if only they rebel... and wipe out the evil rich in a global war.” He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “You can of course see the attraction and immense danger in that idea.”

“I can also see that we could be in another war right soon and after resigning my commission be conscripted – back to corporal again.”

“Very likely. Staying in the army might be your best future. Especially as a major’s commission awaits in my pocket. And sergeant’s stripes for Bach, see if you can convince him. Be quick: we sail soon.”

Bach listened like a stunned mullet screwing up his puzzled face.

“Good God man, haven’t you had enough? Eakins, Clyde, Andrew, Allen, Douglas, Kenny, Hendrik, Hawkins, Trevelyan, Raymond, three out of four Whaley boys, Rupert Dean, all of them dead, Cyril, Jan, Leo, Tom, Hector, all crippled or scarred for life in some way, Max and Alex sick back at base. You have lost fingers and your leg will never be the same. Three of us remain and you try to convince me to re-enlist? What

on earth is wrong with you?”

\*

Book Five

Warlord

October 1918

Ross Clarke

The Dardanelles 19th October 1918

We would sail through big, ramshackle, sprawling, exotic Constantinople now that the war with Turkey had ended and Germany could not last much longer. This meant going through the Dardanelles. Only the 7<sup>th</sup> Light Horse and some officials were supposed to go ashore, but Cuthbert had the same idea.

“Can we do it?”

“The captain will understand.”

So, Cuthbert, myself and a few others stepped ashore, the only soldiers to succeed from those tens of thousands who tried to stand at the narrows.

“A bit late.” I joked.

“Suppose so.” He responded, then he mused. “Even if we had done it, I wonder if... if we would have succeeded. Constantinople is a massive city: the Turks would have defended it fiercely... And even if it fell, the supplies to Russia, well they could not spare even proper artillery for us, munitions were rationed...” He screwed up his face and sighed and then seemed to push something out of his mind. Soon he smiled in the sunlight, listening to pleasant little beach waves, being as happy as a dutiful soldier whose wife, farm and life savings have been taken over by a malingering slacker can be.

I was not so happy. His words here kept going through my mind as if there was a message there and it came, even before we reached Odessa. This war would not be like the Megiddo campaign. It would be another Gallipoli, in reality a dubious idea, one of those big pushes that promised much and delivered little except misery maiming and death – and that in great amounts. It took only two days in the eastern Black Sea port of



Odessa to reveal that I was half-right. This bunch would not deliver even a little, not that we could talk. Odessa was to be held soon mainly by a French fleet, and some infantry backed by Polish, Greek and Romanian contingents, but all were too small to achieve much. The city was beyond overcrowded, refugees slept twelve to a little bedroom, even doorways or railway carriages were equally crammed. The dead from typhus, exposure, influenza and war wounds lay in the streets, where those with the pensive, nervous faces of desperate new recruits to prostitution subsisted, selling themselves for a piece of fruit or a vegetable. Oddly they wore British nurses' uniforms, pilfered from wharf supplies. For us from 1914 onwards those white dresses with the short red capes and white hats symbolized a combination of aide and celibate virtue. Now the symbols were reversed. That caused great confusion and was by no means the most bizarre thing in this war. Despite nearly four years of celibacy, they caused no temptation. Clairvoyants seemed to do a better trade, being equally ubiquitous.

The initially vague French promises of aid had hardened into the first few arriving contingents, so we were sent further east along the coast to Novorossiysk, (called Nova by everybody, the one thing there everybody agreed on) which was another Odessa. On my first day there we had met Alessandra Virashov, at a reception for newly arrived officers. She was someone initially attractive, a svelte aristocrat with a fine command of English. She had dark curling hair and dark eyes, deep set, merry, darting eyes that were quick to assess and a thin if wide mouth with extraordinarily high cheekbones. For the first time since seeing Brionny I could not take my eyes off a woman. She approached me.

“Bad mannered men say I look a horse, but even they do not insult me by studying me like a horse for sale. Do you wish to peel back my lips to study my teeth?”

“No insult is intended. I like horses. My first name means horse.”

Her mouth dropped and then she laughed. She looked me over quickly, focusing on my escutcheons and then the medals. Since Gallipoli the army had awarded bars to my Military Cross and the Distinguished Service Order for Romani and Megiddo; she asked what they were.

“Ah, the paper has written of you. Thrice nodded for the Victoria Cross and twice in one day! You come to boost morale!”

There was nothing for it but to nod and quickly see that her wedding ring had gone. She was sharp.

“He was killed early last year, a revolutionary mob broke into the estate. My son died in the Brusilov offensive two years past. Now their time seems a world away.”

I diverted the conversation and suddenly we found the gathering over. To be agreeable I went to a séance with her. They gathered round in a darkened railway carriage saloon, complete with the clichés of candles and incantations and in an attempt to predict who the new czar would be, tried conjuring up the spirit of Nicholas II – who was coy.

“He will not come! This can only mean one thing! The spirit remains in the body! Glory be to God! Our Nicholas lives!

They began to hug each other, weeping while smiling and convinced me that they were most gullible bunch of silly buggers anyone could come across. What made them worse was that they included generals, bankers and financiers.

“Then where is he?” One asked eagerly and the medium said the first place that came into her mind. “Tibet!”

They believed it and enthusiastically even with frenzy, started planning a search expedition. These people were definitely not future winners. Fortunately, my date was smiling knowingly. We had dinner in the officer’s room of our ship as the city stank. She looked at the food,

just a normal plate of beef and vegetables.

“All this for me?” She smiled nervously.

“Of course.”

“You doubtless think the, the, in English, medium? Yes, medium spirit caller, was a fool.”

“The others were.”

“They sp? Spend more time arguing over who will be the next Czar than fighting his enemies. She was just trying to remove an... obstacle to unity. Not that it will make any ....“

“Difference?” I explained the word and she nodded.

“I took you there to see also if you were a fool or perhaps of which type. Credulous to believe it, impulsive to say it was foolish, conceited to sit there with superior airs- fortunately none applies.”

A smile came across my face, she made me realize how long it was since I had smiled.

“Tell me about Australia.”

She said it a bit too casually: my appeal was apparently in more than my looks, escutcheons and medals. And this woman in her forties tried to be coquettish and I tried not to let my pity show, but she was no fool and the look changed to no nonsense.

“Thirteen years ago Russia went into almost successful revolution. The Czar had nearly a decade to solve matters by modernising and making Russia more efficient, more liberal, he vayed his chance. In that same month that Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated five million workers were out on strike at barricades calling for revolution. The war gave him a few more years, not less.”

“And this means....”

“Two things. First, I have little patience with fools who remind me of the Czar, captain on a ship of fools. Even if they win who could stand

living with their stupidity? They will only cause more problems. If they lose even worse. Already my home plundered, my husband and relatives... Second we saw the trouble coming as early as that stupid war with the Japanese, So we invested in Switzerland and England. In Europe I am rich, here I am down to nine hundredt sovereigns and dubious transport to Europe costs a thousand – and travelling with men who have hungry eyes. Transport me to somewhere safe, a peaceful prosperous land and I can pay for it, eventually. Think on this – and on what type of alliance you want – if any.”

She smiled and returned to eating. See her tomorrow she suggested, giving me her card. Work took me away next morning, so she got a message instead.

The city was crawling with factions: Czarists, Ukrainian Nationalists, pro-Germans, and an assortment of radicals - Anarchists, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, nebulous Greens, Social Revolutionaries divided into factions, and liberals. There were also an assortment of would-be dictators with their own armed bands that were somewhere between little armies and large bandit gangs. The three things all these groups and factions agreed on was, first that they alone could save Russia and second that all the others were the problem and third problem people should be eradicated for the National Good. Most agreed on the next point could you new arrivals, the first arrivals of the victorious and mighty armies of Britain, France and Italy, please start to eradicate our rivals for us, now please?

One extraordinary thing both bizarre and very wrong went with that request: it was exactly what we were supposed to do. Fortunately, the orders were to pick on the three groups at the top of everybody else’s hate list, these being first, the still occupying Austrian-German armies and second their puppets under Hetman Skoropadsky and third those

Bolsheviks who aligned with the Germans, letting them into the Ukraine - where they executed any Ukrainian Bolsheviks they found.

The more we studied this war, the weirder it seemed and the less sense it made. For starters seven of the ten biggest bandit gangs were led by schoolteachers and the Makhnovite anarchists, where led by a former thuggish jailbird Makhno, but his deputies included his schoolteacher wife, and a gentle scholarly Jewish poet, Voline, now under sentence of death on sight by the Bolshevik Army commander Leon Trotsky, his former friend and political ally.

If everybody hated everybody else, why did they all issue leaflets written in the same flowery, idealistic tones saying essentially the same things about the brotherhood of man? All wrote of wanting freedom for the Ukraine, individual freedom for everybody, free elections, land for the peasants and peace, prosperity, law and order. Even the bandits wrote such things.

It was almost a relief to lead a cavalry company north to fight raiders when I was not buried in Russian grammars. My motley company were Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, English, Scots and Irish. There was an Anzac radio unit over on the Caspian and an Australian, Lieutenant Ward, acting like Robin Hood over there with his Moslem guerrillas. We had around three hundred British Empire people here, not an army: so when were the armies coming?

In the mean time we found ourselves amazingly popular in the countryside. The peasants knew who we were fighting and they were their enemies. Forewarned, we also paid in English gold sovereigns for our forage, but even gold was not worth a tin of tuna or a steak. Even more than the waning world war still on here, seeing people starving and freezing to death in some of the world's most fertile farm and forest land was enough to make me see the futility of war. Devouring raiders were

the main problem, but peasants were no longer growing more than they needed because it was dangerous to do so. The more you had the more chance a raider would see it and kill you for it. Where there was food and fuel there was not transport; the war had destroyed it. Journeying was little better than a death sentence.

While we were asleep, German raiders hit our host village. We were advised that this was their favourite time and were dressed and ready, sleeping with our loaded lee-enfields beside us. They must have had no scouts or surveillance, for we caught them by surprise and shot many, and maybe some of our own or the villagers. On a dark night among huts only when the flash of gunfire showed up the distinctive silhouette made by their spiked helmets could we be sure of their targets – or they be sure of us. Better to let them gallop off and then we had better targets when they had to ride over the pale stubble of wheat fields after harvest, no cover, no confusion, nine of them died out there compared to four in the village, where we lost three, plus wounded. I ordered the men to fire at least two shots into each prostrate body out there and two bucked up and then lay still. Wounded prisoners were the last thing we needed, let alone a faker suddenly emptying bullets into us as we advanced after their blood trail.

Two days later we found the German raiders in what our South African called a kraal and what looked to me like a huddled group of ramshackle wagons and fencing, with sheepskins and a white bed sheet flying over it. One of them waved a white stick with a white handkerchief and the South African who could speak German called on them to surrender. Even I knew what “Yar Yar Yarovohl” meant and they came over hands up. We found an English speaker who told us they were a stranded German unit, not common bandits and they gave us hollow grins and thin cheers and we shook hands and took them prisoner, pledging that we would take them back to Nova rather than hand them

over to the peasants who would kill them for very good reasons. So we turned around, collecting more prisoners on the way until it was like some weird peace march. That was close to the truth, for even before we got to Nova we heard of the armistice. Heading south was wise, Nova was fairly temperate, but we were hundreds of miles north and a Ukrainian late autumn was worse than most winters anywhere else. The first thing anyone did upon waking was to check for signs of frostbite. Men who were savagely anti sodomite slept back-to-back so they could double the blankets over them. People huddled to their horses. Peasants slept with beds above stoves.

We had to make it back to Nova before spending long in that foul full winter and were welcomed with cheers. We eradicated their enemies, paid in gold and were a source of supplies. Seeing Alessandra before she saw me meant seeing the mix of desperation, fear and thin hope in her face before she turned to a happy cheer when she saw me.

There was genuine liking there in those bright, decent eyes as well. After parade ground dismissal we met; she hugged me slightly nervously, our first body contact. She was so starved the curve in her ribs felt like the curve in my cavalry sword. We went to the veranda outside the two-storey solid white stone officer's quarters overlooking the parade ground. It was pleasant enough, with flowers in little hanging terra-cotta pots, ochre tiles on the floor and roof, French windows with lead light glass and wrought iron railings. An orderly served coffee with milk, sugar and cream, army issue, hardly gourmet stuff, but there was royalty in Nova who could not offer those things. Alessandra stared and tasted it to see if it was real coffee.

“Actual coffee. Not some substitute. My supply ran out a year into the war.”

“Trade with surrendered Turkey has just resumed.”

“Tell me about yourself.”

This was a change from her usual questions on Australia, she listened, sipping and savouring occasionally. When I finished, she just smiled enigmatically.

“You have left out the former wife in an Irish jail, she who was once your brother’s fiancée and also shared your lover, also this Rosalind, who was also the wife of your former best friend. Then there was perhaps the married cousin and another cousin’s mistress.”

Alessandra sipped her coffee with raised eyebrows and a mock-amazed sigh. “Young man, have you ever considered that all this near incest is a source of problems? A stable marriage may be a source of stability and peace in your life.”

There was nothing for it but to sit there, resenting Cuthbert.

“And what do you want?”

“A stable marriage that may be a source of stability and peace in my life.”

She stared quite calmly, unblinkingly with humour in her bright eyes. She waited for me to speak, but she could do what hordes of charging Turks could not: confuse me and make me nervous.

“Ross I am forty-one years old and know you are thirteen years younger. You can keep your freedoms. Have mistresses, but not among my friends, not openly, not to live with or have children by. Young men, like to dazzle, to carouse, gamble, do fast things, to have time alone or with similar companions. We know all this, perhaps it would be good for you to do these things: you seem so sad, yes? You can have these things, but you must respect me and not touch my finances. I control money, yes.”

“Was your marriage happy?”

Alessandra shrugged her shoulders and nodded slightly.



“He respected my abilities and me; he let me make money for him and did not pressure me to have another child or make demands... He kept mistresses for the more outlandish things. He followed the rules – we both did... My parents, thinking financially, thought it was a good match and being a dutiful daughter...”

“And now?”

“And now I want to marry for love. I feel all those things young people in love are supposed to feel and thought would never come. I did long for you and with so much worry while you were at the front.”

She was attractive and sympathetic – and desperate. Cuthbert brought the situation up at a staff meeting; the refugees who promised much, including matrimony for food, accommodation, safety or escape from the Ukraine. Sometimes they honestly thought that they were rich because they had stocks and bonds and the proving documents were in Europe: but the factories and estates were in Bolshevik Russia, where red flags flew over the factories and farms and Commissars were hardly the people to return dividends. They were not so much gold diggers working amongst our troops, but gold traders, willing to go to great lengths to survive. Their treasures and Jewellery that once were expensive rarities were commonplace amid the markets and the hawkers.

Alessandra bit her lips, pensive. I looked sympathetic.

“Could you arrange accommodation for me? My situation is... One a lady wishes to avoid. Do we need to discuss details?”

This was another of her tests. There were obvious ways to fail it. Ask how or take advantage or refuse. Her accommodation that night was six navy blankets on my floor and even that was shared back- to-back with a female street urchin so her reputation would be unsullied. In the morning the urchin had gone after rifling my pockets and Alessandra, who had slept in her clothes, was staring at my proffered fresh army

ration soap as if it was an imaginary treasure. Her offer to earn her keep by teaching me Russian, was taken, both for her self-respect and my convenience. In the markets I found a silk negligee her size and she accepted it, sleeping on the blankets the next four nights with me leaving the room while she dressed. She was testing me, either lechery or excessive timidity, oh well.

In the day light I trained our recruits how to ride and shoot, preparing them for the great spring offensive northwards that everyone knew would decide the war. In the nights Alessandra and I dined, chatted, went to the social events, kissed on moonlit balconies at Christmas parties the way lovers are supposed to and walked in parks where if you turned away from beggars and wheelchair cases it was possible to pretend there was no war, just as it was possible to pretend this was an old-fashioned romance; it was not.

On the sixth shared night I arrived as usual to find her under covers but looking at me, very levelly. Alessandra usually slept turned away.

“Ross if you really wish to sleep with me, you may.”

She wanted darkness and drew the curtains. As when we kissed, she had this way of running her fingers along my shoulder that showed how much she liked me. She wanted to keep the negligee on, and soon she was under me, her teeth in my shoulders to stifle her cries as her hands clutched my back. She did not thrust into me or even smile or pant, just a gasp as penetration started and within minutes of my climax she told me to go back to my bed, she said it sweetly and in the morning it was as if nothing had happened that night. No signs of displeasure or of a new level of intimacy. That night she slept with her back to me. I slipped into the bed.

“Not for some time; conception becomes still possible now.” In the morning it was the same as the day before. Two more days of that was

infuriating.

“Why are you ignoring what happened between us?” I blurted out during breakfast on the veranda. She merely smiled in mock puzzlement as she levelly unfolded her serviette.

“Ignoring you? How Ross?” Her merrily glittered eyes flustered me. “Uhm Ross, polite society considers the sure sign of a boor to talk of boudoir concerns outside the boudoir.”

She held up a spoon with the desert, ice cream and cherries, a sweet, smug look on her face, knowing she would have me eating out of her hand.

I did not even, think about it; I just knocked the spoon flying and it clattered across the slate patio and rolled over the edge. Alessandra’s jaw dropped and her eyes enlarged in amazement first, then in anger. She just stared with her nostrils flaring as she inhaled through clenched teeth. Then came the long level expressionless stare, a bit like the one Brionny gave me in Dublin nearly three years back. She sighed with enmity and then turned her head away.

“You had best tend to your troops.” Her voice was calm, cold, expressionless.

I was expecting not to see her in my room that night but she was there with her back to me. In the morning light I walked around and could see that she had been crying. My footsteps must have woken her for she awoke, looked at me expressionlessly and then she wiped her face.

“Those tears were not for you, not now. They were for a nice boy who was destroyed long ago.”

No further trouble came by asking what that one meant. She was so late for breakfast that mine was nearly over when she turned up still expressionless. About half way through her meal she started.

“This has been a very foolish relationship, seeing the nice young

boy-man I wanted to see in you, seeing the traces as the man. You are a veteran cavalry major, a soldier, which is to say a legal killer. There were many weren't there?" She sipped her tea when I did not answer immediately. "A hundred? More?"

"War is not like that. Three men shoot at an enemy and he falls, but one bullet only clipped his sleeve-"

She nodded vexed.

"Do you wish me to stay?"

"Yes."

"In two more days you will get what you require, but do not think I do this lightly. Before you there was only my husband."

That night we slept beside each other; she misunderstood and started to complain, but I just took her hands in mine.

"It is no goodt Ross, what you are must be remains always clear now. It is not your fault...the world..."

She sighed and seemed indifferent to me. Conversations at breakfast and lunch were polite and Cuthbert organised an investigation and found out why she was not leaving. Thugs and lechers lurked about the womens' vastly overcrowded boarding house and the investigators found out that Alessandra had been assaulted and robbed of her sovereigns, that she slept in a corridor so crowded that they all had to sleep on their side and that she had nothing to eat for at least four days before she breakfasted with me. Seeing the reluctant prostitutes in the street, I could not turn her out, nor did I wish to. Of course, she did not wish to go, even though she thought she had her mythical millions safe in Europe.

We did our talking at breakfast.

"I have something for you."

As I handed her the envelope, she looked resigned, indifferent and nodded to herself as if expecting the ticket.

“As the wife of a senior British officer you will have priority. A few dozen British subjects are being evacuated. The boat sails January fourth. Within a week of that date every available boat will be used to transport men and material here for the great spring offensive.”

She said nothing.

“Although you are attractive you do not have to do anything you dislike, or are indifferent to. A civil ceremony can be performed here within a week and annulled in a few months.”

“Ah.” She sighed vexed. “Who said I wanted a civil ceremony or a marriage of convenience for that matter?”

“Then what do you want?”

“A full Russian Orthodox church ceremony with guards making a line of sabres as we enter the vestry, followed by a wedding reception which has a three-tier white iced wedding cake, and a proper marriage. We will be safe after you return from the victory, in the autumn. And then we leave, together.”

\*

Keith Anstee      2<sup>nd</sup> Military District Internment Camp 24<sup>th</sup> March 1919

Nothing like being jailed to let a man know who his friends are. I was expecting nothing from nobody, but Albert Moon overplayed his hand with that shame parade on the truck and then his silly perennial victory parade by driving everywhere in what was Max's silver ghost Rolls-Royce. It was a blatant display of his power and his romance with Marsha. Karl and Lynda Taun McPherson, Alison, Rosalind and Zelda and many a barely known nurse were obviously too busy to come, even if they were allowed, but they sent me food parcels and when they asked what else was needed and I said a few books they combined efforts and sent a large bookcase full. Many things came from others, best of all were the packages from the soldiers, usually with cards and one had over a

hundred signatures added to '*Thank you for telling the truth; you should not have to. Any idiot should recognise their own kind at work when they see the Flanders mess.*' Jan and Cyril feed me regularly from the bakery, Last year Roydton's Irish sent notes mentioning whiskey and plum cake for Saint Patrick's Day, but they never arrived, probably taken by guards. Numerous others sent encouraging letters along the lines of 'chin up! Wish you were back.'

All this gratitude might not sound like much, but every letter in and out, every parcel, was automatically investigated and people in contact came under suspicion. None of them were jailed, but rumours of disloyalty usually led to pretext sackings, ostracism, being cut out of wills, pub fights, rocks through windows, that type of thing. It was a lucky individual who did what these people were doing for me and did not cop at least one of the above. The war was still officially on, but anybody could see that neither side would have enough dopes to go back to the trenches if they tried to restart it, when the Versailles treaty failed and the armistice had to be something else. Much to my amazement a guard told me a visitor in uniform waited. His 1914 model Rolls-Royce silver ghost (probably the newest anybody could get) was parked outside.

"Who is it?"

"The ghost of Lord Kitchener by the look of him."

My smile in recognition came for who it must be, but the smile lost its trueness when I saw him. Major Max stood there a cane in each hand to prop him up. His hair and Kitchener style moustache were white, his big frame was gaunt and his immaculate, sun-faded uniform hung loose. The boots, sam brown belt, buckles, buttons, medals, escutcheons, were all polished immaculately, the hair and moustache were perfectly trimmed, but like all the polishing, this gave the impression it had been done by an embalmer, like the faint puzzled smile. Bad as all that was,

the eyes were the worst, so very aged, but with a touch of amusement, incomprehension and madness, but also filled with an exhaustion he was trying to fight off, which showed in his strange fixed smile, then the slight panting through a mouth that did not move came and his batman behind him, who was watching intently, moved forward to help with the three steps needed to the bench outside my room. He sensed him coming and with his stick irritably waved him away. With tremendous effort he made the three steps to the bench and red faced and buffing, sat down and tapped the seat beside him and we sat. I was waiting for the puffing to stop, but his puzzlement over the passing procession of chanting ‘canaries’ with their yellow robes and prayer wheels transfixed them.

“Buddhists monks doing their daily walk around. They are from the German colony of Tsingtao. Our Chinese allies are mainly Confucians who see Buddhists as rivals. This camp serves as a dumping ground for Axis people from Asia east of India.”

“What of the Kaiser’s Boys?”

“Maybe a dozen local idiots here loudly declared their loyalty to the Kaiser. There are a few hundred naval and soldier prisoners from the fighting up in Papua. Quite a few ethnic Germans or those with German grannies asked to get in; better than starving as jobless. Few here got put in for just being ethnic; some tried smuggling letters back to Granny in Berlin or somewhere Germanic. The rest are somebody’s rival.”

“Rivals in love or labor?”

“Work for most.”

“Including Keith Anstee. For what excuse? A German born mother?”

“She had maybe three score of German words and fewer German memories.”

“Zelda and I have connections and so has Ross, when you wrote to

him, he wrote to others and to me. So did Marsha.”

“To keep me in?”

“Don’t be an ass! She started the ball rolling, essential services newspaper editor again. Said to tell you to learn your lesson. Ross did more, a good friend and you are lucky to know such a great man. Lord you should have seen that human tiger standing by me while stuck on a rocky outcrop and a thousand Turks charged! They retreated and called in the artillery! And that was no fluke or just one great day, my God at Lone Pine and then Meggido, the Armageddon....”

This led to puzzled glazed eyes and a panting attack. He needed a minute to calm down.

“Now wait here while the forms get filled out. Pack your stuff, but don’t get your hopes up.”

It was huffing and puffing to make the auto, which drove him to the office ninety yards away. Forty minutes later (with some books in the baggage and everything else left and shared out) we were on the road to Eloura and he slept. Waking not far from town I asked him how Ross was as he had not written.

“Can’t write, stuck in the middle of Russia somewhere.”

“What is he doing there?”

“What every able-bodied man should be doing; his duty, which now must be fighting Bolshies. Churchill has it right! Stamp the red nation out at birth, don’t let the monster grow and spread...” He puffed and looked confused for a few seconds: I was suspecting that the ghost of Eakins was in vampire form and had taken him over.

“Oh but there are worse than the Germans, they can’t help being born that way, and if you get them young enough or generations removed enough they can be improved, you are a decent enough fellow and Bach served bravely, no complaints, but a Bolshie...” He just shook his head to



himself and stared ahead for a minute. “A Bolshie chooses to be Bolshie. But there are those lower than them. Know who?”

“I am not game to guess” And that was true. Jews? The Elders mentioned in the Protocols of Zion?

“You should guess more easily. What of able-bodied men who do not enlist but serve as war profiteers? And there exists among that subhuman species a type lower than even that. The war profiteer who sinks lower than the seducer of absent soldiers’ wives. The war profiteering blackmailer who picks on the mother of two dead boys so that if he can perform his perversions on her, he promises he will save the last by turning an honest boy into a slacker! This scum actually boasted to a paralysed war wounded soldier of things he had not really done with his blackmailed wife. Can you think of anything more evil than that?”

Disturbed or demented, he still had a point.

“You must never ask for the name of that couple, but the villain as you may possibly suspect, turns out to be that same nasty little man who wronged you.”

He just stared ahead for a few more minutes and then started up again.

“Ross fights evil in Russia and though my health no longer has much oomph, I fight evil on the home front. He rides round Eloura in what was my auto as if he owns the town. This one is a new purchase mad the same year...Are you with me?”

I nodded as we approached the road to Roydtown.

“Good man! There are many of us! Jan won’t serve him in his bakery, Marsha and Alison Caufield have spat in his face. Zelda well! Oh there are many of us and wait till Ross gets back! He will knock him for six!”

He went into a reverie lasting until we reached Eloura, then came

out of it as he looked around the town as if it reminded him of something. It did. “You had friends here, but Moon either paid off the union leadership, shouts the lesser ones beers to be his pal... You can buy most men and get away with anything in Australia if you buy a man a beer... The few who were harder cases got moongoon treatment; blackmail, rocks through the window, set them up for ostracism as slackers... German shepherds hanging outside their homes with ‘Like Dog Like Master’. Never trust a man who hates dogs!”

Now it became clear why there was no whiskey for me this Saint Patrick’s Day. At the paper office, nothing had changed, except Moon’s supervising censor in the background. Max stood beside Marsha, who stood there in black with a strained, haggard face and just under composure, nodding slightly.

“Mister Anstee most people here are sick to death of the war, of politics and of conflict. It would be wise if you were to go back to reporting local matters, if you do you will be left alone, but you cannot run this paper into the ground, again.”

She nodded again and left. Max offered to take me round town to see what had changed and as we reached the car Moon drove by, disconcerted for a few seconds by the sight of Max and his rival rolls, but sharp, working out roughly but quickly how sick and unstable he was. Max’s eyes bulged and he threw the first solid thing he could lay hands on at Moon, this being a box of my books, much longed-for favourites too and to make it worse, Moon laughing, ducked them and they landed in his back seat. That vexed Max and when laughing Moon merely tooted his horn at red-faced Max who was yelling “scum, scum, scum!” in the middle of the road and rounded the block and came at him from behind, peeping and waving as a startled Max made it to the board walk and sat panting with the look of a defeated, dejected man as Crown pub rowdies

(many of them men who used to toast him and doff their hats and who know now who shouts free drinks) laughed cruelly. I sat beside him in solidarity and Jan came out and did likewise, a cold fixed sneer going all the way across to the Crown

“Keith, I suppose you think this exaggerates what he was like. Jan was there, put the holy fire into him. Comes from knights and lords, colonels and generals, oh they laugh now at the idea, but breeding will out... And he was smart, a decade back he knew how to deal with Moon and that sanctimonious reverend, and that was just a taste of what they will get! Oh! I may be a sick old duffer, but I know where duty lies and will hold on till Ross gets back, it may take him five years to wipe out Bolshies, it may take him ten, but where my duty lies must be here!”

For a few seconds South Africa became a consideration again, but my brother with his pro German De Wet allegiances and my own past military service would make me an enemy there, and I had no great affinity with the other side, puritanical Protestant Boers. I would be hated by both sides in Ireland. Maybe Canada, Kenya or America, but starting over at nearing fifty in a new land while an editorship waited at my feet here... Moon would be a problem, Max nearly as much and clearly all Eloura would get very tired of hearing “When Ross gets back” very soon, but where in this emerging new world was there a place without problems?

\*

Karl McPherson                      New Albion Veteran’s Hospital 24<sup>th</sup> April 1919  
 The Spanish Influenza was sweeping the world, already killing more than four years of war did by some estimates. Rather weirdly it attacked the strongest and the healthiest, we could see it here in our surgery and at New Albion and reports from all over the world revealed the same pattern. Perhaps the strongest immune systems overcompensated and

their virus killing properties also killed off all essential life within cells. My family were among those hardest-hit of any in Eloura. My daughter Keddy recovered, our son did not. Sister Ruth, brother-in law Murie, my parents and widowed sister-in-law Barbara, had all been sick with it, as were Jan, Zelda, Katie Dean Clarke and her parents and surviving brother Earl, for whom influenza death would have been a mercy as he was dying slowly, from syphilis. Leo had only a few months with his children before it arrived in Australia, most probably with returning soldiers. It had killed their daughter in early February, the first in Eloura to die and then both sons within hours of each other last week. Marsha was already widely believed to be Moon's secret partner in both business and lust, but going by facial expressions, and adamant vexed denials, probably not. Even so, she believed the children dying was a punishment from God, probably for sacking and interning Anstee so she could be what she always wanted to be, a newspaper owner/editor. When he returned she ensured that he returned to his old position as editor and even assisted him with updates and changes. Alex, we sensed, would never get over returning to find his wife and child dead from the killer virus.

After us and the surviving local Aboriginals, who were virtually wiped out by the influenza, the worst hit family was the Whaleys. Cerdic, last of the four Whaley boys was chronic. Gerald and George junior were killed at Gallipoli and Eric, born with the century on New Year's Day 1900 had lied about his age, enlisted in late 1917 and been blown to pieces at the start of the German's Michael offensive last year. If Cerdic followed his sister, parents and uncle and died of the influenza the Whaley dynasty the richest family in our district, was finished.

Eric's fate was almost an omen of what this century would be, one of disappointed hopes, increasing conflict and horrors. The new technology we thought would bring health, order and prosperity had only

made more war more devastating. We used gas for anaesthetic and for poison gas. The aeroplanes that made mail deliveries and passenger travel faster and led to the serenity of flight became bombers. The submarines that could have been used to explore ocean depths for new resources torpedoed ships. The newspaper that replaced gossip with faster and serious news brought xenophobic and racist hate campaigns and fears and casualty lists.

Once rumours of an approaching armistice made me happy, thinking our workload and the misery inflicted on so many would soon decrease, but now the influenza wiped that out. My surgery with its few hospital beds, even our courtyard and even the wards of New Albion, were crammed with cases. The coughing and spluttering never ceased, sleep came in treasured snatches. We had to get two first year Sydney medical students here and we had to work them like seasoned professionals, but as we were hallucinating from insomnia while performing surgery, we had no choice.

With staff falling sick the workload was threatening to cause the whole system to break down, only two people kept it going, my wife and Rosalind, the woman who nine years before, we felt could never be a successful nurse.

Now in terms of how the patients saw her she was a local Florence Nightingale, a war-widowed wealthy general's daughter, although she was quick to silence those who made much of it and nobody seemed to recall the rumours of her involvement with Jenny and Brionny or the stories about theft. There were some comments of her trusting a bad pair who had the whole town fooled, but that would open a can of worms that would bring down nearly everybody. In these insecure and sad times, they desperately needed an angel to worship and with her beauty, sexlessness, widowhood, patience, and calm self-sacrifice, she suited

perfectly.

She had no end of respected would-be suitors; but they were politely but firmly rejected. Lynda once asked her if she would ever consider remarriage and she said only two words “Ross, perhaps.”

A week after she said that Marsha had printed a story of Ross married to one Alessandra Rostov, aged forty-one, according to the rites of the Russian Orthodox Church. As he was on active duty in Ukraina it would be some time before he returned to us. Rosalind said nothing but her mouth was tight and there was hurt in her eyes. His mother merely had the tight mouth, for once being in unison with public opinion:

“Why these foreign women? What on earth will this one be like?”

Just as we thought the armistice would lessening the casualty flow so we could rest, the influenza plague came and so did the last two of the dreaded black-bordered telegrams. Eakins McKenzie and Clyde Whaley were dead in some skirmish. Apart from Stepan, who went back to assaying and jewellery as if nothing happened, He was the only soldier remaining among those who tossed for a penny in Max’s bar back in 1914 who was not wounded or killed. Alexander was devastated in his health even before finding himself a widower. Max survived all that, in a sense, but at his homecoming in March it was evident that only the shell of him had survived. Chipped vertebrae in the lower spinal area in the last battle left him unable to ride again or walk without canes and a slowly healing perforated lung, broken ribs and the influenza left him weak and puffing, but even more than that were the psychological effects. His smile had no reality, his views were like recitations, he tired so easily and seemed weary of the world, saying leave it to Zelda or 'Ross will fix it soon' and only now and then did traces of the cheery old Max emerge, fortunately there were more of those traces as the weeks sped by and they were becoming longer, an hour was common, sometimes even three or

four.

Everyone was pensive, for there was the question of who would be the big man in the district now and many feared Albert Moon, perhaps with Marsha's aid, would take on the role. Max might return to health with more time, but probably not - and yet who could ever replace him?

\*

Ross Clarke

Novorossiysk 24th April 1919

Tomorrow my Russian cavalry detachment would go north to scout for the big offensive on Moscow. I was to take two thousand gold English sovereigns with me, the strongest currency in Ukrainia at present. There were more Europeans in the force now and as with Alessandra's help my Russian was just passable after seven months intensive. That got me new Russian recruits while my old command was transferred to beef up the English cavalry, top heavy with volunteering junior officers. Everybody cheered the tanks, aeroplanes, trainers and artillery detachments and they were impressive, but where were the infantry divisions? Mutinying actually, like the French navy and army here, who evacuated Odessa early this month and left it for the Red's ally Grigoriev to take.

Our lower classes were sullenly refusing to volunteer while wharfie strikers made sure no munitions or other supplies came from England or America. The Russians and Ukrainians marvelled at the influx of supplies, but some of those very same boxes were piled up at Gaza year before last. We were fighting on last war's leftovers. We did have good commanders. General Denikin was a quietly competent, dignified figure who had a record of winning. His second, Baron Wrangel also had a fine record; he was ramrod thin, with the look of an amused tiger looking for lunch. He exuded confidence, courage, ability, energy and decisiveness, but he was a ruthless, ambitious intriguer and a supercilious snob who thought everyone else was beneath him, including Denikin, who had risen from humble circumstances on ability and loyalty.

“Ah yes Captain Kangaroo, from just north of Antarctica!”

He exclaimed that when introduced and the name stuck because he refused to learn my real name. Wrangel wrote and distributed flowery leaflets about social reform, but among conservatives and Czarists, he derided these as lures and openly desired a permanent military dictatorship - with him ruling over this war-ravaged land. He also had the usual eccentricities here, an icon of the Virgin Mary was conspicuous on Cuthbert's desk.

“What did he give you?”

“Samson and Delilah and a two-hour sermon on Sodom and Gomorrah as a prototype for Bolshevism and Anarchism. At least we could pull rank with Eakins.”

“He gave me the Virgin Mary and forty minutes on why the Czar is a Christ-like figure.”

“Is?”

“The Czar awaits victory in a Tibetan monastery.”

“The Czar and all his family were massacred. Investigators found fragments of their bones, the Czarina's finger, their bloodied jewellery...”

“I came in for the daily intelligence report. Any more interesting schoolteachers set up another bandit gang?”

“Just a tradesman, calls himself Angel.”

“Any new alliances? Perhaps the Salvation Army has sent a contingent and lined up with a unit of Buddhist monks freed from Australian detention and led by the Czar? After the Germans used a circus ring for the coronation of their puppet Skoropadsky, now officially emperor of the Ukraine, nothing sounds too bizarre for this crazy war.”

“Incidentally do not drink the alleged vodka, it is really anti-freeze, ours, stolen off the wharves, drink that and you will go crazy. And uhm,



all those supposed nurses, hanging round the docks, trying to charm, they are in stolen uniforms. I have led you into quite a preposterous mess, haven't I? Look a little beggar girl here adores the Virgin Mary, care to swap icons?"

"You look like a man about to hit the drink and you might never stop."

"Thank you *Major*."

Next debriefing Colonel Cuthbert quietly agreed that all the signs indicated that this offensive was happening now. We would synchronise with the American-Japanese led push from Siberia for the Urals and the British led drive north from Petrograd first, then everybody for Moscow, the race was on. Cuthbert gave me a letter from Max.

Max Chapman

28<sup>th</sup> March 1919

New Albion Eloura

New South Wales

Dear Nephew,

Well congratulations on your marriage, you young fellows move fast! Yes you do, which is one reason you are still alive! We all look forward to meeting her and seeing you home safe and well, although we know you have worthy duties to perform.

When you arrive here a job awaits for you. Essentially Evelyn remains happy with his art and Leo finds himself too incapacitated to work, which means you are heir to my wealth and position. Nearing threescore and ten now, it seems time to lead a new man into the district leadership role. Just to settle your affairs so you have no other worries and just in case you and your wife are in straits (we read of the starvation, general shortages and horrors in Russia) I advance you ten thousand pounds (cheque enclosed) It was going to be left to you in my will but Zelda and I am sure we will meet sometime again this side of the pearly

gates.

Your Uncle

Max

This was discussed with Alessandra who smiled and we wrote our acceptance, as soon as the offensive was over we would return.

“Now we will not have any money worries!” I declared and she smiled, somewhat knowingly.

“Ross I will wait for your return, and will not sail alone.”

We made our way to the bank to open our joint account and leave a copy of my will, she was the sole beneficiary.

On the day we rode out we had an assembly parade with politicians and generals giving tedious speeches broken only by the music from our army orchestra. I had to stifle a sneer for Wrangel and a laugh for the priest who promised us that the Czar would return from Tibet soon. Alessandra was there and in front of everybody came up to me and upheld my sword, flat with two hands and she was serious. It was some kind of expected ceremony, a few other officer's wives or high-ranking priests for bachelors did the same, but despite that she meant it sincerely for me, concern all over her face, saying something mostly got in translation as “Husband return this sword and yourself to me, both victorious, both unharmed.” I heard the response of the others and gave it.

“Wife, I will return to you unharmed.”

That was the way I remembered her first, not the first time we met or the nights, or the incident with the desert spoon, but that.

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We had been popular in the countryside when we rode out in November last year and expected the same now, but rapidly realised attitudes had reversed - and why. When we had protected the people from

German raiders we were saviours, but the great crusade northwards was little more than a combination of glorified raid, pogrom, vendetta and vainglorious scheme. General Denikin was no bandit chief and did his best to limit gross misbehaviour, but the offensive was on a front too wide, communications were poor and his commanders were at best men with minds of their own and more often, a feuding bunch of cruel, greedy opportunists. Wherever they went they usually left trampled crops, slaughtered cattle, burned buildings, plundered wealth, raped women, hanged corpses of anybody vaguely leftist or even less than servile and they forcibly conscripted youths. The conscripts, like many of the original volunteers, often deserted or joined the nearest available enemy if they could. Jews were everybody's favourite target. We wearied of the sight of burned synagogues and the stench of burned bodies. The White cause was worthless, but behind fine words the others seemed worse; Grigoriev possibly the worst among all the small-time latter day Ghengis Khans. For a certainty, he was the biggest hypocrite or perhaps the stupidest to put it so obviously. Here is his manifesto for his Ukrainian soviet:

*“Long live freedom of speech, press, assembly, unions, strikes, labour and professions, security of person, thought, convictions. God's People! Love one another, don't shed your brother's blood. Forget party hostility and bow before the power of honest labour.*

That was actually found bloodstained in what was once a prosperous village that Grigoriev destroyed before the Whites or the Reds could. Cuthbert showed me an intercepted message he sent to a nearby Red general:

*“Why do you stand up for the hooknosed commissars? Stop being a fool. Let us take Odessa again so that the place will be pulled to pieces. Grigoriev.*

The reference to again was because when he had Trotsky almost

beaten Denikin had to recapture Odessa and much of south-west Ukrainia, driving desperate Grigoriev into a meeting with Makhno, where the warlord who won the gunfight got both warbands: Makhno shot Grigoriev dead and then attacked Denikin. Meanwhile Trotsky attacked Makhno and everybody picked on the weakest in the pack, the Ukrainian nationalist Petlura, who was such a Ukrainian patriot that he offered the Poles half Ukrainia if they gave him the troops money and equipment to rule other half.

Denikin was in a paradox: until late October he won wherever he was, but he could not be everywhere and where he was not, he lost. Bearlike in his build and movements, he and his situation reminded me of a Slavic supposed sport: a bear attacked by six frenzied wolves. The bear had the strength but every time he focused on one, the others attacked from behind and he had to turn. He killed three, but wearied, he bled to death as they closed in. I took it as a cruel omen, and correctly so.

Amazingly his offensive got within seventy miles of Moscow because the Bolsheviks were even more stupid, greedy and unpopular than the White side – until the Whites turned up. For starters the Reds were still unpopular because of their deal with the Germans, then their commander, Trotsky attacked their only allies, Makhno's anarchists, who supplied their starving cities with food and who formed the main resistance to us. With the anarchists out of the way we surged forward against the pitiful Red Army, which consisted of mainly reluctant conscripts kept in line by Trotsky's murderous secret police, who also plundered the peasants with only slightly less ruthlessness than our armies. The great forest that stretched from Romania, across much of Ukrainia to the Carpathians, was rapidly filling with deserters from all armies who did not want to kill each other and civilians hiding in terror from their assorted liberators. Sadly, being unable to survive on bark,

they often became predators to survive and my detachment was one of the pitiful few sent to deal with them and keep our back units and supply/communication lines free from them.

This was no minor task; on the verge of victory, our offensive was faltering due to back lines resentments which led to sabotage and raids and Makhno was exploiting this resentment brilliantly, doing an agreement with the desperate Bolsheviks; he got war material from them and they stayed out of his areas, which meant the rebellious gravitated to his armies. He had done the same against the Germans early last year and because they had to keep divisions back to deal with him so that they would not lose Ukrainia, this along with Spanish Influenza casualties, meant that their Michael offensive lacked enough manpower and Germany's last chance to win the war faded. Makhno also had the jailbird's dream of burning all jails and he carried it out, unleashing not only political prisoners but criminals across Ukrainia – yet another way to spread chaos, the only thing this war was producing - and producing that in abundance.

And yet, when we were told to take a town held by staunch Makhnovites, it was the only orderly place we saw. While food was scarce enough to be rationed, the town was clean and neat, there were no corpses either in the streets or dangling by ropes as examples, no hate slogans on walls (sometimes in blood) no starving new to the profession desperate prostitutes, beggars or burned buildings. It seemed the wrong village until we saw the jail used as a granary and the church as an unoccupied fortress with a black flag over it and a portrait of Makhno on the mural showing workers harvesting under his gaze. Money was used for letter writing and wallpaper. The blacksmith was repairing a light cart, but one with light plate metal and a machine gun bolted down. These were Makhnovite weapons, tripling as ambulances for his cavalry

wounded and supply carriers. He had solved the three worst problems cavalry face, the difficulty of shooting while mounted, resupply and fuel and dealing with wounded. Even tanks were not so good, being heavier in this muddy land with its muddy roads being virtual narrow bogs and dependent on petrol. That was a rare and very valuable commodity here, while Makhno's fuel was grass – on some of the world's most lush and never-ending green plains. The Makhnovites rode across some of the world's best grassland on some of the world's best horses, expropriated from the aristocratic horse-breeding Orlov family.

What was even more remarkable than all this was that here people were actually happy – until they saw us. He had their loyalty to the extent that one man snarling yelled “Shoot me! Better to die than betray Makhnovites to you Whites bandits!”

“Why do you support Makhno?”

“Because only he lets us do as we wish. He kills tax collectors, brigands, aristos and other enemies of the people and he will kill you someday! So why not go home English? Do we invade your land? Do we plunder your granaries, rape your wives starve your children or murder your parents?”

We were indeed invaders, not liberators. My suspicions increased that we had been fed more bullshit stories than the one about the Czar being in Tibet. I disobeyed orders and left them alone, saying it was too heavily fortified to attack. The incessant battles, disease and desertion whittled away my company from over a hundred and twenty to seventy-three by late autumn, when we heard that the offensive to Moscow had stalled weeks before. Unlike the uneasy troopers, demoralised by rumours of a massive retreat, we barely noticed that we seemed to be overreaching, going further into the forest in autumn weather and winter not far off.

In October we were assigned the recapture of sixty supply wagons and important hostages taken by bandits. That number of loaded heavy wagons in a single file made for a muddy track even Kenny Moon could have followed: the only surprise was that their rear-guard encamped at ten in the morning so we found them suddenly in a forest glade, cooking a late breakfast and before we could stop them and negotiate they started firing and another confused battle erupted with my horsemen suffering as many casualties from colliding with tree branches, and holes hidden by piles of autumn leaves - and each other, as we did from any bandit's bullets. That type of trouble is common with cavalry anywhere in the world, but nowhere in the world do such things appear in heroic tales.

My recruits were trained by me to thrust with the sabre, as something about charging a man with a blade pointed at him panics the enemy or kills quicker and with less danger to yourself than slashing which exposes the chest and is seconds slower, but my training went for nought – or maybe it was my bad example as I was slashing from side to side.

While riding down one bandit a group of huddled, bound women and a group of bandits apparently about to kill them. I charged sword outstretched and that got one at the base of the throat where blade extraction was easy. Slash left and right and two more were down, but the other three were out with the pistols at the women's heads, I slashed one's pistol holding hand mostly off, and as another hesitated, angling himself to shoot me, not my horse's throat that was in his way, my shot went to the centre of his forehead and I shot the one bent over, clutching his slashed stomach. The two bullets in the back hurled him briefly to his knees and then seconds later, he keeled over. Of the remaining three, two bounded off darting through trees and shrubs like rabbits and one held his pistol to a whimpering teenage girl's head, snarling something in

Ukrainian. No translator was needed this time to see what he meant. I raised my pistol at an angle and indicated the forest and emphasised with my head, saying retreat with your life in Russian which he did not understand, but a Ukrainian trooper who understood what I said called it out, he took the message and bounded off after the others, leaving the girl slumped with relief and then clutching my knee high boots in sobbing gratitude, her long red hair concealing her face.

One of the women behind her remarkably spoke in English, seeing my uniform.

“She is of no account, a Jew, not even a Russian Jew, but a Bucharest city girl orphaned, and she only stays alive because she is a pretty virgin, they were going to auction her off to some warlord, while I was to be ransomed. My father is General Vladimir Orlov, currently based in Odessa. I demand to be taken there. If you do not it will be worse for you.”

While rolling my tongue around my mouth I counted the eleven wagons we had got and sent a messenger to the nearest front line, asking Orlov what he wanted me to do, follow orders and go after another fifty wagons further on or bring the hostages back to Odessa. Having wounded men and hurt horses to attend to, their dead and eight of ours to bury and everybody needing a rest, we would wait here for the messenger to return, living on the bandit’s abundant plunder until the expected order got us back where we wanted to be.

That night the four women slept near me after seeing the looks some men gave them. The red-haired Jewish girl, Rebecca Goldenberg, insisted on sitting by me, although from her sweet admiring face it was obvious what she would say. “Many thanks for saving my life, which means I am your servant now.”

Then came the unexpected that rang more warning bells.



“Could I borrow your Russian-English lexicon and sleep beside you for protection?”

Her assertive ladyship Orlov had to spoil it: “She is a virgin now but she will be a slattern soon enough and you will be a fool to take her.” Suddenly I could see why aristocrats were being killed off by their underlings when they had the chance.

Rebecca Goldenberg slept beside me and before dawn huddled against me for warmth, her crown under my chin. In the morning she was assiduously studying the lexicon and did so by firelight, sleeping with me the same way again the next four nights. She looked up from her books at me by the breakfast fire. As attractive as that beautiful face, bright blue eyes and red hair was, the men kept away from her and looked on her with sullen sneers. When asked why they said the word ‘Jew’ like we would say ‘cannibal’ or ‘child killer’ as if the word Jew explained every villainy ever committed. The contempt on their faces as they saw what was unfolding and they had some justification: Rebecca Oldenburg was a sixteen-year-old virgin, the birthday that would make me thirty was approaching and Alessandra, my loyal wife, waited back in Nova.

She spoke pensively and softly.

“You may take me tonight. Just do not abandon me afterward. It must be a miracle I have lasted this long, just protect me, yes.”

“Protect you, yes, but my wife remains in my heart, she would be hurt.”

“She would understand and tell you to go on with life, if she could. You cannot sorrow for ever and you are too brave and too young to let the cruelties of the world crush you or sour you into bitterness. Not only from gratitude, curiosity or my desires do I offer myself. It is my wish to help you recover and find happiness again.”

“Recover from what?”

She just stared puzzled, then assessing.

“Excuse me Major Ross Clarke, yes? Sadly your wife has died”

She lay with me for warmth, company and sympathy.

“Rebecca, is my wife really dead?”

“When that Orlov bitch heard your name, she said she recognised it from a newspaper story and that your wife was dead from typhus and a difficult pregnancy due to her age.”

I nodded, she walked off and after ten minutes she returned with Orlov. From that bitch’s sad, pensive face what was coming started like a vice on my throat, lungs and stomach. Rebecca’s sad words could make sense. Orlov did the talking.

“Major Ross Clarke, we have Odessa’s last September issue newspapers. She had a certain fame due to her business connections and so gained an obituary article that mentioned you. At forty-two your wife was too old to bear the child, she may have recovered from typhus but –”

“No! Her last letter is here! Dated September twelfth and she mentions no child!

“Mentioning it may have been a worry for you.”

“No!”

“Now surely you will wish to rush back to Nova to find out?”

“You total bitch.”

She just smirked and gave me the newspaper: Alessandra’s death got a snippet coverage and a funeral notice. Officer’s training suddenly became a blessing in disguise. I had to think of my command not personal tragedies and Madame Orlov had a point. It was now well into November, snow had been falling and the roads would soon be impassable slush soon. I ordered them to pack and we would go back. The messenger would find our wagon-rutted trail. That night Rebecca came to me.

“The other women will not let me huddle with them and I fear the men. Now we should not...”

Over the next two days with snow and slush, and the weight of the wagons, we covered less distance than we had in the week-long pursuit. At night, seven miles from our base, we finally met our messenger, who gave me the two-day old telegraphed letter that had delayed him.

Colonel Cuthbert

27<sup>th</sup> November 1919

Imperial Cavalry Base Ukrainia Expeditionary Force Novorossiysk

Dear Major Clarke,

First permit me to offer condolences on the recent death of Alessandra. She was wise, witty and compassionate, never saying an unwise or false word. The doctors assured me that everything that could be done here was carried out properly; she was just too malnourished and old for pregnancy combining with the typhus....

She wanted you to get back to Nova as soon as you can, any which way you can and that surely demonstrates her wisdom. Use the wagon loads for your food supply if they contain food, otherwise destroy them. Between the Maknovites, the advancing Reds, and rumours of a developing new foreign policy of accommodation with Bolshevism you can rest assured free Nova will not see much (if anything) of 1920 and the British, and our allies will save themselves the embarrassment of defeat through evacuation – which may happen at any time. Our conquests peaked in early October and then were reversed within weeks. The reds either will or have already taken Kursk and march on Kharkov and Kiev, where we have no substantial forces; Makhno, being aligned with the Bolshies again, will take Ekaterinoslav. Our front was contracting two weeks back, now it disintegrates. Like all other commanders here I am

without a single reliable unit. Only Wrangel's forces in the south-east hold ground. Silly and treacherous as he is off the field, he functions superbly on. The British units around the Caucasus oil fields may hold on and you may have to retreat there; but even their presence remains dubious. Once you have taken care of the civilians and your command, save yourself.

That is an order. Veteran officers are in high demand and with your record and ability to speak Russian you are considered invaluable. A colonelship is within your grasp, report to me as soon as possible. Preserve this letter if you feel it wise to do so.

Acting Brigadier Cuthbert.

The messenger assured me that assorted enemies were to the north, east and south of us, besieging our base, now commanded by General Orlov. Poles under Pilsudski, yet another would-be Napoleon, were rumoured to be preparing for a spring invasion from the west, seizing as much Ukrainian land as they could get. Orlov's garrison were the only known friendly force within two hundred miles and if we stayed, we could perhaps be of use against their besiegers, but if we left, his daughter moved further from him.

That assumed we could leave. Autumn rains, sleet and slush meant we were lucky to make four miles a day with the food-laden wagons. Full blast winter was only three weeks off most and the only sensible thing our little force could do was to evade the weather and our enemies, to hibernate. Fortunately, most of the force were peasants who could see the wisdom of this and knew the necessity for working like maniacs before winter hit. We soon found a vale where the soil was still unfrozen and there was not yet winter withered grazing pasture nearby from a desolated farm.

“This farm has been raided by Bolsheviks, those city-bred commissars never know where peasants hide their food.” One of my soldiers declared and he showed me a favourite hiding place, underneath the fireplace slate was the entrance to a massive cellar packed with food, forage, hay fuel and tools. They sought other such places and often found the corpses of emaciated city folk nearby and thrice some alive, several of them thanking me on their knees. Altogether twenty-three came to us, including a master carpenter who was a godsend in building our shelters, three teenage sisters who quickly found husbands among my troops, Isador, a seminary student who married them and Orlov’s deserting maids going to other troopers. We even gained two deserters from the Red Army and two women who could also shoot and ride well enough to enlist. Among the trickle of forest refugees who found us before the snows hit full blast were six middle class children around twelve years old and Armand, their French French-language teacher; he had hidden in a nearby village for nine months, a deserter from Odessa’s French forces. Rebecca adopted him and she became a puzzlingly assiduous student – at night. Like everybody else but her ladyship Orlov, she worked sixteen or eighteen hours a day while this late mild autumn held off the real winter weather. Rebecca spent an hour before bed learning a language, alternating English and French. The jokes around camp were predictable: except the one that with Yiddish, Ukrainian, Russian and now French and English, she knew more languages than men, but she did not know them well either.

Some said taking the elderly, women and children was foolish, but they had a calming, even civilizing effect on the men and they worked harder than some of them and we needed all the labour we could get to build dugouts for the cattle, horses, food, fuel, firewood and forage. The farmhouse could only take fifty if they crammed in and slept on their

sides. It was the kids who found the herd of nineteen milch cows and sixty-eight beeves, secreted into the forest by some farmer, surely dead now. That herd gave us milk, cowhides, hooves for glue, offal and steaks, things that might make all the difference in surviving until spring. By early December we had the first dug out for sleeping finished, but we were packed in as densely as Negroes in a slave ship. Everyone slept on their hip, woman to man and child to child where possible; Rebecca always close to me.

The high workload was a cure, for Alessandra, for this war and the one before, for Brionny and the events from Grahame's arrest until the war. It was not just the hard work which left little time for thought, but the sense of achievement in little things that gladden a farmer's heart. First was the sight and sound of a pine tree crashing, seeing dugout after dugout completed so that the animals would survive, hauling in enough forage to get the poor horses through winter, even collecting acorns dead branches and debris for fuel and seeing them piled up. There was even a hopeful planting of autumn crops, for some wanted to be here till at least next year's harvest. While sympathising with their idea of the grain rising to meet the sun, being home was a stronger desire.

Little by little all this was changing me.

Alessandra saw truly when she said the war was making me a sad old man, older than she was and Stepan's question kept coming back. 'Haven't you had enough? What on earth is wrong with you?' I had enough, Cuthbert's promise of a colonelcy felt like a jail sentence. I wanted home, or being literally as close to it as possible, Max being our neighbour.

Yet desire and libido were returning. One morning after waking from a wet dream while clutching Rebecca, she took my hand, gently stroking my fingers, her way of saying it was alright. She waited till we

had some rare privacy next morning. She had her feet bare, her dress pushed up to her calves and had stripped to her bodice. Isador had prayed for some sunny days before winter's privations: now we had them. The maximum temperature was sixty-two Fahrenheit, but two weeks before winter solstice it was a miracle and Isador's (and God's) status rose high and when Isador declared that this was a Sabbath and so a work free day the people scattered, to strip and sun themselves or bathe or wash clothes and bedding. This was not as foolish as it sounded, Russians often did this, for soon our skins would endure months without sunlight or soap and then scurvy, vermin, rashes, stench and any disease might thrive.

"Last night, well, other couples are starting of their own dugouts, sixty-two people, well the stench, (she made a stagy gesture holding her nose) and it seems we need privacy, don't we?" She smiled tilting her head.

"If we leave the firewood out it will freeze as hard as iron and then so will we."

"You prefer looking after firewood than looking after me?"

Fortunately, she spoke with a smile.

"Looking after firewood is looking after you. Frozen people are unattractive."

"Armand can think of better ways to warm me than storing firewood."

"Armand's looks and personality make him pathetically grateful for any female enduring his attentions."

"Which is why he would claw out a dugout with his nails for me, frenziedly."

"Here?" I sighed.

"And now."

She picked up her cloak to show me the pickaxe, mattock and shovel

under it.

“This place seems the right one.” She smiled in triumphant sweetness, eyebrows going up and down.

We soon dug. Soon enough six troopers came up the knoll, for a roof they were lugging the dismantled base of one of broken wagons and two of them asked that if they helped me build for my wife’s dugout would I return the favour? Mutually beneficial deals were replacing military orders, not that I minded. Next day while the women used the sunlight to make pemmican and finish scraping and drying tanned hides or washed blankets and clothes, Isador and other men helped. His sunny miracle, modesty, selflessness and general good-heartedness made him popular and gained credibility. We were beginning to work out power sharing; he settled religious, domestic, legal and educational disputes: I handled military and forage matters. These included food, fuel, building and movement. We upheld each other’s authority.

We finished the huts in the last of the sunny days, weather so good it made three betrothed couples think that it was time for a wedding.

“Wear your uniform resplendently.” Rebecca mock-commanded. “We took so much care washing and polishing that you must wear it properly.”

That was a missed hint. While watching the last couple's ceremony she took my hand.

“If I stay in your dugout unmarried tonight, my status lowers to that of camp follower and others will try to seduce me, perhaps even rape. Trouble if I give in: trouble if not. If you take me your status and authority drops. Isador cannot deal with an adulterer. Everything here might be threatened.”

“What do you sugg-” My gaze followed hers to the couple. She was smiling, but not joking. “Ross, why on earth not?”



“Why not indeed?”

As Isador finished with a ceremonial blessing on those about to enjoy the wedding feast we stepped forward to amazed cheers and a look of happy relief on many faces, particularly Isador's. Twice now I had married with little forethought and twice so far with no later regrets. I had already married a bisexual Fenian engaged to my brother, and then a Russian aristocrat thirteen years my senior and now in the middle of a forest camp in the middle of somebody else's civil war I married Rebecca Goldenberg, now turned seventeen. She was an orphan, Jewish by descent, Romanian by nationality and a latter-day Maid Marion by necessity. Some people might think I had a taste for extraordinary foreign women.

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Four days after our marriage late winter really hit. Such winters usually mean late springs and so it would probably be, not that that worried, time was timeless in that dugout made comfortable. Rebecca took to sex fast, extremely fast. On our wedding night we had only stopped for a few minutes and she asked to do that again, more slowly this time and again and again. By dawn she had scratch marks down my back and was asking what she had to do to keep me hard and when I showed her using her hand, she smilingly shrugged her shoulders and began. Soon we slept the sleep of the exhausted, and awaking in darkness, found myself alone. I went to the toilet, and when shaving saw in the mirror why all those around the fire smiled at me with knowing looks despite being haggard to exhaustion, I could smile at myself and go back to sleep. She woke me with her hand sliding ever so slowly and gently over my body and then her tresses cascaded over my ribs as she brought her head to mine and we kissed and began again. That night we just slept. Thankfully in our efforts to camouflage and insulate we had

made one of the dugouts soundproof. One morning two weeks later Rebecca came out with:

“Teach me more than English. I want us to do everything possible sexual together. If I do not like it we do not do it again.”

“This will take some time.”

“You do not look surprised. Somebody else has asked you this.”

“Brionny, when we were snowed in seven years ago. That was a very pleasurable week.”

She just smiled and stared. Even in this dire situation nothing can cause more elation than a beautiful woman who cannot take her eyes off a man, especially after a suggestion like that.

\*

Colonel Cuthbert Constantinople.

30<sup>th</sup> March 1920

Dearest Max,

Even before the fall of Nova to the infernal Bolsheviks earlier this month, my major task was the evacuation of refugees and any British subjects. Major Clarke remains very much my concern. We have first-hand news of him. He was still alive and in safe circumstances in January. Verna Orlov, a general's daughter was in a fortified camp in the Ukrainian forest where he commanded. He intends to escape and return as soon as circumstances permit, being keen to be home and working for you. He told Madam Orlov that he belongs in Eloura and although he serves as a splendid field officer, it seems so.

Your idea at Megiddo that the world has fallen into a time of turmoil seems so. Poor mad Eakins may not have been far wrong. In its wisdom the British government moved the refugees from one civil war to another. Tumultuous Turkey suffers in the throes of a power struggle and the current challenger turns out to be our old Gallipoli/Megiddo pal Mustafa Kemal, who everyone suspects will win against us, the Greeks who claim

much of his land and also his Turkish rivals.

Cuthbert

\*

Ross Clarke

Eastern Ukraina 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1920

Russia's spring comes with an incredibly direct and strong suddenness. A few warning signs and then clouds exit for bright blue skies, flocks of birds return, thick ice breaks up and rushes down streams at frenzied speed; strong full grass pushes up where snow lay a week before. Little that appears gentle emerges in Russian springs, but they are incredibly invigorating. We had got through the winter with only one loss that was no loss. By mid-January Madam Orlov had lost all her power and prestige and unable to bear it, walked off towards her father's base.

Down by the creek as we washed our feet Rebecca and I discussed our future.

"Future? For any Jew no future exists in this land! I am a rare survivor of a lost race. Let us make for Europe, perhaps you can talk me into going to Australia."

"An imperial army officer has an equally low life expectancy here."

She stared enigmatically. Despite knowing her body, her mannerisms and learning processes as well as my own now, knowing her thoughts was another matter.

"If you wish we could pass as Russians. Nobody knows my Jewishness and your Russian sounds so good you would have trouble convincing people you are English."

"If staying here would last forever, yes - but we know our time here must be miraculous."

"A week's ride will get us to Nova if this good weather continues. There are things to do here first. We need to let them select a new leader."

Rebecca nodded, but when humans gather choices are never easy. First, they could not agree on a leader: the ones good at farming and food supply economics were not good at soldering, and the soldiers were not good at farming. They wanted to be raiders and choose a side in the bizarre, entangled world of Ukrainian politics, which Isador, the civilians, the reluctant conscripts and I had enough sense to avoid. There was also always one more task, spring crops to plant, timber to collect or cut, hunting and foraging and exercising the horse

While foraging we saw a herd of cattle herded by some troopers and wagons full of cavalry feed. All our foragers were keen to get them and we outnumbered them – whoever they were.

“Give them to the count of five to surrender.”

Then we rode in as nobody was keen to fight back, indeed they gave polite introductions.

“I am Captain Fydor Potūgin. We are men of West Siberia.”

“Who do you serve?”

“First in we deserted from the Czar and tried to make our way back to our homes but the Reds forced us to enlist at gunpoint. Then our Red colonel went over to Wrangel when he had us cornered. Wrangel paid us an advance in English gold to bring this herd to him, but we do not think we can reach him, even if he remains alive, for Nova has fallen to Trotsky and although Wrangel does well with his offensive, it may not be wise to find him, for we being starving, ate eleven of the herd. He may slap us on the back and laugh over that loss, or he may hang one man for each cow. Now he squabbles with the English, who want him to leave for their new war in Turkey, while he tries to talk with Makhno, who hung his envoy. There can be no predicting him – or any of them. Trotsky, Makhno, Petlura, the English or that Polish bastard who invades Ukrainia, Pilsudski.”

Fydor Potūgin was their leader and his words, tone and face showed his vexed weariness and it was reflected in the faces of the other fourteen.

“So the way to Europe from here has become blocked?”

“From the Black Sea to the Baltic - and the great forest now seems mostly denuded of game and food: bandits, refugees, armies...” He knew what I wanted and that it could not be, yet. A fighting man who could, but did not want to fight, or to serve anybody, wanting a rural refuge. Maybe here was the required replacement leader; Fydor would have fourteen armed votes behind him at the next meeting.

“What do you offer us?”

“Peace, quiet, a hearth, forest hunting. We have a fortified forest village and guns to hold it. Here see English gold.” Revealing the gold belt made eyes his gleam.

“We are your men!” He looked behind him. “Anybody who disagrees may take a cow, his horse and gun and go!” Nobody showed signs of wanting to go. “At the last village there were more grass widows than we could take who will go with us, but that village was much damaged and obvious - being on a road. Still, they had tools, laying chickens, seed grain and English machine guns, we did not have enough sabres to hold it. How many sabres do you have?”

“Just over double what you see.” Sabres here meant effective cavalymen. Already I was seeing an advantage. “Some need wives very badly. Lack of women for some leads to trouble in the camp.”

So it unfolded, after driving them up a stream so we could not be tracked, we returned with a herd of cattle, his fourteen fighters, twenty-nine women, four village elders, eleven children, invaluable tools and two Lewis machine guns with six boxes of ammunition. We also had knowledge, the knowledge that I was trapped, had raided my own worthless side to help my command and that in the second decade of the

twentieth century I had become Robin Hood, with Rebecca as Maid Marion, but no King Richard to rescue us and restore law peace and prosperity to the kingdom. In July we blew up a Bolshevik coal train from the Donetz basin and used our wagons to get the coal back to camp, the less far we had to wander through the denuded forest for timber, the better. A sack of coal could also buy anything in Ukrainia; we liaised with Denikin's deserters and got two light artillery pieces and a wagon load of shells for thirty coal sacks and twenty sovereigns. We also took the train's fuel oil, put it in bottles, used soaked oil for a fuse and stored the bottles.

When we returned I was expecting more praise and cheers, but all I got was enigmatic looks and tears from Rebecca. They said it was because a hunting party of four had been picked up by Wrangel's men and shot.

Wrangel was after us and soon sent a cavalry company along the forest road. It was so obvious and easy to ambush we initially suspected that they were decoys. Fydor tried to talk them into surrendering and when some raised their hands immediately their officers shot two in the back. Three more managed to gallop off and the rest made it to us, begging for mercy which they got, rare from anybody, excepting Makhno, in this war. The others got the glass and fire bombs which only killed two, but wounded many and for both men and horses they were splendid for spreading panic. They could not charge us, nor stay still to shoot or dismount. My order was to aim for the officers, who were still shooting more of their own men for trying to surrender than they shot of mine. Within a few minutes we were walking among those on the ground dead or groaning. Those with their hands raised were rounded up.

"Most enemy horses will be difficult." Fydor started. "Some wounds will fester, others will be white-eyed mad for weeks or months..."

others...”

He held up the pistol towards them and kept it there. They would be useless for anything but blood and bone fertiliser. Too often horseflesh leads to dysentery or digestive problems. I nodded

“The Whites?” He motioned with the pistol again.

“As there are no officers left alive let those who want to go home should do so. If they did not shoot at us they can join us if they wish.”

Nine did. Two of ours were dead. We walked among the hopelessly wounded prisoners and horses with pistols. Leaving agonising men and animals who could not move in a wolf-infested forest cannot be mercy. Everybody expected relentless Wrangel to send a regiment after me for that ambush and the herd, but Trotsky and Makhno, pals again despite many a massacre and double cross, were pressing him hard in their autumn offensive.

\*

Magda Rosenthal

Halstatt, Austria 21<sup>st</sup> March 1921

We had almost gone on the sealed train that took Lenin from Zurich to Petrograd. We requested it and he stared for a few seconds and then spoke like he always did, as if he was a lawyer again, expounding in a court, demanding a penalty.

“In the spread of world revolution industrialised, educated, modern Germany will prove itself even more important than Russia. Yet German Marxism, even more than the English or the French, needs more realists, not petty bourgeois romantics, in the leadership. Through timidity in decisions and naivety in dealing with spies, we fear that they will unintentionally mislead the proletariat to disaster and all German resources could be smashed. Therefore, we should have secondary resources, centres for translation and propagation which are separate from a leadership that may not meet the revolutionary crisis.”

“In Halstatt?”

“Where the village policeman spends most of his time jailing the town drunkard and returning lost property.”

“Where everyone knows everyone else’s business. You know small towns comrade.”

That last sentence was a big mistake. Lenin disliked any mention of his personal life, particularly aspects from his small-town days before his radicalism. He glowered, pursed his lips to speak, but then changed his mind, handing me some leaflets printed with a Viennese address.

“These leaflets were not printed in Vienna, let the police search for them there. Comrade, these leaflets and many more like them were printed a kilometre from your home two months ago and by people you see daily.”

I remembered the ink stains on one of the Russian’s prisoner/miner’s hands. He then permitted himself that rarity for him, a smile.

“Your father has agreed to the plan, he will retire to Zurich so as to give the newlyweds space. You will seem to be more conservative with your marriage; we cannot keep losing key people. Being a dutiful daughter, you will visit weekly, reporting on the Austrian/German situation and getting information we want printed.”

“We are not married.”

“Your husband serves us as an excellent translator, and works fast with Russian, German and English. You have excellent French and code skills and also work fast. Usually it takes thrice as long with one article going through at least two translators. Be very aware of the small-town gossips and spies; that can indeed be a vital point.”

Ultimately it was. By the spring of 1921 our German revolution had, like all the others in Europe, obviously failed and almost all our prominent leaders were dead, fled or imprisoned. We thought Halstatt



would pass unnoticed, but we got separate jails. They never found the printing press or correspondence. Perhaps as in Jack London's futuristic fantasy about fascism, *The Iron Heel* one day hundreds of years into the future, they will be found and change or add to the knowledge of these vitally important times, but unlike Avis the radical wife narrating in *The Iron Heel*, they will find no admiring descriptions of my socialist husband. Yes, he was an excellent translator: people with their heads buried in books usually are. Yes, he was a hard-working comrade, so hard working that he never thought about himself, myself or anybody actually alive. After the great victory of November 1917 Lenin (whom Andrew never spoke with very much) went from esteemed and respected leader to superhuman hero. By the time of the arrest I was beginning to wonder if Bolshevik rule was really the same as Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat. Most Bolshevik leaders were déclassé middle class and the death penalty for strikers had gone from being a way to deal with White Guard dupes to a selling point in encouraging foreign capital investment. This was at the same time as Trotsky's enforced militarisation of labor policy and setting up slave labor camps including for those who resisted his labor conscription. Anyone who complained about that or anything else would be visited by secret police and never seen again. The deal had been we obey and endure the self-sacrifice and harsh measures until the war was won, but just days before our arrest Lenin had said the globe was in a class war; the harsh measures must continue until class war was a dim ancestral memory. That idea caused doubts. Then the nepotism, the palaces and privileges for many of the leaders caused more doubts as did the Kronstadt rebels. Puzzled Andrew rightly said their rebellion was like Coldstream Guards trying to overthrow British Royalty, but being thick and naïve and blind, he did not develop what that meant.

Andrew had no doubts. He hounded me for the same recounting of

meetings with Lenin again and again. Little notes from Lenin were kept like Saint's relics among Catholics. This sudden transition from religion was too sharp: Andrew made Marx into a new Moses and Lenin into a communist Jesus. Despite such annoyances the very worst thing about Andrew was his Christ-like saintliness. Even before our jailing I could understand why men like Francis of Assisi, Torquemada, Savonarola and Father Damien were celibates, they would have driven any woman to screaming - and not only because perhaps they were not good at sex or marital give and take.

We got six years and on release, would head in different directions, although he did not know that.

\*

Ross Clarke

Eastern Ukraine 24<sup>th</sup> March 1921

With the war continuing and famine spreading across Russia we had to stay, but our circumstances changed suddenly, when least expected, while bathing with Rebecca in a creek pool

We heard horses' clops soft on deep pine needles and there twenty feet away, mounted were about a hundred men, some incongruously in sailor's uniforms, others in civilian clothing or White Guard blouses or bits of German uniforms, some which revealed bullet holes and faded blood. By their uniforms there were deserters from the Czar, the Reds, Whites, Germans and Petlura and from the contingents from France, Greece, Romania, Italy and Poland. Some still wore prisoner's uniforms from the jails Makhno had blown up. Most had black armbands, scarves, cummerbunds or clothes and crossed bandoliers and holsters with pistols, daggers in boots and Cossack style fur hats or worker's peak caps. One held the black flag of anarchy aloft. It was easy to see why they were successful, they were mainly tough, hardened veterans and so many of them would be shot on sight as deserters, so they would fight to the death

to avoid capture. Another reason for their success and evasiveness was the magnificence of their horses: while all the other sides had mostly the jades, nags and traumatised that was all those seven years of war had left, these men had some of the world's best, by their livery logos, the famed Orlov Saddle Horse breed, almost certainly plundered from that noble's stud farms. I looked for Makhno, a teenage murderer who had survived years in Russia's toughest jail and then led from the front in nearly four years of civil war in which he defeated everybody's top generals without suffering a defeat. Therefore, logically I expected another Eakins, perhaps even taller, more muscular, madder and more paranoid, but in their centre and a little forward from the rest was a very short, smiling, strong-jawed youth with the wind and sunburned facial skin regular cavalrymen frequently get. He had prominent bright teeth revealed by his smile and also merry brown eyes and curly black hair offsetting strong, handsome relaxed features, as if out on a picnic where everything was going well. He gave me the impression that this merry smile would not change if he shook our hands in camaraderie or if he pulled out his pistol and shot us.

"Batko Makhno." Rebecca bowed with a huddle of clothes to her chest and movements into muddy water. His real first name was Nestor, but Batko was a title of respect, literally father, but also denoting an elder, a leader.

He smiled at her manners and clearly still did not know what to do yet. His eyes went over Rebecca in an annoying way. In contrast to another great cavalry commander Lawrence, this legendary hero would not have trouble ordering sugar from a waitress and would ask for sexual favours just as easily. His smile was sometimes a grimace, one ankle was bandaged and beneath his blouse, he had bandages around his waist so he rode very slowly and carefully.

About five hundred more anarchists, including several women in fur

hats, with pigtails worn in narrow fours or sixes and wearing crossed bandoleers, emerged from the woods. One of them looking like that, much taller and thinner than the others, with large, dark and haunted eyes, but with the same self-confident facial expression, rode up. She glanced at me quickly with a faint, hard smile that vanished when I saw it, then she said something to Makhno. This second bunch seemed to be led by a schoolteacher on horseback. She had the wire frame spectacles, pony tail, white blouse and dark skirt that from Alison onwards seemed part of a global female teacher's uniform – except for the riding boots and the holster and pistol. She looked at Makhno disapprovingly as he had a hip flask out – at eight in the morning. She told him to put it away. Like a naughty student he did - and then her glare went to Rebecca as she snarled something in Ukrainian and he looked sheepish. The anarchist terror of Ukrainia, the conquering satanic figure to his defeated enemies (these including the renowned warlords Ludendorff, Gregoriev, Trotsky and Denikin) was controlled by a school teacher. Rebecca spoke pensively.

“The tall thin one, she's Zinada Koval, one of his inner circle, The bespeckled one, that's Galina Makhno, his schoolteacher wife.” Rebecca murmured.

*How on earth do you know who they are.*

Makhno was watching elsewhere and listening intently, until he said he smelled roast beef. Fortunately, the villagers saw him first and either went to the dugouts and had rifles ready or if caught in the open, quickly took off their white guard blouses if they still wore them. He saw them, then glanced at my uniform on the bank.

“Captain Kangaroo. My nickname is Shorty – but nobody calls me that.” He, and then they, laughed at his joke. They rode in and saw Isador, who had the sense to declare a big breakfast to celebrate spring and we

unthawed enough to feed everybody. When Makhno asked who was in charge Isador had sense enough to say nobody really, he conducted weddings and funerals and I was in charge of defence.

“Ah then you are anarchists, just like us!” He declared and everybody relaxed at his conciliatory words – except him. Behind the smile his eyes went to the dugouts and artillery and he was trying to work out if armed men were placed there. His brain was ticking over, realising that we were a motley crew and that killing us would lead to a battle for advantages he had mostly already gained – food, rest and pasturage.

Then he really relaxed and so did his troops. I saw one who was supposedly one of us give him a meaningful nervous look and I remembered a dubious story about chasing a deer for two days: Makhno had not found us by accident. This incident confirmed rumours of his spy network operating across eastern Ukraine.

On Rebecca’s urging our village women performed a song and dance of welcome to an impromptu band of balalaikas, violins, tambourines and kettle drums. This became my favourite memory of Rebecca, no matter how long we lasted. In her boots, red cummerbund, blue skirt and vest both sequined and with red trim, a necklace of my sovereigns round her neck and her long red hair flared out she was striking, and yet even more than that, she was exuberant with the joy of life that seemed to radiate all around her with the bright blue summer sky as a backdrop, a pleasant breeze making its rustle through the pines and oaks, the sunlight dazzling off the sequins and gold, her eyes as bright and blue as the sky; it was one of those moments where life was good, bright and joyful. Everybody seemed to sense it and the dancing women and the watchers joined in the syncopated clapping.

Makhno politely asked permission to graze his warband’s tired horses on our pasture and as they had been riding for days, they needed to

tend to horses, equipment and themselves. It being pleasantly hot, everybody went for a cleansing swim, women one way, men another, as is done back home and everywhere else. Long before twilight most slept under pines.

The idea of a dance and feast to welcome spring took on. Meantime Makhno, myself and our lieutenants went for a walk around the camp. Twice Zinada Koval looking at me when she thought she was unnoticed, her thin, severe face unchanged, excepting the quick darting of the eyes... If I was not with Rebecca...

Makhno was complimenting me on our dugouts, their skilful placement for maximum observation and fire-power, their skilled camouflage...

“Ah yes when Trotsky comes he will need at least two brigades and will have to sacrifice most of one to destroy you. Excellent work! From what? Sixty to ninety effective fighters and fifty more non-combatants?”

He was far from the foolish hooligan his enemies thought, or even just a fighting machine. He was planting a thought in my head.

“I am only leader till the new man Fyodor takes over, then home for me, as soon as we can escape.”

“You are the Englishman still left, yes? Captain Kangaroo! So yes, that will be best, for you and your people. If the Reds find you they will be totally merciless to all and take no paroles and pledges.” He made the sound of a machine gun. By their faces Zinada, Galina and the others agreed and it was easy to believe.

“You have a plan for yourself and your wife, but what of your people? Who looks after them?”

*You Will.*

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Something was developing; the talks went on and on. Zinada Koval was translating Russian and Ukrainian, not Galina. Makhno had read the contempt on Ross's face when he obeyed Galina and also the desire for Zinada and her for him. Understandable. It would solve a problem. It would also make it harder for Makhno to kill him if things became complicated and in Ukrainia things always became complicated and fast.

We needed to align with these people. We had only tiny strength, and had survived so far, well Yahaweh's will or just miraculous luck, whatever. There was little chance of escaping to Europe or Baku now. How I wish I had joined my stage actor Uncle Manny in New York when he offered to adopt me out of the orphanage in April 1914, just before the madness men must indulge in started! Oh! We had never met and travelling seemed so scary then, now not travelling was really scary. While they feasted, I served. Zinada's face furrowed.

“Rebecca, yes? We have crossed paths before.”

“At Ekatarinoslav. I served you food there as well. You tried to talk me and others from the orphanage into becoming anarchists. We need to talk some more, yes?”

“After matters here are concluded.”

She soon joined me by the creek bank, taking off her boots, and smiling at the smell as she wiggled her toes and soaked her socks.

“Ah my poor feet, four days without time to take these boots off.”

“Does that mean they are following you?”

“No. We killed their patrol, hid the bodies and covered our tracks.”

“Even so...”

“After three years the differences between ones really interested in politics and the ones who pretend to get something else are clear fast. Be honest and direct.”

“You want my husband, take him, not permanently, but for some

nights. It would be good for our marriage if you did. Please do not ask why I offer.” Pregnancy would be a nightmare now and refusal led to problems. I needed people sympathetic to me when the problems with Armand started and soon they would. She raised her eyebrows in surprise and then she could guess. A smart one and smarter not to say it.

“The English have a saying “Never look a gift horse in the mouth, but clearly fools say that: always look a gift horse over, from hoof to ear tip very carefully and ride him very carefully the first time.”

“His first name, Ross means horse in their language. He is brave, lucky, loyal and smart. And fun in bed; why want another?”

“He is also an English aristocrat who fought for the Whites.”

“Not against Makhno. He raided the White herd last year and then fought them. For as long as we have known him he calls the White cause a worthless waste. He is not English but Australian, that being one of their-”

“I know of Australia after studying geography at university for two years before the revolution. We stay for two more nights and then there will be the farewell dance.”

“Dance only with him, then take him to your bed.”

“You are a little young for a wife, especially this man’s wife and I am being used. Has he been married?”

“Two wives, one divorced, one dead last year, she was Russian and aristocratic.”

“Makhno and much of his command are free in their sexual ways: I am not. Makhno ordered one woman not of the anarchists punched for not partaking in his orgies; avoid him when he drinks. Growing up in a one-room peasant hut with just a curtain for sleeping privacy, meant sometimes a sister and her husband had to share the same bed. I would pretend to be asleep, but wasn’t. They did not touch me, just each other.



On campaign we think much less about sexual matters and romance than you. For nearly two years such things have barely entered my head for some reason, but over the last week they have.” She paused biting her lip with some embarrassing thought. “Celibacy causes stress and oddness. One thing Lenin got right was that people should be neither monks or lechers.”

“Pity he did not say nuns or sluts. Is he another of those who put us on a pedestal or in the gutter depending on our sexual tastes?”

“Apparently. His wife always looks so sad in the photographs.” She nodded, thinking, then said her thoughts. “You don’t look sad, just guilty: pretend you did not know and if trouble comes own up to this conversation.”

She was not joking or one to ponder or feel guilt: Zinada would be there.

\*

Ross Clarke

Eastern Ukraine 25<sup>th</sup> March 1921

Celebrations for their leaving tomorrow began at twilight with a meal of beef and just harvested vegetables.

Next came the Makhnovites with their acrobatics and that odd form of dancing with the arms folded and the body almost sitting and they kick out but have to go faster as the music does and the last one to topple over wins. A dozen of his men and mine danced to the music and matching rhythmic clapping of everybody else. Several of us expected that with a tyrant’s vanity Makhno would be petulant to the winner because he could not win the dance, but no, he got up laughing and slapped the winner’s back and awarded him a bottle of wine, pirate’s plunder.

After that came the poetry recitations. We heard of heroes conquering dragons, of Stenka Resin, a Cossack Makhno prototype and what I suspected were Russianised Grimm Brothers fairy tales.

At the dance the first four were with Rebecca. Then we sat out one and Zinada refused a Makhnovite and then looked my way.

“Go on she wants you to, let me dance with Armand, no one else has.”

“Any wonder for him. Anyway, she does not want me.”

“Then why does she come over here? Do not insult her or them by a refusal. These are not people to insult or reject, surely you can grasp that. They came to our town two years past and we saw what happened to their enemies.”

I stood up before her and gestured with my hand to the dancing couple and spoke in Russian. “My Ukrainian remains minimal.”

“Mine just a little better, being Russian.” She smiled with her thin lips. She was so naturally thin that with my thumb on her hip my forefinger reached across two thirds of her waist. After what was suddenly the last dance I looked around for my wife and could not see her.

“She tended to my horse and bed, let us go to her.”

When we walked through the pines she reached across for my hand and without thinking I took it. When Rebecca saw us I gave a guilty start, but Rebecca smiled approvingly and Zinada knowingly. Seeing that we were in agreement was puzzling. even so this odd situation made nervous, if excited.

\*

Zinada Koval

Eastern Ukraine 25<sup>th</sup> March 1921

“Let me see what you are like, and not just your nakedness.”

*Let me see if there is more to you than good looks and manners, fine dancing and military ability. Such handsome aristocrats are usually sexually selfish manipulators. One like that was enough. If he is such a wonderful lover as she says, then why do people here say she took up*

*with that unprepossessing, dreary French fool while he was away? What was wrong?*

Nothing so far. He took what was said literally and we were kissing passionately, which was to the good: hungry eyes gloating over the body would have got me dressed. He was not jaded with such sights either, but kept his eyes on my face so I began to massage his shoulder, lightly almost caressingly at first, but without realising it I was soon as far down his throat as it was possible to go. Then when I paused his mouth was as hungry for my breast as I had been for his throat and I was enjoying it all immensely when he stopped and gave me an exhausted smile. He tenderly ran his hand through my hair. We rested like that for some time. A little nervous, a little disbelieving it was happening, yet eager, I straddled him and lowered myself while he clasped my hips. He thrust – at first, then I realised my hand was under him pressing and I was shrieking. When it was over, panting and sweating we returned to lying side by side with my hand on his chest. He stroked it and he put a blanket across us. I had to put a pillow across his shoulder and arm. Sleeping head on bone and muscle sounds romantic, but turns out to be an awkward reality. We exchanged smiles, soft kisses and slept - for too long.

Breakfast was ending when we woke up and there were sardonic faces on those walking past to the horse line and many amazed ones. I felt no guilt, nor shame. Long ago I worked out how guilt manipulators operated and was free of them. However I also knew that people are not dogs, there were limits to self-indulgence in pleasure: that meant keeping myself covered while reaching for my clothes; when the passers-by left we dressed. Few among ours could say much, most had casual relationships and formed triads, as with the arrival of smiling Rebecca, we were.

“You were happy with me.” I asked her so he would hear

“Where do we go from here?”

“To the meeting, this happens after breakfast, so very soon.”

*And the feeling of expecting violence with sex, which was always at the back of my mind and inhibiting pleasure was gone with this violent man.*

“Ross, Rebecca, should we declare for each other?”

They had no idea of what was meant.

“Russia has been losing millions of young men to wars for eight years now, and also even priests to marry those left, so here what we do, at least where Makhno anarchy rules, we declare our relationship before all so none court and divide the command with jealousy and intrigues. Two or more women with one man has become common.” They agreed. We dressed for the meeting. Everybody assembled and the news was given first, then we declared, me first. “For me now Ross will be the only man.”

When Rebecca said the same some loud fool called out “What about Armand?” Rebecca had to say something. “He only kissed me; he would not teach me French otherwise.” Ross was being humiliated and to worsen that he was realising publicly he had married a schoolgirl, albeit one highly intelligent, mature – and clever. How clever. Ross could not yet see. Others there could. Verne, fifty something and gently owlsh stepped forward “You can learn French from me now on.”

“Does it matter that I am Jewish?” She was cranky and blushing.

“I am Jewish.” He responded

Both Armand and the loud fool were soon nowhere to be seen. Wise Ross declared for us both and then I clasped Rebecca quickly and declared we were friends.

It was a simple idea and could have, like anarchy, been so good if only people’s motives and outlook were as simple, However they seldom

were. She was forming a triad, only a little out of camaraderie, more of an atonement and a cover so he could not be moralistic or perhaps violent when he found out about Armand was teaching more than French. Ross was just plain sex hungry, curious and perhaps longing for a woman older than his overly sweet teenage bride.

And my motives were only a little better. Chronic sexual frustration, a desire to forget about the war through pleasure, curiosity and symbolising the unity of the alliance we needed, not that Makhno urged it. He was surprised at the declaration, and the four from among our women, tired of the endless riding and being hunted by the Reds, thought they would find peace here; delusions desperately desired so we three were not the only ones unable to see clearly. At least he did not recite cloying puerile poetry at me like my first lover, (the aristocrat) at university, telling me how my eyes were like stars in the sky and the radiance of the sun was as nothing to the joy I created. In his cloying, cliched mind that one was actually a fool who believed his synonyms; the knaves who pretend such things are the more dangerous ones for women. The poor fool was more of a danger to himself. An army pay clerk who could have been safe, he charged upright into a machine gun nest for the Czar. Ross was smarter, establishing his own private kingdom and knowing when to abdicate; most aristocrats do not. He had no sexual guilt and was considerate, all to the good.

As expected, this meeting began the way they usually did, with absolutely everybody except sentries assembled. Galina usually translated for our Russians, but today I did, shrewd, Makhno usually was. Makhno introduced himself and gave a slight variation of the usual speech, complimenting them on their achievements and thanking them for their hospitality.

“You have achieved much in this land devastated by so many and

done as much as any hundred people can to protect it and defend it, but with the spring will come the last and greatest threat.”

He picked up a dry twig which would reverberate and snapped it.

“That shows a hundred in the iron fist of the tyrant Trotsky. Who among you comes from other small towns, villages, farms and forest refuges?” Almost everyone put up their hands. “Who wishes to tell of it?”

He scanned faces quickly seeing who wished to speak and chose the eldest first, as was village custom and with each speaker he addressed them politely if he did not know their names and today he had made it part of his preparation to know. This always gained the approval of the peasants who liked to see custom followed. When they went into too much detail, making the audience restless he would say ‘yes! True words elder!’ and rush to the next. This subtly reinforced both his respect for them and his control over them.

“If you think that the Reds may not kill you, perhaps you are right, for they have taken over the Czar’s slave labor camps for the peasants, just as they have taken over his palaces for themselves. They are your last enemy to defeat, but are worse than bandits, Czarists, Germans, Poles, Petlura and Grigoriev, even worse than the Whites, for they at least had the sense to leave you land and seed grain, but the Bolsheviks say your land is theirs and the seed for next year’s crop is for their stomachs. Already famine stalks our rich farmlands and they cannot blame anyone else but themselves: they know nothing of land or how to work it so they will enslave you.

You know the proverb that applies to them ‘If the hands are uncalloused, the tongue loves to talk of the joys of hard labour.’”

Bitter sneers in agreement and murmurs of ascent followed.

“You know the tale, everywhere the same devastation.” The cadences were effective. Now it was my turn coming.

“Let us hear how this land could be.”

“The Ukraine is one of the richest lands on earth in its resources: gold, oil coal, tin, fisheries every timber in this great forest, the finest farming soil on earth, grain so rich and abundant that lands that grow grain still buy ours. We have farms, factories, fields, mines, roads, rail cities, ports, everything we need to make the best of what the world has to offer, so why is the land devastated? Why are our people killing each other or starving to death amidst such easily harvested plenty?”

“Because greedy hypocrites want to plunder and enslave rather than work!” Fyodor Potūgin answered and everyone cheered. Makhno came in again.

“Indeed! Each village is like the twig that becomes broken; but if they all had joined together...”

He had Galina bring out a massive bundle of twigs tied with a black band and asked if anyone thought that it could be broken to do it. Most peasants smiled, having bundled timber since being toddlers, so Makhno kidded Fyodor, the burliest man, into trying and it gave the audience much needed laughter after hearing the horrors. This would be the bridge to his optimistic call. He lifted the bundle.

“We are the twigs and the tie that binds us is black flag of anarchy. Do what you like with your lands, your crops, your desires. Own tools together and give what you do not need to those that do – if it seems wise to do so. We of the Ukrainian Insurrectionary Army have no pretty paper promises, no plans you must live by. We want our freedom, not yours. We overthrew the Czar and his tax collectors, and threw Denikin and Wrangel into the sea. See what we can do! Let us destroy the new Czar and their commissarocracy! Comrades! Hasten to work for our cause, the enemy does not sleep and therefore you must not sleep! Only determined effort guarantees victory! together we can win!”

“Batko how?” Isador, their sort of priest answered. “Lenin and Trotsky have five million in their Red Army.”

“Not any more. Time and again your conscripted brothers in the Red Army mutiny! Last month the first brigade of Budenny’s Red Cavalry division came over to us in its entirety! Even the Kronstadt fleet have mutinied and are trying to overthrow them!” A loud sigh of shock went through the crowd. Since the revolution began, they had been the backbone of the revolution, the elite of the Red Army, roughly equivalent to the relationship between the Cossacks and the Czar. Few could accept that and most were stunned, so Makhno motioned the Kronstadt sailors present into stepping forward and testifying. The Kronstadt rebellion would have a massive effect across Ukrainia because the Kronstaders were mainly Ukrainian conscripts.

“Brothers and comrades now that the whites and their foreign armies have gone, like peasants all across Russia we can rise up against them!” He signalled to his orderly to unfurl the black flag of anarchy.

“Four hundred thousand live by this flag, Sixty thousand ride by it. Once they followed others, some were soldiers from Europe, others Reds, my translator was an early Bolshevik, many liked them at first, I did! Others found out by experience that Grigoriev and Petlura were frauds, some of you even wore this until days past.” He held up a white guard blouse to nervous laughter. No matter, believe in freedom now!” Because of the translating the Ukrainians were the first to cheer and shot their firearms in the air, and the Russians and Europeans did not need me to translate much.

“Who among you will be the first to ride with us?”

My translation was very fast and Ross was close: to my amazement he stepped forward, calm but resolute and clasped Makhno’s hand. “These are my people and I will lead them with yours in our drive to Moscow.”



“Then they are the first Mela Forest Regiment of the Makhnovite Insurrectionary Army and you are their elected colonel!”

More cheers resounded with Makhno and Ross shaking of hands and assorted signs of unity among the assembly.

That lunch Makhno, Galina, Fydor, Isador, myself and Makhno’s lieutenants met around the fire to plan strategy.

“We have over six hundred underfed, jaded horses a day’s ride north-east of here.” Galina began. “And with them are the many badly wounded and refugees, mostly widows and their children.”

Ross sighed. “How can we feed them?”

Makhno smiled confidently. “They have full rations for six weeks. They can set up as you did over on that ridge on the horizon and so not denude your section of the forest and protect your left flank for the victorious Reds may come from that direction, now that Pilsudski and Petlura have been defeated there. We already have other such bases in the great forest. Before advancing north we need more such bases for rest, recovery and replenishment. They will also serve to guard our rear and be reserves for the northward advance. Let us learn from Denikin’s mistakes, but not his politics!”

Ross nodded, clearly seeing that there was more to Makhno than brainless violence, banditry and charisma.

“You can raid another Red Army supply train, day after tomorrow, you are good at it. Only two days ride there and back. Take Zinada. Take her command.”

Everyone laughed gently or smiled at the innuendo in the pun, so did Ross and I, but he questioned seriously.

“Makhno what of the march to Moscow?”

“The train you raid and the three we raid all carry food, fuel, ammunition, medicine. All are needed both here and for that march. We

cannot live by plundering the peasant of what little they have, both for humanity's sake and ours."

"Plunder them and they will betray us." Isador added and the others nodded in knowing support.

"Whatever you cannot transport, give to peasants, their support remains crucial."

The meeting was over. I stayed with a long expressionless look at Ross, who read it correctly to stay, just as the others knew it meant that they should go. I waited till nobody was in hearing distance.

"Ross why did you volunteer to stay?"

"They are my people."

"No they are not. They are on the other side of the earth from your home. You are an English colonial aristocrat, a wealthy landowner and a cavalry officer with a reputation for courage and for being a sex maniac and a fool about women. It is no accident that you served the Whites so well."

"They and their cause are worthless and in the past. I served them very little and against Germans, not against Makhnovites or any peasants. I am a second son, my older brother owns the farm – farm you hear, not manor or castle or plantation - and my younger brother married one of the milkmaids; we did not even have regular servants. I am neither an aristocrat nor an anarchist."

He was truthful. Rebecca had been putting her understanding and need for glamorous association onto him.

"So? Why stay?"

"Have you seen the tourists or journalists who come to an unfamiliar land? They have their adventures and leave totally unscathed, blithely leaving the problems and devastation behind for the people who trusted them."

“That type came to us fascinated by Makhno.”

“I am not like them. Leaving that way means giving up shaving rather than look at myself in the mirror.

You say they are not my people, but in a way they are. They are my command and have served and obeyed and been loyal. We tilled the land, fortified it and lived there together. What commander deserts good troops or civilians who feed him and look to him for defence?”

“You recite the basic feudal code between peasant and knight. And that in the twentieth century remains what you are. No, more like a warlord. At least you leave me more aware of where we are placed with each other now.

Was last night about cementing the alliance? Or you two using me as a pawn? Armand off the board in exchange for waving Zinada goodbye?”

“No to all that. It was about attraction – and remains so.”

“Then you have very peculiar tastes.”

Later that day looking at myself naked in the looted full-length mirror after bathing that night reinforced that comment. My impossibly narrow body, bone revealing thinness, angular shoulders, small breasts, narrow pointed chin and nose. And it was not as if my face was of an unsullied charmer. I was a warrior, had killed often and it showed.

Knowing he would be back to his dugout, doing for once what middle class people spend their lives doing. They spend their lives continually musing on opportunities, themselves, their needs and their motivations or at most, the family: never the group, the village or society. Political people think of society, the way I do. These were things to tell him.

When he turned up I stood naked before the mirror and motioned him to stand behind me; he did so, nibbling my shoulder, running his fingers through my hair, that was lying across my breast. His breath

quicken, nervous tingling went through his touching fingers. He undressed quickly and we moved to the bed's edge. Without really thinking about it I pressed my naked chest into his chest, my legs to his and let him penetrate. This time I was aware of my sighs and gasps. The rhythms that started gently but were then as aggressive as the fastest horseback rides, the yells and the feeling that my heart was like a trapped bird fluttering around my chest and my body warming as if in front of a fire. His mouth was on the arch of my neck and when it was over, turning to face him it was clear our passions were equal. As we kissed until our mouths ached, then lying together, we rested.

“Well my favourite warlord, you have convinced me that you really do desire me, but now to know why, please.”

“Why do you think you are not attractive?”

“Because at every dance I was the last girl asked – and then it was by my brother. Perhaps you would like to hear my nicknames: Maypole, Famine on Legs, Scarecrow... And then there were the three sexual partners, the most passion-killing pimply boy on Moscow campus. The aristocrat who threatened to evict my family if I didn't and then told me I was a novelty act. Oh yes, the good comrade, whose eyes gleamed with enthusiasm - over my mapping skills. He thought the Bolsheviks were comrades... Comrade Budenny had him shot, shot for nothing.”

“Put them in the past, we are now.”

“Psychology was another university topic. There must be a reason....”

“And you must have your reason.”

“You are a very handsome man; I could barely believe it when you returned my glance. Ross, do I remind you of someone else? The Irish wife? She was something of a radical and a fighter Rebecca says.”

“Brionny and you are very different.”

*Then you are attracted to powerful, women with perhaps Rebecca as a contrast.*

He laid me on my back to start again. Tempting, but I had something to say.

“Rebecca sleeps alone and cries. Leave me for now and go to her-”

He went; at dinner we clearly had things to discuss, directly and briefly.

“What do you both think of every week, one pairing each? Any more will drain energy we need. Tonight, just sleep as tomorrow’s raid will drain our energies.”

They nodded agreeably. Soon I grew to like the warmth of his body next to mine that was very habitual and agreeable, not just for sex or company, for even summer nights were always a little cold. There was the new sensation of being penetrated and excited whenever I wanted it, none of the others were more than thrice; the strange but sweet feeling of getting to know a man’s body as well as my own, and his knowing mine, being joined to another either in huddle or sexual union regularly. There were strange moments, when things seemed to be happening to somebody else, but the strangeness passed with the months. He was making me see what the silly poems and songs and jealousies were about. This was relating, all the others were deluded or using.

If only politics were as successful. Things have been going very wrong since the Reds attacked us in the autumn of last year and the train raid showed how the situation was rapidly worsening for us.

Blowing the bridge and suddenly appearing from trenches dug and concealed the night before worked perfectly and the people on the train complied with our threats. When we opened the rolling stock there was nothing we expected: just excavators and bagged cement and rich looking foreign civilians.

We questioned the passengers and with some who used what sounded like English, it was as Ross translated. The news was bad.

“This coaling equipment is English, and these men are an English trade delegation setting up business with the Bolsheviks now that Russia has been made safe from the Kronstadt rebels, who have apparently been crushed.”

“Tell them of Lenin’s quote that when the time comes to hang the last capitalist, he will sell us the rope.”

To my surprise they laughed as they answered and Ross translated.

“They said only for the last ounce of gold in the last commissar’s treasury.”

“Let us shoot them.”

He would not, but was sharp with an excuse.

“Could lead to England sending in troops. Don’t we have enough enemies?”

True. As we tried to move northwards, we heard of the crushing of the Kronstadt rebellion, the abandonment of Trotsky’s hated militarisation of labour policy and weeding out of suspected subversives everywhere and Lenin’s New Economic Policy, which let the peasants in control, at least to grow and sell their produce. Foreign famine aid relief was distributed by the Bolsheviks – to the servile. The hated conscription and plundering were over, so many were willing to surrender, but the repression increased, but only against the dwindling numbers remaining who were anything but loyal. Rewards and bribes for informers and spies were more and more common – as were peasants telling us there was no reason to fight now. Others were more loyal to us or while not Makhnovites, rebellious for their own reasons. We encouraged them to the extent of combining Ross’s Siberians under Fyodor Potūgin with ours and getting them home to ferment rebellion there, but after reaching

Samara they vanished. That was the invidious dilemma: disseminate our forces to support rebellion and we dissipated our weak strength, fail to support rebels and they would not support us and eventually we would face Bolshevik Russia alone.

During the spring and summer the battles seemed endless until from the finger to the neck we ached from the use of pistol, sabre and rifle – and our numbers now far below our peak of nearly half a million, dropped faster than we could replace them, as Trotsky with his five million, knew.

“Can we win this?” Ross asked when we were alone, doing arm/shoulder massage. “We win every battle, but they seem to be winning the war. Battle after battle we see them run or take them prisoner, but there are always another Red brigade or division to replace the defeated one. Usually they just attack and retreat, rotate the divisions new for old, attack and retreat and do it again.”

“Yes Ross, riding beside you for months, fighting a hundred battles together, listening to reports of the Revolutionary Military Council and giving them myself has made me somewhat aware of these conclusions.” While not as patronising as others, he could be irritating at times: best to go into my committee voice. “Makhno and the committee estimate that we face ten times our number and they have tanks, armoured cars, aeroplanes, and armoured trains, these perhaps bought, looted or donated from the British and French. Gold, recruits, replenishments of war material from sources we cannot touch, fast electronic and radio communications and trains for quick transportation... they have tremendous advantages. We have mobility – or at least our cavalry do...” I was not facing facts; much of our infantry divisions and their artillery were already annihilated. He said so.

“As an outsider this sounds illogical. I thought Australian politics

could be vituperative and ruthless but...” He shook his head and raised his eyebrows. “Well for people who said they wanted to see an ultimately anarchist communist society the Bolshies put everything they have into a relentless campaign to exterminate Russia’s only anarchist-communist society, one that continually tried aligning with them. I am not fond of governments; nobody anarchist or Bolshie will safely collectivise my farm back home, but why won’t they let you do what you like with your farms, your mills, factories, trains whatever? If they did own these things and you were just bandits trying to destroy what they had made, that would make some sense, but they don’t own them.”

“Yet.”

He pondered and nodded in the beginnings of understanding.

“*They* are the thieves, *they* are the destroyers, *they* are totally out for themselves and to be so good at it *they* delude themselves and others with all their talk of equality and sharing and being simple workers. The world exists for them to plunder, rule and control. And to justify it and salve their consciences and maintain their conceited delusions they accuse us of what they do.”

“Ross, aristocrat or not, we might just make an anarchist of you yet. Bukunin and Kropotkin were both aristocrats.”

“How did a simple peasant girl learn such names?”

“She won a university scholarship to become a cartographer and first she read Kropotkin’s geographic and scientific works; then she read his anarchist works and those of an anti-war activist/journalist who described war’s horrors with Germany so graphically that she marched against the war in the big demonstrations of November 1916 and when the Bolsheviks talked like anarchists in next year’s revolutions she joined them.”

“And she left them when...”



“When Trotsky opened the front to Denikin in the summer of 1919 and said he would prefer to see Denikin rule Ukrainia rather than Makhno. Do you want to know the name of that anti-war journalist who wrote like a pacifist so heart wrenchingly during the first half of the world war? Leon Trotsky.”

Bitter laughter came as he put moss to the midriff bruise and ointment on the strained arms. One of our few genuine laughs in that disastrous summer campaign was when Budenny got himself caught in ambush. A blustery little martinet of a regular army Cossack who politically went whichever way the wind blew, he saw our decoy of half a dozen apparently harmless women nursing four wounded men under a black flag. With ridiculously wide curled moustaches bristling and soviet journalists watching to puff up such victories, he brandished his sword, announced that all who failed to follow his example were cowards and leading from the front he would charge them!

And he did. Uncut grass hid our brigade by the drainage ditch and his eyeballs enlarged in terror as far ahead of his men, he realised we were charging him and the supposedly helpless unarmed women were shooting at him.

Those journalists never wrote of the sight of their most highly rated and over-rated cavalry commander, their red Cossack General Simeon Budenny, galloping far off ahead of his fleeing division - leading from the front indeed, but in cowardly style!

The Reds usually fled when no secret police and commissars were in the back lines, but then clever Trotsky ordered that one in ten were to be shot if a unit retreated and if in a squad one deserted, the remaining nine went to Siberian labour camps. Really not one in ten wanted to fight us, but the days of 1919 when we had a war band of twenty thousand together, other larger separate commands and tens of thousands of

supporters more than we could arm, were gone. Attrition was hitting numbers, supplies, energy and quality, we were losing high numbers fast, particularly among those who led from the front, some who were just a little less important and revered than Makhno, who was also among the casualties, but a rare one in that he was evacuated to Romania for medical treatment at the end of summer. After being wounded more times than even he could recall, including six in one day and a bullet going from the neck through to the cheek, he was evacuated in a cart and semi-conscious, but promised to return.

So many good comrades were killed in battle or executed that nobody could recall them all, for by autumn we had lost close to twenty thousand battle dead or executed and the same number, mainly supporters unable to fight, were exiled to Siberian slave labour camps. By autumn we estimated that since the start in late 1917, ninety percent of our Ukrainian Insurrectionary Army, the Makhnovite movement, once numbering hundreds of thousands, had been wiped out.

And they achieved this, not just by incessant fighting, executions and deportations, but by raiding our villages wherever we were not there. Now we seldom had sex on campaign, sleep and energy were precious for those already physically exhausted, but sharing sex and battle, saving our lives at times, gave us an intense camaraderie. On return to his village, he would spend most sexual energy with eagerly awaiting Rebecca, although he never ignored me, and yet there was that moment when the weak point in a triad came.

He lay on his back, with me cuddled up to him, and with a soft breeze in the pines on a full moon night, we knew what romance was about. "I love you." I said it softly and he smiled and put his hand around my ribs. Every day since the start of spring had been a miracle that our lives still existed, but even miracles end and our merciless enemies were

somewhere not far off in that beautiful landscape. Tomorrow could be our last day, but I had made a success of my life, for I had found love, an unlikely love, but real.

The week that the leadership decided Makhno was to be evacuated we returned to the village, to see how autumn hibernation and harvest were under way, to get ammunition and collect our thirty wounded who should have been recovered by now and leave over twenty more. The Bolsheviks had finally found us. The dugouts were made into mass graves, with a notice on a grave cross which held a crucified Isador.

“197 ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE LIE HERE

SO PERISH ALL COUNTER REVOLUTIONARIES.

GENERAL FRUNZE. Commander in chief of the Southern Front

Anything made of timber had been burned, the granary, and all other food looted. A few survivors must have thought it safe to come out before it was, for sabred bodies, uncharred, lay among the ashes. Some were toddlers and one of the women was pregnant. Killing the families of Makhnovites was nothing unusual. Ross was not one to make great displays of emotion, but his face was harrowed. Like the returning others I had seen too many too close die to be upset any more.

We rode out on a forest path and they looked like a hallucination. Coming out of dense shrubbery was Rebecca, three other teenage girls, an adult male, two grannies and toddler children, all haggard. Stunned Ross got off his horse and hugged her.

“We were out collecting firewood when they came and we heard and hid.”

We could hardly go out of the forest to raid with these additions, nor head east, where a full division searched just for our command of seventy-six troopers, who without replenishment averaged six days food

half-rations and nine rounds of ammunition each. We headed deeper into the forest. As the wounded wanted to be taken to one of our forest hospital bases we headed west towards it. The first had been destroyed, so after eight days more riding west and exhausted, we found the second unharmed, but overcrowded with almost no medical supplies, few defenders and Ross and I the seniors among the survivors.

Rebecca and I talked, that night we three slept the sleep of the exhausted. In the morning Ross, me, Rebecca, the doctors and commanders of any rank had a conference.

“Ross your English gold and your bank account could get us the medical supplies, food, and ammunition we need. These officers could contact our forest smugglers and Makhno.”

“How?”

“Rebecca still has Romanian citizenship with documentation and you are her husband. They cannot refuse you entry, just a stranded English officer and his wife.”

“You will come?”

“To the border and there I wait. They will not let Russians or Ukrainians in. Makhno could with two hundred armed, but... Besides if we all cross who will continue the struggle? The Bolsheviks will not last.”

We rested another day but food was precious, so with an escort of twenty we rode west. Now we were in Western Ukrainia there were still some Petlurist gangs in the forest and subsisting refugees, so there was little we could scavenge. We found dead choked on leaves and bark and cannibalism sometimes happened. Like the autumn weather, the Reds were closing in. Rebecca knew what would happen and let me have the forest nights with Ross. Within sight of the Rumanian border, we went into a smuggler's dugout and conferred with the five there.

“We will wait for you here, if trouble comes, we can hop the border and I will leave a message at the British consulate.”

While hugging I knew that there would be no reunion and no continuing struggle beyond winter at the latest.

\*

Ross Clarke     Dniester River North-East Romania 17<sup>th</sup> September 1921

The border townspeople were gleaming-eye glad to take English sovereigns, accepted currency around the world, for theirs was inflated and food was more a medium of exchange. They were very accustomed to refugees, hardened more precisely, dividing them into those with great wealth they could fleece and poor pests: they pigeon-holed me in the first category and Rebecca in the second and they assumed much. After clothes and a meal, we bought what we could in that village, four rifles and a few hundred rounds, a few bandages, blankets and common medicines and two rafts of food, which we floated across the river at night after giving and getting the right signal, to do more we had to get to the banks of Budapest, not sit around on the banks of the Dniester; she would not come this way, not even for us.

Sadly, there was no need to return. We purchased a cart and were packing to leave at dawn when we heard the gunshots and yells and rushed back to the riverbank where a few villagers in dressing gowns, watched as the ridge where our secret dugout was being bombed and strafed by Red Army aircraft, while a full-strength brigade at least with armoured cars patrolled the river's edge to make sure none escaped our way. After strafing with machine guns another brigade with tanks then attacked what could have only been a blasted crater that once held twenty-six people who because they liked being free to make their own choices, were a mortal danger to these maniacs for control. Rebecca wept: I was numb.

\*

Telegram

25<sup>th</sup> September 1921

To Max Chapman

New Albion Eloura

NSW Australia

I am safe in Bucharest and coming home but will see Cuthbert in London first. Flights across Europe and a voyage, regular passenger flights do not go beyond Athens yet. Please wait a little longer.

Ross Clarke

\*

Ross Clarke

Bucharest 26<sup>th</sup> September 1921

There was no joy in full meals, fine hotel rooms, showers, sixteen-hour long sleeps or shopping, not even in our camaraderie, for after being treated like a gigolo for being thirteen years younger than Alessandra, now the assumption was paedophilia for being thirteen years older than Rebecca.

There were the waiters, the hotel clerks, the old biddies on park benches, always the same sneering looks and sometimes snide comments from powerless people who gained a little power through morality: a morality that we were free from in an anarchised forest. Suddenly Zinada's diatribes against middle class morality seemed all too true.

"Ross take me to Paris. People there are supposed to be more broad-minded."

"Certainly; we could stopover on the way to London."

"Could you give me some sovereigns for clothes, we look cheap, like refugees. And my uncle in New York needs to know... a telegram, yes?"

Rebecca got a hundred sovereigns. She smiled enigmatically: some alarm bells rung, but in a muffled way. At the station as we booked, she

suddenly kissed me, then stopped clutching tight.

“Oh stop Ross, look! Zinada!”

“Where?”

“There in the green hat!”

A green hat on a tall person did stand out amid the crowd and ran after her but the crowds were too thick, it took several minutes. I clutched her shoulder and she turned - and was in her seventies at least.

Walking back to Rebecca she stared at me tearfully but smiling – from the window of a moving Paris bound train holding both tickets.

Back at the hotel there was a post haste letter on the table:

Colonel Cuthbert

24<sup>th</sup> September 1921

Delemere Sandhurst

England

Dear Fellow,

Unlike many I rejoice at your survival and escape and knew you could do it. Unfortunately, you are perhaps just a little bit too tenacious and too good a soldier – or perhaps someone is. When you turn up for debriefing bring with you any papers you have on some English-speaking renegade, possibly Australian or a Ukrainian who has lived in Australia known as Captain Kangaroo. You may have crossed paths with him. The authorities, civilian and military are most interested in this character as he ambushed and damaged a train, our rented train, carrying valuable equipment not yet sold to the Bolshies with whom we now trade and invest. That supercilious villain Wrangel also wants to catch him and he pressures us, claiming he met him in good old Nova in 1918, but cannot recall hearing his name, he was always Captain Kangaroo. He claims to have given him an icon of the Virgin Mary! Command here consider Wrangel as dubious and dealing with him is called ‘wrangling.’ He

remains the only person who can identify Captain Kangaroo on sight.

This preposterous personage clearly cannot be you as he was a diehard anarchist, attacked both property and allies of his majesty the king (a treasonable offence) regularly and was bigamously married in some bizarre anarchist's ceremony to a teenage Jew and also to a renegade Bolshevik. At the time you would have been mourning for your wife.

Captain Kangaroo is more likely to be a mythic figure, Robin Hood stories transported and gathered around some nonentity who picked up English somehow. Even so, best turn up for an interrogation session. As soon as that finishes, please be a wise fellow, go home to the Uncle who wants to make you his heir and marry Rosalind, now widowed. You always talked of her in your sleep – in Gallipoli, Palestine and Nova.

You are welcome to visit. I am lecturing in military history, and need collaboration on so ruddy much in that last bizarre war.

A copy of your will and all your pay cheques have been forwarded by mail to the British consulate and you will confirm delivery by phone.

Cuthbert

Stuck onto this was a hasty handwritten note:

This is true. Even after having us both for hours it was Rosalind you talked of when asleep. We were not really man and wife so do not divorce, nobody still alive knows and nobody should. When I said "Perhaps you can talk me into going to Australia" you just gave a half-hearted nod without a smile and then knew to look after myself first, to plan for university in France if I ever got out of that hell hole and that really what you really really wanted was Rosalind and home and Zinada knew it also. 'We have to be political because we are poor and oppressed, that woman and home represents the ruling class freedom he knows and



will go back to. I do not know why he fights here and neither does he.'

So go home and be what you wish or were born into. We know you found us attractive, were kind and sharing and saved our lives many times. Thank you and go.

\*

My effective immediately army resignation went straight to the English consulate and a brief, innocuous and vague explanation of being missing in action which they legally require. I insisted Captain Kangaroo was Wrangel's invention to annoy British officers, which was the truth, if not all of it. My letter also contained a bank cheque for their remaining sovereigns and replacement costs for non-military expenses. Tom Caufield's lucrative military career, the 1918 disposal of the Australian Light Horse horses by bullets or sale that Max wrote of and the train raid were all convincing me that war was ultimately about money.

Four days later while still recuperating mentally as much as physically and planning the trip home there was an important message in the hotel. This one came from an incongruous looking, nervous peasant waiting in the foyer. The desk clerk motioned him to me. He handed me a water-damaged envelope with the words TAKE THIS LETTER TO MAJOR ROSS CLARKE AT THE BRITISH EMBASSY BUCHAREST AND GET 10 MORE SOVEREIGNS LIKE THESE

It was in her handwriting. "Where did you get this?"

"Forty sovereigns."

When paid he bit each one before he handed me the letter.

"It was in a bottle in the Dniester with ten sovereigns." Then he left. It was all in rushed block letters on the back of one of her worn maps:

EIGHT OF US LEFT HOURS BEFORE WITH THE SUPPLIES YOU MANAGED TO GET. WE SAW THEM COMING AND WHILE WE HID THE ONE WHO TOOK THE WARNING MESSAGE

PROBABLY DIED WITH OUR COMRADES. WE WILL NOT RETREAT TO ROMANIA – AND CANNOT. THEY ARE SECURING THE BORDER BETTER THAN MOST JAILS WHICH IS WHAT RUSSIA IS AND WAS OUTSIDE THE GREAT FOREST. WE WILL STAY THERE FREE UNTIL THEY FIND US BUT NEVER SURRENDER.

DO WHAT YOU CAN FOR MAKHNO AND THE RETURNED COMRADES THROUGH JAN GOLIK BOOKSELLER JEWISH QUARTER BUCHAREST. HE CANNOT BE AN AGENT AS I HAVE SEEN HIM EXECUTE BOLSHEVIKS. TRUST NONE OTHER. THEN YOU HAD BEST LEAVE RUMAINIA. ALREADY BOLSHEVIK AGENTS ARE WORKING ABROAD AND PERMEATE OTHER SOCIALIST ORGANISATIONS. YOU WILL PUT YOURSELF IN DANGER FOR NOTHING. I FOUND PERSONAL HAPPINESS WITH YOU FAREWELL, YOU WERE A TRUE LOVER AND A GREAT SOLDIER BUT NO TRUE ANARCHIST AND HOPELESSLY MEDIEVAL-ARISTOCRATIC, PERHAPS THE LAST FRUIT FROM THAT DYING OLD TREE WAS THE BEST.

## Z

The bookshop was closed, permanently, it and the pedestrians who rushed by it gave off a sense of danger and after seven years of war I knew not to distrust my instincts and they were soon proved right. A sweeper bent over, passed by. “Jan was arrested yesterday. Go and quickly.” she muttered. The third woman to tell me that in two days.

\*

“Are you absolutely sure? English can be difficult.”

When depositing my pay cheque the foreign currency teller shrugged his shoulders and handed me the ledger receipts and the original cheque from an unfamiliar company. Instead of just the expected original

ten thousand from Max there was a deposit equalling eighty-two thousand English pounds made on the 28<sup>th</sup> August 1919 and two others made for very similar amounts made on the same day in the following years?

“These dates fall on days when the usual returns on investments are made.”

“But I have no investments.”

“Perhaps you would like to see a deputy manager.”

A servant led me into a massive room with thick rich red Turkish carpets and maroon overstuffed leather chairs. There was lead light in the windows, cedar wainscoting on the high marble walls and silver service tea, coffee and accompanying luxury food brought out by a liveried waiter. When as a joke I asked him if he could do anything about the cold he rapidly returned with a brazier he nervously rushed to start, heated foot bricks, a blanket and a scarf. It was luxury, but the luxury of a mausoleum.

This room must be among the quietest places in Europe. Forests are not quiet places, maybe in the dead of winter on a still day, when the wind does not blow. Usually the birds, squirrels and other forest creatures make their calls or rummage through leaves, which if dead make noise and sometimes winds roar with a malevolent ferocity. The Ukrainian world suddenly conjured itself up in a wild, vivid, indeed anarchic, collage of fragments of memory:

The clomp clomp clomp of an exhausted horse on as it carried a battle-fatigued rider through a dark night with nowhere to go.

The steppe-straight horizon made crooked as my horse stumbled in a charge.

The hate filled and fanatical determination on the face of a blue-eyed blonde commissar just as my sabre slashed a red line across his face.

Rebecca with her back arched, as we thrust against each other in

abandon.

The view of the plain in summer, flaxen and green patches as looking down from a rise as we laughed to see terrified Budenny leading his men in fleeing.

The autumn wind whistling off rocky ridges as we rode back to camp with plundered food, laughing at the thought of the delighted faces when we turned up at our hungry camp.

The smoke coming off roast beef browning and the darkening fennel across it and through the wispy fire, the smiling faces of those warming themselves round the fire as they waited.

The oozy feel of clutching cold, grey, sodden clay as we pulled handfuls of it out to make the dugouts.

Cuthbert and I indulging his pawky humour as we exchanged Wrangel's icons;

Alessandra offering me my sword.

Rebecca clutching my boots, her red tresses in swirling patterns.

The wild dancing and music as Makhno's men danced to the balalaikas and everyone encircled and clapped laughing.

Rebecca whirling, smiling in that dance, her hair red, clothing and coins whirling in a blurred image;

Myself on my back with Rebecca's long red hair tingling my skin on the stomach, legs and thighs as she slowly, rhythmically and carefully gave me sexual pleasure.

Zinada kneeling in the forest, only three weeks past, holding out her aching arm to be massaged;

The view from our dugout of the flax-coloured grass pasturage and the dense forest with the mild blue sky;

The patterns of the timber in our roof, the grey weathered underside of what was once a wagon;

Rebecca, Zinada and I on the soft fox fur bed of the dugout, me on my back, they on each side, our hands clasped on my chest; but the mood was of camaraderie, the sensual feel of the dawn summer sunlight soaking into us, peace.

The pale, muddy and turquoise swirls and eddies of the Dniester as we looked across to the Ukrainian shore on a grey cloudy autumn day.

The recalled smell of a combined coal and pine forest fire as our villagers sat singing and telling their stories on a spring night.

The smell seemed so vivid because it was the brazier burning the same pine; the reverie was over, images from a world even more dead than this mausoleum. Dead as the Plantagenet world or my childhood Howard Pyle pirate books.

“Would you like some reading materials while you wait sir?”

The break was made: the past was gone. Forty more minutes went on reading banalities of regulated urban existence in the *London Times* until the manager of Romania’s largest bank arrived. He was almost as differential as his butler, even apologetic when he asked for identification, which he examined, extremely carefully. He asked for and got military codes. From a folder he showed me photos of myself, some at our Nova wedding, and documentation of my career.

“Please show me your patience for very good reasons. Soon we phone Colonel Cuthbert, Max Chapman, Reverend McPherson, his sons and your brother; he remains resident in London at present. They will do separate voice recognitions and personal questions. While we wait we will go through more necessary questions. You realise you were to be presumed dead this coming New Year’s Day?”

There were about eighty things, Alessandra, Cuthbert, Max and Zelda, the McPhersons and Robert would know and he ticked them off the list as he got answers. I volunteered more information only they

would know. The bank manager stared at me almost expressionlessly, but he was assessing and asked for my signature to be written in front of him and compared it to mine on the wedding certificate. Then came the phone calls and we chatted and they confirmed.

“Can anybody in Romania confirm that you are Ross Clarke?”

“Nestor Makhno.”

He laughed in great peels and slapped his knee.

“Your wife knew you would escape. The dividends that show in your joint account come from some of her investments.”

“Dividends, surely this must be the total amount. She said there would be some money in Europe.”

“Some money.” He repeated; his voice was level his eyebrows arched and a smile in his eyes. “My dear young fellow. Have you wondered why I, the richest man in Romania outside royalty, have spent three hours of my time personally checking that you are indeed Ross Clarke, husband of Alessandra Rostov?”

“She really was very rich?”

“You are supposed to ask how much.”

“Enough to buy a steak for dinner it seems.”

“We have not calculated with total accuracy yet, land values, taxes, fluctuating shares values and currencies ... Despite these uncertainties a conservative estimate would be around twenty million English pounds.”

\*

Book Six

Millionaire

September 1921

Ross Clarke

Bucharest 26<sup>th</sup> September 1921

*“Twenty million pounds.”*

That most solid of rooms seemed to spin. The financial implications awaited. What hit me was the love in doing that, in giving me everything and the shame in thinking that she had been a gold digger. More than anything I wanted to tell her that I understood now. All the images of her came back and there was not one that was unfavourable; sweet memories of our pillow talk in Australia about kangaroos.

“Uhm they are more common up on the great plains, sometimes we get wallabies at the creeks or forests.”

“What this vallaby?” She smiled.

“Like a kangaroo except they are smaller and live in forests and mountain ranges, not the grassy plains.”

“Ah, will we travel on these plains and see the kangaroos bound?”

“Oh yes certainly in the early morning mist would be best.”

But we never would. Now I realised what was lost and that there was no way back to the past or to bring the dead back, not even with twenty million pounds.

The hollow but extraordinary realisation came that the world was at my feet, while I was recalling conversations about kangaroos and wallabies.

“Well my young major, you may buy the whole island of Tasmania. Or if you are partial to steaks, cover that whole island with one enormous one and eat your way through.”

“Thank you but I am not hungry.”

\*

Taking his advice and doing the classic grand tour of Western Europe (which from the Renaissance on was had been the sign of a wealthy and cultivated gentleman) was a big mistake. It was supposed to



take my mind off my worries, but Athens was another Nova, a gigantic refugee camp in a savage territorial war with the Turks, as if I had not had enough of war, refugees and Mustafa Kemal, who the Greeks in their supposed wisdom decided to attack. Spain, Germany, Italy and Austria were being torn apart between Bolsheviks and militaristic nationalists, both sides were bullies in uniform for whom three or four years of the Great War were not enough.

Weary of all that, I remembered the Romanian banker's better advice that Switzerland was the most beautiful and serene place on earth, a perfect place to recuperate, and enjoy scenery. She had left me an estate there. He was half-right, astoundingly beautiful scenery was viewed by many a recuperating rich invalid, but I did not want to be one of them, even if I could live very, very comfortably on dividends of hundreds a week forever in a world where sixty pounds a week was a very comfortable wage, about four times that of a factory worker, twice that of a master tradesman. All that money could not buy me serenity. Life in the Gallipoli trenches, the interview with Brionny, one daughter dead and the other vanished, the massacred forest village, Grahame, the quarrels with my mother, worries about the women in my life came and worried at me, like snarling dogs. Oddly the more I tried to relax the more intense the painful memories became. One day while trying to appreciate the lake scenery I saw my own face reflected, in the still water, blank, yet haunted.

I had to do something apart from automobile driving lessons and reading books that seemed pallid after what I had been through. At Christmas Robert was tactfully asking for investment funds.

Half a million went on financing Eloura Air, Robert's new airline and two hundred thousand more for buying back Clarkestead. Although the only immediate benefit were free flights and flying lessons, no

overdone sentimentality was working here, airmail and air passengers were a booming business and the frantic rush was for big companies with international connections, not broken-down war pilots in broken down planes working from briefly rented paddocks.

“Thank you ever so much.” Alice smiled with tears in her eyes when they visited in Switzerland, with her distinguished father and four-year old toddler Eustace, and twin boys, nearly two when they arrived, James and Craig, both named for Sir Eustace’s friend and political ally. In late March they came from Australia and stayed with me at Alessandra’s chalet on a ridge just a few miles outside Interlaken and we enjoyed strengthening spring sun on the patio. An unwelcome topic, my mother was brought up by Alice,

“She is rather dreadful, isn’t she? Never thought Ulster politics could be so very boring.”

“We will buy a villa with big gardens and a watery harbour view in Mossman.” Robert contributed.

“And let us hope that the proposed Sydney Harbour Bridge will not ruin the quiet and the view!” Alice added. “We do so like Sydney Harbour, all those quiet little suburbs on the water, but the grandness of it in the views and everything so close by, without nutter’s politics!”

She had made an apparently good recovery from the war’s horrors – as long as it was not mentioned, but most of us were like that. All four of us were on the airline’s board of directors – and nobody else.

“Our focus will not be Europe in detail” Sir Eustace explained. “For the past two years mail and passengers were being flown regularly between Paris and London. A German businessman, Junkers, that is actually his name, has set up a regular European airmail line – and in the world’s first all steel aeroplane!”

“So, we fly to?”

“Across half the world, the empire will be our game. Galway to Dunedin and we don’t mean the Scottish one, via Paris, somewhere in Switzerland, Cairo, somewhere Persian, Karachi, Bombay, Burma, Singapore, Darwin, Brisbane and Sydney.”

“That sounds visionary.” That was all I could say.

“Now you wanted to discuss an idea that will save us money?” Sir Eustace gave me the opening.

“Alessandra left me what we would call stylish tenements that they call pensions: one each in Geneva, Interlaken, Nice, Naples, Madrid, Barcelona, Beirut, Alexandria, Lisbon, Edinburgh, Vienna, Constance, Venice and two each in Paris and London. The design remains essentially the same, the least of them goes up three stories and all from the drawings at least, all have a ground floor which could easily be made into an office and storage room for the mail and the parcels.”

“Pity the passengers of the future could not be stored so easily.” Sir Eustace.

“They can be.”

The three of them laughed in uneasily puzzlement to be polite and it was a moment to be quick.

“In these pensions office staff and pilots get free accommodation as a perk on condition that they accept calls any time; good for emergencies, late bookings, saves us searching for late staff, absentees will drop. With the spare bedrooms they go to the airline’s invited guests; passengers we like, the ones who do not cause trouble...”

Alice laughed. “That works as some incentive for not causing trouble and problem people cause stress, delays, accidents...”

“All of which lower profits, you seem to be developing business sense.” Robert added, and Sir Eustace deflated that, in the nicest possible way.

“Excellent idea – as long as we carry a passenger in two-seaters, perhaps even four, but already Fokker has ten-seater passenger planes on the drawing board – and somehow those people wealthy enough to pay for air travel will not go for bunks.”

“Oh. good enough till then Daddy, we have years yet, well they haven’t even got the air mails worked out yet... or British government subsidies for carry the empire's mail... And when it does happen, we will just lament the good old days when air travel was for gentlemen and their friends – and still give the first old customers a room.”

“It is standard practice for business leases to disallow sleeping on premises.”

Sir Eustace would not allow himself, his company or his daughter, a free victory: a dangerous fellow to be in business with.

“Which is why I still own: only the offices and storage areas are on a peppercorn lease to the company. The other storeys are mine.”

He suddenly smiled. “Could be an idea, in fact I have pensions in Dublin, Gibraltar, and Galway which also fit this situation.”

He became pensive, then curt, but not with us.

“An Eloura Airlines office might survive Irish collectivisation where the Dublin home of Sir Eustace Hughes would not.”

“Oh Daddy, the Irish are not going to collectivise!”

“Dearest daughter, who knows what an Irish government will do?”

“I do!” Alice was now the curt one. “They will squabble among themselves and sing songs about the good old days and not do much else, oh they are not worth the worry.”

Sir Eustace disliked reprimands. Even more, he disliked discussing the Irish situation now his side was losing: the British and Irish were only stalled about which type of independence to get, so he rapidly got onto his escape topic.

“We should buy more of these pensions in Cairo, Aden, Masqat, Karachi, Bombay, Colombo, Singapore, Darwin, secure the bases and when the Smith brothers prove it can be done, that a letter or a parcel can be flown Dublin to Dunedin NZ, we are ready.”

We nodded agreeably and he smiled again as he continued. “Robert will do what he is good at: pioneering those new air routes, realising Rhodes’s great Cape to Cairo dream, but in the air, not by rail. Some fellow has already flown Cairo to Khartoum, you must rush.”

Robert just nodded, accepting the gentle push for personal publicity. The war had also changed him. Remembering the loud, pompous young Duntroon cadet who came home in 1909 was a contrast: here he was barely saying three words together, very much leaving the public stage of the business to his father-in-law and wife. Even with his pioneering flights between cities, which were as much about publicity for the airline as testing the conditions, he tried to recede into the background, talking about the plane, the conditions, and weather, anything but himself. Soon Sir Eustace and Alice knew to be at airports for the personal angles, or he would fly a two-seater with one of them as the passenger as they would do the talking. The press were happy with that: they were both photogenic and good talkers, to boot. Sir Eustace was already famous and Alice was vivacity personified. Something, perhaps the war, perhaps the 1917 scandal, had changed him. He was beyond circumspect, wary even; and the press, except for the occasional eager new young fellow, were frostily polite, if that.

“Going to keep working out of here?” Robert asked with that wary, just concealed dislike. Some of my musings must have been showing on my face.

“The housekeepers are a couple who have stayed here alone for so long that they think of the place as theirs and me as an intruder. They

thought better of me after making arrangements to rent it out to rich Americans soon.”

“Ah, yes, servants are not easy to find these days, and when found are not what they were-” Sir Eustace nodded the tired old nod of a tired old man to himself, “but then neither is the world, The Czar lies in an unknown ditch somewhere, the Kaiser thinks himself lucky to survive as a Dutch woodcutter, Emperor Karl of the Austrians feeds seagulls on some rocky isle in the middle of the Atlantic and the rabble have their palaces while Lloyd George taxes and taxes and dreams up more regulations for flights.”

He paused looking into the fire. “All good reasons why we need to set up company registration here.”

You mean in Interlaken?”

A very Pleasant place but who has heard of it? Headquarters need big city locales for recognition and credibility. In Geneva, you get both and in the most placid, unchanging, untaxed place on earth. Who knows where these turbulent times will end?”

We all agreed with his sensible suggestion and retired to our rooms.

I left the registration red tape and local sightseeing to them and enjoyed the spring sun and the best views and air anyone could hope for - while waiting on detective’s reports.

Albert Moon had been a government official and was becoming rich and powerful. Even with the truce in Ireland holding Brionny was still inside a jail. It took a great many lawyers and many gifts on the side to get her out, but by May we did, with me in the background. Rebecca was where she wrote she would be in that last note, at university in Paris. I ended up there, strolling the university corridors, getting quizzical stares from students and staff, especially while hiding behind a pillar because she was coming down the avenue.

She was striking: her long hair flowed in tresses behind her and she had a stylish black coat on and a matching beret and lace up boots with a wide, clearly expensive tessellated canary yellow, red and purple scarf that oddly and strikingly colour-matched a maroon skirt and blouse laced and edged in canary yellow, both in the new fashion of high cut dress and low-cut top. She had a carry bag full of books over one shoulder and she was radiant with the radiance that comes from youth finding a wonderful new world that can so easily reflect them – and the adoring attention of all around her. There was a thin, wispy bearded, very good-looking boy on her arm as bright as she was and I could see what she was becoming, one of these new women, emancipated, self-confident, career orientated.

It was good to see her happy and that was it. Wisdom dictated returning fast to one of my inherited three- storey brownstones in this city before checking Alessandra's estates in England and Ireland and then rescuing Max. The brownstone was a long walk away, so after ordering coffee and lunch at a street corner café, I mused over what to do with this brownstone and what to do for Rebecca.

She came striding across the street, quiet deliberately coming for me and a wry, tolerant smile on her face. She sat down without being invited and ordered self-confidently faultless French, speaking to me in not faultless English.

“Now my turn to follow you. You were expected and app- What word? One like the second like – a synonym for grateful.”

“Appreciate.”

“Appreciate your tact in hiding behind the pillar. Fortunately, the war has left many neurotic, and they are always so very ob.... obvious, even when unlike most in le derelict's clothes, they were le finest possible suits. You were lucky not to be arrested. Parisian police are notoriously ...ur... difficult, yes.”

“You are starting to get a French accent.”

“Ha! I even think in French! Well, mostly. Yiddish is remembering primary school and Russian and Ukrainian...” She sighed. “Like almost the whole world I try to forget le recent conflicts are spassé, but also those languages, and for reasons much good, yes?”

I nodded while sipping and gave some change to some approaching bedraggled beggar with the traumatised look she had just mentioned.

“Those who do not forget le guerre - en English war yes?” I nodded “and live for now end up like hem - or them.”

She nodded down the block to a hectoring, soapbox orator in some quasi-military black uniform with an audience of four and a French flag behind him with black jagged lightning in the centre.

“You like Paris?”

“Except for the Russian refugees, hordes of them. The steppes must be empty. They recollect a time passé, that is like a dream now, mon Cher.”

“There is only one piece of news I have from that time and it is good.”

I showed her the note from Zinada and she was overjoyed, smiling and laughing with an adolescent’s excitement. When she calmed down I asked her if there was anything she needed.

“Can I keep your sovereigns?” Again, I nodded. “Merci. Mon uncle Manny sent a thousand dollars from America and they stretch here – perhaps until my degree ends. He is more generous than rich. Could we repay?” She gave me his name and it went on the cheque, and Rebecca put it in her wallet. She became thoughtful but the cheer did not end. “I am happy that you offer but am also happy to be an ordinary student. These stylish clothes and buying my own textbooks – well already this attracts the... the ones who expect you to buy their lunch... More money



and more of that, more envy, more gossip, more problem and big time, yes?”

“Certainly. Would free rent help?”

“Pardon, que rent?” I explained rent. Her face brightened.

“Rent prēeté gratiutement/ Oui, merci!” Certainly, indeed – but, Ross this is mystère - p-puzzle - yes?”

Suddenly we realised that we had a youthful group around us and as usual they were puzzled and dubious about me: father, uncle, sugar daddy?” Some came from the hallway, including the handsome one Etienne, who insisted on paying. She introduced them by name and they took a seat and I ordered for them. Most looked like a free meal was a gift from God and that I was nearly as enigmatic. Rebecca was heading that way, trying to work out how best to introduce me. She spoke in French first and then English.

“Ross brings me good news, one we thought was dead, a very good friend remains alive.” She indicated the note and passed it round, to my puzzlement and theirs and then she understood. “Ah the note is in Russian, so many languages, I forget that others...”

Smiling, she looked at the others, who were beginning to understand and were definitely not smiling now. Rebecca’s smile was beginning to fade as she saw the wall go up. This new sexual revolution was apparently limited to clothes and reading about sexual matters, not acts: still she tried, and her face had a gentle appeal about it.

“Ross saved my life many times over and we were lovers for nearly two years. We declared our relationship at a public gathering. That was the way things were done then, there were no real priests to perform marriages, no paper for certificates.... C-est mai qui choisi de faire.”

She spoke in French to emphasize unity with them to get them on side, but did not forget me.

“I just told them ‘It was my choice to do.’ Yes!” Then she faced them.

“We were just discussing the legalities of separation and property division but a statement is no marriage, so there can be no legal b- bind and no ali-alimony involved, he has offered, pousuite, but no, everything all very amiable. We are sophisticat, oui?”

Nobody was smiling or even accepting of what had once been. The glares were sullen with dislike and contempt. Etienne had his fists clenched and muttered something in French and one of the girls with a fixed sneer said in English: “So if all so very amiable, we can leave now?”

One of the boys had the hard glittery eyes, direct stare and fixed sneer of the bully and poked his finger in my chest several times while saying a good deal loudly. I got “perfidious Albion indeed” and “young girls.” Rebecca spoke back rapid fire, starting off worriedly, and a scrutinising look came across his face. A little nervously with sneers, he left, not turning his back.

The worried waiter came out speaking rapidly in French and then to me.

“Please leave, Monsieur, no charge, just leave.” Rebecca answered.

“In a minute, wait for me at the Black Cat Café, everybody please.” Etienne was most reluctant: Rebecca had to ask three times with increasing firmness saying was no danger to her and she waited until she saw them sitting away,

“If you wish for more scenes like that or getting worse stay in Paris. That scene decides it, no apartment, gratuitments, allowances whatever, none! Nobody likes a sad old ghost at a happy kid’s party; especially when the party is to get over fantômes - ghosts: do not spoil it for me. I love Etienne, not you. You are too old and sad and not European, not

sophisticate, nor good for anything but war, money, sex and misery. You made me a woman, let me be an adolescent.”

She walked off. I watched, clenching a glass, she left her opened bag. It had some lecture notes, a poster for a Parisian jazz club with imported American black performers, gold tipped cigarettes, and a copy of the rebellious new generation’s bible, Scott Fitzgerald’s novel from the year before last, *This Side of Paradise*. I had skimmed it on a bored rainy Interlaken evening and found it self-indulgent, self-absorbed, self-righteous and juvenile, but also witty and shrewd in its attacks, all like the youth rebellion itself, like the group just seen. Today was May 4th 1922. It was only eight months since we crossed the Dniester, leaving war and Makhnovite anarchism behind: she had remodelled herself fast. I wrote her name and university on a note while the embarrassed waiter watched me put down a large tip.

“What did she say in French to the loud one.”

“Basically Monsieur, to stop.”

“And less basically?”

He sighed and repeated that I should go. I put down a waiter’s annual wages.

“I have nothing against you Monsieur. My wife is eight years younger and we married when she was eighteen. I see many older men and younger women here. Sometimes no using, sometimes the man uses, sometimes the woman...”

“She told him?”

“That you had killed about two hundred men that she knew of, five in front of her within two minutes. She was terrified of you and only did what she had to survive and now wishes she had preferred death.”

I looked over to where she was bent over weeping while those around her had their hands on her shoulders and glared at me.

*“You are too soft, you shouldn’t have let him run off into the forest.”*

*“Oh do it again Ross, oh why, why, why can’t you stay erect as long as I need?”*

*“Ross you prude, why won’t you try doing this?”*

*“I don’t mind being on one side while Zinaida is on the other, but nothing more”:*

But none of those scenes had witnesses in Paris. Nor were they expedient to her confabulating or what her peer group would accept.

London could only be better than Paris and it was. The Regent Street pension was rented out, but the prestige of such an address for the English headquarters of the airline was worth more and had no trouble moving into Alessandra’s North London villa while the airline was keeping me happily busy; it was actually pleasure to be planning air routes and timetables, learning to fly and drive, signing up pilots watching test flights, winning and dining the necessary connections, suddenly time speed up. The visit to Cuthbert went well, I gave a guest lecture that corroborated much of what he said – and passed over much more, but as the questions from his students demonstrated, that is how history gets written and legends fill in those gaps. I was becoming a legend: so did I really marry a Russian princess, become a Robin Hood in the great Ukrainian forest and was I really nominated for the Victoria Cross thrice in one day?

After meeting Rebecca, meeting Brionny might be a cause for caution and some time passed before getting a reply, I corresponded, but now it was her turn to be in the middle of a mad war.

\*

Brionny Clarke

Kilmainham Goal Dublin May 18<sup>th</sup> 1922

The jail gates opened for me, but my survival ‘twere a hollow victory. There being few professions open for them who are just out of

Kilmainham Goal and knowing none but horses in a city bein' mainly for cars now, I was fer et. Bein' thirty an' having me radicalism burnt out an' seein' more clearly, meant I had few connections with tha radicals, especially as me father, exultant at what we had won, died of just wearing out at eighty-six. Bein' the daughter-in-law of Rachel Clarke and tha spurned enemy of Commandant Donal Shaw, him who was goin' ter be somethin' along tha lines of assistant minister of justice, meant me bein' hated by extremists at both ends. Tha' did not mean I were moderate.

Moderates are always a weak force in Irish politics and gettin' weaker as et seemed them Brits would invade if we did na take their offer of swearin' loyalty ter their king en return fer self-governin.' Self government their way meaning Dominion status fer three quarters of Ireland an' their getten' permanent possession of predominantly Protestant Ulster. Even them who took tha moderate stance of agreein' ter this offer held ter their view extremely. If tha British did not invade they might ha' ter crush tha Republicans themselves to get whatever they could. Personally, I thought tha British offer, bad though et be, twere all we could get, but upon sayen' so found meself tha only one in me family who did. They saw me as a traitor as well as a slattern an' pervert and me own sister Maeve threatened to put a contract out on me life if I sided with tha Brits in tha invasion ter come. Haven na such intention, myself, I still saw many a former radical including Donal Shaw, workin' with their bankers and gettin' weapons an' uniforms from them, ready ter do their work fer personal gain.

Jenny visited sometimes since coming back from America in 1916. She wrote ter me a few days before me release for ter make me manager of her second husband's hotel. They lived in Donegal; he being one of tha very few to ever achieve the Irish dream of makin' et rich in America an' returnin' home ter live like a lord. Me reputation spread an' moralists

insisted on me sacken.’ For a laugh not intended, they made their appeals ter Jenny, a good laugh that, an’ one much needed these days.

She visited Dublin a month later ter see how was doin’ an’ I was honest when she was direct.

“Be it tah yer benefit?” She asked that about the new job.l.

“It be a roof over me head and a wage a woman can save on, but troubles ne’er end.”

“Ireland’s new president would say the same!”

“We have tha’ problem, regular brawls over ter take Britain’s offer or no.”

“So what do ya do with yar traitors?”

I merely sighed and she mistook et as I knew she would: Jenny, still so loyal, energetic, and simple.

“I wish ter leave Ireland.”

“Glory be child, we are a nation just on our feet!”

“Et is complicated....”

“Has et ever been anythen’ else? If et’s a holiday yer want, surely, yer got that prison pallor and lethargy an’ like all who get et, yer been made sad, but first help us sort out these traitors who would wreck us an’ everythen’ we ever tried tah do.”

Poor stupid, loud, immature Jenny. It was clear now, she would be fifteen forever. Assumin’ I was on her side when I was unsure what et were, probably Republican, but like Michael Collins and Donal, so many of them most fiery had gone moderate, so there was no tellin.’

Imprisonment makes yer cagey and so I was with her, when yer own family threaten yer with a contract on yer life, none gets trust. In jail after bein’ chest slashed for being a toff with me half English accent and book readin’ et were better ter stay with the west coast peasant girls and got my childhood accent back and never read or talked of tha officer husband.

There was only money, et bein' the only safety and surety en this world. In solitary the ants were what I studied and there were lessons ta be learned there surely. People are like ants, blind, hardworking fer no purpose that benefited them, beyond tha subsistence needed ter benefit their drones and royalty, hostile ter any but their own exact kind and unable ter relax. I were nert gunna be an ant any more. Stupid or no, I tried warning her.

“Yer heard Donal Shaw speak of late?”

“Had it read tah me by me husband, still na much on tha readen' stuff. Did yer hear what should be done with adulterous women, unfaithful wives an' harlots when we get our government?”

“First the public whipping, then tha imprisonment, then deportation.”

“Bet yer life deportation whone be tah Australia.” She smiled knowingly and continued “Bit tah much like the old colonial days; people might wake up tah how little has changed under them Free State pro-treaty bunch o' mongrels.”

*She is Republican. Keep her away from me family or she finds out.*

“An' Brionny, et's a certainty that none will make et tah Eloura an' hear of his wide an' weird taste in women.”

“Or here Jenny; we know an' that means he'll shut us up anyways. More jail, maybe a knife in tha back some dark night, cor Donal! Tha deputy minister of justice candidate! He'd be a laughen stock if what we know got around. Better go oversea again, what y're say?”

“Yer half right, he's a menace likely ta do as yer say – but we got a better solution, toss that bench of traitors in the Liffey River, put 'em behind bars they like fer others, but we start with fighten' against that bloody mongrel traitor's treaty!”

Best ter just nod, hopin' that she would leave, she would be more trouble, not a solution, just like the national election over the treaty fer dividin' of Ireland ter get some independence that was leading to punch ups in tha streets and in me pub.

“Look Brionny with money yer can solve anything!”

Then why not give me a ticket to Canada?”

“Perhaps what I need is a - !”

“A Republican flag over thah front door and six good men tah keep them traitors out! The worst of the lot are them Free State army fellows with their British uniforms and weapons and pay-packets, tells yer which side they are on! Nothin' but shirkers when the fightin' was on and bullies now!”

She held an outraged face immobile. When I didn't answer she continued.

“I'll be here tah give yer support an' a hand! For certain yo do look worn out!”

“No Jenny, et is alright, I will manage.”

“But jail has made you look tired!”

“No Jenny, et is alright, I will manage.”

“Nah 've been putten tah much on yer, I'll help.”

So on Election Day she turns up with her Republican flag an' burly Republican guards who looked like the type never to leave me, the till or me beer alone. She had just enough brains to see that and took custody o' finances, she did not suspect me and should have, fer I wanted tha' money to escape – and from her. For the first few days pro-treaty Free Staters still drank there, either to sus us out or for them verbal and physical slangin' matches that preoccupied Ireland these days. They got more than they bargained fer.

“Jenny. is it true that you and this here Brionny are a pair of lesos?”



“Haven’t got back into et yet for years, well at least with her, she being a guest of his majesty, but fer sure! Maybe a thousand times us an’ Rosalind.”

The room went eerily quiet and their stares lasted.

“And what precisely darlin’, do lesbians do?”

She told them, precisely. Then in front of men who were going to vote him into office, she cheerily described in equally precise detail what she and Donal Shaw did.

*Silly silly girl. You are signing our death warrants.*

That wise thought came again a few days later when papers announced that Donal was a last-minute withdrawal from his candidature. Soon we were a Republican fortress, one of many hotels made tha’ way in what was called tha block. The Republicans were not taken’ their election defeat an’ barricades were up and manned. I would have left, but got a tip off tha’ Donal had surveillance out fer us. At least there taking us meant taking on a Republican platoon.

When the Irish civil war finally broke out on June 28<sup>th</sup> we were ready and I was ready ter escape through tha storm water tunnels, but tha Liffey River’s tidal swell flooded ‘em. Instead after a few days of enduring shelling and sniping and seeing likeable people splattered beside me I ended up with a rifle, side by side with laughin’ Jenny. With distance and brick dust from the shelled tenements and shops it was hard to tell if our mates or enemies were wounded or dead; hopefully jus’ wounded. If anybody had ever told us we would kill Irish freedom fighters for Ireland would we have ever believed et?

Finally, after a week of et they turned artillery on us, blasting massive holes in the brick and turning her men into writhing or weirdly still brick dust coated figures. Jenny and I were the last two able ter move when a shell tottered the section of the wall we held and before it fell we

ran out – and there in front of us were about twenty women and children led by a priest holdin’ aloft a white flag. And there were three stranded toddlers alone, tha only people in Dublin with tha sense to be bewildered and in tears for what was happenin’. We each took one by the hand and joined the procession.

“Good thinking Brionny, we live tah fight another day!”

Those kids showed us where home was, a Republican tenement. When parental gratitude faded, Jenny’s sovereigns worked fine. Despite the deaths of Collins and President Griffith in August the Republicans were clearly losing the war and many gave up and Free Staters were happy to leave them alone, but Jenny would not leave tha war alone, becoming more enthused, talking loudly on et, as if we had never been told about dangers from informers and traitors from toddlerhood on. There were other problems, openly discussed around tha kitchen table with the usual stuck dumb audience and her usual loud bluntness of a rusty saw going through gnarly timber.

“Girl why don’t we ever sleep together an’ do it like we used ta? The husband don’ mean nothen’, you are tha one.”

“Two gone children, eight years inside an’ now this dreary horrible war tend to dampen the joyous spirit.”

*And I am a wakeup to you. It is not your fault but you walk on a trail of misery and devastated lives, but that trail is mainly behind you.*

Against a backdrop of screamin’ babies, boiling porridge an’ some shootout somewhere distant, the other women came out of just staring expressionless, then some had this puzzled look, goin’ over her finery and me drab, worn thin clothes and prison pallor and loosing tha puzzlement, going expressionless. One spoke quietly.

“Please leave, now, immediately.”

“Ah I’ve been slow with the money, here et be.”

Smiling obliviously to all the hostility, Jenny piled up ten sovereigns and they just sneered at et.

“Go now or the Free Staters will be here with a loaded pistol.”

I was just able ter grab Jenny's elbow and get her out: she just did not understan'. She insisted on a hotel that night even though hotels were being watched an' reception staff had lists with facial photos and I knew why she was insistent an' sure enough she crawled naked into me bed and as a favour I let her, but she could tell the difference.

“Hey girl this will liven you up,” she enthused and then put her head between me legs, I caressed her hair while she did it, but could not feel either excited or relaxed, more day dreamy, it wa' not unpleasant, but where was the ecstasy and unity sex with her could once inspire? Even she sensed it and after a few more times she stopped.

As the autumn dragged on Republican support dwindled and nobody would take us in; we were reduced ter sleeping in rubble or stoops. She had enough money to get us both back to her husband an' his villa in Donegal, but oh no, we had to fight the good fight fer tha Republic most Irish di' na want and even them that did, fer a certainty they did na want us. For a moment, back in Eloura, Jenny had seen how et would be fer us more clearly than anybody else, but now saw et less clearly than any.

Then came possible deliverance. The mailman, being a closet Republican, and knowing our derelict situation, we eventually got mail and sent some.

Ross Clarke

26<sup>th</sup> August 1922

Engadine Villa, Kensington

London Phone 41883

Dearest Brionny,

I rejoice at your release and assume that the way you have not contacted my lawyers for future assistance means that you do not wish for contact. I wish you well in your freedom, if you should need assistance anytime you may contact me at the above address.

Ross

\*

Brionny Clarke

29<sup>th</sup> November 1922

Dublin

Dearest Ross,

I will do anything you wish if only you get me out of Ireland. It is best not to mail help as the mails are being used to trace rebels. Please annul our divorce. Can you or a reliable servant be at the Bank of Ireland, Grafton Street on December 15<sup>th</sup> noon and if that cannot be, have an account and a message for me there?

Your Brionny

That should get him movin' an' fifteen days was ample time. He was still hot for me last time we met, despite tha posh style his letter suggested he was still so an' he was me only chance.

While mailin' Jenny waited outside O'Connell Street Post Office fer me, still wearing that conspicuously coloured pink dress and was now arguing for a Republic, lecturing loudly ter a young uniformed, armed Free State guard, mistaking his intense stare for listening. He nodded ter them other two coming up the steps and they came up behind her. I just kept walkin'; she didn't see me, being enraged with them. Being cagey and without her I was able ter survive another fifteen days an, actually made it ter tha Grafton Street Bank steps at twelve minutes ter noon, but as soon as any Republican steps out of tha tenements onto those main streets danger be great, and me luck ran out, for who was comin' out of

the bank but Commandant Donal Shaw, chatting amiably with British bankers. It was too open a space to run far though I tried; goin' down the many steps I wasn't watchin' me footin' and crashed inter his bodyguards comin' for ter get me. Donal had risen in tha world on more than a loud voice, ruthlessness an' good looks, one of his major talents being how he quickly got over a surprise or an upset, an' so et were now.

“Excuse me gentlemen, an urgent political matter has suddenly come to my attention.” He smiled knowingly and they returned it. “We have not yet got Dublin back to total order, she being one of the last on our list.” He nodded smugly to the guards. “Not Montjoy, the special camp solitary cells near the interrogation room.”

In front of approving bankers and startled passers-by the bastards bundled me off into his black limousine and drove off. Our car passed Ross at the corner. When I tried waven' a pistol barrel was shoved up my mouth an' the trigger pulled back.

“Best for you and worse for Donal young miss if you stayed absolutely still, for fine man though he be, he has a weakness and we have seen too many good men wrecked by slatterns. One slip, problem solved with the very same gun that solved his other problem, silly blonde slutty bitch; she was not going to bring down a man as great as Donal Shaw.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Bank of Ireland Dublin 15<sup>th</sup> December 1922

As soon as I recognised Donal Shaw on the steps it was clear she would not be there. The hope that she had seen him and fled died within seconds: his smug face, the wry amused smile of his bankers on either side, happy to see a revolutionary tamed and the wary looks of passers-by all indicated I was perhaps only minutes too late.

I knew better than to ask him and kept moving. Instead, I asked a doorman who had the look of a hunted rabbit hiding; he had Ireland's most common facial expression, yet he also had something more about him, the look of a man who knows something valuable.

"Can't say much sir, really can't."

"Not even for fifty pounds?" The note went between my fingers, as if buttoning my coat.

"Do you know who that was sir, et were Donal Shaw! He's a very great man and a powerful one!"

"He's a first-class shit, that woman was my wife and look at four thousand that could be yours!" The sight of my open wallet got him wavering, but with fear still predominating, more was needed. "Six in cash with a lifetime job."

"Sir! Add passage out of Ireland?"

"Yes."

He muttered with such immobile lips that a ventriloquist could marvel.

"Four this afternoon, White Hart, the wife and four kids get a train to Cork, eventual passage to Liverpool. Tickets ready."

He winked and put on a voice that could have got him carnival spruiker's work.

"No sir! I do not know who took her or why! Nor is it my job to know, not even for a fifty-pound bribe which a gentleman should never offer to one of lower station and therefore give a poor fellow no choice but to answer in this fashion, now if you may go about your business!"

\*

At the White Hart he was there with the pensive wife and puzzled children clutching little suitcases, but we sat alone. They all got drinks and a family dinner and he got a porter's job at our London airport.

“Day before yesterday they were there like they usually are and his bodyguards waited outside sharing a cig. Their voices carried further than they should. ‘Shouldn’t have done it, she knew where the Australian treasure was’ one says, ‘She got his dander up an’ knew too much on him. Besides after near two weeks of the treatment she would have talked if she was ever gunna’ the other responds. ‘Now we got to find this Brionny, a thousand pound each.’ ‘She’ll be another tough nut,’ he answers ‘Eight years inside kip and she did not break and her family are solid Republican. We hear sister Maeve has done in a few hersel’, people not to tangle with.’

‘Money is money and does not come jus’ for askin’. Twenty thousand lies somewhere.’

Then this morning when she turned up they caught her and drove her off. Donal Shaw’s exact words to them were ‘Not Montjoy, the special camp solitary cells near the interrogation room.’”

“What is the special camp?”

“Lord knows. When they are proclaiming summary execution for anyone possessing firearms and openly executing Republican prisoners in retaliation for Republican robberies and the assassinations it could be anything. Perhaps its just for women.”

*Women who know where the money from Donal Shaw’s robberies remains hidden. McPhee estimated from Jenny’s drunken babblings and her record book that it totalled perhaps twenty thousand pounds.*

\*

There could be no trusting Brionny's affable mother, kind-faced, ruddy cheeked, placidly knitting, a slight smile and speaking in a kind, lilting voice.

“Ah yes, they told me me daughter married fer looks.”

“You know what has happened to her?”

A slightly sharper look came across her features.

“We know that she must still live.” She read my puzzled features. “We know that because if we hear otherwise Donal Shaw goes to the head of our list, even above Churchill and we told him so and have proved that we can kill anybody, Sir Henry Wilson in London, Collins in Skibbereen, Brigadier Hayes here a fortnight past... Churchill recently survived in Hyde Park by a fluke...our trouble being that we find there be ever more traitors, so they usually get our assassins and now they execute ours already held, assassins or no.” The needles clicked again and she sighed.

“What do you want?”

“Your daughter; do you know of a special camp?”

She said did not. I told her what the bank doorman told me. Her face saddened, then soon hardened while hearing of Jenny.

“Breakouts comes hard, especially when where she be is unclear.”

“Buying her out will be easier.”

“It goes against our rules.”

“Not mine.”

“How do yer know he will sell her?”

“Because I will offer him twenty- two thousand pounds that he thinks is his.”

The knitting needles stopped and she just stared for the longest time.

“Twenty-two thousand pounds for me daughter.” Then she stared again. “I’d like ter say Glory be ter God an’ we were wise ter name her after a winnin’ horse, but not now. Is this money going to the Free State government?”

“Probably not, but it won’t even go into his bank account if you rob and kill him after Brionny is freed.”



“Did yer set up Jenny in any way so that we would do yer killing for yer an’ leave yer hands clean?”

“No I knew nothing of her for the last ten years until yesterday.”

“Uhm, this is clever, what else do you want?”

“Forty-eight hours after we leave Ireland.”

\*

The polished mahogany desk was large enough to be the bottom of a small barge, but then his office, while not big enough to fill Max’s hall, that being where I first saw Donal talking radicalism, was enormous. The door guards were so far away they could not hear us. Portraits of Irish martyrs surrounded the room. The uniform was as immaculate as any I had ever seen, but without awards yet. Lines, paunch and grey were also not on him yet. He was more smug than angry now and with reason.

“I am a busy man, my secretary tells me I should give you ten minutes.”

“And I am telling you I can give you considerably more. The treasure or to be precise, its equivalent value in bank notes.”

“For?”

“Brionny McNamara Clarke.”

It was what he was expecting to hear and he studied me for some time.

“What you request is all a little simple in its aim and complicated in its execution.”

I got the innuendo in the pun in that last word and responded accordingly.

“I have a scheme in place that involves your death if I am not at a certain address by a certain time, so you are not going to order my execution and you will not be able to blackmail me with threats. This money for Brionny will only go into your coffers after we leave Ireland.”

He paused for perhaps a minute, face expressionless while calculating what to say. When he did speak his voice was as firm and expressionless as his face.

“Under the Special Powers laws I am already more powerful than most judges or justice ministers, I can conduct summary executions, including perhaps yours if you stay in Ireland.”

“Armed guards with the money await in a car below. Bring Brionny and you get it as we drive off.”

“After counting it.”

After my nod he rang a bell and one of the guards came over while Shaw wrote his note and then we waited near the gate where he got the money, then he whistled, gates opened and a detachment came marching up the alley, fast, so only glimpses of her emerged, bare feet, a dull grey shift, her longish hair blown back and her usual determined jaw. The officer in charge gave a loud clomp with his foot as he came to attention and with extra loudness barked out.

“Special detachment present sir!”

He held the salute till Donal returned it, the greedy glint for money in his eyes and he rapidly returned to counting it, forgetting their rest easy order as he counted, and oblivious to their sullen faces and the woman who once obsessed him. We exchanged glances, her face was set hard, her hair unruly. She was so thin that all her ribs stuck out. She was still proud but wary, as if waiting for a chance to hit back against the powerful. When he finished counting he motioned to bring her over, pointing to the car as he stashed the cash. The officer opened the back door and Donal did not even look as she got in and sat there motionless and I joined her, but she did not even look at me.

“Get me on the next ferry out of Ireland.” She commanded levelly.

“A plane awaits, we can be away this hour, if you are not scared of flying.”

“Nothing scares me.”

That was all she said on the drive until at the airport the pilot knocked on the window, and reported that there would be a slight delay as a war supply plane meant our runaway was commandeered. Her face became a little harder and her voice overflowed with contempt as she snarled out 'Thought yer said the plane was ready' and 'We can be away this hour' she mimicked me and just glared with a sneer. 'Knew that was ter good ter be true.'

“Oh where are the maidens so grateful to their rescuing heroes? Twenty-two thousand pounds for this?”

By now it was obvious that in flight talk “a slight delay” probably meant we might manage to fly out before midnight, but as it was not yet fully sunrise we had best prepare, especially as Republicans were going to ambush Donal’s car and get his twenty-two thousand pounds tonight.

“We can breakfast at the airport cafeteria.”

“Ner hungry thanken’ yer very much.”

She just stared out the window listlessly until her eyes focused on *Eloura Airlines* written on planes and the hangar and her brain began ticking over.

“Did that money fer me come from Jenny, or me mother?”

“It came from my bank account.”

“Yer sat there making a deal with Donal bloody Shaw!”

“Feeling grubby, but tell me how else I could keep you alive?”

“Yer did nert keep Jenny alive.”

“I was not even in Ireland when she was killed.”

*The day you specified, but see if you can take the hint or remember. If not, I've got brains enough not to say that, as a guilt hiding temper tantrum will do us no good.*

“From what I have seen of Ireland and the looks even his own underlings give him, Commandant Donal Shaw does not appear to be a man who need plan for a Christmas Party this year.”

Once again she was puzzled and assessing, staring into my face for the longest possible time, not angry so much now.

“Ross yer did nert prepare this fastest possible time leave taken because of me letter did yer?”

“No.”

“So how long have we got, or to tha point, how long has Donal got?”

“Your mother agreed that he will see tomorrow’s sunset, but not even the dawn after that.”

She just raised her eyebrows, pursed her lips, exhaled and stared out the window for minutes.

“No.” The word was calm and reluctant, but final. “In some southern Irish rural battle someone like him executed William an’ several others a few months back. Donal was one among them who wrote up that policy. Even so, killing him will only get me mother and Maeve killed in retaliation and make us like him; this is knife in tha back stuff. Leave him ter his fate – no better yet, when we are free, write and tell his superiors of tha money – that he will never hand o’er ter them. His underlings who hate him will corroborate. They lost any respect fer him when he executed Jenny. Et sounds far-fetched, but they all tell the same story, she quite literally died laughin.’ She contemptuously discussed tha shape of his prick in front of him and his guards, said he was tha worst of eighty men she'd had and said she had, an’ spent all of tha treasure she took out of Australia. Next morning he had some kangaroo court condemn her an

even when they tied her up at the firin' squad wall she was sayin' 'e was all bluff an' bull, he pulled this one before on Rosalind back en Australia ten year ago. 'You watch he'll come out with a pistol an' fire – an' lor' but it'll be a blank, oh what a lark.' She got tha first half right and her end very wrong."

She sighed and went back to looking out at the grey cloudy day, raining now, almost absent-mindedly she took my hand and stroked it, entwining our fingers and lost in her thoughts.

"Yer could nert have saved Jenny, I could not. Not even Jenny could save Jenny from Jenny." There was a long silence and a sigh that was goodbye to youth; she was thirty.

"I'm nert hungry, perhaps later, but can yer can guess what I really need?"

She scanned my face and saw I was not getting it, at the back of her eyes there was that gleam starting and on the lips some bitterness was fading.

"A hint; it is the middle of December, in Ireland."

"A Christmas present?"

"Ross me bare feet are grey and blue, me shift is cheesecloth an. they did nert give me underwear."

"Clothes, you want clothes, I'll get someone to get you some."

"No, I'll buy them, no one will blink an' eyelid when we shop. The cheesecloth is thick an' dark so nobody will see me naughty bits."

Amazingly Brionny was right. At Dublin's most expensive women's shop it was just a quick glance, more at my rich apparel and 'Can we help you madam?' and away they went. Initially with its brass and polished cedar, its plush carpets, gilded full length mirrors, quietness and mannequins, it seemed an oasis of peace and sanity in war torn Dublin until the manager made conversation.

“You are surprised that we do not fuss, but yesterday we had a cabinet minister's family arrived in their dressing gowns, house bombed and burned. Last month it was a senator in fox hunting gear, went off to the hunt, came back, only the chimneys were standing. The Republicans have a house burning policy for politicians. Back in August one of our young lads turned out to be a closet Republican. The special forces came here to arrest him, he shot three bullets through our only ermine display coat and one continued on to splinter our cedar bench. The way the wounded plain clothesman bought a new gabardine on the spot was most impressive. Trust a detective to know what a problem bloodstains are on a gabardine sleeve.”

“The more I see of war, the more I wonder if its bizarre nature sometimes outweighs its dreariness.”

“Quite so sir, Quite so. Well general opinion goes towards the last die-hard Republicans being dead or fled by next summer's end.”

“My wife is a Republican. There is no problem?”

“Only if you are carrying weapons. I must ask you on your honour if you are carrying weapons.”

To his embarrassment and protests I handed him my coat and waistcoat and opened my wallet.

“It is not that I am opposed to their cause, but they are generally poorer people sir and therefore prone to violence, robbery and the like.”

“I am not a Republican; my mother, brother and sister-in-law are Ulster Defence people.”

“Good lord sir, Good lord. Christmas family get together will be interesting.”

“Hopefully not.”

“Sir this must be asked, your wife is in prison garb; has she by any chance escaped and you are using my establishment to purchase a

disguise? If so leave, immediately, no charge. I do not wish to be arrested as an accessory; particularly when people are shot for that without a trial. I have a family.”

“She wasn't even charged. I bribed her way out and we leave on a flight today.”

“I know of no such flight.”

“That is because I own the airline, Eloura Air.”

“Sir one thing puzzles and it is impertinent, but how did you meet your wife?”

“You would not believe me.” He gave me the feeling we would be spending much of our life together answering that question.

“Oh yes sir, yes. These days I would.”

“Just let her shop, she cannot go through eight thousand pounds, that being how much I have on me.”

“And a cheque book?”

He had a point. One fur coat, a sable cape, a fox fur, ten hand-woven lace wraps, black mourning outfits, riding gear outfits, night outfits and nighties, patent leather pumps, sixteen dresses and assorted stockings, bracelets and box-fuls of undergarments, necklaces and assorted jewellery before I paid and we left. She dressed for the mirror, not my approval. Fortunately, she had taste.

“We must see me mother, an’ give her a few thousand? Me father died recently an’ she has nothing. She should be able ter at least buy mourning clothes.”

They met alone first, then I was called in, briefly.

“As my daughter wishes et, Donal Shaw’s alive fer now, but I am unhappy about that or tha money he has. Look after her as you have done so far and yer will be en me good books, as much as yer can be, but der not spoil her, for I have seen those who lose their beliefs make money

their god. It would be most unwise ta take yer money. Only betraying informers get such large amounts, word would spread... Even if they did believe et, et would all be begged off me, and then begged for more all tha rest of me life an' I'll be saying no ter beggars and tha needy..."

On the flight over Brionny was so interested in her first flying experience that while polite, she pushed my talk into the background until London. By the time we reached the villa, it wasn't far off midnight. She barely noticed the place or her packaged new purchases, which needed a separate taxi truck, being exhausted into an almost zombie state.

"Ross I am ser tired, let me sleep, even here on yer bloody couch."

"The first guest room is first door on the left."

At noon I poked my head in with a breakfast tray and quietly took off her new patient leather pumps, stockings and hat. After four the shower went on and at twilight she came out groggy, in a stylish dressing gown announcing that she was hungry. Soon we divided the roasted chicken and the vegetables, if only briefly. For I had just finished a potato and was fleshing a wing before she was hungrily staring at my full plate while hers only contained bones and she asked for more. Most dogs, even famished ones, ate with more finesse and she seemed oblivious to my presence.

"Sorry Brionny desert's not on."

"Tha' no problem, that's filled me nicely now."

"Is there anything else you need?"

"Ner. Yer got me out of jail, as many clothes as a taxi truck can carry, free flight to a mansion, full meal... suppose this is where I have to pay fer et?"

"What do you want to do?"



“I don’t wish ter do that, at least now. So much ha’ happened. Can I luxuriate in a hot bath, get more sleep. That cabinet thing with knobs, that’s a radio ain’t et, can we hear et later?”

I was telling her how broadcasts had only started two weeks past and reception was still weak when suddenly her face changed and she went into the accents and syntax of those in the great house in Mayo that she knew as a child.

“Surely you will be a gentleman and discuss such things at next breakfast.”

Instead at breakfast, she wanted to see London, mostly by herself. Over the days we saw a few concerts, plays and films, went for the tourist sights, at night there was the radio, reading, board games. Brionny even insisted on seeing *Peter Pan* where being without kids, we stuck out. She even liked housework. It was like that for over three weeks, while the airline and flying lessons took my time, then one day, we had breakfast and discussion.

“Brionny what do you want to do?”

“Well there's not much ter like en London; people here are snobby, first they put me in one group for me clothes, then in a bloody 'nother fer me accent. I’ve been snubbed by poor fer being rich, by the rich fer me grammar and pronunciation and by everybody English fer being Irish and with some for being nouveau rich.”

“Perhaps with Alessandra’s wealth and Grandfather Clarke’s ancestry I could be a proper English gentleman, but don’t want to be.”

“Yer don’ like bloody England neither.”

“It is bearable, even comfortable after the horrors of these last years, but no...”

“And then suss yer out by yer accent and place yer into some bloody

mongrel group or class and if yer not theirs you could very well be an enemy or a target fer a bloody confidence trick.”

She snarled and then speared her chicken with the fork.

“At best yer judged as someone out of tha place. Could be, could be. Goodbye ter narrow little streets full a narrow little people an’ permanently grey skies. Their best must have had the sense ter flee ter the colonies. How soon can we leave?”

“For?”

“Let’s talk, ner hiding, ner embarrassment.”

“As you wish.”

“First off, I want them speech, grammar and elocution lessons. Yer know I soun’ like a West Coast colleen that ha’ picked up a little knowledge and fancy words. Lessons regular, may as well start tomorra. I’ll only be an embarrassment’ ter yer otherwise.”

“Your accent has changed again since we were married. You sounded more educated back then.”

“Jail works as education in reverse if yer are wise, those who aren’t an’ get viewed as toffs get into fights, get picked on or are leso pack raped. That last happened twice while I was in, net ter me an’ I did ner take part.”

She read my stare and the thoughts behind it right.

“I was neither victim ner offender in there an’ I don’t mate in captivity, not that there was any temptation, told yer before I’m ner promiscuous.”

“Eight years.”

“Me bitching wasn’t only menstrual, there was yearning for a woman back then and still is, haven’t come across any English tha’ appeal. Can’t be something I am not an’ I am ner a good little housewife. Are yer a respectable domesticated husban’? I da not think sa.’ Yer goin’

ter tell me tha yer went through tha war an' no prostitutes?" She gave me a long uncertain nervous stare with a lip bite. "Look I make ner judgements. After that argument ten year back Jenny made me pay fer et, and yesterday I nearly bought some poor street walker. It is about syphilis. I want yer checked."

I told her of Helen, Alessandra, Rebecca and Zinada and how stress affected me in the war and then since Zinada's fate and Rebecca's abuse at the Parisian café. She just rolled her tongue round her teeth.

"In their different ways they all sound like trouble."

*And you are not?*

"So what do you want?"

"You an' Rosalind an' children."

The silence that came after her unflinching stare made me aware of the radio on with Scott Joplin faint in the background.

"Anything more material?"

"Me own place, orchids and horses. I was thinking New Zealand, saw it an' liked et before we hit Australia. I like horses more en people, they shit me no end, Ol' Jono Swift got et right."

She read my puzzled face.

"Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*. At the end, where ol' Gulliver finds happiness with 'em, horses. Alison said she used ter read et ter yer class every afternoon."

"Yes she did... we even made a little pantomime of it, must have been bowdlerised."

"Tha means rewritten namby bamby fer kids?" I nodded. "There yer go me lessons have started already. At the end Gulliver comes a wake up to people an' finds he only likes noble good-hearted horses. Trouble bein,' this girl can't mate with them horses, cavalryman with a name meaning horse comes as close as a girl can get."

“We sleep together tonight?”

“Sleep bein’ the keyword. Gimme time.”

\*

Brionny Clarke

London 11<sup>th</sup> January 1923

*“Sleep is the keyword. Give me time.”*

I asked but did na get it an’ ultimately et was me fault, ner his. I let him sleep en tha same big bed, the fire haven na been lit an’ tha bed had been left with summer blankets sa it wa’ freezin.’ Subconsciously et must ha’ reminded me o’ tha cold en jail, fer nightmares came tha’ went back to near buyen tha streetwalker me dead Pa came with me all anger an’ old wardens an’ took me back ter me old freezeen cell, an’ me screamen’ at ‘em in rebellion, then I heard Ross say “It is alright, you are out of there now.”

As he put his arm round me waist and I looked around, realized where we were, and I sighed with relief. Like in West Virginia where cold were so bad feet go streaky blue in socks, he moulded his body into mine and put me feet ter his shins an me arse ter his hips, me crown under his chin; et made me grateful fer his warmth an’ company. Growin’ in tha cold Mayo hut with huddlen’ fer warmth with sisters and runaway Jenny, an then Jenny alone an’ later Rosalind were good, but then most every night an’ a shared cell, made me edgy about sleeping alone. Them days an’ nights in the Eloura cave and sometimes en West Virginia, near drove me inter a nutter. Absent mindedly I took his hand and moulded it ter me breast as we had many times past and soon he enlarged and it was I who lifted me shift and enjoyed et, without the sight of him or talk, et was just the pure sensation of et first, but them old familiar sounds of our bodies hitting in unison and the sensations with him I thought I would never feel again, made et more personal, but I came to orgasm long before he did,

tha' took him a time, an' finally when we were dozen' off the sky started lightenen'.

He did say he had "some urgent essential work he was late for," as he said en apology, et were nothin' trivial, they were establishin' the first passenger an' air flights from London an' Dublin ta Australia and New Zealand, an' since the Smith brothers had proved et could be done in tha year past, the rush was on ter establish first. He did ask me ter go with him, but nah.

Happily I waved me goodbyes, luxuriated in tha foamed up marble tub tha' were en a bathroom big enough for tha whole family hut we grew up en. Later after three hours of grammar an' pronunciation self-teaching, an' me half a chicken and vegetables fer late lunch I got tha infernal fire and chimney workin' an' then blazin.' He smiled when he saw it, knowin' why.

"Remember our first time by tha fire on our wedden' night and the many a time in West Virginia?" I asked.

"Early night tonight!"

An' so et was. He gave me time an' came in ter find me naked 'fore the fire. A month of fine food an' soapy scrubben' up had restored me an' I smiled upwards, stayed on me knees clasped his hips and drew in close. Who said that a man's stomach was the key to his heart shoulda' lowered their vision. Talken' with Jenny she reckoned about half tha married women did et, many di' na mind at all, about half of them disliked it an' she had heard of two tha' would not eat after, near starved themselves down ter bone and raved on about tha horror: couldn't see why, Might have somethen ter do with their man, dunno. William an' Grahame never asked, maybe didn' know an' that left Ross. Women were fine, at least me two: even so, with Jenny, Rosalind an' Ross the three I'd done et with preferred the getten ter the given, but en like sa much in life yer gotta

give ter get, as tha priests an' nuns say. Even so, Jenny said only some few enjoyed the givin' of et an' I was en that few, for like Jenny, I nor felt sexual guilt about anythin' from tha start, na matter what priests an' nuns say with their pictures talked up of hell, but what I felt like was tha other sex after indulging in the one an' satisfyin' as he was that night, by next I was feeling it even at climax.

Thoughts came ta me tha' et would be better ter suppress such desires and be faithful, but when he murmured Rosalind's name while asleep I did not feel ser bound, nor did I wish to be loyal second fiddle fer the rest of me life, but kept such thoughts ter myself, just studying me grammar and listening ter tha hired coach and wondering when Ross would be returning ter Australia alone, Me name was on a warrant there. Divorce Annulment were taken time, a regular liven' for lawyers an' a mess, but maybe he were not pushen an' I had me doubts. From what he said of that Anastasia or Alessandra or whatever her name were, Rebecca an' Zinada et seemed he liked foreign women who wanted to improve themselves; maybe he liked me as part of a type, not me as meself.

“We are leaving England as we have to go to Egypt, the new government there is being painful about our airfield, and this will need the personal touch.”

“That means bribes. Oh well. Sun will do me good, still got me prison pallor.”

“Getting sunlight must be the one thing in Egypt that comes cheap and easily.”

For a certainty he got that right, cleanness, quiet, privacy, all only came in tha best hotels, and Ross got us a long term lease en Shepherds, that bein' the most luxurious hotel in that whole Middle East, a place bigger than even America, that Middle East bein' all between Morocco an' Mesopotamia an' south of them to the equator, but no amount of

money could buy coolness, tha' comes only fer an hour or two jus' before dawn. Even tha best restaurants gave me nausea, New Zealand became a dream, or a mirage, fer et were soon obvious that we were stuck en bloody Cairo, wrapped up all too nicely with their red tape.

“The problems were immense.’ ter quote Ross, ‘There have a king they call a khedive, a radical nationalist Prime minister and Allenby, Special High Commissioner for Egypt. Then back in England they have the Whitehall bureaucracy which deals with Egypt. Each of them thinks that they rule Egypt alone, but none of them do.’ The public service was run by Englishmen supposedly trainin' Egyptians to take over, but they just ignored them Egyptians and kept going, et was en dispute who controlled them, ser they ignored everybody, often the people they were supposed ter help. The police, judges an' transport were all tha bloody same, nobody were sure who controlled what, not tha' there were much ter control.

Few autos were in Egypt, fewer petrol stations and roads were crowded, seldom repaired an' any repairs, communications or transport of any type were a nightmare. Heat wrecked everything an' repairmen were rare. Nobody worked in tha middle of tha day, an' important documents were lost, tossed or just unread because supposed English speakers had little real linguistic ability. Me teacher came with us and left quick for another, royalty Ross said. English teachers were worth a fortune, fortunately I brought me grammars and elocution books and at twelve hours most days progressed, well a bit. It were easy ter know more words, but Jenny got et right about their grammar. In Kilmainham Goal they tried tha wrong methods to drive difficult prisoners crazy an' so get 'em out of their way an' to tha looney bin. They should have told em English was logical an' got 'em to study et. Besides I weren't no Pygmalion an'

my husban' weren't no Higgins. Sometimes I remembered ds and ings on the end, my fer me, to fer ta, the for tha, for fer fer, sometimes not.

One good thing about him was he took me as I was. He tried to teach me posh manners as if I hadn't been in the greatest house in County Mayo fer years and the rest, but it were vexen us both, so he says just be meself. After a time I gave up on Egypt, he couldna, so he came home vexed with haven to deal wi' people who being unfamiliar wi' machines, wouldn't see a purpose ter spare parts an' sold em fer scrap. He swore tha' one trainee pilot actually crashed inter his own hangar and just back backed an' without even checking fer damage, jus' took off.

Then there were them deliberate problems: many Egyptians loved to tease, pay us back fer being wealthier than them and make money through endless artificially manufactured delays that only bloody paying them with money could solve. Even so et were obvious they were paying white people back an' many a white had et coming. 'Hey Gypo! Get over here yer lazy dog an' find me documents!' That was their standard way of speaken' in a land were a dog was considered filthy and vile an' pride were much, then they wondered why Egyptians couldn't find what they wanted and never considered that et was themselves that were stupid.

Growin' up in with a large family in a stone an' turf hut an' kept tha' way by British imperialism, et were ner hard ter see the side of tha poor Egyptians, the main difference to Irish bein' Egptian huts were reed an mud, nert turf, stone an slate an' they called upon Allah, nert Jesus.

Another big difference was in Ireland the British stuck together pretty much, Irish Ascendancy or British born, Anglican or Presbyterian didn't matter much, but here they were more divided by their own caste system than anybody I had ever seen. Et weren't tha et were jus' military verses navy or military verses civilian or aristos against commoners. Et went so far tha' even civil servants were divided by rank an' department,



ser finance was high caste like peerage, but education were equivalent ter' well, released jailbirds, ha, ha.

Soon enough I found that tha only reason I was jus' tolerated were because o my husban' an' his business partner, Sir Eustace Hughes.

Not tha' I wanted ta associate with them Ulster people or English here, but I had ter fer Ross's sake. I did what I could fer him; cooking meals an' given him me whenever he wanted, ner that he pushed when I was nert inclined, or in ragtime, he wa' good like that. He had problems enough an' I was his only local supporter, trust that Hughes bunch? Or his sodomite brother? Ha ha ha.

Negotiations fer tha purchase of three hundred acres of unwanted, totally barren land fer an airfield began with Robert in near ter two years back an' 'were finalised three years later due ter a contest ter see how much we would pay. If our interest meant land prices would increase an' 'ter see how much money could be extracted on a variety of excuses: ter quote Sir Eustace. 'There were bureaucratic sacred ground checks, bureaucratic historic importance checks, bureaucratic inspections ter trace previous owners of obviously uninhabited wilderness, bureaucratic buildin' improvement checks and then suddenly the bureaucrat found all too many found owners an' they were in court ter establish ownership ter see who could get the purchase price' an' tha lawyer, judge fees fer their mates at a commission: *Bleak House* Egyptian style.'

\*

Alice Hughes Clarke                      Shepherd's Hotel Cairo 14<sup>th</sup> February 1923

The poor thing: although we also stayed in a Shepherd's suite, we thought it best to be at the opposite end, awaiting an invitation that fortunately never came. We all expected some gaucheries and common mistakes for a new chum to Egypt, but widow's weeds at Shepherd's Hotel Valentine's Day ball? Anywhere in our Empire, or in anyone else's

that would have been a faux pas. Even worse, she did not care. Perhaps those striking good looks, more handsome than beautiful, the strong character so evident in that jutting jaw and black opaque eyes and waving, unplaited, perhaps never coiffured hair, would have got her through, but that accent, and the combative under-educated personality so evident in every inflection... Even if we had not heard from agent's reports for father, her mannishness was so evident it made me wonder. She was as out of place as was possible on such a frivolous occasion.

Everyone could see more faux pas approaching when she was introduced to Allenby, Special High Commissioner for Egypt and Palestine these four years past, a polite term for dictator until their new government was working, if it ever would. Even though Allenby's mother had only died last year he did not have a mourning band. He was not nicknamed Bull Allenby for nothing. His face looked like it had been carved to go on front of some medieval battering ram reserved for particularly obdurate stone walls. He had the physique, stance and outlook of a heavyweight boxer from boxing's bare-knuckle days. To make matters worse, in fact as bad as they could go, he was fascinated by the current Irish situation, quizzed all Irish visitors on it (as I well knew) and his face picked up at her accent as she said something to Ross about leaving. Despite appearances, Allenby was a gentleman, most fortunately.

“Ah yes, Major Clarke, three VC nominations in one day at Gallipoli landing and service in Romani, Megiddo and even Russia. Brother-in-law to Mrs Hughes Clarke.”

Ross nodded, Allenby, being in the know, never mentioned my husband; his name was not on the invitation card, and he was probably spending the night with some boy, again. Allenby did try to put her at her ease.

“And Mrs Clarke, we hope you are enjoying the sun of Egypt after the rains of Ireland.”

“Tis a most welcome change, the food I’ll not say the same for.”

“You are not feeling queasy?” She nodded, uneasily in response.

“Ah then perhaps another time we can talk on the current Irish situation.”

“Why? Why yer be asken’ me ‘bout such matters?”

The gasp went all around the room. In a suspicious mood, she ignored it.

“While et is glad I am to be out of there, I’m fer the Republic if they can get et. Not likely now though, even so I found myself shooten your Irish Free State allies for et. I cannot tell things tha might help British Field Marshals.”

They were all too stunned to respond. Then the worst possible thing happened; she vomited, clenching her mouth, but the acrid stench and the constricting throat muscles made it clear, she excused herself, but even Allenby was flustered and a horrified sigh went around the room.

“My car at once for the Clarkes please - and find a doctor.”

“We are staying here second floor.” Ross explained. I went with her. Ross thanked me as he left after breakfast in the morning. Brionny came out to the terrace in a dressing gown, dishevelled and pallid.

“Good morning, Brionny. Staff have delivered imported bottled Indian tonic water for you. That must be your diet, you will have to starve the bugs out, they prosper on almost anything else.”

“So what should me diet be?”

“Imported tinned and bottled stuff and fresh food washed in boiled spring water. Even collected rain water goes into dubiously cleaned containers.”

“Fer a certainty I do nert belong here, even before last night that wa’ apparent.”

Allenby goes across like that with everybody Irish, he thinks of Ireland as a prototype for ending colonialism and that what happens there will indicate what happens next here, where like the Irish nationalists, the Egyptian nationalists want some form of independence.”

“But Irish an’ Egyptians are nert tha same.”

“The people in Whitehall are and they have freed Ireland and in Egypt the process unfolds next.”

“But Allenby seems part of Whitehall. He should ask ‘em.”

“He has, often, but does not now.”

She thought over that for a few seconds and got it.

“Ah local food attacks me stomach, local politics me head; where’s that tonic water?” She took some and studied me with a sardonic look.

“Ser tha daughter of Sir Eustace Hughes is me sister-in-law and ministers ter me with kindness.”

“And my sister-in-law seems to be a Catholic Irish Republican.”

“Anglican Irish Republican actually. Can’t stand that Catholic rubbish neither and na ter fond of me pa’s adopted faith. All religions are cacky stuff.”

We stared uncertain, then laughed at the same instant and clicked bottles. I spoke amiably.

“The Ulster Defence Rallies weren’t about hate to me, they were like a massive gymkhana with food booths and sack races and brass bands, and everybody united in smiling patriotism. A moment of truth came when we met my mother-in-law, horrid woman. The thought came that I could end up like that.”

I sighed at the memory of Rachel Clarke and noticed Brionny’s wry smile in a wan face as she started up.

“Never thought ter hate anybody as much as I hated that woman, nert Sir Edward Carson or the English king, nert Tom Caufield ner even Donal Shaw rises me ire ser much. She still got Grahame an’ tha milkmaid nice Katie: she married him to her sa as ter get ‘em under her thumb?”

“Yes she impressed me at first, but by the first winter of the war all that Ulster Defence stuff seemed appallingly innocent and archaic with the Catholic Irish being mainly allied, then. Now those fourteen-eighteen years are too horrible to remember, everybody wants to party. Around a twelfth of the women in short skirts jitterbugging around to jazz last night were war widows.”

“Are yer giving a subtle hint ter get me out of black?”

“Yes, most of us were out of black three, four years back.”

“Et’s for me father, he died a year back this week.”

“Perhaps an in-memoriam notification in the papers makes a proper end to the expected mourning period of a year.”

“Yes, good idea, an’ Ireland had best be left en tha past.”

“For both of us.”

“But with two very close ter me very recently dead en tha troubles, don’t expect me ter jitterbug.”

I nodded and pointed to the river view. A Nubian safragi (a combination of waiter and bell boy in the Shepeard’s standard uniform of green silk slippers, white pantaloons, gold embroidered crimson jacket and turban) came with his silver samovar and stood ready. Amazingly they were to Robert’s taste - or their uniforms were. On this Brionny knew more about rules to do with servants than Robert: she went silent till he poured tea and left.

“Me father was an ostler in one of tha great houses in County Mayo, I learned how servants and mistresses should behave from tha other side.

Picked up their books and some of their words an' how ter speak em, but et ain't me, jus' being somethin' I am nert."

"Would it be impolite to ask how you spend your days? Do you want to become part of the airline?"

"I want ter breed horses, in New Zealand, just as soon as this Egyptian mess Ross ha' got us into ends."

"Until then?"

"We live en the only part of Egypt tha is serene. Love the river view with et's sail boats gliden' by an' them sunsets, saffron an' gold an' a turquoise cloud while them poetic calls sound just right from minarets. Love this terrace, with ets tiled floor an' lattice and lead light, I like me hour long soaks in tha most luxurious tiled up bath imaginable. I love tha parks below this terrace, an' time ter read, but they are nert me, they are tha dream I had of occupyin' that Mayo house once Pa an' his Fenians rid Ireland o' their Lordships. Now I'll settle fer a copy o' this bathroom somewhere else."

"Any other dreams?"

"Studyen English till I got et right, but I gave up on tha last week. Now me dream es ta be mysel' Irish accent n' bad grammar an' all. I've got et all worked out."

"Beyond horses?"

"Children eventually, but dew on green grass, neighin' horses, the clutter clutter clutter o' their hooves pouden turf, sippen strong sugared coffee at a big wooden table in a big wooden kitchen with a load of steak, bacon and fresh eggs an' beans from me garden, an' lots a no bullshit books like Swift, Wilde, Shaw, Ibsen an' Defoe and this funny new yank Sinclair Lewis. He's good, their books by tha bedside, that be heaven fer one Brionny McNamara Clarke."

“And Ross beside you waiting for you to finish the chapter.”

“An’ me girlfriend on tha other side of the bed?” That did nert surprise her, she suspected in the jail visit, just the brazenness of sayen’ ert, surprised, a little anyway. Her gaze and smile held. “Thares ner need ter tell Ross. Et seems you an’ he are evenly balanced in yer martial problems an’ know et.”

“It seems secrets would be a more accurate term. You do know that if you make any of this public you will destroy yourself and you could destroy my husband and therefore the airline?”

“Now why should I? All I ever saw of yer husband was a figure en military uniform off in tha distance at tha Boxing Day Ball near ter fourteen years past. Do I need more enemies fer some reason? The Irish Free Staters, the women of Kilmainham Goal, wardens and prisoners both, the IRA, the Ulster Defence Bunch, come to think of et that covers near to every adult in Ireland, exceptin’ Ma, but not me siblings, they’re in! Then there’s the governments of America, Australia an’ the whole British Empire, each o’ them with me name on warrants as ef eight year inside were nert enough. Then more personally, there’s Donal Shaw, Tom Caufield and our mother-in-law. Oh yes! I have enemies en abundance. Ner more need apply.”

“So you know how to be discrete?”

“More so than yer husband.”

“Can we be friends?”

“But nert ter close, tha’ would lead ta trouble, an’ me life is now dedicated ter avoidin’ trouble.”

And yet in the morning in my room mail there was more trouble in the making, at the very least, if it was not handled properly. The newspapers had made the incident sound as if Allenby caused her to vomit. There was also potential trouble in a note from Viscount Allenby and he thanked for

my assistance and invited me to lunch with the Allenbys in three days and the presence of Mr and Mrs Ross Clarke was requested.

“Why does he want us?” Ross asked.

“There will probably be cameras there.” I told them at lunch on their terrace.

“Rest assured, this invitation is not really an invite, but a directive in polite form and Allenby does not forget slights – or favours and soon we may need his help.”

“In the war he dressed down some junior officer to the point where the man vomited from fear. Last year it was Lord Curzon in tears. Allenby can be domineering and with a forceful temper, but does not need more of these stories, which are used by his enemies. Especially one such story about a woman.”

“Egyptian Republicans?” Brionny asked.

“And Egyptian Monarchists, the current weak Egyptian government and England’s conservative imperialists and Whitehall’s anti-imperialists all agree on their dislike for Allenby. The one man who gets things done and who wants to see Egypt, independent, democratic and at peace.”

The luncheon went well. Brionny’s ears picked up when she heard that Allenby could get things done and was more liberal than supposed. She agreed to be agreeable and he charmed, revealing his ornithologist’s side, introducing his cranes, parrots and his pet stork which actually came to the garden table for titbits. The conversation went from flowers to horses and didn’t get off, to everyone’s relief, except the journalists; even they got a social page story and the Allenbys were pleased.

“Only Allenby can get us out of this morass.” Ross stated *And you had best get him to get you out of it fast before he has to deal with a scandal involving your wife or my husband.*

\*



Ross Clarke

Shepard's Hotel Cairo May 26<sup>th</sup> 1923

As usual we discussed news over breakfast on the terrace and shipped in or now flown in old London newspapers were left for her after I read them. Today it was better that she did not read of them in the paper.

“The Irish peace talks have gone further.”

“There have been ser many talks, they lead nowhere.”

“This time they laid down their weapons and their leadership says surrender.”

“Hard ter imagine my mother or Maeve surrenderin’.”

“They did not.”

She swallowed, studied my face and levelly asked me to go on.

“Their names appear in the final casualty lists, just released. Some traitor out to save his own neck. He shot your sister, your mother was jailed next day, in early January. She was too old for jail, three months she lasted, just a cold, perhaps heartbreak...”

She sighed and stunned looked out at the view for perhaps a few seconds, her throat and fingers trembling slightly.

“Since July, when et were clear that they were losing, et seemed ter me that they were all livin’ on borrowed time. Jenny, William, Maeve, my mother... Keith was smart to get out, he lives. Her glance and thoughts were away from me. “An’ Donal lives, the only one ter profit from all this. “She sighed and tears welled in her eyes. “Ross could I be alone please?”

It was a day to be working hard and long at the perennial Egyptian problems. Thinking that the land purchase for our aerodrome would be complete by now I had ordered aerial spare parts and corrugated iron for hangars, they were still apparently at the docks, waiting unloading permission. A whole day went on trying to unravel that one, but key people were away. If it was not that the Moslems, Christians and Jews

had different holy days on which they could not work, or on forms being lost because the English speaker could not really read them, it was that somebody had a family emergency: family concerns here usually went to fourth cousins or the friends of such, nobody prospered, but at least they survived in this poverty-stricken land by being looked after by relatives.

The day was spent on *trying* to get a shipment moved eighteen feet, from deck to truck. It did move – eventually, but to my disadvantage. My liaison officer Yaris insisted we take tea with his uncle’s third cousin, a wharf official. For over two hours I heard tales about foxes in wells and geese laying golden eggs, a man who saw death in Damascus and fled to Samara only to find death awaiting him there, the parable of the lazy bee who froze in winter because he was improvident, the high cost of being a true member of the faith and not practising birth control, the high cost of educating children and finally the difficulties of storing spare parts. All this with endless cups of insufferably sweet tea and ‘Do you get my meaning?’ To which the only possible answer was no. Finally, he sighed and wrote a note in Arabic, rang a bell and a flunkey/probable nephew came, read the note, smiled and left. While trying to leave, the Uncle insisted good news was coming and that I need only wait, meanwhile he got the discussion onto Howard Carter’s find late last year of the Tutankhamen tomb, a topic which had enthralled all Egypt, and the world for the first six months, now...” The nephew came back smiling with a note. “Ah, your equipment has been moved at last! Off the deck! Off the wharf! Gone!”

“The truck driver must have got bored waiting.”

“No, he was still there, wondering why I hired a second truck to take the equipment and why Yasir and the Uncle were smiling, slightly. In the scrap metal market, the much-coveted corrugated iron and fuel tanks were already gone, and two of the engines were in pieces with bits gone,

but I bought the two still complete, then called the police and had the sellers arrested. If they did not know of spare parts they also did not know of serial numbers for identification; Yasir denied responsibility, even though the sellers were cousins, he did not seem worried for himself or them.

“Sack me offendi or jail my honest cousins and there could be a riot against English imperialist police. And charges for slander if you suggest that this most mysterious disappearance of your spare parts is theft; perhaps some driver picked up the wrong docket. My second wife’s uncle serves as a senior magistrate and his cousin sits on the High court and may well come to this conclusion.”

I heard Brionny in the spare room weeping. I felt like it.

\*

Alice Hughes Clarke

Shepherd’s Hotel Cairo 14<sup>th</sup> June 1923

It was fortunate indeed that I was there in the lounge foyer. Ross nearly caused a diplomatic incident when the leading bureaucrat Yasir got a little too needling with his glittering eyes and smug smile.

“Ah what is today’s delay?” Ross said on the edge of his temper.

“Delays offendei, delays.

The claims of that greedy villain Achmed have been rejected by the courts, but the petitions of Eliza Ben Usef, and six others to have their ownership claims considered have been accepted.”

“And when will these claims be heard?”

“In six months.”

“Six months.” Ross had a way of snarling and then rolling his tongue round his mouth that could be amusing to teasers who had never seen him lose his temper.

“Let me guess, six months till it starts.”

“You have heard the proverb, ‘He who sails the Nile must weave sails made of patience.’ You understand this offendi?”

“Have you heard another proverb, only fools toss good money after bad?”

Yasir gave his oily smile with the glittering eyes. “Ah offendi you imply that you accept defeat, that you will leave Egypt and wave goodbye to forty-seven thousand pounds that you, your famous father-in-law and much illustrious brother have spent so far here?”

“Better than a hundred thousand, and another year and to be no further on the flight route than we are now. And how do you know how much we have spent?”

Yasir just stared assessing if the goose that laid the golden eggs would really fly the coup. We had not told Ross what we had heard about the spare parts, but he was developing an understanding.

“Beirut, Bagdad, Bombay, we can go that way. Why should it matter to us what part of Asia we fly over?”

“Ah yes offendi, but first, we have the Suez Canal, so vital for communication and transport.”

“Not for planes.”

“And do you really think in these troubled lands there will be less trouble than you have here? All the world reveals how tired they are of arrogant imperialists and their tasteless displays of great wealth.” He waved his hands around the hotel. “This is all kitsch to the discerning: doubtless you think it aged Arabic-”

“The Moorish Hall is basic design 1890s Italianate.” I interjected.

“Precisely, the jumbled kitsch of nouveau rich who have no culture of their own.”

“What does the interior of this hotel have to do with our airfield?”  
Ross had his fists clenched.

“Everything! Let me make matters clear by telling you another little story. There was once a very stupid donkey with a heavy load trotting on the road to Cairo when-”

Ross grabbed him by the throat and banged his head into the wall and let him crumple. What was scarier was the way Yasir stayed totally calm as he arose.

“Now let me tell you a story. There was once a thief called Yasir.”

“Mrs Robert Clarke where is your husband now? That illustrious war hero and chivalrous knight of the skies?”

I did not know, but did not say so. Brionny gave me warning glances.

“He cannot be at the office, for he lies back in his room with one of the safragi, a boy of eccentric habits, but both eccentric and frugal. He sells pieces of cast-off paper which he barely understands, being such an innocent one and we know that paper costs much now that our papyrus industry was destroyed by imperialists and we know the worth of the golden goose.”

He let the implications sink in. As a mercy from God Ross kept his temper. Brionny spoke. “This is blackmail, punishable by up to five years imprisonment.” Yasir merely laughed.

“Under English law and Egypt has regained control of its law in which I have many uncles, cousins, business associates and friends, who would, do you think, find me guilty?”

“Conflict of interest!” Brionny snarled “Relatives cannot judge another relative’s cases.”

“Under English law!” He gave that sneering smile with the half-hooded eyes. “But in our new land we have to establish precedent and who knows what may become legal? Women mating with other women? Madness or criminality? Men and boys-”

For the first time in my life, I hit another person: he was more shocked than hurt.

“Ah my compensation claim has just doubled, for fifty thousand English pounds now and court costs will be-”

“Precisely nothing.”

He was Egyptian, or at least Arabic, looked scholarly and was dressed in the robes of a Moslem cleric. Four safragi, stood behind him expressionless.

“If you wish me to testify against this scoundrel my name and address are at reception.” He spoke to the safragi in Arabic and they moved a snarling Yasir off. We thanked him and looked at each other while they were trying not to show pity.

“Time to call the favour in from Allenby.” Ross said the obvious.

\*

Viscount Allenby of Megiddo                      The Residency Cairo June 17<sup>th</sup> 1923

He was just a well-intentioned fellow, footloose after the war and like so many of them he just wanted to do something constructive with his time and wealth and be loyal to his family rather than laze about going to the dogs. That said something good for his character, as did two VC nominations in one day, and another, a swag of other medals and rising from militia corporal to major. Yet character cannot be wisdom and after hearing Yasir’s side, checking out his allegations, getting the horrendous record on the Irish wife and conferring by telephone with his former superior Cuthbert about why he did not get a VC, it was clearly not all black and white. The brother, also a source of much of this trouble despite a fine record, should have been a remittance man in some remote colony: the empire was full of them. Central Greenland was not and he could start a new trend there. Money attracts rogues and Major Ross did not know how to deal with that situation. Higher men than he had been

were defeated by Egypt. I called him in and he started to salute and then remembered, and I sat him down and asked him if had any idea of how much trouble this incident with Yasir Habib has caused. He did not.

“First it gives a sad example of Egypt to other foreign investors. Much more effective than a stay out sign.”

“Yasir bears responsibility for that.”

“Much of it, but can you say that you know how to handle Egyptians?”

*Or your temper, or your wife, or your brother?*

He looked puzzled and I did not develop that, he was going home soon and so was I. “Even more important and problematic are the allegations and counter allegations by Yasir and you and your relatives. Anywhere in the empire parading the sex lives of whites before natives in a court case would be bad, but here! No precedents yet, civil disturbances... Whites on trial under a native court. You, your family, the English here and the Empire will all loose face, and in the East, even more so than in Europe, losing face loses authority. You must all leave before warrants are issued.”

“Gladly. Even at the cost of waving goodbye to nearly fifty thousand pounds.”

“Good news comes now. British authority remains absolute in matters involving the canal, defence and protecting British Empire citizens and foreigners. Fortunately for you Yasir has left an abundantly clear trail leading from implicating you to his relatives in the judiciary, which makes it equally clear that you will not get a fair trial and therefore English authority can protect you. Equally clear is that as Eloura Airlines can be contracted to fly military personnel and mail - so I can reallocate some land on our military base near Port Said for your airfield on a forty-year lease. The land claimants will probably try to charge you for their

time and legal costs, devaluation of their land, perhaps breach of promise. Yasir probably knows that the longer they can drag out the process, the more money they will get, the more you try to settle it through out of court payments, the more claimants will appear, rather like mushrooms after rain.”

He could only nod and sigh and clearly had no way out of that dilemma, but then neither did I. Commandeer that land and I would be in that morass. It was entirely possible that one of the great European fortunes would be bled into bankruptcy by a barren field useless for anything but landing planes. War was easy compared to Egypt’s combination of new law and murky politics and they ensured that a new Drake, Raleigh, Clive, Gordon or Rhodes was no longer possible. Major Clarke was in their mould, but their day was gone, so was mine.

“My direct authority can also give you airfields and offices in Luxor, Aswan and Port Sudan. Further south and east, my influence, if not my direct authority, should ensure that the same pattern can be in place in Aden, Oman and Masqat. Fly soon and a week or two in each to set up your landing strips and supply lines should suffice, but Karachi and Bombay will be another matter. The viceroy rules there and I can only wish you luck in your dealings there.”

Poor fellow, with a wife and brother like that, he would need much more luck than God gives most of us. Trouble would follow him all his life.

\*

Brionny McNamara Clarke

Bombay 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1923

Allenby told Ross that Luxor ter Aden would nert be a problem, true enough, an’ tha 'Bombay will be another matter' but et was nert, jus another Cairo mess: Bombay an’ the finest hotel in India could nert hide et. Even getting’ there was another easy if tedious hop ter hop flight



there. Another barren field purchased an' even if et were quick an' easy, quick an' easy meant at least thirty days in the East. I was also wondering how smart Ross was; Allenby was doin' somebody else a favour, for some fields were already set up ter go some with hangers an' all, one even had a Vickers Vimy, for somebody else had already tried to do just what Ross an' Robert were tryin' an' gone broke at et. What sane or half smart man trades gold for sand?

Even tha miracle of flight got boring fast with nought but clouds, sand and ocean ter see, hour after hour, day after day. Alice said I were first woman passenger ta fly et, but et were still boren' as shit thart won't flow. Luxor, Aswan, Khartoum, Port Sudan, Aden, Oman, Masqat, Jiwini, Karachi, Diu, and then finally Bombay. Et was hard ter hide me feelings, ner could I hide what I was, ner were there any wanten ter.

She was beautiful in their dark skin and raven black hair way. Tha circular, gold, floral-patterned tasselled earring, them gleaming white teeth and flashing dark eyes... an' the red dot on the forehead meanen a married woman. I did nert realise me staring until she returned et, puzzled, a dawnin' understandin' coming across her face, and then a half-wary, half- amused curiosity.

After motionen' ter tha vacant esplanade chair where breakfast were an' four cups of tea and much conversation later when I asked her ter me room, and she mused on et fer so long, looking out ta sea, that I thought she may nert ha' understood me accent. She did. "Yes," she said it quite calmly, "I am curious, have often considered it and you are striking."

In the lounge room, she sat on the settee, waitin' an' her chest heavin' her fingers aflutter just a little an' her eyes warm and nice a glitter in welcome. "We can begin here, yes?" There was a nervous gulp as I moved in ta kiss her, but stroked her arm like yer gentle a horse, slow, sensual and gentle ter start, but within a few minutes my tongue

wa' at tha back of her mouth and our breasts were pushed against each other. Fer me, bein' sa long et held some of the strangeness of tha first time. We undressed an' I put her hand on her hip an' caressed sensual, like Rosalind she knew how ter wait and enjoy et, Jenny never did, Ross seldom. In the bedroom I suddenly realised it was twilight coming through the slats onto our naked bodies – and so did she. “Ah I must go. My family expects me elsewhere, hours ago.”

“Will we see each other again?”

“This has been interesting, yes and more, many times, yes!  
Tomorrow?”

Ross got back after dark as he usually did. Oddly, and though I was sexually exhausted, I wanted him and wanted to do everything and we did. I slept on his chest, my hair, long now, going across his body as far as his navel, as my fingers stroked his hair and dreamed of me and the sixth, a radiantly beautiful Indian girl whose name I never knew an' who I felt I would never see once more.

\*

Ross Clarke                      Taj Mahal Hotel Bombay 23rd November 1923

As soon as I heard her talking with the receptionist, giving a blatantly obvious lie about why she wanted to see Brionny it was evident what was up and the receptionist and the others at the desk waiting knew. The fires of new love burned bright in those eyes and in that high, excited voice.

“Excuse me, I am Brionny's husband. You need to speak with me.”

Sure enough, she gave a guilty start and retreated steps back and gave nervous excuses about “being a respectable Hindu wife” while embarrassed guests tried to pretend nothing was happening. We sat at a table while she was flushed.

“No more stories, we know my wife and what has happened. Continue with this and the ensuing scandal will make sure you are neither respectable, a wife or welcome at your temple. Will your father welcome you back if he knows?”

She was scared: this was what marriage to a lesbian got me into, either being a cuckold or intimidating a meek teenage girl with threats on the edge of blackmail. More gently I finished it.

“For your own good, stay away, you have no idea of how much trouble she is.”

She looked around at the staring faces, her radiance replaced by sullenness.

“No, some idea comes now. Oh, it seems my learning has started.”

I left for work; on my return I booked out for tomorrow morning. She could tell that I knew. At dinner after cold stares I started it.

“We are moving hotels tomorrow.”

“I would prefer to stay here Ross.”

“She was in the foyer. We talked. You will not be seeing her again.”

“You saying that was a certainty, couldn’t yer tolerate et? She was really nice an’ I’m giving yer yer freedom too, maybe with her if she agreed.”

I just stared and she returned it.

“Then let me go on ahead, with the farm in New Zealand idea. Can I arrange things with Rosalind?”

That lead to a dilemma - giving her up was impossible. I nodded

“Findin’ a farm in New Zealand may take some time.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Bombay 26th November 1923

Not at the airport, where I waved her off on a rival’s all stops to Calcutta mail plane, but back at the hotel, the hurt came. It was as if she had just

gone out, her perfume aroma lingered, the stockings were draped across the settee, her breakfast plate and coffee cup were still there; it was as if she was only out to do lunchtime shopping.

Doing anything sexual repeatedly since my finding the Indian girl, suppressing all temper and frustrations instead of her usual fury ways, curtailing her increasingly extravagant spending sprees, speculation about what fun we would have with Rosalind, it made no difference. To tolerate it, to be a cuckold was not in me, fortunately. There was no surer way to lose social respect and self-respect and she could not help it, and what, apart from an extraordinarily strong sexual attraction, a dislike for being exploited and horses, was there that held us together? There would be no home in New Zealand – unless it was with Rosalind.

That was assuming that I ever got home. Allenby's connections in the Arab world had been a godsend; we dealt with honest traders glad to sell flat arid fields of sand and unoccupied terraces for English gold and the Viceroy gave us a similarly worthy connection at Karachi, but that was where our luck ended. We turned up at a British Raj Ball with all the right introductions – for the wrong people. Beneath all the proper English accents, old school ties, titles, medals, and hyphenated aristocratic names they were just a bunch of Yasirs. My detectives found out they were not only trying to steal me blind, but deliberately delaying to give the advantage to our rivals including Olledesham Airlines; many were connected to him through friendship, investment or both.

The only good news was negative: people didn't like him either and the days when any aircraft were such a wonder that they could use racecourses or sports fields for airfields – and without prior notice - were going. Oldsham had not cornered the market, the British in India, and the independent princely states all realised the status, communications efficiency and profits involved in aircraft and were starting to plan their

own aviation. I also heard that I was considered a nouveau rich parvenu for being born in Australia, for being a corporal in 1914 and for my wife. Even my father's habit of wearing suspenders and broughams came up. Apparently, an aristocratic English family tree going back to 1223 makes you a parvenu when among those who can trace their family back beyond the 1066 Conquest. While among those false and supercilious people I missed Briionny so much. From the first meetings back in July she warned me about them and my racist blindness that made me trust them. Now in December, my detectives only confirmed what she said, at the cost of more time and money. I was considering chucking in this whole Dublin to Dunedin airline, but I dislike defeat, we had reached as far as Karachi, and Alice telegraphed that Malacca and Singapore were in the bag and Robert said Batavia was a surety. Maybe planes one day soon would be able to fly Karachi-Rangoon without refuelling. The way aviation was developing that day could be soon. Until then perhaps we should put things on hold.

Circumstances changed over the next fortnight. After months of delay; subpoenas from Cairo for breach of promise and extravagant legal costs came, but returning to Cairo, would only cause a long, drawn out case and endless costs. Australia had no extradition treaty with Egypt and I was ready to flee, but instead submitted a document to them offering two hundred thousand pound in total costs and pointing out that this was much more than an equivalent acreage of prime farmland costs in the world's most expensive agricultural areas.

Eustace Hughes made it up as an English language news story and even got it onto BBC radio, hoping that Egyptians would put pressure on Yasir and his cronies and relatives not to scare off foreign investors, but it worked out even better than that when the BBC quoted him saying that I was a fool for offering so much for worthless land and that, I like my

brother, had deliberately done this to cause trouble to discredit and subvert the new Egyptian government and we had Yasir then for slander, and in England, where none of his relatives had any influence. We offered a total of fifty thousand to be distributed among the current claimants and they could work out who owned the land and no prosecution or they could face slander charges. As Churchill was in the process of jailing Lord Alfred Douglas for slander, what might happen to an Egyptian? They signed an agreement company lawyers put together, but there was the increasing feeling that Alessandra's fortune was being dissipated, and when a no-nonsense Parsee businessman agreed to a suitable land sale near Bombay we jumped at it. On the same day a Mister Conrad got his requested interview. Normally such a resentful, grossly overweight, jowly, sweaty, smelly very young man would have been offensive, but he was British and his enthusiasm was so pitiful all that was overlooked, even if he did sit without an invitation, puffing for breath. He tapped a tin leg in explanation.

“Ah those stairs, three flights up. You are Major Ross Clarke?”

“Australian Imperial Forces. Demobilised.”

“General Manager Conrad Airlines, too young for the big one, lost the leg in a crash after my brother the pilot followed the advice of an idiot superior and senior partner known as Oldsham. At least unlike my brothers I remain alive.”

*And you want revenge real bad.*

“No stories of an English pilot killed in a crash have reached us, su-”

The crash was five years ago: my other brother was found dead days past.” We both knew what that often phrase meant. He was flustered with embarrassment but continued.

“Betham and Oldsham lost our money and then started excluding us from those circles where such stories would damage them. Despite

eventually 'going native' as they say, my brother initially tried so hard to be very pukka, one of the Raj's ruling class. He turned up at their last Empire Day Ball. 'Edwin you should know better than to turn up at an evening function in a white morning suit.' The doorman said. 'You cannot be allowed in.' Some of them watching, including Bentham and Oldsham, got up a petition 'as he had failed every test, dressing incorrectly for an occasion, letting a Hindu doorman calling him by his first name, then following his instruction, he was an embarrassment' basically it said please quit India, we will pay travel costs. It does not sound much, but as we all come from that class, we know how devastating their clever cutting ways can be. They found him at the base of a minaret; the official version is a dare to climb it gone wrong after a drink too many. He left me the airline in his will, but I'm too young for a learner's licence and few take me seriously."

What can Eloura Airlines do for you?"

"Amalgamate."

"What?" He misunderstood my puzzlement for a material request.

"Seven SE5a's, a Bristol Beaufort, two Avro's and fully operational airports at Delhi, Agra, Lucknow, Patna, Chittagong, Mandalay and Rangoon. The planes are all flyable and the airports all have cement runways, hangars, taxis, rest rooms, fuel storage and telephone connections."

"And you want?"

"A seat on the board of directors, direct managerial control of the subcontinent section, some shares and salary and twenty thousand pounds right soon."

"The money being for..."

"A few debts a funeral cost and my own home."

"What can you bring to the board?"

“Expertise. About flying of course, but even more important, about the East. You need that and we know it, first Cairo and now Bombay. Twice you have been gulled sir and delayed and then you fell into Oldsham’s hands and did not even know it, so he has gained airport sites at Hyderabad, Madras, Colombo, and the Nicobar Islands while he delayed you. All currently secret, but he will build, oh he will, that is a surety, but he cannot afford cement runways yet, so very important here, dust in the dry, monsoonal rains in the wet...” He smiled to himself and shook his head. “Oh what that dust does to an engine, and visibility, and oh that mud, landing in mud. Ever tried it? My my.”

“And you wish to drive Oldsham into the mud.”

“Very much so, before he does it to me. We share a common enemy and a common interest and I can give you all the links in the chain across the subcontinent.”

“And revenge and money your only motives?”

“They are not making spare parts for my ageing fleet any more. Oh we can cannibalise for a few years, but then... And planes age fast; both in the sense of wear and tear and in the sense of new developments. My brother died cash poor, resource rich, I do not have the capital for reinvestment: you do sir, you do.”

“How long before you need that capital?”

“Fine for this coming year, but after that...”

“And everything runs smoothly now?”

“Yes sir, everything. A letter or a passenger on Monday’s afternoon flight from Karachi makes Rangoon Friday morning. That includes sleepovers for pilots. Get me more pilots less sleepovers Never a failure, ever.”

“Anything else we should know?”



“My mistress. The daughter is illegitimate. That would have got me blackballed from the Anglo-Indian community anyway, but Oldsham made sure. Deal with me and there will not be any more invitations to the viceroy’s dinner parties or business from them. Oldsham and his offsider Betham will have that cornered anyway. Never underestimate the cunning of that supposed buffoon Old Major, Old Sham.”

“He then deliberately held my gaze until the message he could not say sank in.

*Watch out for your wife and your brother, Oldsham knows and he will use it.*

“Before Christmas we would like to deliver cards and parcel presents that have built up at Karachi and Bombay. Can you do it?”

“Next year for a certainty. My airline works fast, but not that fast, and India is not fast at all... and what of the last links in the chain, the Dutch East Indies and Australia?”

“My brother Robert is fast. In Darwin Robert has secured a sale of land, fuel and sheds, but no Avro, or passenger carrying flying boat yet. The East Indies are almost secured; bases at Batavia are nearly operational, Semerang and Surabjaya are on contract.”

He nodded approvingly. Conrad was likeable and he rang true if precocious. Sir Eustace, Alice and Robert were not so sure, but I sent duplicates of my Egyptian expenses, and said they could not be repeated again.

Life moved even faster in other ways: when the telegram came:

27 December 1923

Ross you are needed here urgently or all you have worked for will be lost. Please reply. Zelda Chapman.

Zelda was never one to overstate or to dramatize. That telegram made me our first passenger to fly from Bombay to Batavia. Without our

airports operational after Batavia yet, it was train through Java to Surabaya, and then boat to Darwin, where our potential rival Atlas now flew passengers to Alice Springs, and then train from there to Albury via Adelaide and Melbourne and across to Eloura on a local bus, twenty-eight days with some hotel stop overs if no hitches occurred: we were shrinking the world.

Amazingly except for a broken axle thirty miles west of Roydton, there were no hitches. We were so close people joked about walking it. Instead the chartered bus chugged its way in and arrived at near to three in the morning, nine hours late. It was a surprisingly cold early summer night, made so by no clouds and with no moon, an incredibly black night, it was so cold I kept my scarf up to my nose and my hands deep in my pockets and there was a weird total stillness that gave me a sense of unreality, of tiredness and a smallness about the town. I sought any accommodation available and outside the police station there was cardboard box with "Ross" in big letters. Inside were two thermoses, one labelled soup and the other tea and a note:

MIDNIGHT LOCK UP TIME SEEMS LIKE THE BUS HAS A PROBLEM AGAIN. USE THE KEY TO SLEEP IN THE BACK SHED. MCPHEE.

Warmer after using the thermos, I walked round. The Pharaoh, Max's ten weeks old new, dark orange stucco picture show, stood out, little bulbs still illuminated the foyer behind ornate glass doors and the film posters. His film house it was a mansion for dreams for he had designed in this new style inspired by the Tutankhamen discoveries, all marble pillars and tiles, lapis lazuli gilt and tangerine, canary yellow, crimson and mauve decoration with incongruously, pictures of the famous film people hanging here and there. Chaplin, Griffith, Valentino, Swanson, Banky, Bow, Keaton, Lloyd, and Chaney. Mercifully after the

foyer he had ordinary carpets, a clash to Egypt's golden goddesses with their wings forming the doors.

I felt like laughing after travelling halfway round the world to escape Egypt.

The posters outside were of D.H. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*: it being about interracial love, which we had seen in Cairo, and the Chinese pacifist hero turned cynic reminded me of Andrew. On the other half of the double bill Chaplin's face, bigger than his name or the film title and bigger even than Chaplin, for the most famous face in the world recently came third when he anonymously entered a Chaplin lookalike contest. That event was worth a smile, for so many of the famous put figurative masks of themselves and their masks are more successful than they are.

*Kitchener*, that bold, steely-eyed, invincibly godlike face on the famed recruiting poster, and the tired, puffing old man facing defeat in the sand dunes at Gallipoli. He dodged snipers like the rest of us.

*Donal Shaw*: that great radical freedom-loving leader, a model of morality; just another sanctimonious, power mad megalomaniac motivated by envy, lust and greed.

*Allenby*: the victor of Megiddo, the mighty controller of Egypt, He preferred studying birds. He was worn down with trying to sedate a babel.

*Deniken*: much the same Ukrainian style.

*Lawrence*: the great warrior, the leader of the Arabs, really a timid neurotic academic in fancy dress.

*Wrangel*: the loyal Czarist, another mighty warrior on horseback, in reality a supercilious intriguer and dissembler believing in the efficacy of icons.

*Makhno*: anarchist terror of the Ukraine, the major force for order in that land. And beneath his chaos, controlled to some extent by his wife.

*Trotsky*: the worker's leader and the leader of a movement supposedly

dedicated to achieving peace, equality, freedom and land for the peasantry and factories for the workers. How many hundred thousand peasants and workers who took control of the factories and farms had he had executed or deported - in the Ukraine alone?

*Bold Budenny*: the brave red Cossack general, fleeing in terror when the unarmed women picked up their hidden guns.

*Sir Eustace Hughes*: he seemed a calm affable man, but he lived in fear of revolution of assorted kinds, Bolshevik, Irish Republican, colonial nationalist, military coups, and yet even these fears where to preoccupy a mind that could not face the dead of 1914-1918.

And yet it was not only the famous:

*Rebecca* wore quite a few masks; orphan, virginal waif rescued by Prince Charming; Maid Marion; svelte university flapper.

*Zinada* was a dedicated sexless radical, but that changed and there was that night she confessed love, underneath the amazon, she was the unloved, unnoticed girl who wanted something better.

*Evelyn* wore his aesthete-bohemian mask for so long it was his real face, but one that concealed egocentric heartlessness for those without the feminine beauty he loved.

*Alice Hughes Clarke*, a supposedly happy, well-treated subservient wife who was really Robert's protector, a competent business woman, but she was so neurotic about the war that she could not bear to hear it mentioned and her fear of Robert's exposure preoccupied her.

*Robert* was the chivalrous Knight of the Air, neurotically enacting schoolboy dreams and bizarre tastes. All his boys had to be subservient.

*Cousin in law Tom* did hearty good bloke, modest war hero, patriot and wise bushie all very well, four roles; but beneath that he was a sullen, sadistic, mean, self-pitying mercenary bully, putting on calculating acts for gain or to fuel his conceit.

*Max* was the local Wise Lord of the Manor, but was really a figurehead for his wife.

*Aunt Zelda*, apparently in the background, was really a very powerful force.

*Alison* was the dutiful wife, playing that role because she had to.

*Helen* likewise.

*Reverend McPherson, Edna and Ruth* tried hard to be sincere Christians, but they also had their masks, as I found out fifteen years back when discussing the Anglican article of faith that said the Bible was literally and factually true and I asked how could contradictory facts in the Gospels be true. It was the only time I saw them angrily flustered, and they were deluding themselves, not others.

*Their son Alexander*, served on the parish council, followed the law explicitly and had much to say about morality in courts, yet his wife had their child seven months after marriage and according to *Brionny* there was *Minnietta*.

*Cousin Karl and his wife Lynda* were also duty incarnate, caring for the public's health through service at all times of the day and night, but when *Murie* wrote to me that he came to the surgery because their baby was coming prematurely, *Karl* whipped the book he was reading into his armchair in vexation and *Lynda* sighed vexed. They always gave me the impression that beneath good manners, they did not like people much and valued their time alone.

*Mcphee* was the same, people who went to the front bench of the police station said the same thing, he was more interested in sitting in his comfortable office reading detective novels than in going out on real cases, he often discouraged them.

*His trackers Cyril and Clyde*, their masks were almost faceless automations on the job, but off it they must have said a lot, at home for

year before last Zelda wrote that Cyril had been dismissed on an employment retry as his kids had been blabbing police secret investigations around town. They also claimed Mcphee arranged Jenny Doyle's escape.

*Jan's mask* was revealed in that scandal years ago when Jenny with her blabbing tore the masks off half the town. Maybe he had a new one as the cheerful town baker making light of his injuries.

*Stepan Bach* had worn one so well that until Jenny Doyle's revelations nobody suspected. Now it was back on: whatever was there was concealed again.

*Keith Anstee* had a mask, but one so well worn it was impenetrable.

*Not so Reverend Jervis*, anybody could see how he used religion to get power over people he envied or who could laugh. He only deluded himself.

*It was one of my mother's masks*, dutiful wife and mother, and Ulster patriot and Anglican moralist were others. Once again that gave her credibility and power, privilege and wealth, and total control.

*Katie Dean* told no lies but she also wore the masks of obedience and duty for my mother. Unlike the others, she did not profit much by it. The same could be said for Cuthbert and his relations with military superiors: comfortable, but not rich in England.

*Murie* also told no lies, but what was under the clown's mask?

*Albert Moon*: Rosalind compared him to Uriah Heep as they wore that same grovelling mask of servility, but from what Zelda wrote, he had a patriotic mask that gave him much power and profit, just like Tom.

*Rosalind* now respectability incarnate, a general's daughter, a Florence Nightingale by all accounts, but who was she really? A dutiful widow mourning a good man or a user? A lesbian in a triad associated with crooks?

*Brionny*: At least she had the honesty to be confused about who she was. A lesbian in a sexual triad and associated with crooks?

So was everybody, (excepting brain-damaged simpleton Grahame) wearing masks? *Uncle Reg, Leo and Douglas's widow Barbara*, well at least as I knew them years ago did not seem to, but grief and defeat leads to masks.

That stung when thought of it and images of making love to Zinada or Rebecca returned, I could not criticize her for that – or anything else. Her mother stole money to help her daughter escape an exploiter; mine stole my daughters. Jenny and Brionny stole jewellery from the wealthy for their cause, I stole herds, trains, weapons and anything else possible for mine. Bach, Moon, Jenny, Brionny and Rosalind's mother were small time compared to Trotsky, Wrangel and also Makhno, one of the world's most successful plunderers and my ally. No, my mask was being a respectable defender of order, and it was one best maintained.

Oh well, all the Eloura people would be here tomorrow. I walked around town seeing what else had changed, not much. There was Van Groendhal's bakery with those words now in bright red on a fresh new paint job, and a wide range of extravagant cakes and pies on sale, as if he was prospering because the district was. The news agency/general store was also renovated with his long floor revarnished and more of everything and barrels full of grains, vegetables and fruit, dried and fresh in big polished up wine barrels. Max now had shelves full of books for sale and racks full of American comics and dime store novels. In contrast the newspaper office, all of the churches, McPherson's surgery and Bach's were totally unchanged, even from childhood memories, as if time stopped around 1896. The livery stable and blacksmith's were still there, but were decaying as if the owners were not putting a penny into

maintenance, little wonder. With only one general's horse coming back to Australia and more horses than men being enlisted, they were noticeably scarce, autos were more common, now liveries looked odd and unnatural.

In many a town seen from the train window stables and liveries had been converted to petrol stations and mechanics repair shops: here they had built a new one on the edge of town, apparently years back or it aged fast. It was ugly brick and corrugated iron made uglier by painting it white and every dust, rust and oil stain showed up. The old bank had been robbed by bushrangers in the 1850s, now it was derelict. One storey clap board, with a veranda and Gothic lettering on its window, its once long ago bright tan paint and gold Gothic lettering on the window had faded and there were flecks of rust on the scalloped, curved, veranda roof.

The new bank opened ten months back also had that Egyptian look, a squat square shape and bold bright colours filling triangular decoration everywhere and damascene filigree on mustard stucco. Like its emerald and crimson lead light the whole thing was, well loud! It seemed the town always attracted exotic architecture; the 1888 post office was Corinthian, down to the fluted columns topped with the sculpted agapanthus, and the white paint job with bright light blue trim. There was the massive Gothic revival Catholic Church and New Albion, still looking like an English Georgian mansion, even though it was now a hospital. Now we had these Egyptian temples, one dedicated to money and one for dreams.

One other thing had changed. The park had a new war memorial, for us. On an arch a life size marble soldier stood sentinel, oblivious to two very feminine angels kneeling in adoration up at him, their diaphanous robes were next to nothing, but pubic hair and female genitalia are never carved in. With nobody around I could have my mask off and smile at the thought of these angels being Rosalind and Brionny.



The smile faded upon seeing the names below. There was mine, third after Cuthbert and Max, with Robert and Alexander after. They went through in rank and listed medals and the dead got an asterisk; maybe four out of ten and there were a few surprises, younger ones from the war's second half. Only one in six enlisted Australians served at Gallipoli. Two cousins and a best friend hurt the most, here, having forgotten what they had become and remembrances came of childhood days, but a reverend, a town baker, the sweeper, our blacksmith and a police tracker, a Catholic seminary student and his brothers, the mine manager and my sister in law's brother, one of our farmworkers, all gone, and the influenza that killed so many here, the fabric of our society pulled apart.

Then the figure emerged, he was getting his brooms and bin ready, wearing his woollen underwear top and red braces and battered felt hat with the edges frayed.

“Kenny!”

He tensed and straightened, as if hostile and turned and it wasn't Kenny, but an unknown with a hostile sneer on his face and the recognising smile on mine faded.

“No it is not Kenny and just as I think everyone in this town has finally been told that and don't have to waste money on new work clothes, lo and behold, another one turns up who has to be told!”

He went back to his sweeping as if I did not exist. Walking around again I could see light coming from the newspaper offices. There at printing and bundling was Keith Anstee, looking sad and old and defeated but he looked up with a smile, and a spark of the old wit.

“Have to be up early once a week, they collect at five. They had a big celebration for you, but it ended by midnight.”

“Nothing here changes much.”

“Oh it has, it has, Albert Moon owns too much, apart from controlling union leaders and others.”

“You work for Moon?”

“No, Max keeps me on, but Moon has an assistant editor, still with time left on his wartime contract. Otherwise it is the blacklist for me.”

“By?”

“Moon.”

“I don't follow.”

“Blacklisted and blackmailed. He thinks that being married to Jenny equals knowing where the thieved jewellery exists. There is still a massive reward out. Keeps me on watch in case I go to the stash.”

“He thinks they stashed loot around here?”

“Unless somebody has already found it on the quiet he probably has that bit right. She only had a few hours that day between Brionny's disappearance and her arrest. It was numbered and so, hot. Not a numbered piece has ever turned up and she was not carrying it when she rode off that night.”

“How can he get away with it?”

“He made a fortune out of blacklisting companies during the war and using moongoons as dummy buyers at very low prices. Some he resold at a massive profit, others he keeps. He also runs a detective agency that does contract work for the government, so he gets power through them”

“He does the dirty work for them that they don't want to know of.”

“And others. If can use his ultra-conservative links to bring someone down; business and church, judges, police, defence force, security agencies... Here Reverend Jervis serves as his main man on the spot, keeping his eye out for reds, libertines, degenerates, so called uppity

abos, union troublemakers and atheists. He can have them tried for trumped up charges.”

“You give me the feeling another seedier side exists.”

“His underworld links are for tax evasion, loan sharking, thuggery, rigging union elections, but no proven murders. Moon gets people who own homes in the way of the Sydney Harbour Bridge to move, for a pittance. He has become quite rich.”

“Any good news?”

“McPhee won't have a bar of him. Moon stays well and truly scared of you: even so, watch out.”

“It is my guess that he will attack on Brionny or Rosalind.”

“Mine too. Brionny should stay away from here or he will get her jailed. Rosalind has become too big to touch.”

“With what she knows on him she can blow Moon out of the water if he tries, just as he can destroy her, maybe not. She will have more credibility, being now chief matron at New Albion and therefore worshipped as the local Florence Nightingale. Big pay, never spends much and her father left her thousands, respectability, and a peerage ancestry.”

“The father? You sound dubious.”

“Nobody else in Eloura is, but then the district never married Jenny. This British general Jervis may have been an actor Jenny employed to enrich Rosalind and remove the stigma her perhaps real mother gave her. The changeling story sounds too melodramatic and Jenny loved such stories.”

“You don't know?”

“The only ones who did were the general and Jenny and they both died last year. Everybody else believes it and that includes Moon, fortunately. Certainly true things must be more important.”

“And what is true?”

“She has been waiting for you since her husband died.”

I could only nod; he gave me a long sympathetic stare, and then returned to printing. “Got to keep going, it is my job otherwise, we need to have a drink sometime.”

He was really giving me a chance to think over what he had implied, and I took the hint, continuing walking around in the cold, black, still night.

Just as the thought came that Mcphee’s spare bed looked good, Eloura’s third early bird, Jan, arrived to start off his bakery for morning deliveries. He smiled in surprise to see me and called me in for morning coffee and rolls and he was genuine, chatting in detail about the welcome dinner for me last night and then business.

“Good old days before the war, bah! Just meat pies, Lipton’s black tea, lamingtons, yes! White bread and damper, day after day, well the occasional wedding cake. Now everybody has more money and the world shrinks and the women come in with recipes; they get from their magazines. Now I make at least three black forest cakes a week, thrice that with fruit cakes and pecan pies, lemon meringue pies also very popular! Mushroom pies likewise! Mcphee never misses his daily, with a marzipan stick and your cousin Murie, nearly as good and every Friday for him a gigantic chicken, pea and tomato pie! He also goes for Turkish delight and mushroom quiche. For the women more than the men, peach melbas, glace cherry tarts on a suet base, and a brand new one from New Zealand, a hot seller - pavlova with peach, glace orange or passion fruit topping! Alison and Ruth and Rosalind love it. Try some!”

“Looks a bit rich on an empty stomach, but those marzipan sticks-”

Straight away six were piled up on one plate and and we sat and munched and sipped away.

“You seem your own best customer, but with a thin waist like that it can’t be.” He laughed.

“Best customers? Murie and Ruth probably are with me, tying Alison for third, but Ruth calculated, with the morning deliveries I average fourteen miles walking daily, good exercise!”

“Zelda wrote that Cyril Abaya was on the wagon literally and figuratively, doing deliveries for you and the milk.”

“He was and did well. Tried tracking again and did not do so well. Married a Melbourne Aborigine last year and went down there with her. I did the run for a time, but horses and a wagon are time and money, besides I like the morning delivery walk, keeps me fit.”

*And reins and horses need two hands.*

“Ever read *Moby Dick* Ross?”

“Only in an abridged children’s form.”

“Remember Ahab?”

“Oh yes.”

“Found a copy when in hospital after seeing the last of Gallipoli. Ahab hit me as a fool, tossing the good gift of life away after he survived near to being exterminated, and that loss of his leg was his own fault, he went to kill the whale yes? Near the end he meets the English captain who lost his arm to that same whale and both had that bad experience, but one laughs and tries to avoid trouble and one scowls and seeks more trouble and misery, yes?”

This was going somewhere beyond his situation, even if it applied.

“Reading *Moby Dick*, it seemed to me to be a choice which would become like, Ahab or the wise captain.”

“You chose wisely.”

“Ahabs do not, and there are many of them.”

“You see me as one.”

“Of course not. You are the great white whale.”

“Who has perhaps trod on toes?”

“We saw it, you rode over them actually and Albert Moon also suffered.”

“As did my wife and children and Rosalind. If you know everything you know that Moon and Jervis brought that trouble on themselves.”

“Of course. Do you know the third and fourth Ahabs?”

“That would be.... Tom Caufield and ..... my mother.”

He nodded slightly trying to hide his embarrassment and then spoke reluctantly.

“There are rumours. Nobody knows really, but there is the way Alison sometimes smiles when your name is mentioned, the way she asked just a little too keenly for news of you...” He sighed and stared.

“Tom was always motivated by envy and malice over land. Now you return unharmed -” He stopped darting a quick look at the missing fingers and the still stiff leg. “Essentially unharmed, a millionaire while he returns disfigured and permanently injured and the war money drains away...” He sighed again and sipped his coffee. “Do you know that in Egypt and the trenches you talked of Rosalind in your sleep?”

“The trenches too? So people say.”

The conversation went back to gormandising, he loved his work and it was becoming clear who my friends – and enemies would be.

Zelda soon proved herself in the friendly camp. Before sleeping for a time at Mcphee’s I left a note for her with the cleaner opening their hotel as dawn broke, after what seemed like twenty minutes I felt a prod waking me up.

“Well Ross, knew you would return to me, but did not think it would be five years after the war and as a millionaire sleeping in a camp bed kept for drunks.”

It was Rosalind, little changed in nine years, most of the vivaciousness was gone and she was thinner.

“I sleep naked.”

“I remember.”

She passed me my clothes, one at a time, her eyes did go over my body, without lust or even cheer. Instead she gave me the cold assessing superiority of a matron hovering over a new casualty.

“Lots of scars, some fingers gone.”

*Saving your silly bloody husband, just so he could live seventeen months more.*

“The scars to your leg were at the Romani fall?”

“Yes, you must have seen scores of scars and injuries.”

“Oh yes and more naked men than naked women. A man’s revealed body appears just so what now.” She just stared and was not joking.

“Would you like some dinner before the sun sets? You slept eleven hours. Walk with me, we have a meal prepared.”

We chattered inconsequentialities until there. The exterior table chairs and silver service set were waiting in Karl and Lynda’s surgery garden, mercifully little different to when I was last there, except that the Chinese and Italian elements by ageing together had blended in as much as they ever would. Bright orange goldfish and burnt sienna balustrades merged with tiles in indigo and vanilla and everything was stopped from being too loud by the lush vegetation and it being an open rectangle with a large fountain, Italians call it a piazza, a sort of terrace. The soft trickling sound of the fountain on pebbles was just right. Had humanity ever made another place so peaceful?

“You will be able to see Keith and Lynda tomorrow. They left us alone by intent. Do you know what goes on here?”

“Not really.”

“Leo still remains unable to take over from Max and never will be able to. He spends his days in an oil bath because seven years on, his skin flays if it comes into contact with oxygen. He can talk, but as this leads to coughing up bits of his lung, he communicates by notes. He wishes you well, but wants you to remember him as he once was. No visits. Somebody has to occupy the position in this community Max once held; Zelda tries but being a woman, and ageing, and...”

“And?”

“Evelyn has as much business sense as those Pre-Raphaelite maidens he paints. He still exists in that dream world and does not want to return here. And...”

“And you still have not told me why you have been sent here.”

“They are cash poor, asset rich.”

“Max and Zelda were always astute at business.”

“Until he returned from the war.”

“Oh do not tell me that he has become another troubled, depressed veteran pondering on the meaning of life rather than getting on with it.”

“On the contrary he has become jollier than ever. You saw that picture show palace that would be extravagant for a Sydney main street?”

“Oh yes, must have cost a fortune.”

“It did. He thought the district needed cheering up.”

“Yet Jan said it had a sorry house full sign up when I walked past – and it was two hours before the start.”

“And if business stays that good six nights a week plus matinees every Saturday until June 4<sup>th</sup> 1940 they will break even.”

“And there is more.”

“He gave away New Albion and its grounds to the government: nothing can be too good for the boys. When they complained about the



high maintenance costs he wrote a cheque for a hundred thousand pounds. ‘Oh that will keep them going for a decade.’ Then there is Evelyn, who gets anything he asks for and Max secretly buys his paintings. Do you get the picture?”

“Except what caused it and what I am supposed to do about it.”

“You saw that meleè outside Damascus where he took blows to the head and kicks from horse’s hooves and then he nearly died in the influenza pandemic?”

I nodded and asked her to continue.

“Perhaps he took brain damage in that last battle; or near-death experiences often have extreme effects on personality, or perhaps it may be the beginnings of senility, he turns sixty-one next month. Or maybe his simple belief in spend, spend, spend, no worries and the empire remains as good as it ever was is because he cannot face the realities. How can a man with a son in Leo’s condition be so relentlessly cheery?”

“And I am supposed to...”

“Take over. He wants you to. His solution to every problem is that Ross will fix it when he gets back.”

“Is Zelda’s urgency because the money has nearly gone?”

“Yes.”

“Am I supposed to bail them out with my money in return for control?”

“And assets, they have considerable. Zelda got Max away on a long Polynesian yachting holiday to stop the spending, and so you could be debriefed on the realities before making a mistake.”

I sighed and uncertain and pensive, she studied my face. “You have bought, or bought into an airline. You do not have much money left, do you?”

“Yes, but it goes fast. The rent on European properties goes into

both their maintenance and the airline maintenance and the establishment of our network. Costs so far have been enormous and it will be the middle of next year at least before we see any profit. Likewise Brionny's farm..."

"Ah yes Brionny. Everyone understands that since the visit after your Romani injuries everything has been over between you?"

"It seems so now. She flew out alone a month past. She did talk of us, hopefully the three of us, together again."

"Us. The three of us. As it nearly was in youthful days and could be again."

For a few seconds Rosalind's face had become a basilisk mask, except for flaring nostrils. She clasped and then twisted her umbrella.

"If you wish to have any further contact with me, you will never suggest such outrageous and depraved things again."

The twilight was turning to dark, of the stillness and of her ribs expanding to take in breath and her glare.

"It seems that there are obvious things that must be said, once. Getting briefly mixed up with that pair in assorted teenage escapades almost led to my jailing, and did lead to me being friendless, destitute and to gaining a false if unsavoury reputation. It was only Andrew, not you or anyone else, who saved me from that horrible fate and he began the rehabilitation of my reputation. My father, Reverend McPherson, Zelda, Karl and Lynda helped, but over the last eleven years I have worked solidly to restore my respectability. I have experienced the horrors of what happens to those who either choose to go outside the rules of respectable society or find themselves ostracised there and there can be no return to that mistake."

It was back to the glare again.

"So you have no interest in me?"

“I have not said that. Your propensity for violence, your lack of Christian faith, your apparent inability to rise in the world were once alienating.”

“And now?”

“You have risen in the world, and after years of nursing weak whiners and marriage to gentle, idealistic Andrew you seem... now I wish you had driven over Reverend Jervis’s head, not his toes. He serves as Albert Moon’s satrap. It is as if Uriah Heep won in *David Copperfield*. He vies for Max’s position and may take it...”

“He has not tried to pay you back.”

“He tried, but by then my position was unassailable, not only through my own efforts but due to... did you hear about my real father being a general...”

“Keith filled me in. You are now a rich, respected aristocrat.”

She paused, pensively scanning my face, starting to say something and then stopping and saying something else.

“It was extremely fortunate that he visited just months before Moon made his attack on local subversives.”

“It matters little to me if your father was a gunner born in slums who left you penniless and illegitimate or a general who left you thousands and an aristocratic name.”

“It matters to society. It strengthens my position, credibility, power. I do not boast of it or go on at length, just let it be accepted. Only fools like Andrew toss away whatever advantages life gives them.”

“So it is not true?”

“You just said it does not matter.” She smiled.

“Andrew said he was divorcing you.”

“He did. Another possible scandal thwarted by mere chance. He was kept so busy in the Somme Offensive he could not get near a post office,

and then he was captured with the divorce documents on him. I have them, hidden and unknown.”

“And what does the future hold for you?”

“I wish to resign from nursing. There are nearly three hundred in New Albion and few will ever recover, even partially. I am sick of the whiners, the stoics, the false hopes and the war stories told with smiles, the hearty sing-alongs, the fake cheeriness, the dramas and the dreariness and the smells of puss and vomit and piss and ammonia and this uniform. Enough! Enough! Enough!”

“Why don’t you resign?”

“And do what? The money will not last long, then questions and doubts will start and nobody goes as savage as those who think they have been tricked by a fake.”

“What do you want?”

“A luxurious down and feather bed and being able to sleep in as late as I like without a single task to do or delegate.”

“That will be wonderful for a week.”

“A quiet country home where birds twitter and the only drama comes from a child upset because their tummy hurts.”

I waited for her to say ‘and I want you’ but that was not coming. Instead, she stood up and lent against the arch, facing the mountains.

“I loved my mother, but she abandoned me. I loved you, but you are a libertine and as violent as they come. I loved Brionny but she betrayed me for Irish politics. I tried loving Andrew but he was impossible. My work means I have no compassion left, no romantic illusions, energy drained away, no sensuality, well very little.”

She turned around, her face slightly sad, her eyes glimmering, a little excitement. Thinking of how to say it.

“I won’t be very relaxed or passionate, and no longer do the outlandish things any more, but if you wish to take me you can.”

She undid the bun, flouncing her hair out, but like it was another hospital duty. Walking past me she held out her hand, with just the recollection of a smile. “I can’t stand the stench or the night screamers so I live here, being so peaceful, here this second door.”

*I can’t stand the stench or the night screamers?*

When she said she had the romance burnt out of her she was not being rhetorical: even so... This was hardly the joyous reunion of the intended bride and homecoming hero restoring order and happiness. Without a smile she took my hand and led me in. At dawn she asked me if she was satisfactory like a stenographer who had done a practice piece for a career job.

\*

Alison Caufield

Eloura 14<sup>th</sup> February 1924

After leaving a note with Jan for Rosalind saying that I would be late for our usual weekly brunch there and went to see Ross at the newspaper office. On my advice he was not visiting my farm and avoiding Clarkstead. I saw Keith and his printers leave and went in. There he was, sitting back to me, nine years older than last time. The bitterness had left his face and he was in his prime or would have been, but the drag in his leg was obvious even as he swivelled around, and I could see some of his left hand had gone. He rose to hug, genuinely delighted and sorry to see the hand up before my chest and the message on my face, but the windows had no drawn curtains and it was a busy public street.

“Thank you. It is so good to see you alive. You were such a hero that we thought you would be another not to make it back.”

“You are looking well Alison.”

I slipped the second note onto his desk. He saw it and took it.

“And you.”

My chest heaved and my fingers tingled.

“I am so glad to see you, the last of the boys come home at last; so many did not.” The heaving became uncontrollable, I burst into tears and into his arms and with my head at an angle saw boots in the doorway and there were Max, Keith, Jan, Reverend McPherson and his wife, Alexander and Rosalind, all with doubting faces, except her, she knew.

“Please, Ross returning brought back memories... my brothers, Reverend Hawkins, Andrew...”

“Of course, of course...we heard.” Max uttered, in believing concern and the others all followed his lead and then followed suit, filing out. Except Rosalind, obviously waiting.

“Rosalind, can I have a few minutes before seeing you for tea?”

“Certainly.” Her face and voice were hard and we saw why. She took the note, and quickly read it.

“As expected. And Ross, you took it. Thank God I was first to round the corner and saw that and they did not. Yes, we will have a cup of tea and a chat.”

Then she was gone and so were the tears, as much for an impossible future as for the past. The chat was next morning: Rosalind waited very calmly, marble statue calmly. Rosalind started, suddenly, vexed and very worried.

“Alison, what do you think Tom will do if he finds out? Say ‘Oh isn’t this nice, you can have the farm, the bank balance and kids and I’ll just take a swag and hump the bluey across this great land while whistling *Waltzing Matilda*?’”

“Hardly.”

“Hardly! Alison you will be lucky if all you get are broken bones!”  
 “Keep your voice down or you will cause what you say you fear. Now

thank you for your concern, but it seems my safety isn't really your first concern and perhaps attitudes have changed."

"Perhaps in a few middle-class urban centres and with naïve people imitating American jazz kids, but-"

"I meant you."

"That Rosalind must be as dead as those with their names with asterisks on our local war memorial. You know the ones who cheerfully marched off to Gallipoli? Now when you can get the survivors to march off to Gallipoli with that same naïve cheer they had nine years back, then you and Ross might see me as I was twelve years past and we can go back to sharing him."

"Cruel sarcasm, why? With two brothers and many of my former students among those dead, I do not need this."

"For a teacher you need a hard lesson."

"Perhaps what I need must be an excuse for not attending the wedding, if one eventuates."

"Perhaps."

She shrugged her shoulders and went back to sipping her tea as if I did not exist. The continual self-sacrifice, and self-repression and the power from being the hospital matron and something else had combined to turn her into a right bitch.

\*

Ruth Fisher

Fisher's Farm 28<sup>th</sup> February 1924

Over two weeks went on preparations for Ross and Rosalind, so that no bloopers would happen! It was up to me to arrange a date when Alison and Tom and Aunt Rachel and Grahame and Katie could not come, so not inviting them would not cause offence and then I had to discuss matters with Rosalind, tactful things.

“Oh! You wish is to give me a debriefing!” She chirped, a military term. Like so many these days, she talked military style and like so many, well I wish they wouldn’t: it’s hard enough to forget the war around here.

“It is best not to use military terms. Poor Uncle Reg had a way of not talking about them, but always thinking about them. He works hard on the land to take his mind off them, but not even he works twenty-four hours a day and when he stops...”

Rosalind got the message, for if war talk came up he would go into vacancy, over dinner tables, over chats on the veranda, anywhere. The gigantic memorial in town was, well, all too successful as a memory prompter, and though Douglas was more of a close friend, rather than a brother-in-law and my own brother was there and many a friend to, I did not want their names to live forever more, well at least in my head.

If remembering them would bring them back we should and would, but it was all too sad and to no good. Poor Uncle Reg and so many others were the ones to save now – and that includes Rosalind, made so different by Andrew’s death and all those very sad years in the horrid hospital.

They turned up and they were already like a married couple, but they were so different to the last time twelve years past it was sad, they were like well, the parents of a dead child trying to recover. They never said anything outrageous or tactless, everything was so formally polite, like at a wake, where people talked about everything: everything but that which is sadly obvious. So it was agricultural prices mostly, farmer talk as Uncle Reg was comfortable with that and we were all starting to relax a little more when somebody rapped on the door and from the style we all knew who that somebody was and suppressed vexed sighs – well until they came in and then we all blinked, but it was true. Alison had a face on that was like a mask and would not meet our eyes. He just stood there in the full-dress uniform of a light horse cavalry sergeant with all the medals



and accoutrements of his service. Even down to the emu feather in the slouch hat. He dressed like this for the occasional military funeral, nearly six years after the armistice some still died, gas mostly.

“Sandy Parkinson’s send-off was at four, didn’t have time to change.” His fixed glare at Rosalind accused and she took the bait.

“Barely knew him.”

“He was a Roydtown man, served with us from Landing to Lone Pine. Thought you knew him well.”

“There are thousands now who have passed through the hospital.”

“But he was a hard case, took a long time for gangrene to get him and it got him bit by bit and poor bloody Sandy didn’t come out of Lone Pine as easy as some.”

“My husband could hardly have been said to have had an easy time of it at Lone Pine!” Rosalind was snarling and her eyes were flashing and we could all hear her inhaling. “His hand is crippled for life.” Gangrene and Lone Pine were the worst possible topic for Uncle Reg and Ross was like a marble statue of himself.

“Yer husband? Thought yer weren’t married yet?”

That just hung in the air while everyone inferred.

“Since you are here, would you like some dinner?” Uncle Reg was always polite, but it was clear he did not like Tom as he stared at him rapidly hewing into the beef and munching potatoes at one go before father asked him if he wanted dinner.

“Well Ross, we both made it back, you being the last to return and you made it back best, you can limp all the way to the bank.”

Everyone was incredulous, and we waited to see what Ross would say.

“See you in the limper’s cue.”

Now it was Tom’s turn to turn to marble. Then he pushed his plate

away from him and stormed out. Alison just stared at the table tea cups as if they reminded her of something. She started to say something softly, but followed, as did Ross and Rosalind as soon as was seemly.

We were expecting Uncle Reg to go into one of his states again, but instead he had a slight smile on his face and he looked up at me.

“Didn’t he look a right fool sitting there with his hat on at the table, with that big black feather like a rooster’s arse on his head?”

He chuckled, and looked up. “He was trying me out with all that talk about Sandy and Lone Pine, wasn’t he? Me or Ross or Rosalind. There are some good things about him, but there’s this other side few like. He can’t stand to see people happy. Maybe I should be, maybe Ross and Rosalind should be... this town has been sad so long and life feels too short for sadness.”

At before bed prayers I thanked God for Uncle Reg’s changed mood, for my husband and that we were not like them, not like Tom and Alison or Ross and Rosalind either, all four of them clearly headed for trouble.

“You pray tonight with a smiling face?” Murie quizzed.

“Smiling?”

He nodded and I understood that one could fall into the sin of pride, even in prayer.

“I thought we were superior to them, when God has blessed us.”

*With a toss of a penny that kept us safe from that silly war started by silly students killing some silly archduke. For perhaps twenty million people dead and no real peace or victory and the triumph of atheistic Communists.*

“We are blessed Murie, we have full stomachs, a beautiful farm, we can laugh off things going bad, we have never wanted anyone else or to be anywhere else. Life is good for us, thank God for it. They can have all their money and medals, it is all hollow stuff.”

\*

Helen Chapman

Hawk's Nest, Port Jackson 9th March 1924

He accepted the invitation and followed what I had said in the phone call. The boy in him had gone, but after our last visit to Clarkstead last Christmas where we saw Grahame engrossed in playing with his model train and Robert like a teenage footballer sentimentally talking about his "scores" - meaning killings, including living human beings condemned to choosing being either burned alive or hurtling through the air to be broken on the earth, there could be no lasting regrets that the boy had gone. He was nervous and when Evelyn smiled in welcome, guilty.

When he walked over to the proffered cane chair the limp was easily noticeable. Evelyn had to help him down.

"The horse fall at Romani?"

"And before that, the August battles."

*The August battles.* Another one. They always referred to some obscure little French or Palestinian village as if it were as familiar to us as Sydney or Melbourne. Even so they were preferable to the bright young things with their false smiles as wide as a jackass and their way of going maudlin or violent after one glass. They made Evelyn's total ignoring of the war welcome. While regretfully writing Ross off, he came good.

"Whatever you do, don't say my dancing days are over. Polkas might be beyond me, but we waltzed last week and finished with a minuet."

"We?" Evelyn asked.

"Rosalind and I."

"Oh."

"How is the painting going?"

"Very, very, slowly." I answered. "But then the Pre-Raphaelite style does. Every leaf has a vein and stem and if you look very closely, why!

There it is a larva on the leaf! We haven't gone as far as painting in the fly turds or the ant's footprint yet, but we will, oh we will."

"Helen jests, but this may well be my master work."

"Think I'm joking, he even paints in every blade of grass!"

"Sounds like a painting to see."

So we took him to the second storey studio, it took up one wall.

"Robin Hood and his merry men enjoy roasting the sheriff's deer!"

Evelyn announced the title cheerfully. Ross smiled in an enigmatic way.

"You are not joking cousin; a trail of ants are going up oak tree bark."

He marvelled over it, praising the bright colours and the more subtle shadings, the exact fire that looked so real, the inclusion of all Hood's men, the joyousness of the escape to the forest and the freedom so evident in their happy life in the forest.

"So what seems wrong?" Evelyn had his shrewd look on: he was a hedonist, not a fool.

"Do you remember how those smelly, scarred, permanently hungry foresters back home really lived, and lived off us, with thefts and charity and bludging?"

"Oh Ross, when will you learn that life must be about escaping reality?"

"Did Oscar Wilde or Whistler write that one?"

"Evelyn Chapman hasn't yet, so don't you."

They both laughed, but Ross was engrossed with the painting, and it was leading him to some wool gathering recollection.

"Father wrote that you had to live for quite a time in the Ukrainian forest after your army disintegrated." I hinted.

“Not quite two years. We survived by miracles. There was a real-life Robin Hood there, well there were many. Makhno was the most brilliant and the luckiest.”

“And this is where you tell me Robin Hood was never like I depicted him, it was all savagery and brutality. ‘And there arose at this time those infamous murderers, Robin Hood and Little John, now so much celebrated by the foolish populace’ as the chronicler quotes. Spoiling my fun with reality again?”

“Not at all. What you have captured could be a happy moment. We had several just like that, waiting for the food to cook, enjoying the fire, the sunlight and the camaraderie. We had our horrors, and many of them, but who wants to spend their lives recalling them or depicting them?”

“Exactly, exactly. Life should be happy, that is why I love jazz.”

“Taking the hint, I put some on and we went to the table where bread, salad and red wine awaited. I called Clarissa in from the yard. Ross to my surprise barely noticed, neither did she.

“Clarissa this is your father’s cousin, Mister Ross Clarke.”

“Hello, I don’t have any cousins. Aunt Marsha’s children died one Christmas, in the bad disease time.”

“Well, you have friends at school.”

She just shook her head and I gave him a warning glance and dealt with her.

“Have some lunch, we put a plate here for you and look, the onion and the beetroot have been taken out, so instead you have watermelon and orange slices.”

She sat and ate, Ross watched without seeming to, unless you knew what to look for. Because we were drinking and chatting and she was eating fast, she finished and excused herself, going back to her play. For a mad minute I considered being honest with them and suggesting that they

accept each other for what they were to me. Apparently, it was common among the rich, but no, neither would tolerate the other. Although I had to tolerate their women, with Evelyn about twenty, just since our marriage almost fourteen years ago and two paternity cases kept out of court. Ross with his Briionny, Rosalind, Alison and myself was comparatively restrained, or was it just that there were no women in the trenches or the Ukranian steppes? Evelyn once went through four women in one night. Two men in my entire life was enough to satisfy and confuse me. Men made me wonder and looking at these pair made me wonder if Ruth was not the wisest of us, married to sweet, ordinary, faithful Murie.

\*

Briionny McNamara Clarke      Whispering Pines Otago 29th May 1924

“Finding a farm in New Zealand may take some time.”

It did nert take hardly any actually, a few weeks back I owned Whispering Pines. Ross put quarter of a million in me account. About 10% of tha New Zealand population gone ter enlistments and Anzac forces haven' highest casualty rates, near ter 65%. Then that Spanish Influenza swept through, particular virulent among tha Maori et were. Between them catastrophes many a farm were left vacant or with aged parents an' no son ter come ba' home an' few buyers, so Ross okayed one very cheap fer two thousand acres, o' which sixty maybe were rocky outcrop, an' maybe two hundred bein' orchid, the rest bein' fine pasture. Stables were big but disused, horses coped et worse than humans in them 14-18 years. I knew as soon as I saw et ter get et, tha house were nert grand but I had a gutful o grand, London ta Bombay were grand enough – exceptin' the bathroom: I'm gunna have a grand one built. Alice Hughes Clarke had that Shepheard's bathroom drawn up fer me an' she even had them Arab tiles and Italian marble imported an' there were na sense of favour owed, jus' generous.

It was mainly sheep, but orchids an' horses too, an' dairy, a lot o' work fer an old couple with one son dead at Pozieres an' the other sitten' on the veranda maken' ratta tat tat noises as he looked for Germans ta machine gun in Otago 1923, an' at over thirty and them stitches on his temple evident he would nert grow out of et, fortunately he did not come with tha house. Another Grahame, last thing I needed. Even their previous house servants were written up on tha nearest memorial.

The place was off on tha road ter Alexandria, south centre o South Island, tha' being as far away from Ireland as yer can get an' still be on planet earth. Two stories, grey panted clap board, tin roof, gables veranda all the way round, barn and separate lodgings fer seasonal help, shearers, slaughterers and pickers mainly. The double row o' pines from gate ter veranda gave et the name an' the high an' gnarly wind made sure they whispered loud.

“It is too much for the two of us, oh there is no end ter the work.”

*An' the misery of looken' after a son like that. Yer need me money fer the medical help yer coulda got fer free six year back.*

Looking at tha' peeling paint, tha peach tree branches broken under their own weight o unpicked fruit an' ramshackle fences. There were no disagreein' with tha.

The photographer took some ter send Ross an' as requested before flyin' out o bloody Bombay, he had copies o' our weddin' license an' photo, me parents and others sent ter me Auckland P.O. an' they went up in tha parlour, respectability ensured an' local people jus' excepted that me husband were away on business much.

This was fortunate as I heard nothen' even after we finalised tha Whispering Pines purchase. When the Alexandria postmistress suggested telegramen' me husband I did, but na response came, nert by mail ner by phone, even though Whispering Pines were phone connected. When I

rang his Bombay Hotel they said he had left suddenly eight days after me, but he were nert at tha next scheduled red tape stop, this bein' the Raffles Hotel Singapore, for I had stayed two weeks there waiting for me sea voyage to Auckland. Eloura Airlines did'na know either. Allenby was kind enough ter phone back personally ter an enquiry and say that Yasir's legal relatives had sent subpoenas ter Bombay about the land sale, so clearly et was Ross's turn ter be on tha run and we would have ter check out our agreed contact point, Auckland Post Office soon.

Bein' wanin' winter then slow spring et was tha house I focused on an' after buyen' the groceries they left an' getten' a truckload more I were happy ter get tha house an' fence done up proper, excepten' paint, that would be high summer, around this part of the world maybe eighty-ninety degrees at most.

Housework kept me goin' sixteen hours most days an' I was glad o that, somethen' ta do an' get me brain sorted out from erratic things. I'd gone from a cell in Kilmainham Goal, to a Dublin hotel, ta sleepen' in rubble or slums, to the most luxurious hotel in the Middle East, ter me own farm on tha other side o the world, a dream realised, even if tha political one had turned nightmare an' I now had connections with them once so hated, I wasn't bog Irish any more, nor rebel, but clearly not ruling class matron either. So many closest ter me had gone in little more en a year; both me parents, Jenny, William and in a different way, Rosalind.

I sent her postcards from the day I got out of Kilmainham Goal ter tha day I bought Whispering Pines, though getten' ner response. Odd that Ross and Rosalind both go out of contact. Bloody Yasir and them planes was tha real problem: he'd get used ter me an' girls again when we shared our shared taste fer triads.

\*



Lynda Taun McPherson

McPherson's Surgery 20<sup>th</sup> June 1924

His great lordship had been here six months and really, apart from ridding Eloura News of its moongoon editor in his usual violent manner (which we had to tend to at dawn) all he was doing was rapidly eroding the reputation it took her years to build up. Even with the soundless bed they were obviously still at it. Even those soldiers and nurses who had initially been sneeringly incredulous when told now kept expressionless faces for her and their sneers were for him. He had her so under the thumb or bamboozled that she did not seem to care: she was smiling and bouncy and now oblivious to the sufferings of those around her, except when she turned up exhausted from a whole night of it.

He must be turning her into a nymphomaniac, or maybe that was what she always was and the last decade of duty and heterosexual celibacy was an act, the way jailbirds will go respectable for a time until the pain of punishment fades and they think they can get away with it again. It was not only her reputation that was at stake, they were making us look accessories or at best fools who did not know what was going on in their own home.

Karl as usual was quiet, but lay there thinking to himself and his patience was clearly ending and soon he would have a man -to -man chat with Ross. If he did not Zelda via Max would, for Max returned at the end of the week and would not be impressed with his hero turning his heroine into a slut. Sighing with irritation, Karl got dressed early, as the sky lightened and waited outside her room. I put on my dressing gown over my thick shift and joined him. Ross jumped when he came out softly shutting the door behind him and saw us. He started to make up some excuse, saw it was hopeless and shrugged his shoulders. Karl spoke levelly with tense lips, his usual way of communicating with him.

“Good morning Ross. Has Rosalind told you?”

“Told me what?”

“About her morning sickness.”

“No.”

“You know what that implies?”

“Yes.”

“So there can be no need to tell you what to do.”

“No need.”

“So when will you have your own place?”

“Sounds like I had best start looking today.”

“It does indeed Ross.”

He did not come to her room that night, and when she did appear at breakfast, she was the chastened maiden. The engagement notice was in the next *Eloura News* issue and the explanation for the short engagement was covered by the story of the long engagement before the war being enough and by many sardonic faces. They waited a week more so Max could settle in and attend the wedding.

\*

Max Chapman

Eloura 14<sup>th</sup> July 1924

God played a joke on me! I waited near obsessively for his return, so he comes back on the only holiday I had since George V was crowned!

He moved fast in the world of romance that was certain, going for a Queensland honeymoon. He had made a start on getting rid of Moon, who was down a key goon and a supporter. Ross had walked into the *Eloura News* office when it was early morning printing and gave him what for the billy ho so bad that the villain did not linger even at the surgery, but after rushed tending made it to the morning train out, leaving much of his blood behind him. Ross had told him he would be going past the newspaper office after lunch and if he was still there or anywhere else in town, he would be a dead man by sunset.

Now that is action! Lynda who did not like him, (or I think, many of us) said maybe Ross had read too many western dime novels as a boy, but he rid Eloura of one bad thug less and as soon as he was back, lord but he cleaned up his own nest first the way a man should. He told his mother that she either broke off all associations with Moon or he would have to move her out to a Sydney flat, then he dumped Moon's supporters on the Clarkstead staff and replaced them with honest forester folk.

When Moon heard that Ross was back he had made himself scarce and when he was here he always looked tense and never had less than four moongoons with him. Not so cocky now my boy!

Apart from that, he was awaiting my return to confer as to what to do next. Wait till he heard of my plan not only to save Eloura, but Australia! He was coming for lunch, whacko!

\*

Ross Clarke

Eloura 14<sup>th</sup> July 1924

Karl, Lynda, Rosalind and Keith, all forewarned me separately as to what Max would be like so I showed no surprise or dismay and tried not to feel it, so he would not pick up. He laughed like a child when he saw me and we sat at the same table while tea was served.

“Marrying soon, well! And to the right girl, well!” He chatted on about marriage.

“Got a house picked out?”

“Building one.”

“Site picked out then?”

“And purchased, but I am not sure if the thing should just be built and she sees it as a surprise. Or should we confer? What do you think?”

“Oh confer, confer. Women would like such an initial surprise, but soon they will be irritated that this isn't there; why did you put this here; why isn't that included? Oh and they have a point, they are the home

makers and the home keepers, all very much their occupation, so give them what they like. Yes confer, but include a few little surprises.”

“The new house will go up on Lavender Ridge, fine views.”

“Thought the Whaley’s owned that.”

“They did till yesterday.”

“You bought the ridge?”

“And everything the Whaleys owned, the whole estate, herds, transport, shares, furniture and a few little farms round it. Seven thousand acres. You can have their house, surely those rooms in what was once your own home are no longer enough, they must be cramped.”

*And depressing. I can’t stand the stench or the night screamers?*

“Oh but being there makes it easy to see Leo and the boys any time.”

*Which is precisely why you should get out. Leo and the memories of what once was are making your problems worse. You swing between the sadness they cause and this childish glee you escape to.*

He looked puzzled and scanned my face.

“But how on earth could you do that? You did nothing base?”

“Cerdic himself said he hated farming and would be happy to retire to the seaside near Sydney. His accounts bear out he hated farming. In a boom and with land and stock that good he was losing money.”

“The last of the Whaleys retires, and not even thirty was he? And what does a man in his twenties retire on?”

“The considerable amount paid to him.”

“Ross, it is not good to take advantage of a fool. He must be for anything less than a million.”

“He is no fool.” I showed him the bill of sale. He was surprised. “I am no Moon to chisel, cheat or intimidate. He was going to sell it to Moon for considerably less than I paid.”

“Good man, when I die and Zelda follows you inherit the remaining

Chapman land and that adjoins Clarkstead, then you have one big estate that stretches from Roydtown to Caufield's. You can see the great plains from the western view and the sea from the east."

"Why not sell it now? You and Zelda can retire on the money."

"Buy what you are going to inherit anyway?"

"Use it now, besides tough old duffer, you did not survive the South African War, Gallipoli and Palestine and many droughts and dangers to shuffle off the mortal coil soon. You will probably see me with grey hair, giving your testimonial at your one hundredth birthday celebration. I will need the land before then."

"I'm too old to manage everything and the farm manager; we say things to him and within the fortnight Moon says it back – and the land is not going to ruin, not yet, but it needs more care and so does Leo."

"But he is getting it."

"At a cost!"

"But you donated the building and gave them a hundred thou-"

"I know, I know. They say they can't play favourites. So what token amount do we get?"

"You mean apart from the Whaley's villa?"

"No, keep it for your kids."

"You get the same as I paid him, a million and a quarter, and for that toss in some shares in Chapman's Breweries, one Sydney pub and four of the terrace houses in central Sydney."

"And the yacht, by the time I had time to sail the damned thing I was too old to enjoy all the work and worry the damned thing took. A man is lucky, bloody lucky if he gets twenty minutes together to relax when at sea. It is no favour, they cost when in dock. I'll toss in the Ocean Ridge beach house as well: seen one wave you have seen them all and got enough of sunburn and sand in Palestine. For a price like that, in goes the

picture show as well, some fun there, but it comes with so much dreary work. Just promise not to sell it. And for you some more shares in the most important invention ever to come out of Australia and you will thank me for this.”

He gave me a long level look and the worries about his mental state, which just now seemed unwarranted, returned and rapidly increased when he handed me a little black jar with a red and yellow label, like they stick on industrial oils.

“Vegemite.” He intoned.

“Vegemite.”

He nodded. “Does not look like much but the first coffee beans smuggled out of Abyssinia didn’t seem much either. Likewise potatoes out of Peru, cotton into Egypt. Big things come in little bottles. Go on, give it a sniff.”

I did and recoiled. “It is a new type of lubricating oil or creosote?” He laughed merrily.

“Taste it Ross, taste it, Go on man, you put it on bread or toast.” I did so and could only smile thinly. “Chock full of vitamins and other good things for you. Kids will love it and it will prove itself: healthy for them and a healthy youth leads to a happy nation. It has not taken off yet, but it will with a bit of a hand in the advertising sector. For that they need cash. So why don’t we secure a loan for them, six years payable in cash or shares. You put in sixty thousand and I match.”

*Advertise it all you like. If the pope said it was a mortal sin not to eat a spoonful a day Ireland would turn Buddhist. Oh well wave goodbye to sixty thousand to keep the poor duffer happy. He just sold me water rights to Eloura, that means with the other water rights from Whaley’s and Clarkstead I virtually control the district, breeding cattle and horses worth virtually beyond any known price, Sydney property that increases*

*in value fifteen per cent a year, a stylish picture show on clear, regular profit and everything but running costs paid for, and a deluxe yacht I can sell for fifty thousand any day.*

I nodded and he smiled like a child.

“Good man, good man!” Actually he was best man at the wedding. Rosalind looked radiant for the assembled multitude.

\*

Brionny McNamara Clarke Whispering Pines Otago 4<sup>th</sup> September 1924  
Postcards ter Rosalind got ner response: me letter sure did. I paid heavy for that Bombay girl.

Rosalind Clarke

19th August 1924

c/o McPherson’s Surgery

Eloura, New South Wales, Australia

Dear Brionny,

Your letter of June 30<sup>th</sup> arrived while we were away on our honeymoon. Ross also briefly entertained your romantic suggestion. This cannot be and he understands this. I wish you well in your current situation, after the hurly burly of the last decade you need rest and stability, we all do.

Rosalind

\*

I had sense enough not to use tha local phone line where receptionists hear everythen and got a train trip ta that big city o’ Dunedin. It took a while an’ a rigmarole, but got on ter Alison.

“Brionny?”

“Tha same. How goes et with yer?”

“We are half way between battling and prospering, Conditions are good, but Tom was badly injured in the war and Jack says there is more money in law than in farming. Esmeralda’s doing well at her schooling...

If you are thinking of returning think again, Moon, Travis and Aunt Rachel are all still the same and your name is still on a warrant.”

“How are Rosalind and Ross?”

“Very changed. Married eight weeks back and she already has morning sickness.”

“Oh.”

“Actually, I have ter contact Ross on red tape, bein’ married once.”

“He was trying to contact you.”

“Me home address, Whispering Pines, Alexandria Road, Otego New Zealand. I’ll be there next week. Et is only for him an’ you.

Everything is alright with yer?”

“Suppose so, marriage is not everything in the world.”

“No, suppose not.”

“Tom is twenty yards off and coming, bye.”

So I was discarded by the happy newlyweds. I owed them nothin,’ but ter myself survival. Land girls here were given me assessin’ looks an’ some gave excuses fer not worken’ fer me an’ innuendoes, as if knowin’: keep ‘em an’ they might. No sacken yet either. There's no farmin' by yerself. That meant doin' somethen' best not done.

\*

Zoe Carruthers

Auckland 29<sup>th</sup> September 1924

She was strange and up to something stranger, anybody could see that a hundred yards off as we all did. At first, we thought she was a new girl being competition, but no, she did not have the look. Reba said she was probably shopping for a husband, but another with a smirk says no, she is out for herself and so it turned out to be. I was newest and so freshest, going on the game only once a week and this only my fourth time, so she focuses on me.

“Have a business proposition for yer.”



“Well then let me hear it.”

“I would prefer to discuss it over there in the coffee shop.”

*I just bet.*

Most of the girls guffawed and whistled, but that did not phase her and when Reba steps forward and says “I’ll do it.” She just smiles and says.

“No, this girl will do it.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

She opens a wallet and counts out a hundred pound. My heart starts to thumping and my throat to gulping and I mean to say “Take Reba” but that hundred pound equals twenty times with men and the four so far have been hell and even if it is weird and twisted how could she be worse? The other girls say five pound a night is only for starters; once a girl loses that fresh look price goes downhill too and looks go downhill fast in this business and you only have to look at the others to see it is so. To me it sounds weird and silly and I’ll be a laughing stock, but an aching gut from hunger and getting out of a rat-infested, cold water flat carries more so I say “What do I have to do?” and she smiles and they laugh and Reba sticks out her tongue and wags it fast lasciviously and sticks her finger out.

“The money goes in the bank first off.”

“Et is fer a day and a night, till tomorrer mornin.”

“Bank first off and breakfast is the key to my heart.”

So she stands behind me at the bank I sense then what I was committing myself to, more so than when I was angry and drunk and got on the game. They used a polite handsome fellow for starters, it was his job. Oh well. At the coffee shop she was one of those who wanted my life story. At eighteen easy enough. Factory girl seamstress, heart went thumping for the handsome foreman who promised marriage and didn’t

give it when tired of me and gave me a pretext sacking to get me out of the way, maybe for the next. Sacked, no references, not much saved, a reputation for being easy. Some talked me into a few drinks and I wake up on the game. With her I would lie there and go mechanical as before I thought, but she made sure I did not. After an hour or two, she stopped.

“You are alright with this?” She asks seriously.

“It felt strange at first, and I tried to go numb, but you won’t let me.” By the time she asked that I was so tired I slept for fourteen hours and when waking up, there she was, dressed, silver service breakfast waiting.

“Sleeping and paid in sovereigns fer et, well, Zoe this must surely be yer lucky day.”

“So it seems. Eat with me and we will talk about how yer can make even more money. Are yer comfortable with women? Or would you prefer to treat this like an experiment?”

“So far I prefer et.”

“Good.”

“Today we go shopping, I pay.”

“Clothes?”

“Women.”

So we go back to where she picked me up and they hoot and holler and call us lesos until I do what she says, offer them her money and I choose the one I like best and like her chose the youngest and newest and meekest, red-haired Rosa, Reba’s decoy, around seventeen, not seen before because she starts today on the game, no man yet, a stranded, jilted and robbed highland Scot being a first timer, doesn’t look hard or jaded yet, a sad angel and I just keep offering until she nervously accepts and its bank time and bedtime, but she wants Brionny first and she breaks her in for a whole day and then she is mine. The only rule Brionny makes is we cannot go mechanical, we must really feel it and do. After a full day

with the new girl, its shows and shopping and swimming at the beach for the three of us for two days, then Mrs Clarke takes her turn for a day and then she says she will teach us threesomes and she does and a night's rest and then threesomes again. Rosa seems fine with it, but green.

By now Rosa and I had given up on her being a lesbian nymphomaniac as the sole explanation and also the likely next, a Madam training girls in a brothel for women. This one does not need a career: the husband is apparently off shovelling some part of the earth for her where the ground is piles of solid gold, but already minted in sovereigns. I had six hundred in the bank, and Rosa, starting a day less, has a hundred less. We wonder how long it can go on. At breakfast we find out.

“Ah well all holidays must end, so here's tha deal as they say en America.

If yer want et ter end now, et does, but yer both have brains enough ter see how et will end fer yer sooner or later iffen yer go back ter tha street. I like yer both an' see yer character. Me farm needs workers, I'm not saying et is easy work, fer et ain't. Orchid, dairy, horses, some sheep, but horse care first. There will be times when I will call you out on a freezin' night at two in tha mornin', no overtime. You will be the only regulars.”

“Pay?” I ask.

“Forty-five pound base rate. Yer own room, all yer can eat. That's without sexual favours. You agree to regular sexual involvement whenever I ask fer et an' yer pay goes up ter seventy. That includes threesomes whenever either of us wants et. In fact none of us regularly refuse tha other an' no men trouble, Ross will supply that.”

“And what will the husband think of this?”

“Not much, but he can't say much. It would be best if yer pays go up ter a hundred per week when he visits. Guess what for?”

“Anything hidden?”

“Only what we are: we will be ostracised if known. Say little about your pasts, Rosa you should be right, nobody knows about your two hour long non career that never got onto the ground. Zoe, you are a war widow, romance died for you in Flanders fields. Buy a picture of a proud soldier, border it in black and say little.”

Rosa looked confused and the poor thing did not have enough sense to know to be quiet or even what she was. Twenty pound a week was a good prostitute's wage.

“But what do we have to hide? I am not a lesbian.”

Mrs Clarke and I looked at each other incredulous and she sighed.

“It seems Rosa that I must take yer shoppin’.” She gave me an amused look.

\*

They had not returned when I went to bed and Brionny came out dishevelled and tired for breakfast, nodding.

“Six hours of looking, never satisfied, nerves. Finally the most beautiful girl in New Zealand’s most expensive brothel hears of us and interviews and I have to be there with her for the first few hours, but insisted she break her in and she did, now she can’t stop herself. Now go in and enjoy her, you will never get one more beautiful. Costing me a fortune”

Then start on another. That goldmine your husband digs must be making a hole all the way through to China.

“Often this feels like it is all a bizarre dream.”

“The focus is sex on holidays here, work down there. Are yer in?”

\*

Rosa MacDonald

Auckland 4th October 1924

I wonder about going from virgin to prostitute to prostitute buyer in four weeks. I have had one man and three women, yet when I look in the mirror I still have that sweet face that people says shows I am naïve. I don't understand. Me being aggressive with Zoe and Brianny both and telling her to do this and that and me doing to her what I wanted and feeling lust for her at how beautiful she was and coming to orgasm and wanting more, doing things I never dreamed of. Brianny put fire into me, Zoe says backbone.

I know that after waking up to find both my virginity and my life savings gone and me possessing nothing but a note saying “naïve idiot and I had a lousy time of it, Margret does it better” and him running off with the older sister who was supposed to look after me, It wasn't just the starvation after a week or being sacked from the dishwasher's job because I dropped dishes just like I did in Scotland. I was so angry that I would show him by getting sex from the first man willing to put food in my hungry stomach for it. I was hating them so much it just wasn't even the money, it was to show them I could do it and enjoy it and others would enjoy it with me. I was learning to hate men, from him and the butlers and bosses and creeps refused. He was so nice back in Scotland and we had been friends from childhood, and his letters read so nice as if he had not changed, but at the embarkation dock before he saw me I saw him and that calculating smirk that I pretended meant nothing and Margaret not surprised by it. What happened to him? He always stopped before when I said to and he was a believer.

I still did but wondered what God thought of me. And yet I was happy with them. Brianny was like a kind protector and Zoe was a friend and what Ross and I, well we did together was not sinful I thought. The girls were not sinful either. Nothing about lesbians in the Bible, males yes...Well... It was just one part of our life together.

We caught the train and then South Island Ferry and train all the way and she did not tell us how beautiful Whispering Pines would be with the poplars and pines, russet hedges, stone cottages made of schist stone in the same design as back home, everything so neat and green and trim and air so crisp and views that stretched. Otago was Scotland on the other side of the globe, the way everybody secretly wants it to be, more sun and less rain and no Lordships to be our betters. Being in service was hateful, but a daughter should never disobey a mother, even when she says ‘Stupid stupid girl’ and I am so dense and clumsy I am lucky to work even in service. Maybe if she wasn’t yelling coming up behind me so often I would not be so jumpy.

On our first night in Whispering Pines Brionny says:

“Well me charmers, do we consummate our abode?”

Zoe gives me a warning look and though tired, I agree, but know tonight I will go passive, travel tires. Sometimes they like me like that and sometimes they want me aggressive. Sometimes I want them to be the passive one, sometimes we are all equal. Oh well, it is all pleasure and togetherness.

We sat toasting our new home with sparkling eyes and grape juice as I had taken the abstention pledge, at age twelve, but that was just for alcohol and lies. There were no lies in Brionny, but that is different, well, a bit, to not telling everyone everything

The sex was concealed, it went as she said, regularly. After a time it seemed normal and my days of longing for a husband and children like a fading dream. They both said I was good at it and if anything happened this would be how to earn a living, but only with women. We were both supposedly war widows and Brionny had supposedly spent her Auckland hiatus with him. She showed us his photo, much distinguished,

bemedalled, and handsome as they come. We wondered on his much-delayed arrival, so did the district.

White lies or bearing false witness?

It would be bearing false witness to say we spent all our days pressing our naked bodies into each other. Even in autumn with those winds up from the Antarctic and being so high up it was so cold we slept in one room fired up for warmth and it saved fuel costs, these being massive if you are not careful, just like home. We slept in a double bed with woollen nighties on and for body warmth. If somebody sometimes wanted to take another or both, it happened, so what? I never refused them, it was earning a living and a pleasure.

If we were still eating breakfast at seven we were lazing and lingering. We spent more time in gumboots and overalls among the hay, manure and soil than in bed. Even with seasonal help there was so much work to do on a farm this big and varied there was little time to think on much else. Brionny knew virtually all there was to be known about horses and I came to love that work and the horses. She taught me to ride. Back home only lordships and farm kids have horses, even them not so much these days.

After being still scared of the horses and making the same mistake with the bridle thrice she gave me this assessing look.

“Who never let yer build up any self-confidence? Same person made yer self-destructive? Get et out of yer head girl, make yerself anew.”

“Like being born again?”

“Phrase et how yer like. Control tha horse, don’t let him control you. Look maybe this stallion is a bit ter strong for startin’. Try this little mare.”

Amiably we would talk horse talk for hours while Zoe focused more on the orchids, preserves, clothes and cooking. Nobody liked housecleaning so we shared it.

I found a typewriter and just for fun played around with it. Three hours later I had my letter to friends home typed up and a week later the same size letter to my old pastor only took twenty minutes. Brionny got me an instruction manual and soon I was on eighty characters a minute and learning accounts and shorthand. She got me onto a correspondence course for all that with no teachers yelling at me the way they always do and soon I was good enough to do the farm correspondence and business. In my entire life Brionny was the only one who had never yelled. Zoe went into dressmaking with her own machine.

That was what went with the little time left from farming. But I almost always managed time for Sunday service at the nearest Presbyterian and sometimes made Bible study and special events, being a Celtic dancer back home I joined them here as well. Maybe two thirds of the locals are Scots descended or even Scots, keeping the accent for generations, even so, best to keep my distance. Everybody has fallen short of God's grace, everybody has their little secrets, as I soon found out. We could gather respectably on Sunday, but it was only a day for everybody to try to reach God.

Another reason for distance was would-be romancers. If I did not lie outright I misled.

"My partner is not dead to me." I would snarl, pointing to a soldier's photo requested from Scotland which had a black band and was put up beside Brionny's with a black band for visitors to notice that to. I had really been sweet on him at the start of high school. He was a 1921 influenza plague fatality on garrison duty in India. Let them assume me as still loyal - to my partners Brionny and Zoe.



There were restful moments. Brionny found me eating lunch under an oak tree on the ridge on a clear early winter day, just a few cumulus clouds to make a pleasant contrast and a little breeze waving through the fields, making them waves of grass. She came behind me and nestled into her arms around me while I stared at the sky and the rolling hills view with that sweet little farm nestled in the vale.

“Sweet, so sweet.”

“Uhm.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Whaley’s Eloura 20<sup>th</sup> October 1924

It was wise to keep Whaley’s villa, for building the new house rapidly became a nightmare. It started as fun. We conferred with the architect, making our hopes practical. It was two stories of big black stone blocks each a foot high with thick creamy mortar. Corners had the new style of rounded bay window, but without those silly imitation crenelated decorations. Castles were out before Cromwell. Instead, there was a light-yellow limestone trim and the marble on the verandah continued into the great hall, the limestone marked the three stories, and the second storey timber verandah only went around three sides.

The problems started with the plants, even before foundations were poured. Brushwood, Blackwood, cedar, peach, apricot and maple seedlings were planted and when smiling to myself while sniffing the latter Rosalind spoke behind me.

“Remind you of somewhere.”

“West Virginia”

“Thought so.”

I did not like her tone as she all too calmly walked off and it seemed there was a chill, then at breakfast it started.

“Those maple trees.”

“Yes?”

“The ones you like so much... because they supposedly remind you of West Virginia.”

“What of them?”

“They remind you of Briionny, and therefore of what Briionny is willing to do and I do not do.”

*Any more.*

“Oh really.”

“Yes really. As I cannot do anything at this stage and will not do those more outlandish things you wish for your mind turns to her.”

“I am happy with you.”

“For much of the time. Then last week all Helen Ryan has to do is visit: you end up in her auto at what you think is a secluded beach and in broad daylight... Sixty pounds hush money, turning truanting schoolchildren into blackmailers.”

She sighed and threw her plate to the floor, and then stamped her foot into it and stood there fists clenched and eyes blazing.

“Helen Ryan! Helen Ryan! You could scour the earth and not find another woman more dangerous to your position, more dangerous to us! She is Max Chapman’s daughter in law! As if you do not know! Your major benefactor, ally and protector! If he turns against you your fate will be that of some remittance man off on the remote ends of the earth! Then you can smile all you like at the pretty maple leaves of West Virginia!”

“Oh no, with money you can get away with anything.”

That calmed her, but too much, the eyes still blazed, the nostrils flared but that was her only movement and she sat down again.

“It would be on again with Alison if I had not caught the pair of you! Only slightly less dangerous than with Helen, and Evelyn thinks of you as

a friend. Alison loves you and for you it must be like masturbating into a mirror...”

“Nothing has happened with Alison and as you well know it was not like that. What has become of the woman who could bake meals while Alison and I made love in the next room, then take her turn?”

“She found the cost of losing respectability. She found that her idea of finding total unity with another was impossible. She realised that people do not or should not mate like animals. And she grew up.”

“Respectability at the cost of feeling any pleasure. Always pretending, always holding back...always worrying.”

“That is the cost. So why Helen?”

“She said she wanted to discuss something. We went for a swim...”

“Discuss what?”

“Could that pass?”

“Secrets as well as affairs. The secret would not be that the daughter Clarissa is really your child, would it?”

She looked at me with the utmost contempt.

“You don’t have even the innocence or the obviousness of the animals. You are apt at deceit and you have a puritanical streak inflicted by Mummy.”

“What do you want?”

“A husband who loves me, totally. That reunion with Helen was just because you were sexually frustrated, wasn’t it?”

“No.”

“You probably love me in your way, but I want deep love and your love is as wide but as shallow as the sandbar at Ocean Ridge, and just like there, many wade in. Oh well. Keep me as the wife and Brionny as the mistress. Fly off on business trips when you need her, never bring her here. This resembles the conversation we had with Alison thirteen years

ago, doesn't it? It would preferable if you left as soon as possible, to keep you out of trouble. Do not come back for Christmas. The last one I liked was the day before I met you. Return nine weeks after that, perhaps Valentine's Day, if you don't find anybody else."

She stared into my face expecting something, sighed and she got up and left.

\*

Rosa MacDonald                      Whispering Pines Otago 9<sup>th</sup> November 1924

"Uhm, airmail and from your husband."

That got Brionny's attention, she almost grabbed it and sliced it fast but read calm. Zoe looked pensive.

"He will be here soon. Well me girls, let's have the place spick an' span and we might get outside help. I'll take the wagon inter town fer extra groceries and see if I can get that extra help. With help in the house best back to yer own rooms and careful what yer say and how yer say et. This place must look like a profitable concern. He grew up a farmer and knows what ter look fer. And I have some ideas of other things he will look fer, Zoe, think over earning extra money."

"You did not ask me about extra money."

They looked at each other like they had a secret: we never had any before. That made me was curious.

"Rosa he ain't yer kind. Yer will only be hurt."

A few quiet seconds went and then the rush around started. The night he arrived we would have a dinner party on and the night after that was a town dance. We were expecting him to arrive by train, but there was a plane up there and the ridge was flat.

"Must have cost a fair bit to rent." I commented to Zoe as we stopped unloading blood and bone in the orchid.

"No, he owns it."

“His own plane?”

“His own airline.”

“Oh. You going to do it with him?”

“I’d better. Brionny reckons he gets jealous easily unless they share the women. Strangest marriage anyone ever heard of. I’ve done it with men before. You haven’t, stay in the background. Brionny was thinking of an excuse to get you away while he stays here. I am supposed to-”

I could just nod and laugh.

With all the visitors we got very brief introductions lined up in the corridor with the part timers, men with hats in hands, women curtsying and with me he held on the introduction, well just a little bit too long. He was as handsome as in the photograph, maybe more and he had something else, charisma. During the first week I saw little of him, there were dinner parties and dances and time alone for him with Brionny. He was polite, and that was it. He came to the study with Brionny one day while I was engrossed with accounts and I jumped startled.

“Oh, don’t mind, Rosa, she is such a jumpy little thing, but she keeps accounts so beautifully.”

She showed him past accounts, how the farm was going and he turned to me.

“These are very well done, very exact and you have beautiful handwriting.”

Although obviously descended from landed gentry since knighthood was in flower he took part in autumn work after harvesting, fodder storage, land clearance, pruning and firewood, worked harder at it than most hired help, despite a gammy leg and wrecked left hand. He talked horse talk with me a few times when we worked in the stable.

At breakfast with me serving Zoe looked different somehow, being nervous before him. Because Brionny shared my bed and had me last

night I was glad to stay out of his way, blushing, but Brionny was calm enough. In the kitchen I overheard and the way Brionny's voice was a little louder than usual suggested that I should.

“Uhm daily tasks, Rosa and I will be preparing tha fireplaces, checking firewood fer damp an' white ants, then hauling tha first hay loads in befere dark.”

“Do you want me to give a hand?” He asked.

“Not today dearest, you must save yer strength.”

“For?”

“Zoe.”

“Now Zoe your tasks fer today. Yer can either haul dirty damp timber out in that raw autumn wind or yer can spend all day in a nice warm bed with tha nice warm major, continuing what began last night, learning ter do all types of new things together. Tonight while Rosa and I partner, you can sleep tha sleep of tha exhausted together. Now which do yer prefer?”

“The major miss.”

“Good girl, now off tha pair of you go!”

Then when they had gone, she called my name and told me what we were going to do with timber and at the end says.

“And is it alright if I spend tha night with you? Hopefully they will be exhausted and...”

“Oh Mrs, you know you can take me whenever you like. But why do you talk in that funny voice?”

“Because we are enough to make a cat laugh. We all are.”

A few nights passed and he and Brionny always shared a bed, but with the workload what it was, and the way they had been at it, nobody was up to much. I had a chance to talk to Zoe.

“What happens next with them?”

“Form a threesome again, that is on tonight.”

“Again?”

She just nodded and she had this expressionless face on.

“Don’t mind it, but I tell you now, they want me to be somebody else, I’m just being used, and maybe you will be to. It has something to do with you. If I were you I would not do it.”

“So what is he like?”

“Best I have had so far, but that is not saying much; oh he is considerate and polite and when you let yourself go, exciting and then satisfying - but in a year or two if somebody asks ‘How’s Zoe?’ he will say ‘Zoe who?’ and then recall after a few seconds and go “Ah yes Zoe!” and recollect the good time, but not me so much and I suspect that is as good as the world of prostitution gets – or maybe this place gets.”

“Even so I want to try it with him.”

“Best ask Brionny first.”

I intended to the next morning, but that night they were making so much noise I felt lonely by myself, so, with Brionny’s door ajar there was enough light to I could see them. I just dropped my shift, closed the door and did the same thing that Brionny taught me when we formed a girls’ trio, Brionny gently pressing my body into his and using my breast to slide up and down his back with my arms around them. It feels odd but not unpleasant to have his stubble grind into my cheek, it is not better nor worse than the soft rosy cheeks of women, just different. Even after two women I want him and tell him so and Brionny just shrugs her shoulders and pairs with Zoe. The rhythm starts with him and I never knew there could be such exhilaration, but finally the exhilaration we all have has to subside and he whispers about another time. With the dawn approaching it is no surprise or insult as gets difficult to stay awake much longer.

When I awake it is afternoon light and I am the only one still in bed and can see the three of them from the window, working together on clearing weeds. Brionny has left a note saying it is too late for work and to dress for horse riding, Ross wants to take me for a ride, so I shower and dress and go to them and say 'Here I am' The three of them give me this look, amused? Surprised? Anyway, he just talks horse talk while we saddle up and ride off, but not being born yesterday I strap up a clean, extra saddle blanket and he notices and smiles. He has a picnic hamper attached to his saddle. He can see I am not a champion rider so we take it slow.

“Never knew you were only eighteen.” He says.

“Tall and mature for my age, I am turning eighteen very soon.” I reply and he nods agreeably.

“And you have seen a lot of life.”

*Now what does that mean?*

“Oh, well no, not really. Avoch on Moray Firth was our town. Dead fisher father so my mother took me out of school at twelve, said I was hopeless and so did the teacher. My mother said she was at her wit’s end about how to make money out of me for the younger ones when the marriage proposal and the free tickets for me and my sister came through and lord, but I should have woken up when he insisted on the dowry. After school she put me into service, we needed my wages, but apart from learning to say miss or sir at the end of sentences I was hopeless at that too. And at measuring cloth, running a cash register....”

“You keep accounts well and both your spoken English and your handwriting are excellent.”

“Brionny says that here life starts to be to be different for me. I do some things very badly, well like woodcutting or cooking, but Brionny being very kind, says it does not matter: she just gets me onto something



else that I can do. Mind you, she prefers to eat off tin and not the porcelain when it comes to my turn to wash or cook. There is so much to learn, even just about horses. When I am in the study by myself with the account books and the typewriter I teach myself well. Secretarial skills are one of the two things I am good at.”

“What is the other?”

“Prostitution. Well at least with women, last night you became only the second man I have ever done absolutely anything sexual with and the first was only for a few minutes. He was horrible...well you, well you showed me how good it could be....”

He just stared at me as if he had been punched.

“Well I’m glad we did go all the way last night. I mean now you know what I am, well it is not as I’m a common street walker. I have read up on such things and I am more like a mistress or a courtesan. Well...It wasn’t the thing I thought I would be good at, but I am and I enjoy it with you and Zoe and Brionny and you all enjoy me and what can be wrong with enjoying it with friends? Sometimes I wonder what God thinks of me, but other times I feel good about my choices.”

He just continued to stare, then quite calm he asked me how on earth did I get caught up in the world of prostitution.

After explaining what happened with the boyfriend and how I was only supposed to be Reba’s decoy but when Brionny came she charmed me and all that money and the higher wages she gives and to pay the boyfriend back and he just nods.

“This is a great place for a picnic.” I say that when we reach the place where Brionny held me and I knew I loved her always. So we unsaddle and eat and drink and after I put my arm around him and snuggle in and we look at the view.

“Now this sounds a little ridiculous, coming from a prostitute and

considering last night, but could you court me, do all the things that courting couples do, you know go out together, chat, a ride like we are today...”

He nodded to himself and stared at the view.

“So when you have to go, you can take me to Auckland for a birthday present. Six months on the farm, a hundred and twenty hours farm work nearly every week, I need a rest.”

He nodded again I spontaneously kissed him and he kissed me the right way, not lecherous, but soon it was passionate – and soon it was dark! Time to go.

“Well young lovers, soup has been kept on the boil for you.”

Brionny spoke cheerfully and the evening ended sweetly in the lounge room, before the fire. Me huddled to Ross and Zoe stretched out, lying elongated along their settee, her head on Brionny’s lap, she was soon dozing while I was cuddled by Ross and we listened to Jolson and the Negro jazz singers and there was no need for talk or give sex for the sated, Bliss.

\*

Brionny McNamara Clarke Whispering Pines Otago 10<sup>th</sup> December 1924

Bein’ me turn ter start tha kitchen fire I was up with tha dawn and there was Ross sittin’ et tha kitchen table, arms folded, motionless, almost expressionless. The only thing tha’ moved was his eyes an’ I knew ter fear this type more than ragers, especially him.

“Good morning.” I says level, not ter set him off.

“What are you doing with these girls? What game are you playing?”

“No game. I was straight with them, rescued both of 'em from a life of street prostitution and give 'em a good wage and a place ter live. They have a relationship with me, if we wish. They stay because they wish ter.”

“Or because they are so poor that this seems heaven in comparison?”

“Et is heaven, if yer ever saw how most live-”

“I have seen and I have heard her say that she is only eighteen – soon.”

“All the more reason ter rescue her, protect her, encourage her ter build up her confidence an' try ter get those schoolgirlish ideas about tha glamorous world of prostitution out of her naïve head.”

“While paying her extra for her favours?”

“And yers. I am thinken of weaning 'em off et and I am tryen ter protect her from yer, not exactly good at protecting women are yer?”

\*

Rosa MacDonald

Whispering Pines Otago 29<sup>th</sup> December 1924

My first night alone with Ross was sweet, we were not just about sex; I didn't even have any and slept longer and at breakfast, they were already nearly finished.

“Now this morning, Zoe an, meself had best check tha flock and see if rain has precipitated tha top field and then more firewood an fodder. Now, Rosa, I am sure that yer still have much ter learn of tha ways of men, now which would yer prefer, checkin' sheep fer signs of disease or spending tha day in bed with Ross?”

“Oh Ross Miss, definitely.”

“Surprise, surprise, off yer go then.”

By next dawn their seemed to be nothing left to learn, and slow as I was to learn and do right with other things I picked up fast and without guilt and knew what I had said before was true, I was good at this and as much as I liked Ross, maybe even loved him, and although I would not do it with anybody, this was my profession.

Next morning I stretched out, with the weak morning light, toes to fingers stretching like a cat. He had already dressed and was just lying there.

“Got to go into town today, meeting the town council at two this afternoon, about the new airport.”

“What new airport?”

“The Eloura Airlines airport for south central Otago.”

“And what is it going to fly?”

“Me to you, all the faster.”

“Uhm whenever we want you?”

“Well, nearly, Clarkestead and the airline are both much work, time and travel. Now I have to gallop into town to find a secretary before the meeting starts.”

“Can I be your secretary, do you want to see my shorthand?”

“Can you gallop four miles?”

“Can canter if the horse can canter, can! can! Can!”

“No breakfast and we should make it cantering. Now you play the double game. These are very conservative people, so no romantic looks, not a hint that you are anything else but a staid secretary and I am a married man, yes?”

And that was the way it went in town, where he got his aerodrome and landing field and the town’s air business and the right to charge other planes and it was the way it went in Dunedin and Christchurch and then we went to Auckland. I was good at the double game in my starchy blouse and long skirt and ordinary glass pretend spectacles that was my idea for the disguise and Mister Clarke this and Mister Clarke that and your wife (sometimes Rosalind) calls on the phone and being good at typing and shorthand, better than most. Ross said my talk about church was a good act to and he could not understand why I got angry about that. He was good at it to with the adjoining hotel rooms that he never entered before midnight and Miss MacDonald this and that and telling me contact the wife.

“What would you like for your birthday?” He asked after sex one night and in asking that, oh boy did he fall into a trap.

“Anything?”

“Uhm, you want your own ski resort château.” he said smiling.

“It won’t cost a thousand pound.”

“No contracts put out on anybody’s life.”

“It is something fun,”

“Yes, now what would something fun be?”

“A night with Elizabeth.” His face went stunned. “You promised.” He sighed. “Is it right to buy somebody for a night?”

*Or a lifetime or the time we have had together which Brionny pays for?*

“You promised. Wait till you see her, then you will want her to.”

And he did. Everybody did. He could not take her his eyes off her; I couldn’t either, well no wonder. She was so svelte, so elegant and she had finely cut features as fine as the best clothes dummy in any clothes store, but no dummy ever smiled like she could with lips so curved and a voice and eyes so beguiling, so charming, so perfect. Her eyes were a deep dark blue, with some light blue flecks and sometimes if you looked into her eyes you saw they were violet and other times just that deep, dark blue. Her voice was like soft sweet music and beguiling and her hands so thin and elegant and her hair bounced whenever she turned her head with her neck a little longer than it should be normal, well for most of us, on her it looked right. She had hair you could do so many different things with. Today it was swept up under a stylish dark blue hat and veil. I had only met her that once at my job interview when she was reluctant to employ me and only took me on when I said I would work elsewhere. I didn’t tell Ross or Brionny, but wrote, saying we were coming and when, sending a photograph of him, telling her about him and telling her what I

wanted us all to do and what could be. When I called up the restaurant to confirm she was there and sure enough we got her attention and she smiled with her eyebrows raised for a second, and they were so engrossed in each other that I did the introductions.

“You are the aviator, you served in Palestine during the war?”

“You are thinking of my brother the famous air ace, Robert.”

“Ross Clarke, ah yes we have heard something of you. Hopefully your sense equals your courage.”

She looked at me and smiled.

“Did your secretary happen to tell you what might be the perhaps legal penalties and definitely social ones in terms of social notoriety and opprobrium for buying an eighteen-year-old girl a prostitute for her birthday?”

“No, nor did she need to, I thought that meeting here and giving you the money expected would be the best way to solve this and in return you should supply those details and also give her some idea of realities in the world of prostitution.”

“Ah so this is the job offer mentioned. I do not get sexually involved with females”

“Job offer?” Ross asked puzzled.

“Last time Rosa and I urh met, we considered a new line of work.”

“Elizabeth could run the New Zealand branch easily, oh let her, nobody could be worse than the people on your brother’s list.”

“We are working on establishing the last link in our Dunedin NZ to Dublin Airline. That slogan on all planes.”

“I know.”

This did not make sense, it wasn’t in the letter.

“And we were considering fliers and managers for our airline. So far only two out of twenty-one interviewed pilots are possibilities.”

“Not employing, because?”

“Traumatised by the war or trying to fly the newly produced planes like they are wartime fighters - or just plain arrogant.”

“Managers?”

“Hearing of Richard Pearse’s reputation as the man who flew a monoplane before the Wright brothers, we interviewed him.”

“Ah yes, being a family in aviation here we know that story, but he is...”

I sighed for effect. “To save the cost of a tiepin he used a nail and he sleeps on old sacks, and just eats bread and cheese so old hungry rats wouldn’t touch it.” Her face had become hard, as if she didn’t like him.

“Sounds as silly as the men who need prostitutes or girls half their age.”

“You are?”

“Twenty-three this year.”

“I would like you to tell Rosa some professional realities.”

She looked around, sighed and lowered her voice and was uneasy, snuffing out one cigarette and immediately lighting another.

“They are not necessarily things I have done, or forced others to do. I do protect my girls and if they are reluctant... they just lose pay.”

“You are the madam?”

“And always have been. My husband serves as the financier, and trouble. Now professional realities...”

She blew out smoke and rolled her tongue round her teeth and stubbed out the almost unburned cigarette. Ross knew not to smile, Elizabeth’s vanished like somebody had put castor oil in her cocktail and I was not smiling after the first half an hour. At the end Elizabeth looked at me and smiled.

“Now few girls leave their teens as still virgins. Few of the remaining are pretty and when you deduct the ones who have not had an opportunity, how many are left? So young Rosa, like everybody you have had your flings and experiments, so why not work as a secretary and settle down?”

“All right. With you, Brionny and Ross, well maybe Zoe, but she might not want all of us, she looks so tired.”

They just looked at each other the way my teacher and mother used to after I said something harmless that they thought was bad.

“Now back to the airline,” I tried being cheery to make them cheery. That would make them optimistic.” Elizabeth could run the New Zealand branch easily-”

Ross just smiled and sighed; Elizabeth just looked enigmatic.

“Well she could, some of the other girls say she started with nothing and runs the most lucrative brothel in the southern hemisphere and never does it herself.”

“I cannot take money from such a source as an investment.”

“And I am not asking you to; my money goes into safe investments, the strongest stock available.”

“Your reputation?”

“Most of the officers who... most of the officers and old men are dead. The few left are unlikely to speak and they do not know my real name and I intend to leave Auckland anyway.”

“For?”

“My regular sugar daddy wants to return to England.”

“And?”

“A role in running an airline could be fine; he is old and boring and I could waste my best years with him and then find myself looking for a salaried career job way too late. You are here now.”



She lit another cigarette and put it in her holder, smiling mischievously as she blew smoke upwards.

“Doubtless you think I do not know a thing about your business but I do, oh I do.”

“What do you know?”

“The mistake you are making for a start.”

“Please.”

“I would not waste two seconds on Pearse. Twenty years ago he was in the forefront of world aviation, but developments twenty months ago are obsolescent now, just like most fighter pilots. They learned to fly to fight, not to fly long distances. They learned to command and kill, not how get on with people, or how to make a profit or see a customer’s viewpoint, which are essential business skills. Some readjusted, but ...”

“And?”

“Other mistakes? Oh windy Wellington. Why fly to where winds are so sudden that you cannot plan, and so strong that you cannot land, even with a Vickers Vimy.”

“Alcock and Brown flew across the Atlantic in one.”

“One Vickers recently could not land at Wellington. Even the strongest available plane today fails there. Most of them have to keep circling until the fuel is almost gone and then try forced landings.”

“But there seem to be similar problems here.”

“Indeed, but not as extreme. It snows here. Even so the joke about Auckland’s weather report ‘today we will have as usual four seasons’ applies. That makes landings difficult and then land prices are high and considering how much you will need, your cost will be enormous and the zoning laws...”

“With two thirds of this nation’s population in the North Island, we must have a base here.”

“Of course. Auckland’s weather swirls because we are located at the edge of a temperate zone. Go up a hundred and sixty miles to Ninety Mile Beach and planes can land there on the hard sand. We already have a struggling bus line from the coastal town of Ahipara and a ramshackle three storey clap-board folly on a hill with coastal views that will make a great hotel for the tired. They will be entranced with some of the most beautiful country you could ever see. Save the bus line for those wanting to go south, employ locals to restore and then man the near derelict farmhouse turned mansion and you have the locals on side and no zoning cum legal problems.”

“And this will cost?”

“The farm is on my family property. If I restore I own. The barn I can do for an aerodrome likewise the hypothetical airfield. We have eight thousand acres and almost all is on the coastal flat, but if we stick with flying boats we don’t have to build an airfield.”

“If your family own eight thousand acres...”

“I seduced my teacher. Name struck out of the Bible, never mentioned, all that.”

“So how can you build an-”

“My surviving brothers are more forgiving, they are both war veteran pilots, sensible ones.”

“You worked all this out on a letter from Rosa?”

“Why not? It took an hour on a rainy day.”

I just had to butt in.

“You see Ross, Elizabeth can work things out and she knows about airlines.”

“Oh yes you know a good deal.”

“So why not ask how?”

“Indeed”

“My husband was a military flyer, still flies. He serves on the board of directors for Ollhdesham Airlines. And I hate my husband with an intensity only matched by my desire to be a successful businesswoman and being a success in a rival airline.”

“Revenge, success and prosperity make an alluring combination?”

“Do you always state the obvious with such an annoying way of thinking you are revealing deep wisdom? If only you would cut your vocal cords you could be the world’s most popular lover. We could even assume you were intelligent.”

“Oh stop it!” I interjected, unable to take much more. “It’s my birthday and Elizabeth you are being catty, while Ross says the wrong things and won’t give you a chance! Anybody can see you two want to jump into bed with each other!”

They looked at each other with wry faces and she sighed while he raised his eyebrows. Elizabeth spoke first.

“Today is indeed your birthday and I have ordered a special cake. Waiter!”

At her signal out it came and on a trolley. She had phoned Brionny to find my favourite and there it was, blazing candles and iced inscription and my first taste of champagne and we became so happy and chatty that it seemed suddenly the staff were cleaning unoccupied tables and we looked at each other. Elizabeth often smiled, but beneath that there was something else, as if she was watching the staff and trying to suss something out.

“Time for bed!” I said.

“Ah yes, time indeed, and for sleep, all of us. Now we have had a good time, why not leave it as that? We will see each other at breakfast, but not before, we have all the time in the world, so why don’t we spend Christmas at Whispering Pines, Brionny must be so lonely down there,

just Zoe for company, almost by herself. So sad to spend Christmas alone.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Courtville, Auckland 30<sup>th</sup> January 1925

I knew who was knocking at dawn and so curtly. She had a no nonsense face on and was quietly angry and made for the veranda where we sat.

“Don't tell me you don't need a talk on sexual morality from a madam, you do.”

She left an opening for a defence that remained not taken.

“You do not come across as a total idiot, so surely you can see what she is.”

“I did not touch her until she came into my room and -”

“She has already informed me of that. Brionny confirmed it in a recent telephone conversation; if I had not heard how she started with you I would not be here. She has had us because she desires us, she is no seduced virgin.”

“Actually she is, but not by us.”

I told her of how Rosa ended up on the street and she just sighed.

“A familiar story and now nobody is a lustful demon out to devour poor little innocent Rosa. I only took her on because she was going to be a streetwalker without protection. That type usually end up in casualty wards late at night and it is nothing unusual for them to be found dead-either by their own hand or that of others.”

“So how do we protect her? Or at least protect her further? Last night's tacky talk will probably end those school girlish ideas about being a courtesan.”

“End the payments.”

“I was going to do that this morning. Or rather change them, secretary’s wages. In all honesty, she does earn a secretary’s wage.”

“Then tell her, at breakfast.”

“And something else occurs.”

“Her future? Sooner or later she will want children and with that stability, respectability, calm. Then we will have to let her go, probably with a man of her age.”

This would be so. Elizabeth was oddly sympathetic, reading my mind; she was clearly good at that, but in her profession she would have to be.

“And something else emerges. Romance, if you wish to call it that.” She blew her cigarette smoke out and snuffed it down into the tray. “We are all finding her innocent sensuality so very attractive aren’t we? It makes a wonderful distraction, salve, cure, painkiller, therapy, whatever, to being the walking wounded, the living scars to the last decade. You and Brionny share enforced divorce, lost children, and two wars. One war was enough for me, doing succouring duty of a sort. Near pun intended.”

*But you said you were twenty-three, lying already?*

“After the scandal with the teacher and the accompanying pregnancy scare, I married quickly. Instinct told me that Torrance Betham, father’s aide, was marrying for rewards that would come from dearest father, but everybody else assured me that oh no, he was for true love. Being handsome and so polite and deferential, so full of the most clever and correct sentiments so correctly expounded and being of such a respectable family, I disregarded my instincts – for the last time in my life.”

“And you want out of the world of prostitution?”

“Do the dead want out of hell? You heard the stories I told last night. I neither lie nor repeat gossip.”

“That story about the wife locked in a room and the husband who took their money so his fellow officers would be let in? That was you.”

“What I would like is to leave those recollections behind and be not so smeared with it. All that is part of me, the hashish, opium and cocaine that he gave me free at first to cope, make it seem like a drug nightmare. I am not deadened or jaded but...”

“I am a chance to get out of it.”

“Perhaps. Months before dearest Torrance happened to mention his aviation rivals and what he had on you or rather Robert and Brionny, the wife at Whispering Pines, so when I heard the name...”

She smiled, asking me to trust those gleaming eyes.

“If I don’t have something challenging, I might just end up staring into space.”

*Like me at Interlaken.*

“This could work out. I want it to and so do you.”

“Desiring me, is one thing, thinking that I am obliged or that the job will work as a lure is another.”

“So you will also tell Rosa tactfully that the business is going ahead?”

She raised her glass in a toast.

\*

Elizabeth Betham

Courtville, Auckland 4<sup>th</sup> February 1925

Over another restaurant dinner Ross was shaping up to be the one.

“With the wife we could never be a married couple, can we?”

“No I am afraid not.”

“Uhm afraid not, also goes for me o. If you had said yes two problems would have arisen. First the bonds and restraints of marriage are not for me again.”

“And?”

“If you had said yes, you would have seemed like one of the men I have had dealings with. Enamoured with my looks, they look for the whore’s heart of gold: do not waste your time. I am not cruel and do not enjoy what I have to do, but can be just as ruthless as you are and also feel no guilt about what has to be done to maintain my position. If I have made myself sound like a victim, I was at the start, but twice when men scared my girls I hired thugs to scar them for life. When the girls snickered over my husband’s tastes I extended invitations to bargain prices for those hard cases most madams throw out.”

He nodded quickly to change the topic and asked what was expected.

“Is all that over?”

“If this airline works out, or if you can afford to keep me as a mistress.”

“You sound as if the airline will fail but I can afford ten mistresses with extravagant tastes.”

“I am also astute. Two years of costs and where are profits?”

\*

Ross Clarke      MacKinnon’s Hill Ninety Mile Beach 15<sup>th</sup> February 1925

Meeting the family was as close as we would get to following the usual pattern; perhaps closer than I should go. This was the woman right for me, or would have been if she had not made a wrong turning. Can people forget the past? Ignore it? No morality, no deceit, no jealousy, no rage. Just beauty and sensuality. Wonderful.

\*

Elizabeth Betham      MacKinnon’s Hill 15<sup>th</sup> February 1925

In days past I would have been as one dead to my family, but even before the war old ways were crumbling. Even so, it was to my surprise

when the general agreed to see me, for the first time in five years, since Tom's court martial, when that meant he had found out my profession. The war, the death of a son and my life had left him more than older, more than tired, but the indomitable will and clarity were still there, so were the brothers. From their faces and tones they assumed that Ross was more than he was to me, yet. I had stalled him on sex while here and he was agreeable. For the last week we were doing what the Americans called dating, restaurants, concerts, plays and dancing. He definitely had afternoons with Rosa which wisely, passed unmentioned,

I had written to the family of my new respectable profession. What went unmentioned was that after Ross had heard how Torrance had come back in March last year and tried to get money, control and information about Brionny by belting me and scarring my buttocks, he had found him a few days past and left him in rather a mess and subsequently and perhaps permanently was his way to Europe, yet again. They could hardly object, as father said, to quote:

“After the court martial he was paid a handsome regular sum to keep out of New Zealand, then he acts the leech, taking this place to rack and ruin. The only thing worse than a remittance man is a remittance man who won't remit.”

Ross was doing that thing where he observes without seeming to. He notices the calloused hands and suntans of my brothers, forced to labour to keep the place going, the crooked paint peeling off clap-boards with their rusty nails. Dropping his gaze to the floor, he notices the faded, threadbare runners, looking out the window, he sees the cracked window, the dust in the corners, but he also sees the harvest in, the fine porcelain.

“Seldom seen a finer war record or a better family name.” The general muses to himself rather than speaks to Ross and stops and we know what he thinks.



*So why are you getting mixed up with my no-good whorish daughter?*

He probably assesses on automatic ruling class rules now, albeit in contradiction to each other. He cannot welcome us, warn Ross clearly or ask what Ross's intentions towards my daughter are. Yet he knows that rejecting us outright might lead to my return to a life of shame and Ross has rid him of the leech and that might be the key to desperately needed prosperity. He sits there puzzled and solves it, sort of.

“Too cold here, in the shade, autumn now, outside.” The brothers got his must have MacKinnon tartan blanket in place and wheeled him out to the wide solid cedar veranda with the magnificent views all around, sea to the east, beach north, farms west, sub-tropical forest south. He faced his favourite, north to the sun.

“When somebody finally crosses the Tasman they will land those aeroplanes along that, will you?”

“General, with ninety miles of it, they won't overshoot, or miss!”

He laughed and then Ross and the brothers did.

“Fly up past Three Kings Islands, on to Norfolk?”

“Perhaps a weekly in flying boats, eventually. The island is too small for a runway Father.”

“On to Suva?”

“We are trying to persuade Ross to do that. He just wants Dublin to Dunedin, but to wipe out Ollhdesham Airlines, to prosper, we need to go Norfolk, Suva, and in a few years Ellice, Honolulu, across America and across the Atlantic. If we won't they will.”

“Then do it.”

“Father to do it we have to turn this place into a hotel.”

“Then do that to. Only the mortgage grows here. Your brothers are good pilots, but not so good at farming; now don't deny that, look at the

place, Blind Freddy could see it. So where can the money to fix it come from? I won't take dirty money."

"It comes from Eloura Airlines."

"So you own what was our family home?"

"No, your daughter probably will, perhaps with your sons. She will be part of Eloura Airlines, a director."

"And what of my boys? This must also remain at their home."

"They can be our pilots. They can either take their wages or be investors if they wish, paid in shares, not just employees."

"Well goodbye to quiet, but this big house cannot survive much longer, this sounds better than going to ruin." He stared out to the beach.

"MC, DSC, both with bars, battlefield commission, corporal to major, three VC nominations, twenty million or thereabouts, eight thousand acres of prime farmland, an airline and you bash Betham to buggery in your first month in Auckland. Uhm." He pointed to Ross with his cane. "Here's the one you should have married."

"Betham will not divorce and Ross must soon return to his expectant wife." Before he could incorrectly assume, I kept going. "She has given him permission to be here, for business."

The last two words were emphasised and to that there was nothing else to do but regretfully nod, and wonder.

\*

Ross would have to follow form and sleep in the opposite wing to mine, with Rosa's room adjoining. In the morning we walked around the beach and the village and ended up where I wished, the local Anglican Church, nothing elaborate, one lead light window behind the laced altar, and painted clap-board on a timber frame. The Maori decorations on the A frame at front and back being the only unusual aspect for anywhere in the world. Yet I loved the church long after giving up belief at age twelve

with mother's inexplicable death. The A frame and no ceiling gave it an airy feeling and my memories were happy, fortunately Torrance and I did not marry there.

Ross and I should have and I said so as we stood in the centre, holding his hand, looking into his eyes.

"So you agree with your father on that?" He joked, unable to declare love or joyfully bond, the way most men can't. Then he looked into my eyes and was lost in them and he could.

"Yet I have a wife I do love."

"And I have a husband who will not divorce."

*And I am a prostitute, and a drug addict, not really recovered from both yet..*

That thought came to me, this was how he must see me. The world was rushing in with its woes into my happy moment.

"Leave the past behind, treat it like dirty water going down the drain. Emerge as a clean person, be whoever you want."

Good advice. I was glad the pure beach water was currently icy: it resembled washing dirt away and I knew now why adult baptism appeals.

\*

Rosalind Clarke

Whaleys 14<sup>th</sup> March 1925

He came in all concern during nursing, knowing something already and after the hollow form of merry Xmas greeting I enlightened him.

"He came prematurely?"

"No he came on time, forty days past. I lied about the due date. If you cared about me as much as you should you would have recalled and worked it out."

"Why lie?"

"Obviously so you would not be here."

"But his christening and baptism-"

“Done. He was baptised into the Anglican faith, as his grandfather, the general would have wished and your father too, His name is Horace to honour my father and that is that.”

He could have said something but just stared. Horace began to cry.

“You-”

“You are exhausting and so is Horace, he needs food, so could you excuse us? Now?”

\*

Ross Clarke

Whaley’s 18th March 1925

There was enough to keep me busy and in conflict, without provoking marital arguments; we usually saw each other at breakfast, but not always. With the baby and a difficult birth, she wanted and got her own room. As she was usually asleep or resting she had breakfast there. Karl requested a chat with me. We sat on the veranda while she slept. He was fishing around, while he stirred his home-made lemonade; like many a doctor, he never drank alcohol.

“You know of the melancholia that often hits women after childbirth?”

“She has it bad?”

“And a general exhaustion. All those years in the hospital...” He sipped and sighed. “And it was a difficult birth...There should not be any more, even if she can have them, which appears unlikely.”

“Should I tell her?”

“Lynda did.”

“So you are telling me not to enjoy my marital rights?”

“I am telling you to be careful... In all your dealings with the fairer sex.”

“Anything else?”

“Humour her. She has not had an easy life.”

Humouring her however, meant being gone after a leisurely late breakfast, while she gave orders to house servants and then napped or read or basked in the garden until Horace had to be fed. I was welcome at teatime and for perhaps an hour's chat or music before separate bedrooms. After Karl's talk about post-natal depression and exhaustion her behaviour fitted the bill. I gave what support I could.

During the autumn my life was busy with the old problem; the airline. The Dutch in their East Indies, the French in Indo-China and the Thais favoured us with some trade because the British did not and we were technically a Swiss company. Conrad proved himself reliability incarnate in setting these routes up, we could still use sports fields there. Elizabeth was ahead of schedule for setting up New Zealand and her local aerodrome and Otago were also problem free, but they were the only bright spots. Due to our assorted reputations (which the great reputation of Sir Eustace Hughes could not compensate for) the British Government did not want to give us concessions. The cabinet minister who was in charge of aircraft was encouraging a new company aptly named Imperial Airways to do almost exactly what we were trying to do. They would fly mail passengers and goods from London to Singapore in Avros and DeHavilands, coast crawling much of the way and Elizabeth picked up rumours that they would align with Atlas to fly from there to Darwin and beyond Speed in setting up was crucial, but there were always delays: a sand storm or stolen spare parts somewhere between the Nile and the Mekong, always a strike somewhere between Darwin and Sydney, then Conrad rang from Bombay one late April night.

“There is a new airline, operational as of today. It is small, localised, but government backed.”

“And?”

“That bloody Bombay bugger Betham has stuffed us up in red tape!”

“Of what kind?”

“Betham must have studied the Cairo mess for he replicated it with a twist.”

*And here we have an awkward silence which I am supposed to fill but I had best know first.*

“The twist has something to do with his wife?”

“Considerable. He has much sympathy, the type given to any married man wronged that way and you have none and with her on the board of directors Eloura Airlines has less status than a law-breaking untouchable.”

“So nobody will do business with us.”

“Not even the night-soil removalists. We are stymied.”

“Hire trucks to take mail from Karachi to Rangoon, as close to non-stop as you can do Pay for relay drivers if you must. We cannot lose what customers we have and we will lose them over delayed deliveries.”

“Nobody will do business here. The Anglo Indians have blackballed you and their influence and power remains extensive.”

“Are you saying that in all of India you cannot find a truck seller?”

“And fuel, four trucks actually, the build up being massive. I could try the princely states, Goa where the Portuguese rule, dummy buyers, but whatever we do successfully at this moment, we will need a regular solution. Even trucks need regular fuel and giving up on Bombay, India’s commercial hub... not good.”

“No do not give up, hammer them. Find something.”

I sighed, snarled and kicked the brass fireplace accoutrements over – and then saw my wife motionless on the settee, a magazine down on her knee staring at me.

“Are the newspaper stories of Eloura Airlines costing a million

pounds so far for an income of thirty thousand true? Or are they an Ollhdesham Airlines plant?"

"A plant Mrs Betham says, and an exaggeration, but well over eight hundred thousand pounds over the last three years remains still too much."

"And perhaps Mrs Betham remains too much. I did not think any woman on this planet could be more trouble than any of those already in the harem, but I was wrong. At nights I muse on which of them will cause your downfall."

"We are making money out of the Colonial Dutch and French and the Thais and Princely states. Not where we expected and not all that much, but..."

Horace started crying. Rosalind sighed and threw down the magazine as she left.

The next morning I decided to give the airline a break and return to another task to take my mind off the airline, which was rapidly becoming an obsession, so I went to the new house, that under Max's inspiration I wanted to call Megiddo; we like victories and need reminders of them in these insecure days. There were soldier settlement towns named after victories, so why not my mansion?

The new problem this autumn was the building. It had reached the stage where the roof should have gone on and the floorboards have been installed. I knew something was up when all the timber for flooring, ceiling, wainscoting and dado, (all of it expensive cedar and jarrah) was just piled up, not even with canvas wraps in the autumn rains, not even resting on supports, just on grass and earth so white ants could get it, there were even white-anted gum slivers stuck under some. Then it hit me. Half the slivers were so obvious I was meant to see them and kick up a stink and fall in to some trap. I looked around at smug faces and glittery

eyes – and some were recognisably moongoons. One with the strongest smirk was Jack Caufield.

“Put this timber inside under cover immediately.”

“Yer can’t order us, only the contractor can. It is in the contract.”

Jack stared into my face with absolute hatred.

“But I own this timber and this house and the timber will be white-anted.”

“Even so, only the contractor can order us to move it. It is in the contract.”

“I’ll sack you all.”

“Yer can’t. It is in the contract. Barring accidents or ill health the employees who sign the contract remain in employment until the work finishes.”

“And where might Mister Reeves be right now?”

“What has that got ta do with anything?”

“Mister Ken Parkinson is the contractor.”

“Was. He took the ill health sub clause and appointed his own substitute as he legally can do in the contract.”

I knew better than to give Jack the rat more lines and so just rode off to town where there was a copy of the contract and Alex.

“The contract did not specify a particular stack of timber?”

“No.”

“Nor give away my right to sell it?”

“Not at all.”

“So I can resell it to Elizabeth MacKinnon of Eloura Airlines, have others collect it and the canvas tent and leave them sitting on their bums in the rain doing nothing until they fight among themselves?”

“Assuredly. Just so long as you pay them.”

“And I have the right to see my employees listed.”



“Oh yes, but blacklists for future reference, well, they are tricky. And Ross you should have spent ten pound on having this contract legally checked.”

“Ken seemed a good bloke. He served with us from Romani to Megiddo. He was brave, loyal and honest.”

“Which is why he would not take Moon’s bribes and ended up in hospital.”

He shuffled papers and sighed. “Three moongoons invited him to the pub, talked him into a few and then in loud stagy voices insisted that his brother Sandy died of syphilis, not gangrene. Ken fell for it, first punch counts for much in court.”

“When was this?”

“Early February. You should spend more time locally. That airline seems too big a burden, even without the farm, new house construction, picture show, shares, baby son, what else?” He gave me a meaningful glare. Maybe he was right I thought, then he proved it. “And you have not asked the second most important question.”

“Which is?”

“Who is the new foreman?”

“Some moongoon?”

“Moon himself. Moon agreed to drop the case if Ken made him contractor and got jobs for his boys, including Jack Caufield. And a messenger in a car, being much faster than your horse, came and they sped off towards your new home.”

“So what is the most important question?”

“How much will this legal consultation cost? You do realise that legally I could now print out a bill for thousands?”

“But we went through school and the army together-”

“Ross the fee today remains ten pounds. The pioneering days and

Max's way of doing things are gone, gone. Everybody fleeces you or setting you up for it. You have a sex life that would have caused wars among the nobility in another era. Now it will cause bankruptcy and ostracism. You need legal advice for everything."

"We need to discuss this in detail, tomorrow."

"I will book you in for six at night."

The horse was played out and getting the timber sale organised by phone to New Zealand and then telegramming the needed money so she could pay, all took time. Then finding Max with his truck and some labourers took more time. Moon had that time for his havoc, which was not evident at first, my focus being on the timber. He looked smug even as my suddenly hired new men (technically employed by Elizabeth) gave and explained the bill of sale and then loaded it. Max grabbed my arm and puzzled, pointed.

Where the house title Megiddo was to be was the word Ahmegodheho and when we saw it Moon burst into a false glittery smile and a sing song voice.

"Ah we seem to have misspelled it and after carving in so deep to. So deep that you won't be able to rub it out. You can of course remove the whole block, that is the only way, but then the top floor will drop a foot and crunch goes the whole thing! Or dismantle the top floor and start again, only another hundred thousand and six months. You got the money and time, haven't you?"

"Leave it as it is."

That puzzled everybody. They waited for the ungiven explanation. Still smug and on his hidden plan, but a little unsettled Moon went into his next phase.

"Cor! What a lark! Ah! Me! Oh me god!" Then he changed his face into a savagely accurate mimic of a donkey. "He ho." He looked around,

glittering assessing eyes finding the servile smiles mocking me that he was expecting. They all knew how to keep their little niches.

“Early mark today, no pay loss. Standard hours tomorrow. It will get boring while we wait for the timber to arrive.”

That puzzled everyone present, Max included. I waited till they left, so did Moon.”

“You think you can buy Moon’s men? Even if you could should you? Good lord man, I’d sooner trust Long John Silver’s pirates than that bunch!”

“Trust them? Trust *them!*” I laughed and Max began to understand, at least that I had something up my sleeve.

“Hey you fellows, take down the tent and take it to the aerodrome, the work gang there will need it.”

“But Ross it is bloody rainy weather and-” He smiled suddenly, grasping more.

“Nothing in the contract says I have to supply them with a tent.”

“Five days of doing nothing, some probably in rain, somebody will start trouble.” He let out a glittery eyed guffaw.

“Among themselves, I’ll have guards for the house.”

“There is a clause in that infernal contract that says they are to be employed at meaningful work.”

“Which will be watching for the timber delivery. Standing forty paces apart, no chatter, no daydreaming, total alertness, ten hours a day including a toilet and lunch break.”

“And how long will that last?”

“As long as they do. The timber arrives the day after the last moongoon goes. I’ll give it two weeks.”

“And then? What of your house?”

“A new gang with a new contractor. If the work is not complete by June 30<sup>th</sup> Moon loses the contract and the bonus pay.”

“Sixty-six days and there is not twenty days’ work left to put in the timber. High cost to make a point.”

“A point that has to be made.”

“And you will choose the new contractor more carefully.”

“Already have! You make seven thousand and Zelda tells me how bored you are with newspapers and strolling around town and that you gripe for something to do. Employ a master builder for the technical bits you may not know. Interview the workers individually. You know the moongoons or can sniff one out...”

“Foxy! Foxy! Your grandfather was a fox chaser and he said he should have tied a fox tail on your shorts and given you a head start! Oh, he had it right!”

He smiled gleefully at the building, seeing what needed to be done.

“It will probably take two weeks to get a gang together, so it might tie in neatly. If not, first the aerodrome, then the house. It would be good if both are done by Christmas.”

“You could hold the Boxing Day Ball here! It will be big enough!”

*Why not? It will be an incentive for him to get it done and reinforce my local power. Too much is making it shaky.*

“Good idea. Zelda says that it is so much trouble to convert the ward over for that one event – and well she does not say it, but well, it feels such a sad locale now. We will make the second floor the ballroom with big staircases in the grand style.”

“You can be master of ceremonies, both here and when we open the aerodrome and the new station.”

\*

Ross paid for this latest extravagance, a whole radio station, but he wisely made opening day Max's day. When in the opening speech Max said "And now a round of applause for the visionary who financed this, Major Ross Clarke" There were seconds of silence with only Zelda, Murie, Alison, Jan, Alex, Keddy, Helen and Evelyn and myself and his expressionless wife dutifully clapping and her gaze went to the house servants who got the message and others, looking at Max's hopeful and cheery face, gave Ross applause for Max's sake. The applause became loud and prolonged, but there was no life in it. It amazed me that this was a duplicate of the aerodrome opening and Max had not learned, probably never would and the same would surely happen at the Boxing Day Ball, now to be held at Ross's monstrosity. Many thought Max was being used by Ross, but it was a symbiotic relationship: Max supplied respectability and public acceptance, Ross the finance.

The McPherson brothers all said that Ross and Max were bringing progress to the area, but once the novelty of flight wore off the planes brought an annoying drone and the radio in its way did to, for all the beautiful music came with loud tedious advertisements and a drone of worries that was the news of the world. Peace, that rare, much wanted thing, was being abraded by the modern world they brought to us.

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Ahmegodheho 26<sup>th</sup> December 1925

"There is a Mrs Betham miss, at the front." The maid put the silver tray on the coffee table and I picked up the card:

Elizabeth Betham

Co- director Eloura Airlines Mackinnon Hill

Northland New Zealand

“Please have tea, coffee, ample sandwiches, lamingtons and cakes ready promptly. Have her seated on the front veranda and request a few minutes.”

“Any particular type of sandwiches miss?”

I sighed, when would these new chum girls ever learn?

“This heat produces flies and flies are attracted to any meat, so cucumber will be best, and have the lamingtons covered, everything covered in fact.”

She curtsied and left; at least she tried. Mrs Betham had her head to the view, so with the wide sun hat her face was covered till I faced her. She was elegance and cool sensuality incarnate and the most alluringly beautiful woman I had ever seen with eyes so dark violet-blue. Obviously well dressed, yet her clothes, shoes, hat and jewellery were not ostentatiously expensive, unless you knew what to look for and then she was obviously rich.

“Mrs Betham.”

“Mrs Clarke.”

“Tea will be a few minutes.”

She was waiting for me to ask how I could be of help to her. That would put me in the position of being her servant in my own house. Asking why she was here might be making an enemy and already I sensed that making an enemy of her could be very dangerous.

“It seems that we are both general’s daughters.”

“Seems so.”

I got that, she just smiled and looked at the fine view, flaxen fields, distant roads underlined by dark green foliage, the occasional gum in a field bright blue sky and some fleecy clouds dotted by crows. The air exuded a refreshingly warm summer.

“It seems that the Australian heat has been much exaggerated, this feels much the same as our summer.”

“

We waited until the maid delivered and left. I started another offensive.

“You are here for the Tasman crossing?”

“Oh yes. Robert should succeed in this weather. Let us hope he does, Sydney-Auckland, the last link in the chain, Dublin to Dunedin. I have all New Zealand operational and profitable. We did our first passenger flight to the snowfields of the southern Alps last week.”

“Isn't that extremely dangerous?”

“Extremely.”

“I don't know where Ross is.”

“I do. In bed with his cousin.” Now it was time for me to stare at the pretty view.

“Brionny wrote that you knew and he had permission.”

“That was true only of Brionny.”

“Four women in one night?”

“Yes she wrote about that, without giving names, I can guess one now. I knew of some others here....and discouraged. They are a danger to his position.”

“I am not.”

“Oh? You seem the most dangerous of all.”

“Without me the New Zealand-Pacific division, which incidentally comes a close second in profitability to the much larger European section, would not exist, and I am going to be the one to solve the Bombay problem so that our mail and clients can indeed fly from Dublin to Dunedin. Nobody will pay air rates for delivery speeds nearly as slow as shipping.”

“And how will you do that?”

“With methods Ross and Conrad must know of and approve.” A slight sneer came onto her face. “Do not worry. You will not know the financial cost or the methods used to get the money to be able to laze away beautiful summer days.”

“But Ross is not here, yet you are.”

“Because something else must be discussed. Brionny says you will never divorce and from what I see and hear, you will not. He has said as much during last year’s visit and our recent liaison on our last trip.”

“Which was supposedly about getting the New Zealand end of this crossing ready. It did not take three weeks did it?”

“Four days. He spent more time in bed with Zoe, Rosa and Brionny than with me.”

“Oh, why?”

“Period. You tolerate a good deal, so do I. Tolerate me.”

“As?”

“His regular discreet mistress.”

“It seems you are only asking for what you already have.”

“We need to protect him, from himself, from blabbermouths and the indiscreet and from any further unwise financial ventures. And perhaps from a vengeful wife?”

“My life has been too dramatic, let me doze in the sun to summer sounds and be happy. Just do not throw it into my face. As the other directors are staying here overnight in the guest rooms for the opening and the flight, it would be best if you also did. Not to do so would send a message.”

She just stared, smiling sweetly, enigmatic but no malevolence. Then smiled as she admired the view.



I was not even aware of how it happened, just the sensations, the delight the rhythms, the delightful feelings of her tongue in my mouth and then suddenly she stopped, giving me an assessing amused stare.

“Calm down, we don’t want the servants to talk, after all we are in broad daylight.”

She just stared off into space while I calmed down. It took minutes.

“I am not so inclined, despite the men in my life. With you I was unsure. You are not like what my girls so inclined are. Brionny’s stories sounded so far-fetched: definitely not. That kissing test... never fails with the employed girls... Oh well if you want to live a life in vexation and deceit you may.” She sighed and stared into space for perhaps a minute.

“With a view like this and a home like this you are lucky to be the stay at home. I like the world of flight and travel of luxury hotels, restaurants, concerts. Different worlds, different wives?”

“Once again you ask for what you have.”

“

“You look tired, I will show you to a guest room where you can shower and sleep. I have no wish to meet the secretary. Is she discreet?”

*Are you?*

“I make sure that she is. And so am I. Best if Ross doesn’t know about the last few minutes. Rosalind? I can call you by your first name? Is that all right? Although we have only known each other for what? Ten minutes? The secretary will get a telegram ordering her to stay in Sydney tonight.”

She tried staring me down, but was so alluring that I became mesmerised when I knew I should not be.

“Ten minutes, if that, oh I am sure we are going to be such good chums.”

*No you are an enemy, playing on me.*

The party was a great success, tripling as house warming, a celebration of Robert's government permitted attempt to cross the Tasman tomorrow. As the ball room at Ahmegodheho was becoming the new locale for the Boxing Day Ball. Max was a perfect master of ceremonies and popular. Although we had moved in six weeks before, it took five of those weeks to get everything in place and fix all the fiddly little bits. The state governor was there, but there was no way the new premier, Jack Lang, a socialist, was being invited, even if he had been persuaded to lift the prohibitions on attempted crossings of the Tasman.

No gossip arrived from India either, although Conrad, the director there, did turn up, but mercifully without his mistress. He actually was a gentleman in his own way, escorting his fellow director Mrs Betham, widely assumed to be a war widow, which she was of a sort. Robert and Alice looked a happy couple, as they could be when needed. A happy family for the photograph with little Eustace and the twins, little Craig and James in front with their model of Daddy's plane and Sir Eustace on his daughter's side and Rachel Clarke on her son's. This was the only time Ross had allowed her within fifty yards of him and she was similarly inclined. He held her responsible for much, with reason. She left after for photo and before dancing began. Katie Dean Clarke stayed with Grahame and we got through the evening with few embarrassments. Those that did speak to him assumed he was another war casualty; there were several obvious ones there, as there was on every public occasion, young men without a limb, in a wheelchair, with stutters. Jan and his hook and face was unusual, even for that type, his natural good cheer even more so. Alison was sitting out with Stony Tom until Ross and I came over.

“Oh Alison dance one with Ross and one with Robert, the Clarke brothers think duels will be fought if they dance with other women. I

wish to chat with Tom, catch up on all the news.”

That puzzled him, but we chatted on wheat prices, stone fruit prices, stud bull prices, winning horses (he obviously hoped for a hot tip) how the Gallipoli campaign could have been won, why the females of the world had gone mad for that silly dago ponce Valentino, how they had gone mad anyway twitching like diseased lunatics in dresses up past their knees, the damned sluts, (who apparently could not be lured off for a quick one by Tom any more) and from there we went political. Tom explained how if you read the secret revelations of the elders of the protocols of Zion you would understand how the Jews were behind the Communists and how the Communists were behind Labour and then he had a debate with himself on if that mad dog socialist, Jack Lang should be shot or hanged, as Tom was in doubt which method inflicted the most pain. This was all to the cheery dance music. Suddenly he looked up puzzled.

“That’s Negro music, Americanised African stuff! What happened to the bush music? What is wrong with that?”

“Perhaps with the clipper ships, bushrangers and convicts gone and the squatters and gold rush diggers rich now, they wanted newer songs.”

“Can they play white man’s music? Not that idiot Jolson! He’s a Jew pretending to be a white man who pretends to be a black with that black face paint so people will think he’s a white!”

I kept a straight face and so did the people who were beginning to stare. My hospital calming voice seemed the best initiative.

“Certainly. Broadway hits and crooners are overly popular, perhaps we should request some bush music.”

He nodded and slowly I made my way to the podium, enjoying the sight of the dancers. Elizabeth was with Sydney sophisticates, all young women in the short, bright and shimmery lamè costumes that looked like

spangles. Male evening dance fashions had not changed so dramatically, but some wore all white summer suits, at night. Local fashions were slower to change, but more diaphanous than a decade back.

People were freer in their movements. What a contrast Jan was to Tom, he was the first to laugh when he and young Keddy Taun Fisher were supposed to hold hands in the dance and he held up his hook. Alison and Ross looked to everybody like younger brother and older sister dancing awkwardly, not lovers for years. Robert and Alice, Evelyn and Helen, Karl and Lynda, Reverend McPherson and Edna, Mcphee and his wife, all looked like what they were, established married couples, while Murie and Ruth looked like cheery old friends. Alice and Ruth were expectant, Bach and Keith stood out as failed husbands with reputations, politely but firmly rejected by every woman concerned with theirs and left to be wallflowers. To get him out of the dumps Ross recently got Uncle Reg appointed mayor again with time healing as well, he rallied, and to this occasion, walking round, chatting to all. I put in Tom's request and waited by the punchbowl. They barely noticed the music ending and then Alison read my face and came over.

"Hello young lover."

"No need to be catty. I got the message last year."

"Well take a new message. If you are discreet restarting now can happen."

She blinked, rolled her teeth around her mouth and stared, fluttering her fan and clenching her dance card.

"What brought this on?"

"You remember how we used to take turns, how-"

"Of course I remember, now why this change in attitude?"

I motioned with my eyes to the dance floor and he was dancing with Mrs Betham, who had merrily glittering eyes and a wide smile that could

have charmed a smile onto Reverend Jervis's face.

"She will marry him if we give him half a chance."

"So the pair of us will make Eloura twice as attractive. And it is illegal for first cousins to marry, apart from all the other problems. Nice to know my path on the chessboard."

"I have just gained the impression that my suggestion must be a mercy given to the wife of that." I sighed vexatiously in Tom's direction.

"Ross will always be the love of my life and you make it sound like a furtive affair. You make yourself sound like a –"

"You can arrive for Saturday morning shopping, maybe Thursday matinee films and after. You come to shop, then chat, tea and card games in the afternoon and I can drive you home at twilight."

"I will think on it."

*For ninety seconds - and they are so as not to appear hot.*

Thoughts came of her son Jack, with his sharp hard eyes and chin and a mouth ready to bite. He disapproved of dancing and drinking and was engaged to a puritan and at home studying for his law exams. Children of libertines often become that type.

\*

Towards evening's end, when alone with Ross I mentioned the sleeping arrangements.

"Mrs Betham and her secretary will have the mauve room, the one with two single beds. With the crowding I can share your room?"

"Certainly."

He knew. We undressed with our backs to each other.

"I thought pregnancy would make me accumulate fat by now, but perhaps it is because the bone structure has not changed, or watching my diet, but it hasn't."

"You look fine."

“Lie on your back, now let me take control.” He did as suggested. I shrugged my shoulders and did what I hadn’t with him for many years and felt neither guilt nor great pleasure.

“That took you a long time, Helen must have exhausted you.”

“We only stopped at four this afternoon.”

“Any time you wish I will do this, regular sex must be another matter, no more pregnancies.”

“There are safe times.”

“And you will hear when they are and I am willing to share you.”

“With?”

“Elizabeth, Brionny and even Alison, if you are careful.”

\*

Robert Clarke

Ahmedogheho 27<sup>th</sup> December 1925

Last night was so good, everything was right. Alice lay in my arms, head under my chin on pillows. “We should always do this like that” she said softly and then fell asleep. There would be few more times like this, over the coming months, the baby was becoming obvious, but this time there would be no wandering. Happily I pulled back the curtains to see more of the dawn light that was starting to lighten the room. My smile faded. Ominous dark gray cumulus clouds filled the horizon. Gently as I could I disentangled myself and she just murmured. I went out to the veranda and Sir Eustace was already there, also accoutred in dressing gown and slippers. His face was pensive and it was not just the clouds, or the incredible drop in temperature, it was the too still stillness.

“Not in the weather report.”

“No”

“Call it off.”

“No”

Everybody knew it would fail: it was in every glum face at the new

airport, even little Eustace could sense it, even James and Craig. We went through the formalities, but most forgot to cheer as I took off. Even so there was a happy moment when flying over Clarkstead and how tiny it seemed and inconsequential the things that happened there. The first twenty miles were just ominous as the clouds blackened, but then even before leaving the sight of the coast the growling started. Sixty miles out to sea it was no longer growling, resembling more a whip crack attack and then the lightning came in the distance at first, then so close there was nothing but white around me. When the rain hit the wipers were nearly as ineffectual as knives in water. Flying blind at high altitude in a solitary sky is not so dangerous, but when the headwind buffets so that you are little better than stationary, danger starts: planes are just not built to grind against the elements, very soon something strains too much and breaks, and the fuel was being burned up for nothing. Petrol supplies meant overshooting could only be by fifty miles at best, so best to go with the wind, which means turn back and land fast.

Unfortunately, the beach was on a horizontal line and I approached on a vertical. Sand hills paralleled the beach and high waves precluded a sea landing. I gave the turning a try but knew it was no good. The wind must have flipped the plane as sand, sky, thin wispy grass all seemed to somersault round me. Crunch, stillness, agony in the ankle and blood dripping down into my upside down face.

\*

Alison Caufield

Ahmegodheho 28th December 1925

“I will leave you alone now, back at six.”

Rosalind sitting pensive, rose and left. I had a few minutes to look around at the tastefully designed lounge room, obviously wealthy, but not opulent. Ross came in just as I was looking out the window at his garden and when turning my head saw that he was as nervous as I was.

“You have been at the hospital. Robert feels well?”

“They could find no concussion, broken ankle and fingers, hernia. No flying, sports or horse riding for a year and even then, it will depend on check-ups. The plane can only be good for parts.”

He came over beside me, even more nervous. My chest was heaving.

“Let this be our time when the world just goes by. This will be our secret place.”

“With a secret bedroom?”

“Yes ours. Nobody else will sleep there.”

He totally missed the sardonic implications; his tone was loving and he opened the door on a pleasing apricot coloured room with polished ash, wainscoting, lead lighted double bedside lamps and a new patchwork quilt that gave it a much-needed homely touch. I signalled for him to come over and took his mangled left hand in mine, putting it around my waist and he came up behind me and hugged me just the way I wanted to be. If the bedroom had not been so homely, if he had not hugged me this way or Rosalind had not been so matter of fact I may have walked out, but did not. We stayed there swaying slightly, looking at the view west to the faded purple mountains for a long time until I said it was time now. It felt a little odd now, to be naked before him. The last time was eleven years past and it was like discovering each other anew. There was that difference, but what has that to do with love?

\*

Elizabeth MacKinnon                      Taj Mahal Hotel Bombay 28<sup>th</sup> March 1926

“Here are the negatives of what you did to my body and statutory declarations from doctors, nurses, working girls.”

“You can’t do this!”



“Oh yes I can and no more faked emergencies, no more delays. Or you will be seeking delays in a court of law for a messy divorce that will leave you a pariah.”

“You want something.” My husband’s face glimmered with desperate hope as he scanned my face for clues.

“And will get it. No more blocking of our airfields, our supplies, our workforce. If Eloura Airlines cannot fly from one end of India to another unhindered by August we go for a messy divorce. Any more trouble from Oldsham and we will see who gets blackballed then, let us see who has no customers then – you know the government already favour Imperial Airways and that could become total - and if you are thinking of having me killed, Ross Clark and Conrad know all about it. Would you prefer dealing with him after last time you met? Have your bones healed up so that you can take more fractures?”

\*

Rosa MacDonald Clarke      Whispering Pines Otago 27<sup>th</sup> June 1926

“I’m taking it, and you would be a fool not to.” Zoe was adamant and cranky. “Twenty thousand pounds! Twenty thousand! For what I want to do anyway!”

“Why do you want to leave here and us?”

She just stared at me as if she had been asked why she would prefer to go on living rather than die by cobra bite. Then she stared with a different, odd look.

“Working over a hundred hours week after week ages and tires me, even if the money is good. And the cold, can’t stand it, I dream of the tropics, and staying up late, then sleeping in, not getting up at freezing five. Running my own dress shop, not in Auckland, perhaps Brisbane or even Honolulu.”

“But what of us?”

“Even the handsomest man palls when there is no love.”

“But us.”

“You need to see more of the world and then you will see what a mad house Whispering Pines really is.”

“I am happy here.”

“Wait till it all falls apart, and it will oh it will. And when it does there will not be twenty thousand pounds to pick up.”

“Jesus tells us not to be interested in money.”

“Then have some interest in yourself. You are already spending your life waiting. Every time a plane can be heard you are scanning the sky with a wide smile and whenever he takes off you are sad for days.”

That was true, but it looked like I would have to be happy with three, not four.

\*

Helen Chapman                      Hawk’s Nest, Port Jackson 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1926

“Here take twenty thousand pounds Helen, all you have to do is renounce my husband.”

“But I love him.”

“So does almost every other half good looking woman he comes across. You have a husband you say you love-”

“You know what it is like to love two people.”

“I realised what you have not, the impossibility of that. Perhaps if we were all marooned on a tropical island... But we are not!”

“Why start with me? Why encourage Alison and tolerate the New Zealand harem he frolics with as we speak?”

“How on earth do you know of any of this?”

“How on earth? How on earth? Who does not? To answer my own question, My parents-in-law, Max and Zelda, Tom Caufield and maybe a few schoolchildren. Why Moon hasn’t used it yet stays beyond us.”

Rosalind considered that before speaking.

“This sounds worse than I thought – and you cannot see how this could put you and Clarissa under suspicion? If Evelyn finds out that Ross is her father do not expect to be installed in Clarkestead. I will not tolerate it and neither will Max.”

“And neither will I!” Evelyn stood up, off the settee, having the tousled hair and still drowsy look of someone just woken up.

“Seems you make me a cuckold, and unwilling eavesdropper. Wondered why I could never bond with her or feel close. Probably knew at the back of my mind.” He sighed and stared and was making up his mind. “Bringing up somebody else’s child conceived that way, no Clarissa will be going, definitely. Absolutely no compromise on that. Boarding school at least until the Christmas break. Mrs Clarke you and that sly bastard, your husband, are no longer welcome in this house.”

“We cannot take her, it would give the game away.” I was adamant.

“I would not inflict him on her!” He responded fast. “She might end up drifting into a sheik’s harem thinking such things are normal!”

This from Evelyn! He had just overplayed his hand. Rosalind and I exchanged knowing glances and then glared at him contemptuously. He looked my way. “You can stay, this remains your home, you have made it the wonderful place it is, but you are not seeing Ross or Eloura again. That is where Clarissa can go: she can then live with Father and Mother, they will not need to know details.”

Rosalind stared with mixed pity and contempt before putting on a basilisk face before speaking levelly. “Sometimes love becomes a degrading process; you know this... and sometimes a mother’s love that supposedly comes like light with the dawn just doesn’t and you know that. We are a pair of monsters, aren’t we?”

\*

Clarissa Chapman

Eloura 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1926

The worst moment was not while being under the tree near the open window hearing what they all said. From the way he treated me I always suspected that he was not my real father. It was bad to hear and the school was bad to, but the worst was the first night here, after they welcomed me nice and kindly and then left me alone in my room. It measured nine feet by six and had frilly little things around the window and muslin in the middle. There was a thin old cupboard with slash marks and a desk with a Bible and a dictionary on it and a single bed with an old quilt patch bedspread. On the polished timber floor there was one tiny carpet and it was so worn that in places you could see the timber through the threads.

“They have plenty of money, it will be like living in a palace.”

She said that to me so that she would feel less guilt. They did not have a palace, they were fools to give it away to be a hospital and this sandstone place was decent enough, but it was a step down from Hawk’s Nest.

Sometimes they were so nice to me I squirmed, but after being booted out to school for a prank on my eleventh birthday I knew not to show it. And they were so old. People had talked about how the war had rattled his brains, but not all that much. Grandpa Max, well he would sometimes pause when he was saying things, and screw up his face trying to find the thoughts like they were spilt beads under the settee, but that was alright, sort of.

His way of saying the most obvious things as if they were secrets a genius knew and would reveal as a favour annoyed me. What was most annoying as was the sheer predictability of everything he said. Every morning when the broadcast came on the radio that they had bought for Christmas would come the eight o’clock news with its silly stories about nothing. He would wait till the five past eight commercial for vegemite

and say, 'Now that is true so don't forget to eat your vegemite!' Not that anybody could, he would have put it on ice cream if we had let him. One morning after three weeks I did what I should have not and mouthed the words just before he said them at his back and Grandma Zelda saw it just pursed her lips and stared. The radio was not good for him cause it worried him. When some great medical expert said the King's health was faltering he boomed out "God Save the King!" When they were talking of the name change of the Empire to the Commonwealth, he was almost fearful, saying "no good will come of it." And shaking his head like a gypsy fortune teller reading bad cards. He was always worrying about the disasters that silly radio boomed around the house, but it was his own doing. He had pressed my real father to set up a radio station and when it opened, only ten people in the district could afford a radio and he had a big hand in the station. It was all about pride.

"Seven years since the first station on the globe broadcast, five since London, three since Sydney and Eloura stays ahead of most Australian cities! Think on it! The world becomes most fast!"

Even so, he was nice enough, like teaching me the importance of money, giving me easy jobs around the house for it, handwriting and helping with homework. Sometimes we would play board games before the fire, that was fun and he did ask me what I wanted for Christmas and got me the dress I wanted, nice blue with floral patterns, that was the new style, but I was glad my real father (who I seldom saw) kept him fairly busy as manager. It was so he could not think of Uncle Leo in the hospital; he was never to be mentioned. Grandpa liked me sort of, doted on me, but it was not really me he liked, more like an idea he had of me and an act I had to bung on.

They were nice enough, but different to the way I thought they were when we came down here on holidays. People here often were. Rosalind

Jervis Clarke seemed so nice and beautiful, but she was really dangerous and sly. Jan the baker was pleasant and polite, but I heard why Keddy McPherson (at the age of thirteen!) was sent off like I was. Her mother at least looked like what she was: a hospital matron who was one of those women who never smiled and always expected total obedience. Grandpa Max's brother-in-law the mayor Reg Fisher, Aunt Katie Dean Clarke, wife to the brain damaged Uncle Grahame and Uncle Leo's wife Marsha all seemed nice, but they were both sad and older than they looked and she was guilty about something. Kids around town said she had an affair with that vile man Albert Moon. She must have liked punishing herself, as if her endless religious talk and charity collecting were not enough. He had sly eyes and this way of looking at people as if they were bits of maybe gold and he was an assessor. When Grandpa Max pointed him out in the street and shouted to me "There goes evil! Keep away from him!" The first bit was only a little over the top and the second was not needed.

Worse than Aunt Marsha was Aunt Barbara, she never spoke as far as anyone here knew and just sat sad on her veranda, always dressed in black clothes from the war time. Nobody around here thought that she spoke to anybody alive but she mumbled when she went down the street. My real paternal grandmother, Mrs Clarke, was a bit like a combination of Aunt Marsha and Aunt Barbara. I only saw her around town sometimes, she was seldom in and when she was she ignored me as if I was air, but 'that was fine with me' as the Americans say.

The newspaper editor Keith Anstee was nice enough, but his wife had been a shocker with many of the men in town, and when I delivered radio ads to the paper I could smell the alcohol on his breath and sometimes there were bottles about. He had been jailed as a wartime subversive and nearly jailed about the big burglary ring just before the war. The assayer and jeweller Bach seem so level and respectable, yet he

had been not so lucky and gone to jail and been mixed up with Keith's wife both in secret romance and crime. Mrs Caufield did not look like the type to have a secret affair with her cousin, but she was. I did not like Eloura much, better than boarding school I suppose.

Hawk's Nest was more like a happy magic castle the more I remembered it. Sometimes I missed it, and the beach, but not him. Artists are fakes.

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Ahmegodheho 4<sup>th</sup> January 1927

Alison was no fool and could read my face, hers faded from happy expectation to pensiveness and she looked around the room for clues.

“Ross will not be here, he's off on one of his New Zealand trips, left yesterday and then Batavia to Bombay and beyond, working it all out. Sandstorms it seems - and the theft and supply of spare parts. Nearly four years of it and he has still not got a Dublin letter here quicker than any ship. They still have not flown the Tasman! Aviation and all the other costs are approaching the two million mark.”

“We understand Max got more out of him for vegemite and the Pharaoh picture show and our Eloura district radio station and he wants more in that line.”

“Yet another reason to have Ross away for a time.”

“Another?”

“Helen put me on to it and Clarissa overheard, she stays here now and she knows. Moon has known for some time. Why hasn't he hit? He could destroy us all but-” She knew; it was on her face. “Jack or Tom?”

“Jack. He has become Moon's right-hand man. He acts as a leash.”

“Others suspect. Revelation will ruin us all. If Ross becomes disgraced business contracts fall off, Max turns against us and Moon triumphs. You know it can't go on. I have already phoned Tom to ask

him to pick you up as Ross is suddenly away and my driving skills are weak. And he will find us doing the social things we are supposed to be doing – and for the next few months while Ross is away. We must allay suspicions. It is over, we can only shape how it ends, badly or quietly. It cannot be considered my doing; I restarted it for you.”

She went expressionless, then had tears in her eyes and quietly asked to be alone. Helen and Alison, the most dangerous gone. Zoe, the least dangerous, vanished. That left Brionny, the “secretary” and Elizabeth, probably awaiting his pleasure in some swanky oriental hotel. Her I could tolerate, she was even a benefit, not only making some money out of this flying white elephant but satisfying the sexual tastes I preferred not to indulge. Likewise the secretary. Brionny I could have tolerated, but it was clearly from what Zoe said, a bigamous arrangement and if it blew up, could damage us more than Helen and Alison put together. Three down, perhaps three to go, more likely one.

What on earth motivates him to be like this with women?

\*

Ross Clarke

Ahmegodheho 24<sup>th</sup> February 1927

“Ross take me to Paris.”

“What?”

“Take me to Paris. Now your airline flies all the way we can arrive in how long? Three weeks? Less? Here hems me in, boring! We could have such fun! You are always the one flying off. I want to be the first woman to fly from Sydney to Paris.”

“I'm only four days back from New Zealand and tired.”

“Whispering Pines to Christchurch can hardly be a tiring flight.

What else tires you?”

“What of Horace? He is only two.”

“Zelda agreed to look after him. I am so tired of baby minding. I



want Paris.”

“Flying is not the fun you think it is. It is cold and tedious and you must stay seated for hours without a thing to do.”

“Oh well, that is the only way to go to Paris.”

“We have commitments here.”

“And overseas. Think of all the fun you could have with your commitments on the way. Trading rocky fields for gold, vendettas with Mister Betham over Mrs Betham (as she once was), frantically scouring the bazaars of Asia for missing spare parts, being the target for every gold digging litigationist east of Suez, Oh what fun! You will be glad for relief when we finally stroll the boulevards of Paris.”

“What brought this on?”

Smiling archly, but enjoying it, she held up a book *The Sun Also Rises*. “The hero resembles you in being a troubled and restless Great War veteran living in Paris and he was a flyer. However the differences are amazing: he is loyal to one woman, probably because he lost his testicles, not his fingers.”

“Ah this leads somewhere?”

“To the banks of the Seine, the Eiffel Tower, Mona Lisa, those cute little cafés on cobblestoned boulevards... Ah Paris!”

“When is your mouth going to stop putting Paris at the end of every sentence?”

“When my feet are on Parisian soil.”

She said it sweetly as a joke, but we both knew it was not, well not totally.

Even so I enjoyed the banter almost as much as she did.

“So Ross, when do we go to Paris?”

\*

The Eiffel Tower shimmered in the distance and she let out an arch “Uhhh?” and offer me a bored face for inspection, part of the game we knew we were playing, but only she knew the end gain. She made languid body movements, looking at Paris briefly, rather like a mediocre play she did not particularly wish to see.

“Can I sleep as soon as we get to your pension?”

“Of course.” She should not have been so tired, we had been staying at the Zurich pension for a few days and flew from there this morning. She showed no interest in our Paris headquarters. She was not really sleepy, and sat in bed reading Henry Lawson short stories.

“So what do you think of Paris?” I asked.

“Uhm? Oh it looks boring. Not enough green. The trees look like prisoners the way they come through the cement in neat identical little circles a regulation distance apart. What Paris needs are anarchists!” She was taking a new tack in the game; I did not bite so she pretended to muse. “Oh I do not know if I wish to see dangerous anarchists! What I would like to see some stringy bark gum trees and purple grey mountains off in the distance.”

I kept my temper, which I was supposed to lose, and went for a long walk, and there on a corner, surrounded by underlings with the look of demobilised soldiers, thinner than ever with his half-hooded eyes and his hair now thinner and grey to white, was Wrangel. He had a few more seconds to recall, despite the limp, my walk and bearing were still military and cavalry at that. To my surprise he grinned, slightly. “Ah Captain Kangaroo, the man all British military experts insist does not exist. If one keeps returning to Paris as I am briefly doing,, one sees everybody eventually.”

I did not feel like reminiscing with any supercilious intriguer, let alone one who was a mass murderer and a killer of my people. I walked

on and past the side walk café where Rebecca, her fellow students and I had the confrontation. The waiter was still there, with new students. The freshman class of 1927 were reading Spengler's *Decline of the West*, one Jean Cocteau and Scott Fitzgerald still. Without sexual or romantic desire I wondered where was Rebecca now? From Rosalind's clue, it was more likely to be Rebecca than Makhno, who did not know my Australian locale or Zinada perhaps, having escaped and penniless, reached Paris, the great centre for Russian refugees. It could even centre on Wrangel.

I returned to find the office map of the world eccentrically labelled with names. Rebecca on Romania, Alessandra on Russia, Brionny on Ireland, Rosalind under Cornwall, Rosa over Scotland, Zoe in New Zealand and Helen and Alison on Australia. Elizabeth was scrawled across the black air routes with everywhere and anywhere written after her name. Zinada was in written in bold red on a black flag of anarchy in Ukrainia.

“Cuthbert responded to my questions; he did not know for sure. I suppose the anarchist was for all those stateless women. Oh well, Africa both Americas, China, Japan, all remain virgin land to you. Turkey, well there were no women in Gallipoli's trenches, and here we are in Paris...the most romantic city in the world.”

“This prolonged joke should end.”

“So you want a divorce.”

“I am not saying our marriage is a joke.”

“You want me to take trigamy seriously? Brionny in Otago, me in Eloura and who do you have awaiting here in Paris?”

“Did Wrangel feed you this rubbish?”

“Who is Wrangel and who is your loving wife in Paris?”

“Which of them wrote -“

That was definitely the wrong thing to say and she nearly fell over, the stood there so angry she grasped for breath.

“Which! Which! Which! What do we have a Parisian seraglio as well as the mad Whispering Pines set up? How many women consider you as their husband? The Eloura honey might not if you don’t stop it! I tolerate at least two others at present.”

“You have listed every woman I have ever been involved with. So what is this all about?”

“I have remembered it off by heart. It arrived in early March.

‘Dearest Ross, I need access to a Swiss clinic immediately. Uncle Manny has sent some money, but there must be a guarantor and I cannot give a specific amount needed, but forty thousand francs to start with, telegram immediately. I will do whatever you wish if you meet this most urgent demand. Your loving wife Rebecca.’”

She sighed stared and sneered.

“Can I give an explanation?”

“Certainly, but it would be best if she were there.”

Rosalind went to the phone and made a brief call.

“Tomorrow here at eight.”

“It was a wartime romance, in Ukrainia. When she left me she said it was not a real marriage...”

“Ross please shut up, at least till nine tomorrow.”

\*

Rebecca Petit

Pensione Eloura Airlines Paris 18<sup>th</sup> May 1927

He had aged little, although a vexation about him was there. She was more the powerful matron, more vexed with the world, less romantic than he had led me to expect, but surely that was the effect of passing years and motherhood. I nodded and Ross gestured to a table where tea and

dainties and three chairs awaited. She was expressionless, not hostile, curious perhaps.

“You remember Etienne?” He nodded. “We married a few months after you saw us. Five good years, then tuberculosis. It was not easy for me to write that letter. I remembered your town name. The people in this office did not think you married, perhaps if I knew... Nobody else knows. The specialists say if I can get him into an expensive alpine clinic he has a good chance, little without....”

“Money can be organised. It will take some time, an hour perhaps.”

“Good.” Rosalind spoke curtly. “Perhaps you can walk to the bank now.”

Ross and I could both see that she was not one to disagree with. He nodded, said he would speak to me again and left. As soon as he was out of sight she started an assessment look first.

“So what do you do for a living?”

“Translate, English, mainly, but also Russian, Romanian, Yiddish, Ukrainian. My speciality is Scott Fitzgerald short stories. He has become nearly as popular here as in America. When I was so sure of my French that I could get an honours degree I went back to building English skills and then one by one my old languages; rebuilt at one a year.”

“Are you married to my husband?”

“No, it was more like a declaration of involvement.”

“A declaration of involvement.”

With Zinada’s name on the strange and silly map there was little left to give away, so I told her.

“Yet even with us he would talk of you in his sleep. You are his true love.”

“I fear so.”

She sighed and stared out the window and I would have left, but there was the money. Sometimes love was degrading. She was not hostile.

“Pour yourself another tea or coffee.”

He came back and I saw on his face that he had a cheque ready. She spoke.

“Give me the name of the sanatorium.”

I wrote it out for her and for him.

“What happened to his Romanian jail?”

“Like most anarchists he didn’t like jail so he escaped.”

“And made it to Paris?”

“After a spell in a Polish jail courtesy of his old enemy Pilsudski. He did not like that jail either so he escaped it.”

“Maybe we should marry him off to Briionny.” She was too resentfully sardonic to be veracious.

“We can see him easily enough and Denekin lives on a farm near Paris.”

“I did not know Denekin well and dislike his cause. Makhno...”

“Here's Makhno’s address. If anyone has news of Zinada he will. If you wish we could walk there. My bank's nearby. When we see him do not mention Petlura. Makhno is under suspicion of having murdered him. They bumped into each other in a restaurant and had a snarling competition two days before Petlura was mysteriously murdered.”

I pulled out a pair of dilapidated boots and had remembered his size correctly

“Carry these, don’t ask why, you will not believe it when you see.”

We had nothing to discuss, at least with her there. Makhno was as usual, under an alcove near the bridge in the Russian quarter. His little timber stall held all his tools, that gave him two metres to work on and

another to store customer's boots and kept off the rain. He needed the rain off. His cough was terrible to hear. He also needed a haircut. Like most men nearing forty long hair goes thin, straggly and frayed. Even without the hair his looks were terrible, too many painful wounds, too much poverty, too many defeats and betrayals all leading to too much alcohol. He bore a scare across his face.

“Galina did that. Do not mention her.” I whispered to Ross.

Memories of his strict, permanently vexed wife returned while he squinted and remembered me easily, Ross took a little longer. I did the translating.

“Captain Kangaroo, shoes please.” From his wink Ross realised Makhno suspected surveillance and complied, also handing over a hundred francs. For seconds the old fire returned to his eyes and the good humour and good will stayed as they did a little act about shoes.

“Rebecca knows how I am doing, many anarchists make a point of being here; in a little while pull out your tourist map and I will give directions.”

He then gave Ross a warning about Paris seething with white guards and Communists.

“Ah yes, I've already wrangled.”

Makhno got the message but not the English language pun. “You want news of Zinada and your surviving people?”

“You have some?”

“It is like a massive brick wall from Norway to the Black Sea now. Few escape and she seems not among them. We know Makhnovites or even those that helped us are still being hunted down, even though resistance ceased long ago. They gave amnesty to White Guards, Petlurists, everyone else but us. Two secret police guards defected some

weeks ago, one knew of the hunt for Makhnovites, and could remember the listed names, no Zinada.”

“Perhaps she survives in the forest.”

They farewelled. Impulsively Ross went to the nearby men’s shop and bought him a fine workman’s leather coat, matching cap and knee high boots, new mittens, a scarf and Makhno pretended not to be embarrassed, giving a laugh. I hoped he would not sell it all for drink.

“Who was that?” Rosalind asked crossly.

“A man who changed world history twice. If Ludendorff had not had to weaken his force on the Western Front to use several divisions against him in 1918 the last great German offensive may have succeeded - and we could have lost or still be fighting the Great War. If he had not attacked Deniken the Soviet Union may not exist and instead of pottering about on a French farm Deniken may have been a new Czar or Russia could have gone anarchist.”

“So now he mends boots.”

“And I translate fictional characters less remarkable than he is.”

“And I fly planes.”

“Are you staying to see if Lindberg can do it?”

“With a banner across our headquarters, *Eloura Airlines welcomes Lindberg!*

“Time for a new type of hero, one that does not write history in blood.”

“No... you will write it in air.”

Ross never got that irony, but then he seldom did. She looked at my face, understanding and smiled.

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Taj Mahal Hotel Bombay 30th June 1927



On the return trip Elizabeth Betham nee MacKInnon waited in the foyer, with several cards up her sleeve by her looks, which fortunately were not malevolent. They were both very good at pretending to be amiable business partners. Alice and Robert did not want to risk the new baby, Carson, in India's climate. Elizabeth asked of my flight, as very few women had flown from Europe to India, apparently a dozen at most since the first, about a year past.

"No danger, but the cold, the stiffness and those rickety wicker chairs tied steady with flimsy rope. They do not even let body heat accumulate and I finished my book and there was nothing! Boring!"

"Hubby should have warned you!"

*That you would be in the lobby of our booked hotel.*

"Who says I did not?" Ross was stern, being rarely able to perceive a joke or mock anger.

"Perhaps as a passenger you would like to contribute to our impromptu meeting?"

She sighed and lit up, holding out her cigarette and Ross lighting it gave a signal watchers got, then the pair of them realised that and froze up.

"Conrad knows, so does Anglo India." So cool, so matter of fact. "Even so Ross, best not in front of the wife, even if the wife agrees."

"And she does not, at least in these circumstances."

"An expected attitude and it is best that we are this mature. We aren't talking about smoking in public, are we? Now to Conrad."

"How does Conrad cope?"

"With work, and then more work. Work not only to make us prosper, but to destroy Oldsham and my former husband. I divorced: my surname goes officially back to Mackinnon."

"And here Conrad comes."

Ross had warned me; Conrad now had a hardness, no, more of a brittleness about him. He also had the good manners of an inherently decent man and after courtesies got down to business, giving a report.

“After the sudden and mysterious unblocking of our development by Oldsham my responsibility, Karachi to Singapore operates on a profit, albeit small - but increasing. Our clientèle comes mainly from outside the Anglo-Indian block that Oldsham and other little airlines cornered. There are increasing numbers of tourists and Asian, American and European investors who dislike the Old Guard and prefer us.”

“All to the good, what isn’t?” Ross asked.

“Customers aren’t. They mostly fly once.” Conrad answered.

“Because?” I asked.

Mrs MacKinnon, looked my way and gave me an introduction.

“Here is where Mrs Clarke, a first-time flyer, can tell us of her experiences.”

I repeated, then amplified what I said earlier. She was ready with her rolled up cardboard now unfolded and a tension in her voice.

“And here is the solution, this is my design. The builders are called Horizon Blue. I have a contractor and they will come at cost.”

Her unfolded diagrams and artist’s impressions showed a new model plane with reclining padded leather chairs, being very much like those in a car. The drawing included a bar and a shelf full of books and magazines. Conrad shook his head in disagreement and Ross grunted and they said the same word in unison.

“Weight!”

“The door levers do not need to be made of cast iron! The propellers do not have to be made of the all too aptly named iron wood. Interior wall panelling can be light aluminium, not heavy steel, without loss to structural soundness. Per plane this saves over ninety pounds in weight.

With aluminium frames these chairs and their leather and stuffing weigh only nine ounces more than the horrible cane chairs and ropes. The drink bar, food, books, magazines and blankets for eight passengers, plus their chairs comes to seventy-eight pounds. We even save on fuel.”

“Aluminium has been investigated and found wanting.” Weary-faced Conrad started and Sir Eustace quickly continued, less vexatiously, more patently.

“Aluminium corrodes very quickly in salt water or even in saline air, becoming brittle. It is so weak that it can bend in a strong hand; such a material will make the plane interiors look shoddy and us look cheap.”

“You are talking of obsolescent aluminium. Alloys solve those problems.” Elizabeth spoke with less patience and took two silver bars out of her handbag and plonked it in front of Sir Eustace. “Bend this with a strong hand.” He did so. “Now bend this!” He tried and had the grace to grin and concede.

“It seems we will refurbish with the new aluminium.”

“After we buy the planes.” Ross added and sighed.

“We all know wartime surplus aircraft will not last forever” She answered.

“I said this when I joined.” Conrad added.

“How much, each?” Ross sighed before he asked.

“The newer planes will have air cooled motors, saving more weight, costs and every preliminary tests demonstrate that they are safer. They will take orders now and promise delivery by January. They have not mentioned a price yet, being unsure.”

Now I sighed; we all knew what this meant: expensive. Conrad read our faces.

“How many wartime surplus planes can fly at most, over four passengers? If we do not buy something along these lines, Ollhdseham,

De Havilland, Imperial Airways, Atlas, Qantas, KLM and others, assuredly will, and will just mail, combined with a few thrifty passengers return a profit equal to investment?" Mrs MacKinnon was being cranky and rhetorical, while Ross was on the edge of my temper – and his.

"Over almost six years, over a million pounds of my wife's money has gone into Eloura Airlines for a return of ninety-four thousand pounds. Of that return every single penny has gone back into updates and expansion. With small airlines and individual aviation businesses collapsing all over the globe the market for bargain sales in aviation already seems glutted. Excepting some hotels and city real estate, I have assets we could probably not be able to give away. I have paid of late for barbed wire, locks and security guards to stop our parts, planes and hangars from being stolen for scrap metal. So those with pliers stole the wire and bribed some guards!"

"These new planes should return higher profits more regularly." She answered conciliatingly.

"Lindberg flew the Atlantic, we cannot even cross the Tasman."

"What do you wish to do?"

"Succeed."

"Then you will have to buy the new planes." Conrad was trying to avoid confrontation; Elizabeth came to his rescue.

"And strengthen the weak links in the chain."

We all knew what that meant. Sir Eustace ran Dublin to Athens, Conrad Karachi to the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, Indo-China and Thailand. Alice Singapore to Sydney, and Elizabeth New Zealand - and all four produced a profit. Robert ran Athens to Cairo and then to Gwadar in Persia and finished at Karachi. The problems and losses on his link were endless. We all just looked at each other. Ross did it.

"Robert has recovered sufficiently for another attempt on the

Tasman; linking our successful operations elsewhere to our success in New Zealand should be his focus. We must make our Dublin to Dunedin slogan a reality, are we agreed?"

Everybody did. Then Conrad brought the good and bad news.

"As you all know Sir Samuel Hoare flew to India as an Imperial Airways passenger last October and he is repeating the flight, accompanied by his wife, again. He writes of airfields and flight paths: she will be the one to describe what it is like to be a passenger. Their reasons and high connections are obvious, surely."

"He backs Imperial Airways for how far?" Elizabeth was calm.

"Timor, then Atlas or Qantas goes to Brisbane. The British government will back him and fund Imperial, not us."

"That still leaves us Sydney and New Zealand." She responded.

"And Thailand. And the Dutch East Indies and Indo-China – for another year at least, maybe two or three. The Dutch KLM and the French both feel they must have a National Airline for national pride and to hold their empires together – and to make money of course."

"Are they using airfields or flying boats?" Ross asked this tensely.

"Converted bombers mainly, at least for now. KLM first flew Amsterdam-Batavia mail run three years back and had a Batavian airport already."

Ross scowled, sighed and took control.

"There is no way we can compete with government sponsored National Airlines, assuming they will even allow us to operate once they don't need us. Sell the French everything they will need for Thailand and Indo-China. We must have the Javanese airfields, at least until a plane can fly Singapore-Darwin non-stop."

"So I shouldn't sell everything to the Dutch?"

“Start negotiations for trading, giving them regular access to Singapore for them continuing regular access to Batavia for us. Give them the same to Surabaya and Semarang and Lombok in return for regular access, no fees, taxes or trouble and some regular trade. Sell out local flights and airports if KLM insist - and probably they will.”

“If they have brains they will buy us out.” Elizabeth started.

“And so will Imperial.” Conrad continued. “They have massive problems. Crashes, uncertain markets. Even their subsidized mail run is a bit of a dud. Less mail than they thought and people don't trust planes yet: about half the air letters are duplicated and those duplicates go surface mail. Pot shots at planes, plunderings of fuel supplies in the deserts-”

“But with all the oil in the desert now -” I interrupted and Conrad interrupted back.

“They empty it on the ground. It is the oil tins they want. Leather canteens seep and have a high evaporation rate.”

“Then scour old wartime depots and sell them tins!” Elizabeth exclaimed and we laughed in a moment of unity. Ross killed that.

“Good idea I'm onto it, but we have to decide to either sell up now or compete as the little fish among the sharks.” We may have a year, maybe two, while the national airlines battle to establish their routes as we have and face every problem under the sun-”

“As we have.” I interjected. “We can negotiate from either strength or weakness. Either admit defeat, sell up now for a good price while we have the routes, equipment and trade they want, or wait till they can get our assets at desperate prices and then they might not be saleable at all.”

“I hate defeat.” Ross said it with finality.

“Imperial got the government support not just because they were British establishment.” Conrad spoke in a flustered way. “We also *were*,

but except for Sir Eustace we are all outcasts and we will have to go for the lesser markets.”

“Yes!” Elizabeth started. “Trade with Imperial, and KLM; sell only to the French; don't sell them our assets, grant them access in return for payment plus treaties which leave us some routes.”

“If the French and Thai route goes almost everything competes on the Imperial Airways route.”

“Use the money from the French sale to set up Singapore to northern West Australia, there to Darwin to Cairns and from Cairns to Port Moresby before Atlas does. The Whites in Papua pay big money for transport and imported goods.”

I could see it was going to happen. More money draining away. I asked her if she had any other ideas.

“The noted aviator and Texan millionaire Howard Hughes, has gone into epic film making, about air aces of the great war with massive battle scenes. He needs more wartime aircraft than even America can supply. Our vintage aircraft will go to a good home at a good price. Nobody says that this Texan stints on price.”

She took out a cheque and it was passed round. There was forty percent of the replacement costs for the new planes mentioned at the start of the meeting on one piece of paper. Fortunately, Ross had not heard of Howard Hughes's reputation with women.

A recollection came of Sir Eustace's dream of a Dublin to Dunedin airline service that would make the empire stronger by binding it together. Well last year the empire was declared a Commonwealth and we were all equal. That meant we would scour dumps for battered petrol tins to sell to Arabs and take the trade others felt was beneath them. Hardly the great pure dream they started with.

\*

Keddy Taun- Fisher

Fisher's Surgery 2nd January 1929

It was probably going to be bad when I was to meet her in the surgery at the time she dealt with problem people, like a patient at an appointed time, when Father was doing his usual late hospital shift. She had on the stone face: she was very good at intimidating people. She ordered me to sit down so I would not have the advantage of height she usually had, no other woman was as tall as my mother or as angular, it made her cold anger effective.

“You were told that if you went to the Boxing Day Ball it was only on condition that you did not dance with Jan Van Groendhal!”

“But I am nearly seventeen now. Other girls in high school are sometimes engaged and even married.”

“For a reason that becomes obvious!”

“Well others my age do not have to ask permission to dance. I only went out by the window because you locked me in. Everybody parties on New Year's Eve. Other girls come home late.”

“Other girls do not come home at two in the morning in autos driven by men over twice their age!”

“Jan is nice!”

“He is the town baker! The town baker and a foreigner, and old enough to be your father. Does any of this count with you?”

“I don't like silly pimply boys with nothing in their heads but football, beer, and groping. He is a proper gentleman. You do not have to be rich or titled to be a gentleman. He talks of cultured things.”

“Seventeen years ago, incidentally at the time you were born, he and his twin were lucky not to be arrested for organised theft or at the least, consorting with thieves – and of the lowest kind! It was only his war service, injuries and time that faded out his ostracism. Next time that gentleman baker talks of cultured things ask him who Jenny Doyle was.”



That made me uneasy, I asked to go now.

“You are going on a beach holiday for the next week, with your grandparents, Wollongong is very nice. Your new school in Armidale is a very fine private school for young Anglican ladies. You can finish your final year there and you leave three weeks from today.”

“Nothing happened. About twenty minutes after midnight when all the fireworks and singing ended all of us went on a drive it was such a fine starry night. Nothing more happened.”

“And nothing more will. When you return from your beach sojourn you will need the remaining days for packing.”

Escaping was possible, but then if that happened I knew what I would have to ask him and dreaded the answer. My mother never lied.

\*

Andrew McPherson

Vienna 7<sup>th</sup> January 1929

Leading a strike and propagating Marxism in a prison run by rabid Nationalists meant serving a long sentence. At the least every beating, every confinement with nothing to read but their silly mysticism, and vile racist rubbish only made Bolshevik Marxism more clearly correct. My time inside was not wasted: my German and Russian were now as good as my English; I even ended up teaching German to illiterate Austrians.

Upon release I contacted my wife Magda's old cell mate. She opened her tenement door as if expecting arrest, and was initially relieved to see me, then squinted. I wished her a good day and introduced myself.

“I know who you are. Your photograph was on the wall for years.”

She looked around as if spies hid in the mortar cracks, not far wrong, then she motioned me in and to a chair, but she wanted me gone soon.

“Clearly you wish me to tell you it was not suicide, but it was. I helped cut her down, only the guards had the key to the laundry.”

“Then they are the ones who murdered her.”

She just stared expressionlessly.

“She was no longer a danger to anyone. She said she had virtually given up on Bolshevism even before the arrest. The jail experience, what she read in the papers only added to it.”

“But she knew Lenin!”

“When we asked her what he was like. She said ‘Like most males, always domineering, always controlling, expecting obedience and insisting it was not for them, oh no, but for their great cause. Always exploiting women. It was starving housewives who started the Russian Revolution and a failed exiled lawyer who took it over, but somebody always does and then we are supposed to worship them. The one good thing my father and both my husbands had in common was that they were not like that.’ She shrugged her shoulders and wouldn’t talk politics.

I was clearly dealing with a warden’s flunky, perhaps she was even in on it, but the party does not allow personal vengeance; still I could request her being investigated and that might lead to a trial after the next revolution or perhaps even something sooner. As party training so wisely incalculates, I left the presence of a detected enemy immediately.

On my first Party meeting outside I raised this issue and agreed to trust the party decision. Obedience, cause before self and organization are at the Bolshevik’s core. We have not lasted ten years without that. Party before personality, a trait Stalin knows but Trotsky ignores. Now that a Bolshevik nation exists and prepares for a war with decadent capitalism there can be no peace. Capitalism rushes to its death to the cacophony of jazz, whiskey, silly movies, fads, fast cars, fast planes and fast shares and fast money, yet even while dying it will not commit suicide, there will be a struggle and any struggle can be lost through irresolution or incompetence when it should have been won, Gallipoli taught me that.

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Book Seven

February 1932

Upholder

Rosa MacDonald Clarke

Eloura Road February 27<sup>th</sup> 1932

Oh yes, we heard it was very bad here in Australia, but we thought it could not be worse than what we could see in New Zealand, but it was. Like back in Auckland, the streets of Sydney were filled with people sleeping on the pavement, but there were more here. From the train to Elora it was like in Otago. In both places many a farm had up signs saying NO HELP WANTED and threatening to shoot or prosecute thieves and sometimes owners would be there sitting watching with a shotgun. Like in Otago there were all those who thought they could make the great depression fun by being gold miners and fishing the creeks and being small game hunters with their little pellet rifles. They thought they would find gold where their great-grandfathers had given up and there were signs up on Eloura Road near the bridges. FISHED OUT LAST YEAR GO FOR RABBITS.

At the big Sydney Railway Station and the little Ocean Ridge Bus Station it was the same. Usually men, they would hover about in their frayed seen better days clothes with their eyes on the pockets of those who were lining up to pay. And the glint would come when the wallet came out and they would assess the amount quicker than me and then they would try. They made me wonder if humans were just another species like sharks or bears or if they were really God's creatures. In the bus we felt guilt as the trudging less fortunate looked up at us and even little Eunice, not four yet, could sense it and start to whimper.

It was a relief to see their homestead, Clarkestead, with the three women outside on the veranda. The much older one with snowy white hair still had something of his face, particularly in the eyes and strong jaw. She was in a wheelchair but looked as hard as nails, which was all Brionny said about her – oh and that she was half mad. Another must

have been the sister, so like him that perhaps they were twins. The other had the look of somebody in service.

The driver pointed out Clarkestead and he obliged and even helped with the case. The one in service came over, no smiles, but few did now. She had a soft voice and an expressionless face.

“It is best that you read the sign. You can read?”

“Is Mister Ross Clarke about?”

She looked at Eunice and understood, well a bit. A fearful look came in her face then went.

“Please wait, you alighted at the wrong house anyway. Your name is?”

“Rosa MacDonald Clarke.”

She just sighed very softly and went to the mother and sister and I waited until spoken to. Then the sister, the others called Alison looked at me with a warning look when the mother couldn't see.

“Oh I am heading that way, easy enough to drop you off.”

Alison helped me and Eunice into the ford. Nearby a man played with a pup, like a child would. That would be Grahame, the younger brother. The sister's smile and the wave vanished down their driveway.

“This is the ancestral home, where Ross grew up. His new house went up on that ridge, miles off.”

“You are his sister?”

“She died over thirty years back. First cousin, Alison Caufield, just visiting.”

So this was the cousin he had a secret affair with, understandable, she was nice and handsome.

“I am-“

“It is probably best if you do not tell me. If you see Ross do not ask for money, he has become very cranky, being hard-pressed of late.”

“That is just what Brionny said.”

She sighed amazed and then vexed, as if I had praised Satan during a sermon.

“Actually it is probably best if you do not talk at all until we see Rosalind. She has been his wife this decade past.”

She stopped by the public phone when we came to the town, which was nice enough but little, one of everything except banks and alcohol serving places. Ross had a grand mansion of three storeys in black granite with pale yellow trim and lead light windows and big grounds and three verandas that went all the way around with coloured stones in the decorations on the mortar. Very nice. Rosalind it must have been on the ground level veranda. She was pretty, but would have been prettier if she smiled in welcome, but she didn't. Still she had the silver service tea out with jam, scones, and cakes and steaming tea, all welcome. Lace doilies hand woven, some dark wood table varnished so that it reflected, as did the silver spoons. Even blue willow china and silver holders glistened. They were for sliced dark fruit cake with thick white icing. Everything was so very correct. She motioned for me to sit and when Eunice said she was tired and clearly really was, she rang a bell and a maid came.

“My maid has four children. She can put your daughter to sleep?”

“Oh yes, thank you.”

Aristocratic manners meant waiting until the maid left and they noticed that, but they couldn't know it was from my own time in service.

“You have come here to?”

“See Ross.”

“He is away on business, we, and he, are not sure about his return.”

“Oh isn't that London to Australia mail thing resolved yet?”

“Ross went berserk eight weeks back when Kingsford Smith landed in

Sydney with nearly twelve thousand letters posted in England nine days before.”

“Hard to blame him, Missus, he says he has been trying to do that for nearly nine years.”

“He says he cannot throw away money on this problem, he will solve it.”

“Sounds like sackings, litigation, maybe violence Mrs: he can be a very violent and ruthless man.”

They looked at each other, then at me with peculiar faces, but the wife did all the talking.

“Oh really, you are sure that he can be a very violent and ruthless man?”

“Brionny says so and she has been wife to him for twenty years and Elizabeth told me the same, well she said what he did to her pestilential husband.”

“Elizabeth would be Mrs Betham, now MacKinnon.”

“Oh yes Missus. I was her secretary and also to Ross before Eunice. Flying about with Eunice was hardly practical.”

“And was a secretary all you were to Ross?”

“Oh no Mrs, didn't you know? Elizabeth said that you did. I was one of his mistresses, and to Elizabeth and Brionny and with Ross I still am. well I think so with Ross, but we haven't seen him for well over a year and he did not even send a Valentine's Day card this year and Elizabeth and Brionny do not say much about him. He did send a cheque three months back but everything needs clarification, that is why I am here.”

“Are there any other mistresses?” The cousin asked expressionless, like.

“Brionny and Elizabeth separately said you knew of them and did not mind, but perhaps you did not know of me.”

“No, I did not. Are there any other mistresses?”

“Not unless new ones have come into the fold.”

She bit her lips and glared at that.

“If anything there are fewer. Zoe left Whispering Pines years ago, said the place was either a mad house or a brothel and she couldn’t be bothered working out which.”

“Now why on earth would she say a thing like that?”

Shrugging my shoulders was the only possible response. “Brionny’s as thrifty, polite, straightforward, and hard working as they come. All signs of sanity and no lunatic could run a farm so well...so maybe Zoe had the problem, sexually she was rather conservative; she would form triads and quartets but only to oblige, no real enthusiasm.”

“If Zoe has vanished showing no signs of pregnancy well and good.”

“Elizabeth did not tell you of Eunice, did she? Elizabeth said she would tell you of Eunice as she was more tactful. Perhaps she forgot or perhaps she was waiting for the right moment, which might as well be now.”

Mrs Clarke was calm, totally still, so I explained.

“When my pregnancy was obvious Brionny got jealous because she was trying but getting nowhere, and instead Eunice was an accident because the contraceptives did not work.”

“Why not, pray tell?”

“Perhaps the manufacturers made a bad batch, I used all the cream every time when the calendar and the doctor said, and even other times, all the time, even though it tasted terrible.”

Her mouth dropped open and Alison Caufield had the red face, gleaming eyes and bit lips of someone trying not to burst into laughter. That was mean; pregnancy is not fun for people who plan against it, even



if the baby turns out as nice as Eunice. Mrs Clarke looked at her, then me, then her again with blazing eyes and flaring nostrils.

“So, Alison, who have you aligned with amongst my husband’s many enemies? Therefore you have aligned against me! Moon most likely, betrayed a friend and Ross to back your husband and the son? For money or to avoid violence? Not that it matters; betrayal remains betrayal. “Alison stopped laughing and glared offended while Mrs Clarke started on another tack. “If Mrs MacKinnon nee Betham is behind it she can have the great white elephant airline and the great white lover and both can go for the asking!”

“Brionny said that you would not be jealous.”

“And you can go back to your stage company. You perform so well.”

“You think me an actress? But why?”

“Because you are. Nobody in their twenties can be so naïve.”

Alison was studying me and then spoke to her.

“Why not use the airport phone to check with airline people?”

“A very good idea. Excuse me.”

Soon Alison drove a very fine-looking new model Bentley down the driveway in a cranky way, giving me a glare.

“Brionny said how nice and tolerant she was, one of us, her lover. I should let her know. Is she acting like that so you don’t get jealous?”

“You assume a good deal.”

“Normally I would not talk so openly-”

“Thank God for that!”

“But we all love Ross, excepting Elizabeth we are all bisexual and everybody knows what is going on. As mature adults we should be able to get on.”

“You started getting absolutely everything wrong after the word Ross.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am not bisexual and never have been. Rosalind gave up on all that about twenty years ago. You are not a mature adult, and none of us, particularly you, know precisely what is going on.” She just stared at me then at the view like there was something out there apart from orchids, gum trees and cows and then at me again.

“Now please, just drink your tea and munch on biscuits.”

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Ahmegodheho 15<sup>th</sup> March 1932

Silver service tea with Alison was on again, but cold and rainy weather meant the upstairs lounge room, so spacious with the windows eight feet high and wide, these going all along one wall fifty feet long, with ottomans placed to enjoy the view. Turkish carpets and curtains and the mahogany dado, a dining set, fireplaces and doors and their frames all had arabesques and the fireplaces had, like the exterior, embossed stones in bright blue, ruby red and emerald, but they were too large to be genuine. The doors were arched like in a church, and opened in the middle with tiles on the cement door- frames. The wall decorations were also Arabic, crossed scimitars? This was all Evelyn's design when he was in an Arabian mood, paid for, albeit quietly to oblige Max, who loved it and Evelyn's art work, almost as much as Evelyn did. A green Turkish battle flag that he had personally captured on Gallipoli was framed under glass. Alison looked around like she had unknowingly walked onto a stage set.

“So this is the room that everyone speculates about?”

“No nubile dusky maidens in skimpy silk awaiting the return of their lord and master?”

“Just a silly Scot asleep at the moment. And in a guest room that might become her room.”

“Are you serious?”

“I have to be. Despite all that ‘yes Mrs’ and ‘Brionny says’ and ‘Elizabeth thinks’ there is a strong will there.”

“So what does she want?”

“Ross.”

“To herself?”

“She is not *that* stupid. She just wants him more frequently and to be around him more often. And she wants what most of the world’s population now want and worry about.”

“Money?”

“Regularly and a roof over her head and food in the stomach, for her and the daughter both. And she has come closer to getting it than most.”

“Meaning?”

“If Moon hears her ideas on love and freedom...”

“The scandal will destroy Ross, we need market profits, not just dividends.”

“And who will trade with a man who has a child-bearing bisexual simpleton for a mistress?”

*Or the wife of one of his non-commissioned officers.*

The thought came but better to let it pass. It was over five years past.

“We can keep an eye on her here. Amazingly she does understand discretion with the world outside; she had everyone fooled until the pregnancy. Brionny made up a husband, had wedding photos and press announcements from Auckland and avoided the scandal. She got away with it; she appears as a widow now. From what all sources agree on she could be useful.”

“How?”

“Work for starters, she has proved herself a first-class secretary and housekeeper and will replace two wage earners in return for room, board and Eunice being educated here with Horace.”

“And something else.”

“She suggested it and we agreed.”

“She will be Ross’s live in mistress.”

“And travelling secretary. She has few connections to anybody else and wants a refuge from the world.” I held the stare of hers that came from so many years of teaching and being married to that bully. Alison expressed disapproval through the expressionless gaze. “She gets luxurious accommodation, as much food as she and the child can eat, free personalised education and travel. She frequently stays with the man she loves, my husband. This must be better than starving in the gutter, like one out of three Australians and almost all unwed mothers.”

“You should be honest with her.”

“I was.”

“It is still exploitation.”

“Mixed in with protection.”

Alison sighed meaningfully and drank her tea as she stared out the window towards Clarkestead. “Ross was always the most uncommon little boy.” She sighed again and left.

Ross got back so servants left early; he would meet me on the veranda and that Rosa would wait in the Arabic lounge, her bedroom was down the hall and she would have tonight, being the wrong time for me. “How did things go?” I asked. He had been away since January, all the way to London and back.

“Good in some ways.... At every hangar they were assembled and given the same speech. Kingsford Smith had done what we should have. The customers were going to be guaranteed eighteen days from posting

anywhere in the British Isles to anywhere in Australasia that had a post office. No excuses for failure accepted.”

“Rhetoric.”

“Reality. With the collapse of so many airlines we directors were able to buy up over four million pounds worth of planes and equipment for seventy thousand. Now we have all our fleet on 1930 models or later. Now every airport has a spare plane with a waiting pilot and a waiting mechanic if something goes wrong. Every airport has a security guard twenty-four hours, seven days a week. No more delays over holy days and assorted Sabbaths because there are so many unemployed. If a pilot won't fly or ground crew won't service because that is his holy day or Sabbath, well someone else will and suddenly the holy folk start to realise that their holy days are putting their jobs in jeopardy, so they fly.”

“What of the dust storms?”

“Robert, Conrad and I have rerouted much of the Middle East and India. Pilots disagree, but coast crawling and even the open sea may actually be safer now we have more flying boats. The newer planes hold more fuel, we can bypass some airports, landings and officials. Airports, landings and officials, that is usually where the problems occur. Now we reduce that. Imperial have given us access to their airport and fortress at Gwadar. The Sultan of Muscat has actually granted them a real fortress with a protecting platoon commanded by the British. The passengers stay there, dining on silver service brown windsor soup, champagne... We actually sold our Gwadar assets to the French, fifteen thousand profit.”

“Anything else?”

He just sat there with this triumphant smile, as if I was supposed to be dazzled by this achievement.

“Cash only. No credit, no cheques. No payment in kind. Since the onset of the depression over ninety per cent of credit dealings fail, over half incoming cheques are returned by the bank...”

“But if you do not give credit you will not get it.”

“Good! We pay in cash and do not overextend ourselves. That will give us a reputation as solid, as people to deal with in a cash short world. And we give discounts for cash payments and expect the same.”

“Anything else Ross?”

“What applies to the airline applies to our local business.”

“Ross, this sounds all very tightly planned, ruthless, mercenary and distrustful.”

“Andrew was the reverse of all those things you mentioned and he ran decades of his hard-working Uncle’s thrifty efforts into the ground. The same cannot happen with Alessandra’s money.”

“Any other cuts?”

“To charities. Give away food and the farmer and shopkeeper cannot sell, then they go broke and become charity cases themselves. And the more you give the more you attract: give away Alessandra’s money and all that will happen will be that this town will be swamped with the starving looking for hand-outs that are no longer here.”

That idea made me clarify inchoate thoughts.

“Yes, you are right. October 1929 happened because people had easy credit and did not plan. Even so, this will give Moon allies.”

“Let him have them. Giving them credit will wreck him and I am cutting off some of his secret funding.”

“From?”

“My mother. She manipulated Katie and the accounts are padded and some of it goes to Moon and his New Guard branch. We watch her accounts from here on.”

That at least was sensible, so was asking for local catch-up news.

“Keddy goes to America soon with her soon to be husband, some specialised medical type. Uncle Reg talked of retiring as mayor, but when Moon tried to get a goon elected he ran again and won. Uncle Max finally got the Pharaoh and the other cinemas geared for sound and set up for air conditioning and heating. He was able to haggle the price down by six hundred pounds...”

“He seemed an economic duffer, but the four picture shows are our biggest Australian earners and the vegemite dividends come in when even some of Alessandra’s blue-chip money doesn’t.”

“So how much of her estate has been lost?”

“From the original twenty million four hundred and seven pound? Over a fifth, over four and quarter million pounds.”

“Eloura Airlines has always been a white elephant and you are like an elephant owner who spends more money on decorating its tusks, painting its feet, giving it aromatic baths - when what it should do is work for money.”

“It will, it will. It has made money.”

“Which goes into upgrading aircraft and all the other endless expansions and Kingsford Smith always beats you, to crossing the Tasman, to crossing the Pacific, to delivering the mail from England, being the celebrity banner man for the New Guard.”

“He can have the last one, banner man for dangerous idiots and pretenders.”

“A surprise awaits you upstairs. I’ll sleep alone. Off you go.” He just gave me a puzzled look. “Off you go. Horace stays with Max and Zelda, see him tomorrow.”

Alison's room was so far away and the walls were so thick nothing came through and sleeping alone, knowing what they were doing, was

now no great worry, but what really annoyed was when Horace turned up after breakfast with his new model aeroplane to show Daddy and we waited and waited and waited, eventually with that knowing sullen face.

\*

Jan Van Groendhal

Van's Bakery Eloura 28<sup>th</sup> April 1932

Surely, Ross was getting a reputation for being a bastard and he was a very hard man, but in a world where money decides, he was right. He actually had four guards at the emporium, two strolling, two at the fruit and veg in particular and they were not tardy about using the batons. The court could not cope with the influx of petty crime and what threat was jail to the starving? Ross did what he could. With the start of the Depression, furniture was the first local industry hit, so until this depression was over he had the local factory force retrained for planting and cultivating timbers that were rare or heading that way, black woods, cherry woods, oak, jarrah, iron wood and cedar and faster growing pines for faster profit. Trouble was the desperate tried to steal them, even as plants. He had to employ guards at night and when some of them abetted the thieves he brought in a policy of numbering the trees and if a guard allotted those numbers could not account for his trees he was sacked. He could not inspire loyalty, respect, team spirit or honesty the way Max, a much less intelligent man, could. Now not even his employees were thankful that he did not retrench or lower wages. Few noticed the cheaper prices for cash and fewer were thankful.

Yet Ross was right. Nice, generous Christian Murie and Ruth were driving the Fisher farm to ruin and their four daughters to starvation with their hand-outs to the unemployed. They only survived because Ross bought their produce at 1928 prices. I had to follow Ross's policies or face ruin. The first of them started in early 1930. They would sit outside the bakery staring with their hungry intense faces at my food. The first



few got free bread, but a pack of wolves would give more thanks. As they gulped it down one said 'Why don't cha gimme a bloody cake instead a this cheap shit?'

When I didn't they started this stagy conversation.

“Well governor! How much yer reckon this here window ud' cost ta fix iff yer came tammarah mornen an' found it with a nice big hole? Do repairs cost more than one of them nice big juicy meat pies?”

He stood there with the smug grimace and glittery eyes of the cunning, putting on a hard done by simple worker persona so he could get out of trouble by saying 'only joking' if it went wrong. And I knew what it meant when the English call you governor. For a certainty it means 'on guard' and 'You are the enemy because you are better off than me and here come some sly games to cut you down. There is no morality or fairness and I will harm you as much as I can.'

Looking at that face it was clear that this man would kill me for a meat pie if he knew he could get away with it. Praise be, two of the Mcphee brothers, strapping teenage sons of the constable, had come in for lunch and one gave him a truncheon whack across the stomach that left him doubled and whimpering.

“Ah get orff me yer bloody fascist bully! Oh oh I'll go ter yer police and you will be the one in jail!”

“Dad jail us? Not likely!”

“Now we are going ter give yer a free ride and if yer come back this way you go through a refresher course.”

The next time a threat came it was carried out, but by then it was what the English call a blessing in disguise. The intense staring faces tactic was driving me up the wall and it was manipulating those with money. They either were begging from the dwindling few who could still buy or making them feel guilt, so they wouldn't buy. Many started baking

at home to avoid them. Better wooden shutters than the sight of their faces, staring intently, making veiled threats. Others had it much the same as Helen Chapman on one of her visits made clear, mercifully buying much. Usually happy, now her face looked strained.

“We are in the same boat, which is why we sold the Painter’s Arms. Men begging for drinks, or just taking and running without paying, credit slates that will always be paid next week, but never is, personal abuse whenever you press for money and endless con artists...” She sighed softly and looked out the window, her face all mental fatigue, bringing back memories of Gallipoli faces with battle fatigue. Then she came out of it. “Anyway, its over now. We got a good price and if we are careful with the sale price money we are going right into our nineties and Evelyn should sell a few pictures by then. He’s off painting somewhere and we are here on a recuperating holiday.”

She was a welcome customer but today the most unwanted customer came in: Keddy’s mother. She had the glib smile on, it would be nasty.

“You do not seem to have a wide range of wedding cakes.”

“Little call for them. Weddings have dropped off by a quarter with the Depression and those that do economise.”

“Ah? So you do not wish to take a commission?”

“Very much, but not from you”

I was supposed to ask who was getting married or ask if it was Keddy and then be put between the torments of rejecting a much-needed commission or the humiliation of preparing her wedding cake. Lynda Taun Fisher just stared back a little puzzled at my silence.

“You would be well advised to avoid that little tramp Clarissa Chapman. Ross is nobody to make an enemy of and you have a reputation for involvements with young girls.”

“Having known Ross for a third of a century gives me some idea of how he is. If you think me so foolish as to get mixed up with Clarissa, well you do not know me – and I certainly do not wish to know you.”

Realising that she had extracted all the humiliation she was getting away with, Lynda Taun Fisher left. Clarissa was trouble no man needs, but others get. Problem number two was when Max came in that same day asking me for a solution to the Great Depression.

“Well everything’s contracting; everyone’s holding onto what they have and with less purchasers, goods have to sell cheaper and cheaper and therefore wages and costs had to be cheaper or companies collapsed because nobody buys, right?”

“Right!”

“So without sales, sales taxes vanish and if you tax the rich they clam up on spending as well-”

“Or go off to foreign lands where their dollars and pounds stretch far. Either way the government had little money to launch work programs.”

“And what little they have goes to paying interest bearing debts to Britain, debts we took to fight their war. Fourteen years after the war ended, with the worst global depression effects excepting Germany, we are still paying for having our country’s -”

“This is how Reds and those mad dog Lang supporters talk. Things are indeed bad when a man who has spent his life from childhood on as a solid, honest worker and did more than his duty for his country, talks so.”

He paused as if searching his brain for something to say, but couldn’t find it.

“Do you wish to buy?”

He shook his head so vigorously that it was comic.

“Oh bad, bad, the world turns bad.”

*So is my food that you won't buy my silly old duffer.*

He continued to shake his head as he left and another afternoon went waiting for the customers who would not come and the beggars who did.

\*

Ross Clarke

Ahmegodheho 2nd May 1932

Max had requested an interview and he came in, looking at the floor sighing to himself. After signalling to Rosa to bring in the tea set and leave us, he sat.

“As Jimmy Gagney says “Give it ta me straight doc.”

“Some is personal, some political.”

“Most urgent first.”

“We cannot afford to keep Clarissa. Could you keep her?”

I was about to offer a rise, but realised that was not what he wanted. The old duffer was the most hopeless truth evader around. We had heard the innuendoes, so had most people, including by her face, Zelda.

“Of course there can be work for her here, she could do private training, my secretary Rosa could teach her secretarial and accountancy skills, and a place this size always has paid work...”

“We would ask Marsha, Ruth or Edna, but they have already taken in so many, everybody has relatives returning from the city, thinking of growing their own vegetables....”

There was a suggestion there, many grizzled about my palace.

“With Alison's fiftieth coming up, let's host a party and a dance. It would give employment to the local dance band, Jan for cake and pastry, our grocers, some waiters, dishwashers, a little splurge to boost depressed incomes.”

He nodded approval.

“But Ross, what of an overall solution?”

“To?”

“This great depression.”

He was absolutely serious.

“The solution will come from the same source as the problem: America.”

“Uhm, the empire fades, doesn't it? Now that Britain gives up on both ruling India and the gold standard will it ever regain its global domination?”

“In 1917 the Americans became the world's greatest economic and political power and the Communists emerged as their rivals: between them they will decide.”

“All very true, but here we must fight the good fight.”

“Meaning?”

“Here are leaflets aimed at spreading Communism, locally. Shrewd stuff by some spy who knows this district. When good men like Jan, Karl, Murie, and a many another are baffled and despairing, well such rubbish as this could fall on fertile ground.”

I was about to kid him that Eloura would be the last place to turn Red but remembered that impossibly naïve peace leaflet in Turkey that had no chance and saw it succeed in Russia. This leaflet was much the same and signed Rosenthal. Max waited until I finished reading it

“Moon has cornered the anti-Communist support. He leads the New Guard branch here.”

“Well let's go to Sydney headquarters!” I responded. “We will get his endorsement revoked!”

“Let's see why they back him, what they want and what they are like first. Are they admirers of Hitler and Mussolini?”

“They seem mostly good blokes, former soldiers out to rekindle the mateship and unity of the war effort as a way to solve this mess. Not such a bad idea.”

They have a meeting here soon. Let us see.”

\*

Tom Caufield

Eloura Town Hall 7<sup>th</sup> May 1932

There were many who were expected, my kids Jack and Esmeralda; bloody malingering hospital invalids, healthier veterans likewise, many a businessman and a few down and outs, probably here for lamingtons and cuppas. Some like me were in our old uniforms with medals, but nobody else wore a light horseman's plumed hat. Although we had kept an eye on Roydtown's little May Day march and had guards ready, and booted Keith Anstee out, some surprises appeared in the audience, namely Sergeant Mcphee, taking notes, Ross, Jan, Sir Eustace Hughes, his daughter Alice and son-in-law bloody Robert came. They sat at the back and none had the faces of friends, not that anybody would want Robert for a friend unless they wanted a pain in the bum. Wear whatever uniform he likes, have enough kids to fill the picture show, he was still what he was and always would be. Ladedah poofs have never been able to fool me. Max and Zelda and their do gooder daughter in law Marsha, and Reverend McPherson and his wife and sons had the faces of those still uncertain about us. Good if they come on board, but we do not need really need them.

We had a good bunch with Ulm and Kingsford Smith and with some from Imperial Airways and all the Ollhdesham Airlines people in our air wing, no Eloura Airlines people would join us. Their rivals were our leaders, especially Ollhdesham himself and that big, loud and phoney Betham, a New Zealander with a fine aviation record, international connections with people who hated Reds and were willing to fight them. The leadership was heavy with officers and magnates, but maybe it had to be that way: ordinary blokes like myself could hardly buy a bomber could they? The bloody Reds thought in terms of barricades and rifles and

bomb tossing, let them get a few from aircraft and a bit of strafing and they would scuttle off back to their tenements: with aircraft we would win. Mad Ma Clarke, Reverend Jervis and Moon were in the audience, even though with me they virtually ran the local branch. In some ways those three were good, but getting them onside meant many others who could not stand them were off. As mayor my father-in-law Reg presided, even though he had not made up his mind which side he was on. I was the speaker and important organisational people from headquarters were seated on stage, to see what we could do here and how I would go over. They beamed with approval at the filled hall.

This was my chance to be something, at fifty next year about time. Reg gave the welcome, the orchestra played 'God Save the King' and this was my start up.

"There's no need to tell you how much this country suffers, for suffering goes on all around us. No need to tell you why. Bad management and worse planning - by Jewish bankers in New York out for a quick buck and shysters and them poofy or sissy lardedahs out for the same, wrecked the system an' now those of us who have to work for a living have to pay."

I paused for applause and Jack and his Missus and a few other plants started it off with only tepid and tardy coming from some others. "And voting in Labor only made a bad situation worse!" That got a bit more, but the leaders behind me were going expressionless. "In this state we have the worst of the lot, a man so ruthless, so radical, that even federal Labor hold him in dread, a man disloyal to king and country, a Red who doesn't have the guts to hold aloft the hammer and sickle but does their work! You know who we mean!"

"Jack Lang!" Horace Clarke called out and there was some laughter, probably because he said it like he had worked out the answer to a

difficult problem, but I knew who put him up to it and seven years old or not, he would pay someday. Nobody makes a fool of me – or tries to, and gets away with it.

“Yes Premier Lang! A usurper who would not invite the king to open the Sydney Harbour Bridge, but in his daggy suit tried to himself and would have if it hadn’t been for the brave and valiant actions of Captain De Groot charging forward sabre at the ready in the name of the king!”

This pause got a few more claps, a bit more enthusiasm, but not as bloody much as expected or needed.

“That there thwarting of the tyrant gave us all a good laugh, but we need more than good laughs in the struggle ahead, we need good men - and here's your chance to join the eighty-seven thousand who have already applied and been selected - show that you are as good as they are!”

“Good men for what?” Karl asked.

“For getting rid of Lang and Communism.”

“We can do that at the ballot box. Lang has a year at most.”

“Can we wait till then? The country will be pissed away to buggary!” That got amazed gasps and some left, all the McPhersons, except bloody Alexander, the one who should go. Perhaps with mixed company it was not best to talk like we were all men in a bar when women and children and reverends were present. Out came the leaflet. “Here we have the New Guard program and what we stand for!

One! Unswerving loyalty to the throne!

Two! All for the British Empire!

Three! Sane and honourable representative government throughout Australia.



Four! Suppression of any disloyal and immoral elements in Government, industrial and social circles.

Five! Abol-”

“We can read the leaflet Tom.” This from Alexander this time, arms folded and glaring. Another smart Alec; they named this McPherson brother right, all right.

“We need more than ideas, we need action!”

“Do you mean action of the sort that leads to police raids where munition ordinance lists and plans to take and fortify Berrima goal and assorted railway centres are found at your headquarters?” McPhee asked. He was referring to newspaper squealers going on about yesterday’s police raid. That was making people uneasy.

“Action of what kind? Precisely.” Alexander again.

“The type of action that starts with brass knuckles and clubs and ends up with tanks, machine guns and bombers if they are needed. The type of action we gave to our enemies at Gallipoli! And again at the Somme and Passchendaele! In with the bayonet!”

More was going to go on that line but by their still faces, I knew had revealed more than was wise and had best cover and sooth down.

“Of course armies are good for more than fighting. We could use the guard here to build – bridges, dams, roads, get industry started again and replenish the farms.”

“I saw that idea unfold when Trotsky tried it. Even enforcing it with whips and firing squads, it still proved a disaster.”

Trust bloody Ross to know that and say it.

“It worked for Mussolini. Oh, you are all going to say he’s a wog and a Catholic and jabbers loud and long to boot and his taste in uniforms is a bit much, but without him Italy would have gone Red a decade back and look at them now, first bit of Red talk and the talkers go in the lock

up an' are d never seen again. Kids are conscripted so that they know how to follow orders. He drained the marshes and built things and everybody is the same, being born into the fascist party or being a member if they are Italian. That country stands proud and united now, one nation like we should be, not a pack of bloody mongrels at each other's throats."

"Are yer saying that its got so bad we have to learn from bloody wogs?" That was Moon, trying to help. Jack was silent and worried.

"Look at the politicians, the governor won't even sack Lang. Scullin let the strikers strike. Maybe we should think of a military dictatorship."

"Indeed!" Old Reverend Jervis suddenly got excited. "From the days of Saul God's people were ruled by warriors and David did right in the eyes of the lord and who was wiser than King Solomon?"

"A king and a poet, not a dictator and a buffoon with feathers sticking out of his head." That was Ross's new secretary; the one with the baby that came from nowhere. My hat came off. A good one to ask her is where she got the name Clarke from, legal like or not but I let it go, best not rabbit on off the top of my head against a little woman, makes me look like a bully.

"Good men have been forced many times to bloodshed to protect the ideals of our empire!" Jervis suddenly and loudly decreed. "A Christian who does not combat the enemies of our faith is only half a Christian!"

That shot at the departed Reverend McPherson, was a good one. Sometimes that old ratbag was useful.

"Maybe we should think with more sanity and have the love of Christ in our hearts, not hatred." Rosa MacDonald Clarke chirped up with that one.

"We have application forms here." I shouted, but nobody came up. While Alison glared at me, always the teacher examining the slow student she only taught because I repeated three times, Reg took over.

“We have here tonight Sir Eustace Hughes, famous across the empire as a fierce foe of radicalism and a leading magnate. Surely, he can say some worthwhile things about the current emergency.”

He did not come up to the podium as he should have but spoke from where he was. We looked at each other and we knew we would not like what was coming.

“We can all agree that things have come to a bad pass, and that appears even more obviously so when we hear some of the things we hear tonight. Yes! Labor has no solutions, yes Communism would be a disaster, but a disaster as bad would be to see extremists tear this country apart. I have seen civil war's horrors in my country, Ireland and have read much on civil wars in England, and America and more recently, Russia and Mexico. No evil is ever eradicated, no good ever emerges that can justify such horrors and no victory ever gives more than could have been gained by wise compromise. Who benefits from war? Those who wish to rise in the world and gain power.

Even hunger and destitution are better than where we go if we follow this bunch, and as for Italy, how can you be sure life there is so wonderful if anyone who thinks otherwise, by your own words, finds themselves carted off by the police and then vanishes?”

He sat down and despite the other speakers, absolutely nobody enlisted. After packing up the executive requested a meeting. Betham began.

“Sergeant Caufield, your wartime record and your record with us, well when it comes to courage, dedication, energy and loyalty, no member can be rated higher, but we all have limitations - and in the field of public speaking it must be clear, even to you, that you are extremely limited. Your son, now being considered for political office by the Country Party, appears to be the family speaker.”

I was supposed to help the sly bugger in my own bloody degradation, but not being blind Freddy, I did not give him ammunition. The others were staring at him, me, or the floor, all with sullen faces. He continued.

“Now what mistakes do you think you made tonight?”

“Language in mixed company.”

“And in front of sympathetic reverends, who must now keep distance. What else?”

“Dunno.”

“Perhaps conjuring up three of the biggest military defeats in modern history during a speech designed to show how to win might not be astute. And?”

“Our future plans.”

“Oh yes. Our future plans. At this time, they are rather inchoate. Do you know what inchoate means?”

You slimy sly stuck up bastard Betham betcha them stories about you sharing your wife are bloody true.

“No. In a bloody mess I suppose.”

“Beginning unplanned, basic. And also away from the meaning, secret, dear fellow, secret. So what are you going to do?”

“Say it was me, just speculating about what could be, getting a bit worked up, made me get spontaneous.”

“After a drink too many. Say that at the pub; say it in the papers. Now as soon as you have done that, we in the inner circle of the Council of Action have decided that our initiatory period ends soon; now and the preparatory period will begin. Our rifle clubs are on standby. We need you for the hard-core training of the A Class Shock Troops at the secret centre in the Blue Mountains. Some of them are new to the military world and haven't fired a machine gun in their lives; others were clerks, horse

holders, stretcher bearers in the last one and are hot for action in this. Others just need a bit of revision. There is nothing wrong with going in with the bayonet on a gang of Reds or Langites, no nothing wrong at all – if the time is right.”

“And when will that time be?”

“When the A Class men are fifty thousand strong and each of them can train ten men from the Bs and C graders, perhaps even the outer circle sympathisers.”

“And?” Moon asked.

“If the governor sacks Lang in the next few days and he refuses to go and aligns with the Reds, then we offer our services.”

“And if does not sack Lang or if he rejects us?”

Betham just gave a smug, glittery smile.

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But it did not happen like that. Everybody thought the governor would never sack Lang but a week after that meeting, he did. Everybody thought Lang would call for revolution rather than go, but the gutless loud mouth went quietly, talking of victories through ballots, not bullets - and saying he wanted to avoid bloodshed. Everybody thought he would win after that dirty big rally for him in the park in Sydney when a quarter of a million Reds, Langites, Labor types, dopes, Jews, liberals, Abos and poofers and sissies and free lamington munchers turned up a week before the election. If they all voted for him he would have been back and the inner circle would have given the call and it would have been on, but he lost.

That election was our high point with some Nationalists, independents and Country Party candidates (including Jack) publicly affirming their support for the New Guard, but with the electoral victory people were saying what do we need the New Guard for? As if the bloody

commos weren't still around and the Depression had vanished and Lang wasn't waiting and Jews were not plotting.

Instead of us building up the A class hard core by recruiting from the B-Class men and even the outer circle it went the other way: the hard core became softer. The outer circle were the nice decent blokes who didn't like all them left wingers and thought that votes, showing wartime mateship, signing petitions and listening at rallies was enough. The hard core shock troops were those battalions made up of men who knew otherwise and were willing to do something about it with butts, bullets and bayonets, but their numbers were thinning out even before Colonel Eric Campbell, our Guard's leader, decided to go on his European trip to make links with those who thought and fought the same way. He was gone eight months on getting mixed up with foreigner's fights instead of focusing on sorting things out in Australia and we needed to sort much out – or he did.

On Sunday we were all mates working out how to win this battle together and on Monday he sacked anybody who disagreed with his dictatorship. Tuesday he publicly said the Guard wanted a military coup to overthrow a democracy gone rotten and on Wednesday we were a civilian organization dedicated to the sanctity of individual democratic rights. On Thursday he would say we were Italian style fascists and on Friday claim all he knew about Italian fascism could be fitted on a postage stamp. Probably. He would go on about the need for bloody fast focusing on aims and decisive leadership, but the silly bugger couldn't take his own good advice. Even De Groot, his right-hand man, got jack of him and resigned - as did about forty thousand others and that did not count those who just faded out. In Eloura by late 1933 we were down to not much more than moongoons and old Jervis and needed something to keep us active. Like other branches I had them guarding bridges against

common saboteurs but that got boring, something had to be found that was lively. Jack, who could no longer be publicly seen with us, found a blessing.

“Rosenthal’s in Ocean Ridge and going to set up one of those beach side recruiting huts commos use. You know free cordial, a sympathetic ear, a bullshit chat followed by an invite to some front event.”

“Followed eventually by a party membership card.”

He nodded smiling, but it was a smile no red would want to see. We turned up and there were lazy layabouts pretending to enjoy the sun. Many had the sense to flee when they saw our uniforms - others when they saw our clubs. Some should have been quicker or more loyal and we got one in the guts that a minute before had red cordial in it, red in both senses of the word. He was there by himself at the end, in a lean to made of poles and burlap bags with a red flag and little pictures of Lenin and Stalin at the centre, a few jugs of cordial and some leaflets. The others started in on him so with the swellings and the blood and the moving bodies it was hard to get a good look. He was a foreigner all right, with a weird accent and some foreign swear words and yet there was something about him that seemed familiar, in the eyes, tugging on my memory. After demonstrating what to do I left him to the others.

“Why don’t we have some fun? Make him spit on Stalin?” Moon suggested smiling as he had the boys hold up the picture in front of him. “Now Comrade Rosenthal, spit on Stalin's picture of or you get a clubbing - follow?”

There was something about those eyes, so calm. Soon it was only the eyes for everything else was blood and bone. Teeth were on the sand and yet those eyes focused on me. Silly bugger wouldn’t spit so it was his own silly fault. Some of the boys were complaining about bruised hands, one of the bats actually broke on his extremely thick skull and it was

getting tiresome so with his arms broken from shoulders down to finger tips and a last few kicks, we tossed him in the surf, told him he would be dangling from the end of a rope if he appeared this way again and left after wishing him a Merry Christmas.

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Ahmegodheho 23rd December 1933

Carissa unintentionally found them two days before Christmas, they were lucky to have lasted nearly two years. For months after her arrival he spent every night with her. I did not want a total return to celibacy, but he was so enamoured of her cheery innocence that subtle hints passed him by. What type of idiot could be optimistic in the middle of a depression much worse than that of the 1890s? Much worse than any known before? People were being found dead of exposure by the roads or in the forests. Abortions were common. Considering how children were growing up stunted, rickety and slow-witted from the effects of malnourishment that was not such a bad idea. All this was more remote to her than the stories of King Arthur, Robin Hood, Rob Roy and the folk tales she loved so much. Her relentlessly happy face infuriated and one June night when I couldn't stand sleeping alone any-more I went to their room. He was on his back, naked and she was naked at his side. She gave that unintentionally infuriating smile of hers in welcome and patted the other side of the bed.

“Ross, Rosa Rosalind! We three are meant to be! It can't be coincidence, it must be God's will! You are welcome and can have him, for tonight I tired him out.”

I walked out, those days were past, Jenny only came back as a painful innocent, a painful memory and a mistake never to repeat, even if the new innocent was willing. One morning she came in while I was in



the bath, disrobed and stepped in, looking at me in a way which was unmistakable.

“You cannot live a lie, at least not happily.” She spoke levelly. My eyes went over her body before I could stop myself doing that, but... I asked Rosa to leave and not to approach me that way again.

One morning about a month later, still in winter, he just suddenly said at breakfast: “Brionny writes, she wants me there, time for some weeks in Otago and an airline check. The plane will soon be ready, look after the children while I’m gone.”

He then kissed us, the children and left, but 'some weeks' lasted until a few days before Christmas.

In those five months I got to know Rosa’s moods and personality as well as my own and she would always have the personality, naiveté and romantic outlook on life of a talented senior schoolgirl – who had somehow missed out on not only full maturity, but sexual guilt. At least by taking on the teacher’s role it was easy to get her to accept the need for concealment from society and she was amazingly adept and successful at it. Sometimes she had the extraordinary astute flash given to the naïve.

“What are you doing studying shares and the international stock market?” I asked upon finding her assiduously studying the finance pages of *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

“Working out how to live on dividends.”

“But we have an airline, rents, picture shows and farms.”

“Which all rely on customers and public good will and they will vanish faster than vegemite on Max Chapman’s toast when somebody, someday finds Major Ross Clarke of Otago and Major Ross Clarke of Eloura are one and the same but his wives are not.”

Yes, their 1914 divorce would not count for much. I left her to her researches. Over those months I no longer missed sexual involvement

with a male and found myself dreaming of what Elizabeth would be like, not just because she was alluring sensuality incarnate, but because she was mature, but Brionny was enough of the hard, calculating type for me. Ross returned for Christmas with expensive presents - and Elizabeth. The sullen children just thanked mechanically and stared while Rosa and I gave ourselves glances and Elizabeth smiling slightly, noticed. After the children were put to bed and we sat round the radio listening to Wagner on the new ABC channel. Elizabeth gave a stagy yawn.

“Time for bed.” She decreed merrily.

“At eight thirty?” Rosa asked.

“Rosalind, I imagine you would like your husband back?”

Everyone went very still. Ross was like a stone statue of himself. Rosa saved the day.

“Oh this is very complicated. Why don't we just do what we did at Whispering Pines and see if we can exhaust Ross and each other?”

“Thank you very much, but no! I am not some weasel or a rabbit in the mating season!” Elizabeth stayed flared up after that outburst. She was a moralist when not running a brothel. Ross just shrugged his shoulders and went with Rosa to her room, while Elizabeth and I sat there staring at each other. She spoke.

“For the first time in my life I am being rejected – extraordinary. It must be terrible to go through life vexed, always pretending.”

“I am not pretending any more, this is what I have become.”

The next night everybody else but me slept the sleep of the exhausted.

He was gaining sexual variety, excitement and fulfilment, yet he was losing, we both were. In Ross's mind and my own I was becoming not a wife but his matron/housekeeper. If I joined in his triads I would be just another of his favoured mistresses. Celibacy meant I would not be a wife,

so I gave myself whenever he wanted, for whatever he wanted, pregnancy danger times excepted.

I did not want more than one to one and he did not want me to, after everything stabilized there was no jealousy. There was also not that deep, happy unity that two people who have shared everything for years and only want each other have. At the Boxing Day Ball I could see that Ruth and Murie had that, as did Edna and George and Karl and Lynda, and their daughter Keddy with the American husband, the tropical diseases expert, they would soon be off to his home in Hawaii. Max and Zelda had it to some extent; they loved each other, but he was a man of delusions and she protected him. Helen and Evelyn were there and they also had some of it. Now he was in his fifties he apparently was leaving the younger women alone and finding out he was a cuckold by Ross because he had mucked up probably had something to do with it. Helen was courteous to Ross, but they did not dance together; watching carefully, she was avoiding him. Alison likewise: she and Tom were the reverse of the couples who showed a oneness; what a mistake she had made thirty years past.

So Ross and I danced and Elizabeth danced every dance with some young dummy she was flirting with as a cover to stop stories and suspicions about Ross, but nobody danced with waiting Rosa. Going by faces the district knew the reality about the baby: she quickly took over child minding, hers, mine and others.

We were able to fool Eloura about Ross's tangled sex life for almost a year after that, mainly because they were away. In July Ross was off in America for months investigating the new Lockheed Electras and Catalina flying boats, In the one letter he sent he wrote that 'both with their large carrying capacities, sturdy build and better radios would supposedly revolutionise air travel when they came off the production

line in the May of next year. The Pacific would be crossed regularly with these new aircraft.' Pie in the sky indeed, his favourite diet. Soon Elizabeth and then Rosa joined him – and later they would turn up at Brionny's house for their musical bed routine. They returned for Christmas as usual. Eight days later, before I could stop her, the seldom seen Clarissa burst into the bathroom when Elizabeth and Ross were sharing and she was staring.

“Oh I didn't think anybody else was here.”

“Use the toilet downstairs, as you usually do, then wait in the Ottoman room.”

By the time they had dressed and left I sent for Rosa and sent her off, even she had the sense to be worried. Clarissa was just staring.

“Suddenly much becomes clearer. It is all of you isn't it? Rosa, Elizabeth, Alison Caufield, that farming woman over in Otago. Eunice must be my half-sister isn't she? Is Jack - and also Esmeralda? Don't worry, I am not a tittle tattle.”

“We agreed that you stayed downstairs.”

“Alison rang on an urgent matter and asked me to find you or Ross. Tom needs more bail than she could supply. He bashed some Communist senseless.”

“Tell them to call at two.”

She just stared, wondering how the future would go, so did I. She may have said something or perhaps they were just reading her face, but instead of the habitual good manners and respect she now gave me scrutinising, doubting looks. By year's end the other three followed my advice and decided that updating the air fleet with the new plane purchases required their personal attention.

\*

By the time we had to leave everybody knew that Briionny was no fun anymore. She did not sleep with me and she was changing. When Ross and I came into her room she just sighed in a vexed way and said there was a lot to do next day and she needed to save her energy. She certainly looked tired all the time and I heard them arguing next day. She said menopause was soon and she had time for more children, and would have them, but had no more time for the menagerie, whatever that was. She said they were on to us and she needed either more of a husband round or less.

In town it became clearer what she meant. Twice while shopping people came up to me and asked the same question about Ross being Robert, the famous air ace. It was funny how they asked it, as if it was important to them, not just nice chatting. Somebody else asked about Elizabeth and nodded to themselves saying "Oh yes, she's that General Mackinnon's daughter; we have heard *all* about her, O yes hard to believe she comes from such a good family" Then they would nod slightly and give each other meaningful stares.

I told them all this and Briionny and Elizabeth were serious but unsurprised.

"Runnin' a farm is never ending work; hired help causes as many problems as they solve, an' they have eyes an' ears. Best ter sell up."

"To go where?"

They said nothing but just stared at each other. We left next day and they were writing letters they would not let me see.

\*

Jack Caufield

Pharaoh Picture Show Eloura 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1934

Since election to the state parliament Jeanette and I lived in Sydney - and were only back now to conclude Dad's court case. We celebrated with a restaurant meal and a night at the pictures. We did not like Eloura.

Uncle Murie was silly. My sister Esmeralda was a farm girl; we had little in common. Grandpa Reg disliked me and the feeling was mutual; we did not even get an invite to his eightieth. Sex-mad Ross was despicable, his brother Grahame and Max were both pathetic and I was seeing enough of my father to see him in ways I disliked.

It wasn't his cruelty, violence, smug hypocrisy, snarly griping and overwhelming self-esteem that upset many others, particularly life's losers like Grandpa Reg and Uncle Murie and Aunt Ruth. All those supposedly evil things were winners' characteristics. It wasn't even lying about bashing Rosenthal, even when it was lying to me after he insisted I be his defending lawyer. It was the way he did that to make me either a man who had no choice but to either sell his own father out or be a corrupt lawyer - and he put me in that dilemma deliberately, because 'you are getting stuck up and too big for your boots.' At twenty-eight? That messy court case became gossip in the party and circulating things about Moon, my mother, and the New Guard made influential political people ask me not to run for re-election.

So there we sat, Esmeralda, my parents, Jeanette and I, pretending to be happy because of our supposed victory in court – bullshit. Rosenthal could not be found, witnesses changed their stories in the dock while looking fearfully at me and my smirking father and the case was dismissed for lack of evidence, and then on the court steps my father positively beamed and virtually boasted before journalists by saying what would happen to reds like Rosenthal who came to places where they should not be, meanwhile my mother stared down the steps.

Now we stared at the screen, at the newsreel – about Hitler's purge of his dissidents by knife and bullet to keep his generals and industrialists on side. There was Hitler and not speaking German had little to do with the way everyone in the theatre was impervious to his supposed charms.

He was clearly not only murderous in his rhetoric; Watching those jerky but fast arms with the balled-up fists and the mouth hurling spittle, the stories about carpet chewing suddenly got credibility. Shrill, bombastic, fraudulent, raging at imaginary things and paranoid beyond belief, the only puzzle was why anybody ever voted for him. Trust Max to blurt out the obvious.

“Why does anybody support this raving madman?”

“Who said anybody does?” My father snarled back.

“Eric Campbell thinks his wonderful, they met. They had a pleasant chat by Campbell’s account. Gone stark raving German has he?”

My father got up with fist clenched and we had to control him and soothe him. Max had just enough sense to be content with his shot.

How we longed for Sydney and the steady hum of traffic in the background.

\*

Alison Caufield

Caufield’s Farm 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1935

“Jack could have supported me!”

Thirty years of Tom being like this; he made me so weary. He was talking of his by-election result, Dad running to replace his boy.

“You are the reason Jack resigned and the by-election was called.”

“Lost my deposit! Seventeen votes! Seventeen bloody votes!”

“People only listen to extreme talk when conditions are bad, and conditions are easing. The New Guard are hardly moderates, are they?”

“Betrayed by my son, and perhaps my wife.”

After over thirty years I knew silence was even more dangerous than answering.

“We had to do the farm work. Esmeralda could not manage alone. We will lose this place if you do not focus on it and leave politics alone.”

“It was more than your bloody absence from meetings and polling

booths that has been noticed.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning people are saying how can he help control the country when he can’t control my own wife.”

“Meaning what?”

“They say you and Ross are a secret couple.”

“On what evidence?”

“They just say.”

“And you just believe.”

“You deny it?”

He wanted to believe that, so he got adamant denials.

“Do you really want to know why you lost, and so badly?”

“No use crying over spilt milk. I’m not one for self-pity.”

*Oh really? Really?*

Esmeralda was motionless in the doorway. She never said much, but she knew.

“Is he really my father?”

“Yes! Oh really! Oh, to cut out the tongues of all gossips! And then to stuff your ears with wax if you don’t have the sense to not listen to-”

“And what will you do to my eyes?”

She stood there for a few seconds more expressionless with milk pails in her hands and then walked off. This was paying the price for pleasure in life, nearly a decade late. How horrible, now. Now, when I was ageing, nearly fifty-three and romance was memories and life was a farm that took every waking minute, a bully for a husband, and grown children holding me in contempt. I phoned Rosalind and briefly explained.

“If I leave Tom can there be a room for me at Ahmegodheho?”

“Absolutely not.”



Then the line went dead.

\*

The real trouble started nearly a month later, just as it seemed to have blown over. Esmeralda (who had not spoken to me after her comment about eyes) was making dough mix for damper as he was going away, doing a little shearing.

“Thinking of leaving.” Esmeralda said sullenly.

“Why?”

“Yer know; if he bashes yer, yer got it coming. We dunno who our real father is, Dad or mister cash only no credit, him high an’ mighty up on his castle on the hill with all them mistresses an’ kids an’ money he burns up on planes - but never shares with anybody round here!”

“Oh you are your father’s daughter all right, have no fear of that!”

“What is so great about Ross Clarke? I must admit to being blind to his charms, but then there are some things that should never be done for bloody money!”

“There are some things that you will believe for unknown reasons.”

“Unknown? Do you think that we cannot see the way you look at each other? Jack says that when he was six he walked in to protect, hearing the screams - and he saw you and him!”

“It ended nearly eight years ago and it only started after spending my best years trying to get your father to be something else but the mean, malicious, envious, dreary, sadistic, sly, conceited bully that he is.”

“Dunno what malicious or envious means and don’t care and if he’s a sad sort you made him so. Dad says yer don’t need big fancy words on a farm or to be a teacher either. Yer taught me nothing.”

She walked out, taking the vegie loaded dray to Ocean Ridge as she usually did on market Saturdays.

I just walked around the house, seeing how pretty, snug and comfortable I had made it. The place glistened with the new, almost grey, light blue interior paint job and then the land, a neat orchid, overhanging firs and oaks, Beyond them summer ripened crops were made wavy by a cool breeze on a not too hot summer's day under a cheery bright blue sky that made birds' hearts sing and could have made mine, but for my daughter and husband. He had cunning instead of intelligence, dullness instead of imagination, conceit instead of camaraderie and resentment, resentment, resentment; against those who were smarter, happier, wealthier, or younger. Now Esmeralda and Jack, despite everything I could do, were his children. I packed two suitcases full and would make the noon bus easily.

He was on the veranda, sitting quite calmly. Esmeralda was riding off, her back to us. She must have known.

“Amazing what you hear when you are not supposed to be around isn't it?”

After he was finished and the pain from the broken arm made me regain semi consciousness I phoned old Mcphee, who came personally to take me to Karl's surgery, where I kept on going into unconsciousness and was put on a stretcher. Bits stay in the memory; flashing lights, coughing blood and bits, but repeatedly waking up to find myself in their small hospital with Lynda usually reading something, apparently on watch when I relapsed into sleep. She put the magazine down when she heard me trying to move.

“Please stay absolutely still, you have hairline fractures.”

Her own body was absolutely still, her face expressionless.

“So for how long must this be?”

“A week..”

“We - I cannot afford that.”

“Ross can – and should.” After a few seconds more of the face which held massive contempt, she spoke again in that same cold level voice. “My husband will explain your injuries, then your husband wishes to speak to you. Then the police need to see if your descriptions of the attacker match those given by your husband and daughter.”

“Are you joking?”

“Of course not.”

“Do not let my husband into this room. He d-”

“It is best if you do not speak on police matters. Mcphee will discuss these with you.”

He knew, even before he started asking the questions.

“Two witnesses say they saw Ross egging on his retarded brother Grahame to do it and Grahame with blood on his shirt, was seen walking back from your farm by a bus load of passengers on the noon run to Eloura.”

“Who are these witnesses?”

“Your husband and daughter, they say they returned to rescue you. They went to Ocean Ridge to get a court order and unfortunately Grahame must have thought he was living the battle to save Brionny again or perhaps he is the dangerous nut case they say he is. After the 1912 precedent and after he punched three police he got custody confinement.. They arrested Ross on assaulting you, causing grievous bodily harm.”

“I must tell the truth.”

But I did not, legally wives cannot testify against husbands.

\*

Katie Dean Clarke

Clarkestead 19<sup>th</sup> February 1935

He howled for a picnic by the creek so much that sooner or later he would get it and being bored to screaming with Clarkestead, it seemed a

good idea to have the picnic on the Clarke-Caufield border and drop into chat with Alison. The only people that came to Clarkestead now were reluctant tradesmen or itinerants. At least a picnic would get me away from the old bitch, even if he would (as usual) continually ask 'Where's Brionny?' every few minutes.

Despite that it was going well enough on a beautiful summer's day until a butterfly fluttered by and when he heard me say that he laughed and chased it and being in a dress and mindful of fallen branches, he got a good start and vanished into the forest, his movements decided by a butterfly. Therefore, my movements would also be dictated to by a butterfly if I chased him. And why not? Grahame, Ross, the old bitch, even the occasional tradesman dictated to me what to do. So why not a butterfly? No. let him run, let him drown for all I care. That left me alone - with time to think.

Nothing can be worse than this, not sleeping in the streets, not starving, not eking out a living in a forest hut, nothing, nothing, nothing. Turning forty means if no escape comes soon it never will. He turned up howling and blubbing about wanting to go home and wearing a bloodied shirt, not from him. Other trouble waited at home.

Mcphee wanted to take statements there, but he agreed with my request to be taken to the police station – after all the petty cash tin money was in my purse. The Clarkes probably would not report it anyway. I knew too much. Robert and his boys, Ross and his girls... Theft and gossip are not nice, but forty years of being nice only got me hell while clever bastards like Moon, Donal Shaw, Ma Clarke, her boys Robert and Ross and Tom prosper. The statement did not take long and there was time for one of Jan's pies and a cuppa before the Sydney train.

\*

Tom decided to let me question him, initially that seemed foolish.

“Now you say Mister Caufield, that you came east down the Eloura Road, when you saw Ross and Grahame Clarke on the veranda conspiring to bash your wife.”

“Yes.”

“Why were you travelling east, back home? You have no witnesses who saw you in town.”

“That is because I did not go into town.”

“But your wife and daughter insisted you were going into town.”

“So I was, forgot me hat. Fella can’t forget his hat in the hot sun.”

A few jurors actually smiled.

“You said you heard Ross and Grahame Clarke conspiring on the veranda. Now you have heard the surveyor’s testimony that the veranda lies six hundred and forty-three feet from the road. How could you hear?”

“They were yelling.”

“Four other witnesses only yards away heard no yelling. How can that be?”

“Look at who they are. Their mother, the half wit’s wife and Murie and Ruth, who Ross kept in business these last few years with great amounts of money.”

“What are you implying?”

“I am answering a question about your witnesses and doubts about the four of them; them doubts become well justified when you look at how they connect to the Clarke brothers.”

“Your statements make no sense. You supposedly heard the Clarke brothers conspiring to bash your wife senseless and yet you never argued them down, used a nearby public phone to get the police or rushed home to defend your wife, although you could have galloped far ahead of Grahame Clarke.”

“And killed the already tired horses from exhaustion? And if I did that the lunatic could be doing his havoc while I was miles away. As for contacting Mcphee, well everybody knows the Mcphees are Clarke allies. The sergeant’s a regular guest and on the same committee as their mother. His sons are his armed guards. He donates to police charities, no, being on my own left no course open to me but to follow the law.”

Very, very, clever. Rehearsed as the grammar and vocabulary, so different to how he usually speaks, both show. A no lose for him whichever way I went. Let him get away with that and the jury would pick up that I was in retreat and that Caufield was apparently being kept from giving vital information in the unfolding narrative. If they thought that they could convict on resentful suspicion. To oppose it with questions meant falling into the basic trap of asking a witness a question I did not know the answer to. When Caufield employed that bush lawyer Moon as his barrister they appeared to be a pair of overconfident idiots: not now and not since the jury selection began when they got the judge to disallow any officers or wealthy farmers, but not former enlisted men like Tom.

“How did you supposedly follow the law?”

“By holding my temper and not doing the manful thing which any red blooded man would do if laws were different and they heard their wife was going to be bashed for trying to put a stop to his immoral sexual depravities against young girls up in that mansion of his.”

Murmurs went around the court and the judge pounded. Alison sneered with glittering eyes, but the jury had their eyes on him, so better to loudly move several steps back beside her and vigorously wipe away imaginary flies from my face with my rolled-up brief. Pretending to wait for quiet while they looked my way - and hers.

“If that is so, then, why did you let Grahame go?”

“Who says that happened? Being so engrossed in stopping Ross, yours truly did not realise that the cunning little bu- oh sorry, but well the clever little gentleman had sneaked away and using his canoe, got there by fast river current long before me.”

“Cunning, clever. Odd words to use for a man all sides agree on has been left a simpleton by a brain injury.”

“Oh, never underestimate the cunning of them society calls simple fellas, the illiterate and them nearly so, the brain injured, them farm boys without much education, never underestimate ‘em.”

At last he had made the mistake his type almost always do in court, going too far on their triumphs. I wanted every juryman to see that smug grin, the gleaming knowing eyes, sharing the needling joke with me while ignoring them, the scar across the head as it glinted in the sunlight. I moved to within a yard of him and the jury followed that move. Sneering, hostile Murie, cold faced Ruth, their daughters, and Bach and Jan likewise were on a diagonal line behind me and the jury must have noticed and wondered why these people who had known Tom all their lives sneered.

“I put it to you that you broke your wife’s arm and ribs, fractured her skull and kicked her in the face repeatedly and that you have suborned perjury from your daughter and some paid thugs to blame a man you hate. We have witnesses who say you railed against her as the cause of your electoral defeat the night before the attack.”

“I did not break any of my wife’s bones or injure her face. Ross Clarke did.”

“Rebuttal witness, Alison Caufield.”

There was no preparation for that, or her, now it was their turn to not now what was coming. The judge stared hostile, having an inkling of where this could go.

“Mister McPherson we have discussed the rules and I must ask you to write your questions out and give them to me.”

They were ready. He raised his eyebrows and he read and returned them. Wives cannot testify against their husbands, but they can shake with fear when they pass each other on the witness stand and press themselves against the wall to keep as far away as possible, as Alison did.

“The defence will limit themselves to the words written on this paper and the witness is cautioned to answer only these questions and say not one word more.”

“Mrs Caufield. Did you see your attacker very clearly?”

“Of course.”

“For how long?”

“For several minutes, perhaps ten.”

“How close?”

“At times half an inch from my face, at other times a few feet.”

“How long have you known Grahame Clarke?”

“Since his birth, being a cousin. He was my pupil for most of his education and have seen him regularly over the years as he lives at the farm next to ours.”

“Does he bear any resemblance to the man who attacked you?”

“None whatsoever! He has chestnut hair, my attacker was and is a blonde going grey. Grahame and Ross have no facial scars, my attacker does. My attacker has or had scratch marks from his knuckles to his elbows, where I put them in my defence. Grahame does not, Ross does not. There is eight years difference in age between my attacker and Ross.”

“Have you ever spoken to anyone about exposing Ross Clarke’s supposed predilection for young girls in his castle?”



“Of course not! He does not live in a castle and the few female staff he has are mature adults. I have neither seen nor heard anything remotely on those lines in the decade since the house was built.”

“Did Ross Clarke authorise, encourage or initiate any attack on you?”

“On the contrary; he warned me previously against my attacker and gave me protection against him so that I could tell some of the truth today in court.”

Oh that was just a little too brilliant. She seemed to sense that the ice was cracking under the judge’s feet. The slowest on the jury had just got it and were looking at Tom’s hands; sadly, the scars had healed.

“Over the years Ross Clarke has always been a good friend to my parents, my brothers and my sister- in-law.”

“That was my last question.”

The judge turned to the jury and instructed.

“In an assault case where the victim insists that they are absolutely sure that the accused is not the attacker, that someone else is, no real case exists. Does any member of the jury believe this case should continue?” An enquiry into the sexual questions Tom raised started, but the Eloura Airlines, Ahmegodheho and Clarkestead employees were uniformly puzzled as to the judge’s questions and so were Eunice and Clarissa. Fortunately, the questions Tom and Moon wanted to ask did not involve illegalities, just scandal. Alison got a court order against Tom, stayed in town a month until the land sale was finalised and then vanished.

“Why did Tom agree to sell half his land back to Ross?” I asked her, suspecting that I was being an unknowing accessory to blackmail.

“Because if he did not he was going to be divorced for adultery with a prostitute and for extreme cruelty. In divorce court the evidence for

extreme cruelty can be submitted and then he could be charged with perjury, slander, and subverting the course of justice.”

“This advice does not come from me.”

“From a divorce lawyer in Sydney. You have done enough to make an enemy of Tom. He blames the judge and jury much more than you. Do more and he will wake up and use Moon to destroy you. Ross paid eight times what that land was worth, Tom got ten thousand, so don’t believe it when he cries poorhouse around town.”

Tom was seldom in town now, not even for RSL events, now Esmeralda did the shopping, we seldom saw him anywhere, sob, sob, sob. Even so it was a close-run thing. Tom and Moon had Grahame and Ross’s record for violence, especially Ross against his mother, who testified to that in court. Grahame did have proximity, human blood on his clothes and shoes. Moongoons perjuring themselves swore they saw Grahame going down the creek with Ross yelling “Give her one for me!” Tom did have that good bloke man on the land act well prepared and even his clichéd stodgy, speechifying testimony went over well initially. They had a jury of two-thirds former enlisted men and one had just divorced an adulterous wife. If Alison had not been allowed as a rebuttal... if it had gone into the jury room...

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Alison Caufield

Lake Conjola 21<sup>st</sup> November 1935

After the near nightmare months of building, at last came peace, quiet, and all the time in the world, so company when it came was welcome. Barking Woffie heard the engines off over the mountains before me. Ross flew Dad and Murie down in his Catalina. Due to the steep hills that surrounded the lake that was not half a mile across where my home was, he had to fly east to Conjola Beach and u turn, then fly low to land at my new lakeside home.

As we previously agreed the narrow timber slat was rolled out onto the rope jetty, then fastened to the row of little pillars. Being unpainted, low lying and with the line of rocks going to the deep and near to the other side, the jetty was a secret – or had been, so was Ross. A landing Catalina on a tranquil morning in a place where no planes land makes Ross and now my cottage, very much a failed secret. Now everybody from the coast to the rolling farmland hills would wonder why he was here.

The neighbours were in sight - out with binoculars. Sydney siders knocked into early retirement by the depression, they were ideal neighbours, being a mile away and staying that way.

The squawking birds, maggies, shags and kookaburras, unused to such a thing, soared up and just missed the propellers as it splashed and rippled, making little white-capped surges on the bottle - green lake, a colour easy to learn to love.

He put his bright yellow inflatable raft out and then came someone else, my father. I recognised him after a few seconds, then did not recognise him. Getting into the raft was an awkward slow process, but not that awkward or that slow. He also carried a cane. The level walk from the jetty to the veranda was eighty yards, it took him perhaps ten minutes and his puffing meant he could only nod and smile and mouth a hello.

“Hello Dad, Murie! Cuppa can be poured soon, the wood stove was ready to go and we heard the engines.”

He nodded, starting to wipe his boots as Mum had insistently taught him over fifty years ago, Murie trained for less, followed.

“Oh you can take them off, the floor has been sanded and polished, no splinters.”

And no dirt on the hand woven sheeny Turkish carpets either.

“Ross flew in the creosote – and another four big tins, just to make sure. Likewise trimming paint, varnish and wood stain.”

“Which, like the groceries and blankets, had best be put away in the shed.”

“Need a hand?”

Dad was serious; we kept blank faces as Ross shook his head and went off, Murie following.

“Suppose you want all the news girl”

I stopped myself from shaking my head. Murie had a habitually happy countenance, not today.

“Retired again as Mayor, permanent this time. My heart stays fine, it’s the lungs, got to be careful Karl says, lucky to see eighty, but I’ll be very lucky to see eighty-five though, but few do, few do.”

That stunner left me not knowing what to say. Eighty-five being five years off.

“Still we’ve seen the worst of this depression pass, and I’ll be good for a few years yet. My body goes like one of those old tractors that work well, but suddenly a bit goes wrong, the mechanic fixes it, then something else goes and then everything, but we splutter along for a while yet. The legs are a bit weak, but got my brain and eyes working still, tongue to.” He was clutching the cup to stop the shakes, then gulped the tea. ‘Wouldn’t mind a walk; your garden looked good from the air.’”

A walk lasted twenty yards.

“Wise to put in rhododendrons, grevilleas, hydrangeas closer to the house, bushfires don't burn em, just wilt em. An' yer vegie patch what a solid acre narrow? Patch o' grass the same, that lush green should be a solid break, and the ditch as well, over a hundred yards gap all up but that counts for little against those wind born embers....”

I turned on the fuel driven power motor and the sprinkler system that connected to the lake soon covered the house, and us. He laughed with amazement, briefly and then it was back to worry, as always. He had been fighting nature so long, it had defeated him, in a subtle way.

“Ah but don’t ever underestimate nature...”

“No Dad I don’t. The thick tree cover looks burnable, but with the slopes that steep and high precipitation and regular fog, it stays damp, almost as unburnable as jungle.”

“Be full of snakes? Looks snake country.”

“Not enough sun; too damp; my ditch has slippery slate sides two foot high, should be fine, but even if they pass that the sound of the pump will annoy them away.”

That stumped the old worrier.

“Good place.” He had another glance around, then went in. I kept it immaculate. The walls were varnished honey eucalypt to the dado line and fibro painted duck egg blue above it with plenty of cedar framed with bevelled glass in French doors that opened onto the slate veranda. The slate went under us as a base.

“Good to have a high slate base, stop snakes inside for sure, but you will need the creosote for your beam ends and first slats.”

“And the boat port shed, first jetty moorings, even the roof beams.”

“White ant country, could pick it from the air.”

So he talked on about white ants, fish in the lake and timber till he got onto the topic that was his reason for coming.

“You don’t ask after Jack or Esmeralda.”

“How are they?” Asking that will set off a no-win trap, not asking makes me a bitch, despite their calculating betrayals.

“Oh Jack and the wife are battling up in Sydney, doing so-so, like nearly everybody.”

*Doing very well thank you Dad; here's hoping that you don't know why.* Jack eventually earned three thousand pounds from his father's sale money for legal work done behind the scenes with prepared questions and advice for Moon and Tom.

"And Esmeralda?"

"In a bad way and does not know it. Met a bad one she has."

"Good lord, Esmeralda onto boys at last."

"Name is Henderson Crutchfield. They met when the new postie made a mistake over surnames. Turned up two weeks after the sale of the land and her money coming in, to drop off her misaddressed letter. Handsomest devil anyone ever saw, but no married woman can stand him, even many of the younger ones are a wake up. Tried to latch on to Clarissa Chapman for her money, but she was a wake up. Several have tried to warn her."

"Who?"

'Rosalind for starters. Esmeralda just sneered and asked her 'Ross Clarke's wife says that Esmeralda Caufield intends marrying a bad man?' Then even that naïve little Rosa said much the same and she says 'Robert Clark's mistress thinks Esmeralda Caufield intends marrying a bad man?' Lynda Taun Fisher got 'If your marriage is so good why you don't ever smile?' Ruth got 'At least he ain't some fat fool.' And she told Zelda a bad husband is better than a jar of vegemite on legs."

"Marriage, everybody thought she would be a spinster: she loved the farm that much there was not room for a man."

"Everybody goes against him and so they are turning against her. He will wreck everything you ever worked for when he sells that farm."

"And you think that she will listen to me, she won't."

*Just like I did not listen to you and my mother about Tom and should have.*

“We owe it to our children to try.”

They probably had left space for me on the flight back.

“Part time primary teaching from the nearest family earns me twenty shillings a week plus two skinned rabbits and a dozen eggs and lessons restart soon. Disrupting their education just after getting their trust would be bad and even my little Shangri-La has council rates, not that we get anything for it here.”

“Not even library books from Milton?”

“Don’t need them. Remember all those birthday and Christmas gift books? All those cheapies purchased at the church sales? Never had time to read them, the farm and children...”

His gaze followed mine to a short bookcase along the lounge room dado, ninety unread books, down from ninety-four last month.

“Good lord! There’s *The Earthly Paradise* by William Morris. We got that for your sixteenth birthday when you graduated!”

“Still haven’t finished it: mightn’t need to, now I’m here in one.”

He laughed and recalled the happy days before mother’s illness and Sean’s scandal. Ross and my brother shut the storage gate and then paddling back to the Catalina for the single mattress and bed frame, bits of which rested on the plane window.

“Why the extra single bed Dad?”

“Well we knew it was the exact same make as what was in the guest room, so it will balance the room out symmetrical like and give extra accommodation for guests. Ross and I can have one each and Murie gets the lounge, looks comfortable enough.” His gaze went to my bedroom, with the gaudy patchwork quilt and a scarlet eiderdown on the double bed. Scarlet being code for scarlet woman in his mind.

“Your mother and I did not bring up our daughter to be a kept woman.”

“Nobody, keeps me, I keep myself.”

“Ross paid eight times what that land was worth.”

“You know what he is like with money.”

“Oh yes, and does this air load we brought come free?”

“Try cash no credit, no cheques, his standard deal for everybody. Instead of a ten per cent discount Ross gave free delivery.”

“Which is fast.” This was loud and cranky from Ross at the door. “Easier than driving a ford down that long mud-slush road and usually less expensive. Better Alison’s way than the usual discount.”

“We were thinking that Ross could fly you back to see Esmeralda. I look after the place and Murie looks after me.”

“Don’t change a single thing, please Dad, not one.”

He could see that I was serious and just might, for once, obey me. We flew out two mornings later, my first flight, the exhilaration and wonder that was expected was there, but the motor hum was tedious and Ross was a competent flyer, but no more, he was ceaselessly checking and tense: he did not have the relaxed assurance and the love of flight that someone so great and powerful in their field should have. While landing we both gave relieved sighs. Ruth and Alex were at Eloura Airport, tense.

“Tom has gone, so they prefer to see you at Crutchfield’s Farm.”

“Where is that?”

She looked at me until I got the message.

“Henderson Crutchfield did not believe in honeymoons or church weddings so they married at Sydney registry. No local invites.”

“How did Tom react?” What was this son-in-law making an enemy of my husband? “Where is Tom?” That had to be asked, the last question in the world I needed an answer to.

“Where is Tom indeed?” Ruth just shrugged her shoulders then continued. “Esmeralda gave me a message. She says ‘If you wish to see



her to go to the farm but it won't take long.' It is best if Ross, me and the girls go with you."

"More witnesses than he has." Alex added.

"Why do we need witnesses?"

"In case of lawsuits." Alex answered. "They have one for slander going against Bach. He denies he ever said anything remotely like it, but as Henderson Crutchfield says, he has a witness and Bach has a criminal record."

Ruth was usually a happy person, but now she had a resentful, almost snarling face. "There is nothing of Esmeralda left...best to remember her as she was." Alex nodded and took over.

"We can go there with you, but my free legal advice is don't go."

How I wish I had taken that advice. The farm looked more prosperous, so totally neat, even the neatly stacked woodpile with no timber more than a quarter of an inch overhanging the level. He had new quality paint on the exterior trim guttering, and on the picket fence. The once slushy driveway now had pale pink and beige gravel and slate borders. The dints and flecks of rust on the corrugated roofing purchased twenty-three years past were all under silver paint now. He was so motionless we did not see him at first, leaning in the doorway, dressed in nothing but shorts and an old open shirt, both paint splattered. One arm went up the windowsill, the hand clenching the top in possession. The torso was straight but the legs, one crossing the other, were angled, as was the cigarette in the cruel mouth. Extraordinarily handsome? He could have been, everything about the features and the perfectly tanned body reminded me of statues of Adonis and he was in his late twenties. The eyes were blue, almost whitey blue, brighter than Tom's, but with that same conceit. Tom's eyes however, were the eyes of a human, albeit a cruel one. These were the eyes of a hawk put into a human face and there

was as much humour, whimsy, doubt, mercy, and affability there as you would see in a hawk. Instead, there was the fast decisiveness, ferocity, cruelty and contempt for others that hawks have. This one would not only steal the pennies off his dead mother's eyes, he would do that with an audience and gleefully toss the pennies in the air and catch them, clinking them together in triumph.

While we were assessing him he was assessing us and he was the one smiling.

"Yer be the mother." Scots, brogue, probably a highlander. He waited for a response, but that would be falling into a trap in his hidden plan which he started off contemptuously.

"Well! Tthe world has heard of Australia's bush lawyers and bludgers, but a bush teacher, even worse. Doubtless yer read a few books, an' gotcha degree fer been somebody's pal nae doubt. An' who else but an' Australian 'ould bring up ther own kids or let em be edhaycated by tha likes of you? An' married ter one of yer own students!" He shook his head in mock disgust, making twittering noises.

"She taught us well!" Ruth called out and Ross assented.

"Ah well then Mrs Fisher, what's the past participle form of seeing?" He said it rapid fire so she could not answer and moving over to us, sticking his gleaming eyed face in hers so that she was flustered and trying to find the answer. Then he speeded up while I had to hold Ross by the wrist. Oh he saw it, smiling quickly, he was fast. "Or the square root of sixty-four? The first prime minister of Australia? Capital of Louisiana? Pythagoras's theorem?"

He stood and held his palms out, asymmetrical in a smug stagy way and a quizzical expression on his face as he walked to the door.

"Yes, the simpleton and yer the cousin, who she taught more out of school than in, by all accounts."

Nobody bit, while he stared. “Esmeralda!” He called for her like a dog and she came like one. It took me a few seconds to recognise her and suddenly I understood while so many societies had stories about vampires and demon possession and why Dracula had become such a popular story. She had his facial expression and his body language and she was clearly going to perform like some trained dog that has learnt circus tricks.

“Esmeralda would you say your mother were a good teacher?”

“She was hopeless, lazy, she knew nothing and didn’t even try! That is why me an’ my father are near to illiterate. We wanted to learn, but she was so busy flirting with boys so she paid us no attention!”

No attention? Six-hour bursts of one to one learning thrice weekly and you still could not tell the difference between a noun and a verb because you didn’t want to. ‘Can I round up the cows now Ma, it’s getting to twilight.’ In a vexed dreary-bored voice to end class.

“No attention! Was it just flirting with the boys Esmeralda?”

“It was worse! One was just a common stable hand who got her pregnant, but Albert Moon knows! She had an abortion! And then it was with her own cousin! There he is! Ross Clarke! Jack will swear in court he saw them! Probably still at it”

“That must ha'e been extremely distressing and messed yer and your brother up for life, adversely affecting your capacity to earn income as does her professional incompetence.” Alex was rolling his tongue around his teeth. Crutchfield smiled and tilting his head, was virtually saying ‘How will that go in court?’

He came over and quite calmly contemptuously smiling, leaned on the car door sill pushing his face inches from mine and level.

“Now dearest mother-in-law; we doan care where your lettule hideout come love nest be. Personally we ‘uld prefer et to be in Japan or outer Mongolia.. What is good, in fact vital, is that et no be around here

and if we ever see yer in thess district again after sundown tomorrow we gae ta court and we litigate. We get yer money, yer hide-away and we get you, behind bars and exposed for the sex-crazed scum an' old fool that yer be.

Esmeralda! What are we and Jack going to do?"

"Jail her and get the money that is rightfully ours!"

"Oh I love the law!" He laughed with gleaming eyes. "I love the law! And morality! I love et ta! Almost as good. And Ross Clarke, laird of the manor in the antipodes and local big man, we'll cut yer down ter size." His gleaming gaze went up to the sun, just like Tom, oh God. "Now take yer last look at what I am maken of this property, see the advantage that yer squandered and get off me lan'."

"Ross please leave and get me home as soon as possible."

On the road away Ruth and her daughters would not look me in the face or say anything. Ross and Alex said only one thing each, Ross started.

"If that man and Jack joins with Moon and Betham--"

"They already have." Alex replied.

"Then we are in for a dangerous time."

Ross invited me to Ahmegoheho's guest room: being twilight made it too late for a return flight. Ruth with an upset face went straight to Rosalind and left tense, cutting me dead. In contrast Rosalind welcomed us with silver service, she poured the tea levelly and Rosa joined us but let Rosalind do the attacking.

"It is starting again, Alison isn't it?"

That started me on denial, then I held off as she passed me tea.

"Perhaps."

"Rosa, Elizabeth, Brionny. Why not one more? Three or now four makes no difference to me."

“You are welcome to visit me at Conjola.” It was Rosa who beamed and Rosalind who just nodded in acceptance.

“What does make a difference to me Alison, is the considerable amount of trouble the odious, extremely dangerous Henderson Crutchfield will definitely make if you appear in town again. This one never bluffs, never lies, and never makes a mistake. These characteristics make him infinitely more dangerous than the buffoon Oldsham, the weak if vicious Betham, cloddish Tom and the reptilian Moon. He is a human tiger, but one in charge of his appetites. I have to ask you to leave Eloura for as long as he remains here.”

“I have no desire to return, my husband and children have seen to that better than even Henderson Crutchfield can.” I felt like adding Ruth, but held back.

“Ross can fly visitors to you. There are other towns.”

“The towns I won’t care for all that much.”

“And you can have Ross, within limits.”

“I know them and did when we discussed this twenty-five years ago.”

Back at Conjola Dad and Murie had either been warned somehow or more likely, knew what to expect and saw it on my face. They tried to keep me busy with card and board games, recipes from magazines and rowing down to Conjola Beach for a picnic, all so that to avoid brooding, and they stayed as long as they could, but that was a week. I hugged Murie and Dad with more emphasis and emotion than I knew, for Dad with his blustering way to cover emotion exclaimed,

“Oh girl, I’m not that sick, Karl just said to take it easy. You’ll see me make a hundred and show up them experts!”

I just smiled to hold back tears and felt that we would never see each other again. One side of Ruth’s concern for everybody was that she was a

gossip. The other side of Ruth's Christianity was that she avoided evil – as she saw it. Abortion, well. A married woman having an affair with a married man was equally evil – as she saw it, and a teacher with students – it did not happen the way Crutchfield made it sound, Tom was only months younger and Sean was older and both were grown and not even my students at the time. Even so, I could not cause a split in Murie's family.

My wave off was with enforced cheer as they paddled to the plane. “Oh well, if you want to see me, here I am, I'm not going anywhere.” The words reverberated across the lake and they waved and the revving engine sounded forlorn and off they went in a diminuendo against the totally still morning, while I sat on the sand and gravel spit. Soon the ripples were still except for my thoughts.

I'm not going anywhere

I'm not going anywhere

I'm not going anywhere

Indeed I was not. The ditch to stop snakes and possible bush fires was beginning to look like an echo of those medieval moats to keep enemies at bay. The board was put up, the rolled-up jetty a hidden escape route. Suddenly I was conscious of my motivations in painting the house chocolate brown with bottle green trim and shutters. Letting wisteria climb up the sandstone chimney was also a help and planting so many sheoaks and grevilleas and not in the straight rows rural people usually used to show where their home was, but in dense clumps to break up the lines of a house and conceal the flowers. The storage and boat sheds were also low lying and at an angle, so that the spit would conceal them.

Oh yes! I was definitely not going anywhere, nor did I wish to, for I needed a rest from my life, the farm was a battle and if many farmers lost, the winners were usually like Dad, living in a permanent state of worry,

never relaxing so that they would not fail. There was ample to vex me, Henderson Crutchfield was clearly brilliant at it and the possibility of a visit from him or Tom or arguments with relatives was a nag on my psyche.

My life had not gone very far. The abortion was a betrayal and my later babies seem to have paid me back with their betrayals, yet with them what had I done wrong? Esmeralda was always the sunniest, sweetest child, always delighting in the farm and my company, even at times coaxing smiles out of snarly Tom. Until she was about nine she would snuggle up with me in the armchair, delighted with me reading to her but playfully saying no at every attempt to teach her to read and she would shuffle off if I persisted. She was the same at school and it may have been a genetic trait, Dad, Grahame and Douglas were the same: while teaching them about farming their attention span would last hours, anything else seconds. Tom was a little better, but all of them had their simple person's world view: no logic, general knowledge or complications. Their instincts and self-interest decided what was true (usually some easily grasped truth) and to be loyal to those simple beliefs and people you know. Outside of them everything else was bullshit or lies or poofsterism or strange or satanic or Bolshevism or the unknown, so stick with what you know and you will be right mate. Nobody manipulates them or tricks them – in their imaginations.

From what Dad, Ruth, Alex, Karl and Ross separately told me Crutchfield was very good at playing on that. Somehow he got most of Tom's money from the land sale. Now Esmeralda was his vicious robot. It did me no good to ponder on what a wonderful child she once was. The puzzle remained how on earth he got Tom (stubborn toughness incarnate) off that farm. When Dad came he unintentionally brought with him a world of worry with his talk of fires and snakes and the bad son in law.

The worries of building my refuge were only four months over and it had taken three of them in self-enforcing relaxation for me to start not feeling guilt for sleeping in past dawn, for reading books in the middle of the day, for letting dishes pile up and for letting the lamp burn full blast. After eight years without Ross, Ahmegodheho or sexual involvement, the sensual world was returning when I smelt flowers and caressed their petals, kneaded dough or brushed Woffie's coat. Running my palm against the glaze on my blue china, becoming engrossed in the stories told in its pictures were having the same therapeutic effect. Now while barely awake I would look at the wine bottles kept for guests. Better not make that sad choice. One morning temptation went by hurling them against the rocks opposite the spit. The sound echoed and the neighbours rushing to the jetty in their dressing gowns.

Amazingly soon after Ross brought me back Woffie started barking off to the mountains as if he heard Ross's Catalina and sure enough, he came alone, bringing a raft full of groceries from the plane.

"Hardly starving after about a fortnight Ross, although fresh tropical fruit and steak are always welcome."

"A fortnight? It's been over seven weeks."

"Oh."

He was staring at me with some kind of assessing look.

"What's wrong Ross?"

"In Eloura? Between them Karl, Ruth and Reverend McPherson virtually forced Edna into retirement after her heart attack, but she won't rest. Your father's health remains no better or worse. After fleecing Tom with threats and threats to begone Crutchfield then used courts to get Bach into selling up to pay trumped up litigation, so he's got a new and better job, manager of my properties; he gets on with people and knows how to command. Everybody continues to improve a little with the



depression easing. We are appealing legally to get Grahame out of the nuthouse. Some shearers who came in from the west said Tom was shearing in their shed out Walgett way some weeks past. Lucky to hear him say two words together they say. There's all the news."

"You did not come to give me news, not that I want it, you make me sound like a queen in exile, hearing from a loyal courtier. Best to forget all that, just as they have forgotten me."

"I have not forgotten you: I came here to see you."

"Ross, my rib cage has still not mended and you have at last count, three mistresses, aside from a wife who loves you."

"She also loves my mistresses."

"Is that why you are here?"

"If you prefer no sexual involvement, I am still here to see you."

"Because?"

"Are you happy here?"

He was hedging around something, trying to be tactful, like most Eloura males, not his strong point.

"The neighbours got the name off the Catalina and phoned up. Do you know why they ended their children's school year early?"

"Gossip from Eloura?"

"They say you hurl bottles into rocks while swearing obscenities to yourself and two days past you were sitting on the gravel outside, on the spit, looking over the lake on a perfectly still day, screaming as loud as a person can, at nothing."

For a few seconds we just stared at each other. He really believed it.

"No recollection comes of any such thing, although the bashing from the husband, the betrayal by both my children and the ostracism from my home make me certainly feel like screaming."

"The way you do not recall it is more alarming than the screaming."

“I have no recollection of any such thing, and nothing more can be said on the matter.”

“You have been under too much pressure lately.”

*Oh really Ross, really?*

That one made me feel like screaming, but I merely grimaced although the suppressed anger permeated into my shaking bones while his gaze went to glass fragments on the rocks.

“Did you bring fresh milk? The last of mine ran out a week ago and although some condensed remains, nothing substitutes for fresh, bottled, pasteurised milk.”

He pulled out six bottles of such milk.

“And ice cream, fresh steak, sausages and their ice, all still in the Catalina.”

A thank you and sigh, a long one to relax. I lit the fire, all ready to go, doing that quite calmly now.

“The Franklin stove burns a champion, it only takes ten minutes.”

*If you love me do not pressure me into having sex as a repayment for these things or even for staying loyal. No more betrayals.*

“Mild summer.”

“Love to go to the beach but it’s a long, long row.”

“Get a sail up, easy enough to get one and a detachable mast in Milton and we can share the rowing if your ribs-.”

“Sharing rowing, that’s fine likewise tea, beds are another matter.”

“Although you are an attractive woman, with me you do not have to do anything you dislike.”

“A fifty- three-year old mistress? Odd tastes. How long are you staying for?”

“Today is the sixteenth; there are Christmas Eve parties with the children, best back a day or two before then.”

“A week at most.”

“I have responsibilities.”

“And four other women to look after.”

“And a farm and a business. Alison, what do you want?

*You here permanently with my wedding ring on your finger and your wife, mansion, businesses, children and worries blasted off to buggary except for one Catalina and your bank balance so we don't have to live on mangy mullet, stringy rabbit, and puny browned-off carrots and speckled lettuce.*

“To sleep in more often, make that cup of tea leisurely and just muse on the silence, it's so wonderful.”

We played checkers, ate a meal together and went for a row around the hidden parts of the lake. At a sandy edge he swam in his shorts. After tea the lamps were on for a chess game.

“No sense in staying awake long after twilight. No electricity, up with the dawn. Bedtime undisturbed.”

With the rowing and summer sun we slept quick and deep. After breakfast there was fishing and strolling and clambering around the lake's edge.

“Anybody who lives here must like solitude. These steep rocky cliffs would make house building and bringing roads here hard, and the remoteness, even little Milton's about ten miles away.”

“Do you want a spare truck so you can get there if need be?”

“Not yet. You are my lifeline.”

That night went as the one before did. He flew us to the beach where we had our picnic, and a few amazed onlookers quizzed us about the Catalina. With a few parents he took the kids for a pleasure flight, while I stayed on the ground and found that once the kids were gone, smiles vanished, the parents froze me out. When I first came the bruises still

showed, and like Henry Fleming's bloodied bandaged forehead in *The Red Badge of Courage*, that novel I used to teach, they were a sign of respectability that got sympathy, nobody blamed me for separating from such a husband. Now that was being thrown away, or more correctly, flown away. From their faces they categorised me as the kept woman who lived somewhere around the lake. Best get Ross to bring a hunting rifle to keep away the respectable males would now see me as a slut and come a courtin.' The teaching job was gone. Ross got my supplies and so there was nothing to lose now and that was fine with me.

That night started the same as the others, but I woke up restless, sighed and went to his room. I turned my back to him as his hand went to my hem, but I pushed it down and we merged, my back to his chest, our toes rubbing together.

"Sleep, just hold me tonight... my ribs."

"Too excited."

He murmured that in agreement and he let me guide his hand to my midriff, kissed my shoulder and stopped. With the dawn light I arose, went to the toilet and started preparing the stacked timber for the breakfast fire. It was a rainy day so I brought in much more. He came out.

"Want to come back to bed?"

"It has been eight years, and it is no longer a secret."

"In the place you can never return to and don't want to. Who worries here?"

"You are all I have left stand another betrayal or abandonment."

"When have I ever?"

Briefly the thought came of lifting my shift over my head and standing before him naked, but at fifty-three that can only be unwise, even if I have kept my figure well. Instead I took his hand and lead him back to the bed, where I sat on the edge and as he clasped me gently I

pushed his dressing gown off his shoulders and placed my head against his chest, feeling the warmth, hearing his heartbeat, sensing the texture of his skin and scars, slowly rubbing my cheek to his breast and then my tongue on the smoother areas of his skin. Because it still hurt to lift my arms above my head I wore a front-buttoned shift which he undid, slowly and he caressed my skin.

“I cannot take your weight yet, you will have to lie down and let me be upright.”

We had made love this way many times before. My hands spread out on the mattress behind his shoulders and my excitement meant disregarding the pain in my arms at first, but later after the first break, they stayed by my sides. After exhaustion and sleep I awoke to find myself in a foetal position with him hugging me. In the twilight on a grey day; cold for almost summer solstice, and it rained heavily, even so, some birds twittered off in the distance, where through the wide window the sheoaks with their green needles and thin branches swayed slightly to a breeze so soft it was nearly silent. The sensual world was returning. My hand held his right, that one was fine, but the wrinkles were starting on mine, as were the little brown flecks that come with age and the crow’s feet and first grey in the hair.

If only I had waited, but it seemed preposterous; when I married Tom Ross was a thirteen-year-old boy. Then I thought of how it would have gone if I had waited. Aunt Rachel would have still been the dominating, madly fanatic bitch making life dreary for all. The penny he had tossed with Grahame would still have gone the same way and off to war – well at least the one against the Turks. He would have come back sooner and without his second wife’s Russian money, which got Clarkestead through the worst of this depression and was still doing that. Seventeen years in the same house with him and Aunt Rachel, those two

iron wills who hated each other and brain damaged Grahame and the last six of those years going through the Great Depression to boot. I did not need to recall Katie Dean's face to know what my fate would have been. She had run off, would I? Perhaps if he did what I wanted life here would not automatically be the paradise it initially seemed.

Christmas was spent alone, but soon after while he was away Helen and Evelyn visited. With a truck I was able to collect them from the highway. Evelyn loved Conjola for painting and they stayed about a fortnight. Ross came soon after they left, on his return flight from Otago, from where he had news.

“Brionny suddenly left Whispering Pines early last year. Until last trip we thought somebody with a warrant was getting close. Now we got a letter from a Post Office in West Virginia asking me to sell Whispering Pines and to send her a cheque. I sent the value instead, fond of the place and it makes a good bolt hole.”

“For?”

“You, me, Rosa, Rosalind, Clarissa, Conrad, Robert and Alice, Elizabeth, who lives there now... We all live such precarious lives...”

He went quiet, staring at the fire and then spoke as if the previous words had never existed, saying if we ever wanted to traverse the lake and get to the beach, we had to get the mast and sail in Milton and so should also stock up on supplies, so why not have a meal and a film? We got more than that, many a smug dirty look and stagy conversations in shops sotto voice about loose women (never loose men) and incest being an abominable sin and Ross got 'can't yer get any other woman but yer own sister? To which he replied 'Cousin actually, not that it concerns you' the mouthy local responded with 'Decency on public streets in our community concerns me.' And I led Ross, fists clenched, off to the grocer's where we were told that 'My shop has a reputation for

respectability, so we don't serve your kind here.' At lunch at the hotel it was 'please leave, immediately' so we lunched with pies in the park.

The chandler refused our money and told us that 'we might be rich enough to show off with that big aeroplane in front of people who work for a living, but having more money than sense leads away from God into irredeemable evil and don't think that lots of trees can conceal a sin bin. We know where it is and what abominations go on there and I've got half a mind to phone up your wife. You have one, don't you?'

"It seems that you people think we invented sexual intercourse and kept it to ourselves."

Ross's quip made the shop deathly quiet. After that I just wanted to go home, but oh no, he had his mind set on the pictures. The queue stretched the block and with two billboards outside saying STRICTLY ADULTS ONLY PROOF OF AGE MAY BE REQUIRED we could see why and we also saw most of today's moralists in the queue. The sin of the age was a double bill. First off *Tarzan of the Apes*. Four years out of Hollywood, which sometimes sent us the uncut versions their censors had banned. Nobody was there to see the acting and they did not see the penis either, although the tight little loincloth on the big man came as close as they could get without being labelled pornography watchers, so they had to be content with rippling pectorals. There was the uncut scene (at least here) where they swam naked, filmed for displaying her posterior which brought delighted gasps of horror and lingering gazes. It was obvious that in the gap after Tarzan carries her to his tree Jane was being deflowered by a man as much ape as human, one who had to be taught his six-word English vocabulary by the target of his seduction process. In the next scene, at dawn she wakes up smiling radiantly, few got the idea. One young couple did and smiled at each other and so did an elderly woman, as if remembering something generations past, but most were not even

puzzled. Former Olympic champion Johnny Weissmuller was no great actor. He left the impression that idiot boards were just out of sight, even if he did not speak more than eight words at a time (if grunts are words) and few of those were beyond two syllables. Maureen O'Sullivan was fun, going for deliberate laughs and sensual innocent charm in a flimsy, tattered safari costume that had the males here watching like hawks. Apparently two adults can live in happy wilderness abandon and be liked for it – as long as the wilderness is in Africa, not Conjola, and as long as it happens on the silver screen. *Jezebel of Arizona* was another punish the scarlet woman film. In this one she may survive by repentance, redemption coming through endless suffering during an Apache attack on a wagon train where she performs good deeds, dying to save the hero's virgin. The way society ostracised her for wearing a ruby decorated dress to a débutantes ball and flirting with a half breed were left for viewers to assess. Was society wrong? That was as daring as Hollywood could be and made in such a way that our moralists would not pick it up. They did however stand outside afterwards, after seeing the images and denounced them most aggressively.

Potholes on the road back broke the axle. Other cars, probably coming from the pictures, passed by and gave us splattered mud and snarls of 'get out of the way' as we walked miles until the lake's silver shone through the gum's blackness and so the turn off to home was close, even so I did not disguise my anger.

“It will be four before we are abed.”

“Flying out at first light mean returning around lunch with parts and a mechanic.”

“And some guns.”

I got that right. Within forty minutes of Ross leaving a very angry man, hands on hips and snarling hammered on the door. He was one of last



night's cinema hawks.

“Now we don't ask where you're from, don't know and don't care, and you are ain't for polite conversation, but you outsiders had better understand if yer to stay round here. You don't leave a road blocked, even if you can afford to block it with a bloody piss weak car, all that shows is that yar got more bloody money than sense.”

“Don't swear in front of me thank you very much.”

I knew that the swearing was a test, if I accepted it I was a slut and fair game. He sneered in a lascivious way as this great moralist tried looking down the bit of my shift not covered by the dressing gown.

“Year got till noon, then we ring Cess, he tows it at Sunday rates and you pay for it an' lockup fees. An' here's a bit of free advice I'd best give yer fer yer own good which yer too fool ter see. Yer kind don't belong here.”

“Please leave, immediately.”

Amazingly, he left. Ross was back in a few hours and we had the mechanic (happy to earn triple pay) and the new axle down by the car by eleven forty and soon we heard the motor coming. He snarled in disappointment.

“It is all under control, another forty minutes, mister?”

“That takes it to twelve twenty and your wife or twin sister or whatever she is agreed to midday, I'm not waiting and there are many concerned citizens who want to use this road now! I'll ring Cess and you can pay for it! Bloody rich enough aren't yer!”

“Go away, now!”

Something about Ross seemed to make him pause for a few seconds, then he snarled and went on the attack starting on again about outsiders with more money than sense and actually poking his finger at Ross, almost in his chest. I was expecting Ross to break it or punch him out. Instead, he

slammed down the car bonnet on the other hand that was resting on the car. The man yelled while Ross leaned his body on the downed bonnet.

“Can’t hear a word you are saying, What’s that?” The scream continued. “Something about calling Cess? Are you going to call Cess?”

“No!”

Ross lifted the bonnet and gasping the man moved back clutching his bloody hand. The indentations went a fair way in.

“You seem accident prone, best stay away from us. Next accident could see you shot by mistake for a rabbit, I flew in a range of weapons, and we both know how to use them.”

He waited until he was twenty feet off before abusing Ross as a madman. For someone so concerned with sexual morality in public he certainly used obscenities.

Even back at the house and left alone the tension of that weekend was palpable Alex loved fishing and visited a few days later and Ross asked him to stay while we travelled.

“Off we go to Sydney, let’s see the big smoke!” Although he did not ask if I wanted to go, I went and it went as envisioned. The harbour and the new bridge were impressive, the beaches were a delight and eating in the restaurants, all those exotic meals, French, Chinese, Spanish, I could never cook them at Conjola, and they were heaven, like the electricity available at the flick of a switch, that was heaven too. The rest of it was not heaven.

Much was as it was in Milton, if not so loudly supercilious: staff everywhere either sneered, made smart comments or showed hostile faces. At the new Grace Hotel Ross paid for my own room and things were better, but we could see that years ago Rosalind got it right about what our prospective married life would be like, the knowing sneers of waiters, the more reserved faces of receptionists trying to puzzle it out,

the doctor or psychiatrist (real or amateur) at the next dinner table talking with meaningful glares our way in a sotto voice about 'how the narcissistic personality can really only find fulfilling sexual love with somebody who serves as their reflection, either with a real body or by projecting imagined perceptions onto another. The connections between narcissism, megalomania and incest remain a rich field to be explored.'

The one sympathetic face was on the obvious call-girl, passing in a corridor murmuring "Don't feel so guilty love, quite a few of us started with our own brothers, but we moved on." She moved on to the doctor's room; which of them was going to cure an ache remained unknown.

With such people abounding, the roar of the city was a welcome contrast at first, but soon the trams clatter, tedious roar of cars and the stench of polluted air became irritating. The people; so rushed, so hard faced, so 'you do not exist', alienated more than the smart alocs, although I rapidly learnt that the ones that were not, (the smiley ones) were con artists and country people standing out a mile were there favourite targets. Like the beggars they seemed to infest parks, some were veterans or said they were, hanging around the new Hyde Park memorial and when I looked up at the dome with its decoration of stars, one for each of the 120,000 and more who served from New South Wales and I sadly thought of my brothers, Douglas who would never harm anyone and even Allen, and so many of my students who were immortalised there. Ross made himself scarce during my visit to Helen and Evelyn. Like everybody they were talking of the King and rumours of an American mistress and that was puzzling until they made it clear that they meant Edward, not old King George, who had been dead for weeks and Kipling, his poet laureate (who I had to teach but could not stand) had gone to heaven to sing his praises two days before him. After organising their next visit to me it was back to the foyer of the Grace, with Ross.

“Where do you wish to go next?”

“Home and soon.”

The lake nearly got a kiss. Between Christmas 1935 and Christmas 1937 Robert and Alice obligingly flew in the supplies thrice while Ross was busy, bringing their four boys who thought the place was modelled on Hansel and Gretel’s cottage, so guess what that made me? Robert flew Karl in for a final check on my injuries and Dad, Alex and Murie did turn up in a ford with groceries on my birthdays, but only stayed overnight. Only two uninvited guests turned up, one was one of the men from the pictures, asking for a drink of water.

“If you can raise your eyes from my breasts, you will see a freshwater lake twelve feet off.” I went to the kitchen, got him a mug and came out with the shotgun in the other hand

“Keep the mug and drink as much lake water as you like.”

The stories of Ross slamming the bonnet door and me keeping weapons worked, as the only other uninvited visitor were probably the last of the swaggies recreated by the Depression, a bikkie and a cuppa for chopped wood and he was on his way. Ross usually visited once a month, and suddenly it was next Christmas and I found myself wishing my life away for those visits. They came, but the thought also came that if you love someone you want to be with them all the time. He did love me, but it was mainly my love that held us together.

\*

Reverend McPherson

Barcelona 17<sup>th</sup> June 1938

It was him, standing, the instructor on the rifle range, effortlessly slipping between Spanish and English for the volunteers. So many casualties had depleted these foreign volunteer brigades that they were filling them out with Spanish volunteers. He was unsurprised and uninterested in me,

ordering his recruits to wipe down their rifles and let them cool for a few minutes.

“How did you know I was here?” My son asked like an interrogator questioning a suspect, not even a hello. Despite the facial scars and the passing twenty-four years, it was more the hardness in him that made him almost a stranger, I even felt a danger enumerating from him as he patiently waited for an answer without a blink or a change in facial expression.

“When Tom Caufield went to court for assaulting one Rosenthal, who knew so much about Eloura, he said there was something familiar about you and the physical description matched. Rosenthal was the name on the letter informing us of your death and we knew that Communists used pseudonyms and subscribed to an Australian Communist publication on the chance that somewhere the name Rosenthal would appear.”

“And it did. You came all this way to find?”

“My son.”

“He does not exist anymore. Talk of cricket bores me into weariness. Anything religious is anathema, not even Christmas carols. The archaic world of Anglicanism seems laughable. Small town Australian life appears as a faded and distasteful memory on the rare occasions when it comes into my mind and when it does it goes, being quickly banished. For me the party, Soviet Russia, Marxist-Leninist theory and this war here are what life should be about.”

“What happened?”

“You cocooned me from reality and probably yourself as well. If you knew reality you would not have sent me off to the war with such cheer. The war proved a rude awakening – eventually. You know that I was so naïve that throwing grenades into machine gun nests was like

throwing cricket balls, around eighty men died as a result and I was unaware of it until jail gave time to ponder my past?”

“At least you do not sound proud of it.”

“Poor devils probably thought they were just defending their country from imperialist invaders – and they were right. Even so we need to think beyond artificial borders that make up nation states. We need class terms, for now the age of the dictatorship of the proletariat approaches.”

“You haven’t asked about home or the people there.”

“You haven’t understood. They hold no interest for me.”

“Your wife-“

“Was murdered by fascists in an Austrian jail twelve years past, my true wife Magda Rosenthal.”

“So the divorce was finalised?”

“And sent. Months before my supposed death. She must have kept it secret to be a respectable widow.”

“Rosalind married Ross. They have a son. I flew here in one of his Electras.”

He was focused on his recruits, making sure that they were reloading and firing the Lee Enfield properly. He had become a violent man: that odd way that he did not even seem to notice the sharp sounds of the bullets. He read my mind.

“Gallipoli taught me that, bullets twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, month after month. Doubtless you believe what capitalist propaganda says about Bolsheviks here and in Russia did to their class enemies, bathing ourselves in their blood. What the Bolsheviks have done in two civil wars that they did not start does not equal the horrors of a month on the Western Front.”

“The stories of Red ruthlessness here are too widespread, too many of them come from former comrades-”

He suddenly flared up, eyes blazing nostrils going like an excited horse would but no horse had a mouth like that, like two pressed razorblades.

“What stories! What stories!” He snarled it six more times, becoming fiercer and determined, but then suddenly becoming more calm and more cold. “Well stories originate with someone, so who told you these stories?”

“Speakers at anarchist and Independent Labour rallies in London, George Orwell in his book *Homage to Catalonia*, and a veteran of all this who said the Communists got down and out drunk and shipped them on the overnight train here and were waiting.”

“What is the name of this veteran?”

I shrugged my shoulders and did not mention the others, feeling he would have them killed, and perhaps even me, then I tried to dismiss that as ridiculous, but stopped, looking at that face staring at my reverend's collar and I knew in my heart that my instincts were not ridiculous.

“You don't show the slightest concern for me, your old school friends, war comrades, your brothers or sister or your mother, who died these two years past.”

For perhaps three seconds there was a faltering and something like remorse passed quickly across his face, but it died like a little spark struck off steel

“If you don't mind, we have a war to win, an important part of the struggle against fascism to which everything else must be subordinated as Austria's sell out shows that Hitler will get whatever he wants from England and France.”

“She kept your room as it was, your cricket trophies, school citations for language, photographs.”

“Petty-bourgeois delusions and behaviour do not concern me. The party are my parents, the party replaces the family. as Engels wrote with such insight, the family is an invention to maintain the inheritance of property. That is simplifying what he said of course, but..”

He stopped, staring at me he was doing an assessment and probably realising he was wasting his time. He shrugged his shoulders, then totally ignored me.

“She kept it for the son we loved, the boy everybody loved, who started to die at Gallipoli, and it seems did die in a mine shaft accident over twenty years ago. Good day to you Mister Rosenthal.”

He continued with totally ignoring me while I stared at him for another few minutes. Later my escort explained that it was party training as a devastating way of belittling and confusing enemies who one day will be killed. First they are mentally put into non-existence and then made physically non-existent. It makes the killers feel easier by being gradually accustomed to destroying somebody and the targets are so devastated that they sometimes prefer death. The party contact who delivered me to him told me this later. Now he looked fearful and refused to talk until we reached the airport. He also got on the Red Cross plane, giving me a pleading look and said nothing. On the way nationalist fighter planes veered close, but we had the Red Cross logo clearly visible so they left us and rejoined their bombers, back from Barcelona and the pitiful Republican Moscas (nicknamed rainbows for their way of appearing after the fight was over) also were soon by us, then left. *We have a war to win.*

His statement came back to me, and with it the realisation that he was still naïve, at least in his aims, for as that little incident in the air showed, his side was losing and all the determination of a fanatic with a pistol could not win against a squadron of bombers. The signs of



approaching defeat were all around him, in the rubble, in the starved faces of raw volunteers facing the well-trained, equally fanatical veterans of the other side, in the maps that could not be updated fast enough, as each showed evermore shrinking Republican areas. Such evidence counted for little with him, as always. As a child and an adolescent, we had to protect him from bad women and worse men. He could not see what was so obvious about Rosalind, or Ross. He had not lost as much of the religious world as he thought either: declaring anathema has always been a religious process and where outside of religion, are leaders and thinkers always right? In Communism and Fascism it seems.

The guard was quiet until we landed at Bordeaux where he had much to say.

“It was probably that reverend’s collar that decided the central committee on letting you live. He phoned them for orders. Stalin’s policy at present is to conciliate the churches. Never seen anybody else disagree with Rosenthal like that and live. He’s been looking at me the way he looked at my predecessor, now deceased, that is after the usual sudden night trial in a nearby cellar, that’s for party members. Others don’t get that.”

“There must be more to it than Gallipoli, to have changed him so.”

“It put him in hell and Magda, Marx and Lenin gave him a picture of heaven if he joined those who could wade through the blood, mud and tribulations he was already in.”

“Do you think they will ever make it?”

“Put it this way, did you see me buy a return ticket?”

\*

Clarissa Chapman

Cronulla Beach 14<sup>th</sup> August 1938

Everybody important in his rich but silly little world was there, hoping it was a great occasion for hordes of reporters with flashing

cameras and Movietone filming it all, but only a bored *Sydney Morning Herald* cub journalist with his own camera arrived. Imperial Airways were smart enough to have seven reporters aboard as passengers: the great genius never thought of that one. What publicity Atlas didn't get Imperial Airways did for being second after them. Poor Eloura Airlines! Sob! Sob! Sob! Nobody looks too long at third past the post, especially when it always happens. It was all quite false really. These new massive Short brand flying boats (which should have chosen a better brand name) looked impressive, not short at all, true enough, but both our rival Imperial and us had been using them in the Mediterranean section of the route for two years now and they even had Sydney-to-London practice runs two years past, but airline people know not to get the publicity machines working until the flight machines certainly do. There definitely is such a thing as bad publicity and crashes and delays make for that.

The other flying boats from Europe landed at stylish, convenient to the central city Rose Bay. His airport subsisted at Botany Bay, miles out and miles from anything, even a paved road or a protective breakwater. I was not the only one round here with a reputation for being slack.

Once they were beaten they delayed all this to combine it with Sir Eustace's seventy-fifth birthday celebration. Even the control tower, let alone the reception area was wrapped in bunting. At last the very profitable Short Brothers flying boat flight had come through, Dublin to Sydney via London, Cairo and so on in nine days and on to Dunedin NZ in another. As a birthday gift Sir Eustace was the first passenger (after seventeen years of trying) to fly that Dublin to Dunedin NZ route – but would he be the only one? His great flying Titanic could carry a truck load of mail, another truck load of stylish luggage and yet another truck load of fifteen passengers and an endless supply of chilled oysters, wines and, gourmet foods. The plush red refurbishing, silver service, vintage

wines, cashmere blankets and coached staff were in the best upper-class taste. He took it as far as posh accents for all Eloura staff, just posh enough for servants, but not so posh that the ruling class felt threatened by ones who did not know their proper place in life.

For once he was jubilant, lining up with his other directors, his harlot mistress Elizabeth MacKinnon, strange Uncle Robert, Sir Eustace Hughes who was aristocratic, Ulster English epitomised and his daughter Alice, the only one I would willingly speak to. Her teenage sons, Craig, James, Eustace and Carson were there and insufferably pompous as only British ruling class brats who have never suffered or known deprivation or defeat could be. That they were my cousins grated; but then this whole very pretentious day grated

Father dear smiled winningly when the first passenger descended, the other director, Conrad, paused for photographs for his scrap album and perhaps a framed picture on the wall. Soon other bleary-eyed phonies, as the Americans called them, stepped on to land, their false smiles matching the director's false smiles as hands shook in their welcome to Australia. All the directors did that. Uncle Robert was much worse, the wife and sons on display fooled nobody with a scrap of intuition. Sir Eustace, a charmer was better at it; Alice was the genuinely happy one.

Recently Father looked less jubilant in the Ottoman Room. Atlas beat him again, getting their flying boats London to Sydney and back with such massive airmail orders that they could not cope, so they leased airmail work to us; it was a humiliation that financially he had to take.

“Ah those idiots! Ah those ratbags! Why do they always fail me! Why can't they obey Robert! Atlas and Imperial and Oldsham! Atlas! Atlas!”

Etcetera with crumpling reports in clenched fists, obscenities, and leaning against the mantelpiece while staring morosely into flames while we, the royal court, that being Mistress Number One, Wife Number One, the daughters who were officially not (senior and Junior) and Horace the son who was, but did not want to be, sat on the best plush leather armchairs knowing to be properly petrified and not to say why.

Petrification never lasted long, however and we knew that these tantrums usually ended in a journey along the long, long trail; to sort a problem out. Not that a problem was ever really sorted out, or if it somehow one was, there was always another. More spare parts to fly from England to some sandy hole where they had been stolen to resell as scrap metal. More flights run for prestige not profit: Tourist flights to Iceland? More blackmail money to silence some parent about Robert and his latest adolescent boy. More on the expense account for Daddy dearest and Mistress Number Two, who being upper class, another general's daughter, only went to the best room in the best hotels. More new planes, always more new planes. Updating he called it. Over two years ago Imperial Airways contracted Short Brothers to build this wonderful new seaplane and Father just on seeing on the board design alone, just had to have one, just like a boy seeing a toy in the window. He actually traded three airports to Imperial Airways, and two to Atlas, a hefty price for one sea plane and he was paying out big for more on order.

He could have just invested his inherited twenty million pounds in blue chip stocks and sat back and made more on the dividends than he ever would out of his flying white elephants. He may not have been a financial genius, but he was the luckiest man in the business. Eleven years back, just as he was about to show sense and quit and debating whether to turn all the war vintage planes to scrap or to send them to the proposed new war museum in Canberra, along comes Elizabeth with

another of his kind in tow and guess what? He is making an epic movie about the knights in the air and can you sell me all the old planes you have? Elizabeth's Horizon Blues flew well enough, but they were costing a fortune, keeping a workshop open for spare parts, and only carried eight passengers and in speed were obsolescent by their first flight, even so, they lasted six years. That wasn't his greatest luck. Amazingly nobody in government ever questioned that we were not a British, Australian or British Empire based company. Sir Eustace being our front man and the board being all so properly Empire people may have made people assume – and then maybe staff with posh accents wasn't so stupid after all. Or maybe somebody was on the take, being blackmailed or maybe they were just stupid. If it was ever found out we were Swiss registered that would have knocked us into being banned: only Empire registered and based airlines could legally fly to Australia and all planes flying here had to be built in the Empire.

There was no end to his idiocies. Four years past it was Lockheed Electra's, Model Number Ten - the planes we just had to have – very good for high altitude flying in luxury, especially over the New Zealand alps when you have to rush to Wife Number Two in Otego because Wife Number One no longer gives oral sex and the mistresses are in lesbian mode and off on the trail somewhere anyway. They could also take ten people, (the Electras, not the mistresses) well! Hello profits from passengers at last! And Catalina flying boats, more cash down the drain, but one day there will be a tourist market for Papua and cyclone swept little atolls in the Pacific which have plenty of sun and sharks but no shade or fresh water. At present we fly them newspapers and what he calls “luxury goods” and the rest of us call tinned food, booze, medicine, movies, frozen and chilled groceries and cigarettes. In bizarre idiocies we

should not forget that he cornered the market for the Icelandic tourist trade – in winter.

Then came the DC- Model Number 2 fast! Fast! Fast! Which at fourteen seats could make profits from passengers at last! We couldn't buy them fast enough – second hand from companies in the know that the bigger, safer, faster DC- Model Number 3 was coming. It carried twenty-one passengers plus massive amounts of mail and we replaced the DC-2 with the DC-3 after eighteen months. Elizabeth joked to dearest father that we had no Hollywood movie makers to rescue us this time and he just laughed and said the Spanish Republicans in their civil war were buying anything they could, and as a Swiss registered airline, we were not subject to non-intervention treaties made to keep Europe out of that Spanish war and he sold the DC-2s and all but five of the Electras-10 before the non-intervention pact did stop such trade. Profit from war is the one thing he is good at in assorted ways.

He was lucky again with the Catalinas and the DC-3s. Not just Eloura Airlines but everybody that was allowed to buy them found that here at last was a profitable passenger plane. The Electras were faster, more luxurious and had a stylish look to them that gave them fans, but the DC-3s soon established a reputation for durability, safety, fast repair time and being able to land on anything flat. Now America was manufacturing them in thousands, so spare parts were no longer a problem. We had an edge over all the other Australia bound air companies that flew the empire route, the British aligned Ollhdesham, Imperial, ANA, and Atlas in that we were Swiss registered and could beat the government enforced “buy only British planes” law – because nobody investigated those sales either. Why was that our old friend BOB (Bribery or Blackmail) again?

That seemed his only clever move until Rosalind told me that Swiss Registration was Sir Eustace Hughes idea. He started making substantial

profits from the end of 1934 on with the American Electras and DC's – so we just had to keep up with Atlas, who purchased by buying the world's most expensive flying boat, the British Short, a misnomer if ever there was one. On calculations the last of Alexandria's money would run out in 1947 if he didn't stop. Recently I told him so.

“I suggest you recalculate.” That was all he said and went back to his papers, as if I was not there.

“It is obvious. I love the world of flight and planning and could be a company director. I know about Uncle Robert and Elizabeth MacKinnon; what they are does not matter. The planes do.”

“You think me a wastrel and you could run things more efficiently.”

“Yes.”

“Our passenger and luxury goods to Cairns, Thursday Island, Timor. Guam, Papua and the Pacific, an idea you ridiculed, makes us a clear and stable profit of around twelve hundred pound a week.”

“It took a long while.”

“So does growing up. Like babies, commercial aviation was born in agony, the agony of the Great War. Its infancy was the time of the war planes being used commercially and of their subsequent adaptations. Now infancy is an inevitable period, but how many infants make profits? With the later Fokkers, Curtiss and DeHavillands, we reached adolescence. The same question applies. Now with the Boeings, DC3s, the Electra, the Catalina and the Shorts, commercial aviation has just reached a youthful maturity and like humans, it makes money in that stage. All the time and money spent is like that a parent spends on a child.”

“You mean like the time and money I did not see that much of and had to earn by being your housekeeper? If me, Eunice and Horace had wings would you have loved us?”

“So the spending is over?”

“Basically. The DC3s are miraculous. Nearly four years and no repairs. The Electras? Nearly as good.”

He stared at me for a time, enigmatically, while I was very aware of the crackling fire in his little cream coloured study with the big big cedar desk and the framed photographs of the planes we had talked about, all with the four Horizon Blue bands and the leaping salmon that Canada, Ireland, England, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand supposedly shared. Sorry Africa and Asia, it was Elizabeth’s idea eleven years back. He seemed puzzled.

“So what is it that you want?”

Keeping my temper I spoke in a level voice.

“To be a company director.”

“But you do so well as a housekeeper here.”

“I turn twenty-three soon and hope to do better with my life.”

“You can. Start off as deputy local aerodrome manager. Rosa will teach you mapping and aircraft control.”

Because Rosa obeys; that is why she has lasted so long, it’s not just the elfin charms of a perennial teenager for a man who never had a childhood that saves her.

“All the directors will be here for the celebrations of the new run from London in August, perhaps the idea will be considered then.”

So here they all were, and I was ignored while they chatted with customers and people of minor eminence. After two hours of alright food and a jazz band that managed to be mediocre. The pilots who try to cotton on to me are all the same, like Uncle Robert and by twelve I could spot them – and smell them yards off. No matter how hard they scrubbed with that same sunlight soap they smelt of grease and oil and although over the last few years they were flying behind glass in the cockpits many long flights against the wind always had the same effects: their lips were hard



and cracked because they thought gloss effeminate. Wind pressure made their eyes flat and their hair pushed back. Hard breathing pinched their nostrils and flying leads to intense concentration and time devoured, so it is rare for them to talk to anybody else – well to talk to me about anything else but flying and the room was full of them. To make it worse the continual engine noise usually leaves them a little deaf so they communicate all too loudly and don't hear anything less. I was bored to screaming and feed up so I went to look at the planes. The checking mechanic was polite without being grovelling, very manly in a working-class way that was easy to like and he talked about other things, music and movies, but not too much. The glimmer of appreciation for my looks did not escape my attention either. He was impressed with my knowledgeable questions, the only real person there and I had done it before on lesser acquaintance with lesser men. He could not believe his luck.

Afterwards as we came down the ramp all the directors were coming up and my father had that cold fury that was something to worry about, as I remembered from a similar incident. Even Rosa had the sense to be alarmed. They all glared and Mistress Number Two at the back mouthed 'silence' – as if I needed to be told. Nor did he, vanishing quickly.

About an hour later she (that being chief mistress Elizabeth and general's daughter II) asked me to see her alone in the plane in that way that is a command and from her face it was not going to be nice. She read mine.

“This is not about morality, so the smirk can go. The depression is not over, so don't be too quick to leave Ahmegodheho or get yourself booted. You'll find aligning with the working classes less attractive than you think once you are part of it.”

“Thank you for your concerns.”

“That comment and your tone brings me to my next point. You seem to have studiously read a manual entitled *How to Be Your Own Worst Enemy and Make Many More*. Your habitually sullen face stood out in the crowd. Why? You were so close to getting your desire. Rosa gave you a fine report as station manager; Ross pushed for you to become a trainee director. We were coming into the plane to discuss your future. Nobody really objected; in fact, with war coming, perhaps as early as next week, and the almost certain ensuing male employee shortage a trained, experienced female would have been welcome. Instead you do the worst possible thing - and with a mechanic!”

*Were you so selective in your harlot days?*

“How on earth can you know with such certainty? Perhaps nothing happened. Perhaps he just tried to kiss me.”

She sighed, moving a finger across my forehead and holding up the mechanic’s grease. Then with another finger she touched the base of my neck and quite coldly ran her next finger below my blouse’s first unbuttoned button and held it up, greasy again.

“It seems that being oversexed will always be a Clarke characteristic, with like attracting and gaining like. Even so stay around, when war comes there will be employment opportunities galore.”

*As what?*

“ I do not do sex for money.”

“That was not what was meant. I have never lured anybody into that occupation. I meant management with Eloura.”

So when is the war coming?”

“Perhaps in days. They are building bomb shelters in London, and issuing gas masks. The gathering at Munich gathers the world’s premier fools. All proud, all thinking they will win the next war. Unless somebody gets duped or somebody backs down it will be on.”

“But after the last one that would be so stupid.”

“Never underestimate the stupidity of men. Now please, you had best leave by the left door, because the directors approach on the right and we have a war to prepare for.”

\*

Elizabeth MacKinnon

Ahmegodheho 29th August 1939

When someone is described as their own worst enemy what is usually meant is that they drag everyone else down with them and so it was with Clarrisa Chapman. It was a situation that recalled Abraham Lincoln's quip about a general who snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory.

Everybody was there and happy. Sir Eustace had the pleased gleam of a man who had a dream realised at last, even Robert was in a chirpy schoolboy mode and Alice followed that lead. Rosalind and Conrad looked relieved. Ross smiling, dreamily swirled the scotch in his glass. At twenty-two Eustace was the heir apparent and having just gained his pilot's licence was now the latest director. At nineteen this year, the twins James and Craig were trainee pilots. Everyone was fussing over Eustace the way people fuss over a promising and likeable young man who is on the cusp of a great career – everyone but Clarrisa who just stared with an expressionless face and lips pressed together like two razor blades. I knew how it would go, roughly – and that I must stop advocating for her. It took a massive effort but I was able to get the other directors to reconsider her after last year's disaster with the mechanic. All she had to do was sit quietly and look pleased, so both things would be beyond her.

Conrad as chairman rapped the table with his glass for silence.

“Good news travels fast and I had the accountant on double shifts and Sundays to get a clearer and confirming picture ASAP. In a nutshell the last financial year is our fifth on profit and not only our best ever, but better than any earlier two put together. Two hundred and seven thousand

pounds net profit. Later in the meeting we will work out dividend sizes...

Imperial Airways airmail leasing not only gave us an irregular boost, we have twenty-four regular customers coming over to us in signed contracts, some for several years. The exiled Spanish Republican government have honoured their promise and paid for our flying refugees out. Demand for our services in the South Pacific have quadrupled in one year and so we have extended our services to Hawaii, Los Angeles, Fiji and Acapulco Mexico and they have already paid off establishment costs. On the empire route we have picked up bases on the Cocos Islands Aden, Mombasa and Ceylon. The new break way at Port Hedland has ended the water landing problems we were having there and we now connect to Perth. If we do get into a war with Japan or Russia and India or the Middle East goes under Eloura, not Imperial will survive.

This year over two thousand people have flown with us on the Empire route-”

“How many actually flew Dublin to Dunedin?” That was Clarissa on the attack.

“Six”

“Six- after seventeen years.” Conrad responded calmly.

“There will be more.” Ross was falling into it. “People feel air travel is safe now we have the Electras, the Catalinas, the Shorts and the very safe DC-”

“Safe in DC! Have they heard of the *Keema*? Seventeen dead last October-”

“That was a DC2, the weather was the problem and it was not an Eloura Airlines plane.”

That was from Rosalind. She spoke in very calm tones that had a sharp edge to them and the fact that even Rosalind was fed up with her

should have served as a warning, especially as the others were all staring at her with expressionless faces.

“It won't be safe if we are in a war and Hitler and Stalin aren't men to stop – then what will happen to your silly planes and airfields?”

Absolutely nobody moved. She had their attention.

“Silly?”

“You should have invested Alessandra's money in blue chip shares and then took up something sensible with the dividends – or just relaxed. But you can't be sensible or relax, can you?”

“Please leave.”

She did, but with a sneering face; it looked like she was going to spit, but she settled for slamming a door. Whatever wrongs she had suffered we did not deserve having our triumph wrecked and although Ross and Rosalind were unaffectionate with her, that was not totally their fault. She was a glum, surly, arrogant child who brought disgrace to them and she was an ingrate to us. Although we treated her well, she wrecked the triumph we had worked so hard to achieve.

We had the negative news next from Sir Eustace who had the grace and the effective ruling class killer instinct to totally ignore Clarissa.

“My regrets to all but once again I must be the wet blanket. Australia's government knows that this Pact of Steel means war and soon, so yesterday they have made a new Defence Act. What concerns us is that there can now be no sending of capital overseas and no selling of securities to get foreign currencies. They are drafting documents to ban trading with the enemy or to sell goods above a proscribed price. As a Swiss registered company with most staff being citizens of the British Empire this puts us in a strange and legally dangerous position.”

Now Ross demonstrated that he was more than a blundering, brave fool who had been born into aristocracy and married into wealth.

“First, we must be Swiss. Sack any known foreign fascists in our employ. Replace them and anyone who leaves with Swiss citizens, down to cleaners. Get our two best Swiss citizens and put them on the board of directors. Get us access to every major Swiss airport, not just landing-take-off access but rent or buy hangers and booking desks. As soon as a nation declares for Hitler cancel all flights.

Second, even as neutrals we must help our government. Flying boats carry a good deal. Already they lack the shipping to carry exports of wine, sugar, eggs, dried fruit, cheese, wheat and wool to England. War will make that worse. Hitler knows that Germany almost starved Britain last war; he will try this one. We could carry such things as ballast. Free.”

“But our few shorts will not make an appreciable difference. Forty-six million Britons demand a massive food intake.”

“Which is why I have ordered four more flying boats from America with perhaps more to follow. The Short brothers recently got more orders than they can possibly fill and as the US is neutral and Swiss companies are neutral so we are not violating any Neutrality Act.”

“And all that food will be going to England?” I asked.

“In Red Cross wrapping made in Zurich for Briton’s orphans. Surely you know that the Red Cross was started by peace-loving Swiss? More evidence of our Swiss links, ways and connections, that should be our priority.”

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Zelda Chapman

Ahmegodheho 3rd September 1939

Only sixty homes in Eloura District had radios and Ross had the clearest reception, being on the ridge. His Ottoman Room had the most space, so we gathered there with many others, all of us tense, even Horace at fourteen and Eunice at eleven and Murie’s and Ruth’s five daughters. After the news of Hitler’s invasion was broadcast two days

past, obviously war would happen. Being a late afternoon on Sunday and also Father's Day most families were together today anyway.

Ross and Robert were talking of a newspaper article about the new jet engine, just successfully flown a few days past. They were always talking new plane things and buying them. Max got the conversation onto television, also just broadcasting in London, the display one was the talk of the Easter Eloura Show. Would picture shows have to have them? Duffers the three of them. They should have focused back on yesterday's papers headline 'NAZIS START WAR BRITAIN FRANCE MOBILISE: POLES SEEK AID' Soon they were; Ross started.

"As Hitler continues snubbing Briton and France in their attempts to do another deal, Chamberlin has to commit or be dishonoured."

"As with Belgium a quarter of a century past," Marsha added, but the world had changed. There would be no laughing girls putting flowers down rifle barrels, few gay cavaliers with sabres outstretched would last long in this one, as yesterday's accounts from the Polish front, where some had tried it, suggested. And where pray tell, was the enthusiasm to prove loyalty to the empire?

"Ireland will stay out." My sister returned to her old obsession.

"South Africa stays dicey, many a pro-Nazi among the Afrikaners there." My old duffer added, doubtless thinking of his service there almost forty years past.

"New Zealand would declare war on the moon if Britain did." Elizabeth MacKinnon, who few would ever trust, added.

"And us?" Alison asked. Since the war casualties, the 1930s loan repayment scandal on the last one, followed by the cricket scandal over their aiming at our players and the general fading of empire, the bonds were not so tight.

“Oh our new prime minister will do the right thing.” My old duffer nodded agreeably to himself. “The first week of spring will be the last one of peace for many a year. Germany will take some beating now they have Russia on side and they must both be torn apart.”

Clarissa as housekeeper with Rosa and Rosalind helping, served afternoon tea while classical music played. For the first time all Australia’s stations were hooked up together. Finally the announcer in portentous tones ordered us to stand by for an important statement from the prime minister. First came the national anthem, and then Menzies’ voice.

“Fellow Australians. It is my melancholy duty to inform you officially that in consequence of the persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war on her, and that as a result, Australia is also at war...”

There was more about France and England and what villains the Nazis were and honour and loyalty and all those things men die and kill for. Not again lord, give me death, not again. When Menzies finished Max spoke into the silence.

“Three against the bullies! And Australia one of them! That will show the world what a force for good we are!”

*No, not really, you silly old man, they won’t even notice us.*

This war would not show me much of anything, not that I wanted to see it, or would. Three months past Doctor Karl said what my fluttering heart already knew, that I would be lucky to make it till the New Year. I quietly asked Rosalind to be excused and to stay overnight, and Marsha and Eunice, a nice child, helped me to a guest room. I could hear George praying for the nation in faltering old tones, he was much aged since Edna went.



Sleep came long and deep, lasting to nearly midday and I didn't want to go home to that loud accursed radio that was always on the news, so he came to me with it.

“The cowards have sunk a passenger’s ship the Athena. Now the-”

I winced, stopped myself saying something and waved him away, puzzled he went. Next lunch he brought me my favourite cake and we talked recipes. Nobody at Ahmegodheho asked me to leave and after the third breakfast I requested Eunice to help me pack.

“Oh Doctor Karl says we shouldn’t do that. You should stay here, less dangerous than moving you. Do you have snakes at your house?”

Just eating, then a bath, some record music, classics and opera, so peaceful. The spring days were beautiful, vibrant with freshness and sun not too strong and they reminded me of another such long ago, when we were ending our teenage years, after Rachel had gone off to Ulster and came back changed. We three sisters Mary, Rachel, and myself, the youngest, and our friend and almost adoptive sister Edna, on a whim and tired of our pompous old preacher extolling the praises of General Custer as a martyred Christian in his struggle against savage pagans, frolicked with a gusty wind on a beautiful spring day at the church gymkhana. We gambolled around, letting our hair and parasols be blown about, mocking American Indian war cries:

“Oh silly General Custer,  
 With his hair giving off a golden lustre,  
 Stood on a hill in a cluster,  
 Thought he could wipe out Sitting Bull with a duster,  
 Couldn’t pass muster!”

It was all bluster! Bluster! Bluster!

There would be no mocking of war and its heroes now. Nor would there be boys in our lives again. Jokey Reg who arrived early with his

usual dray's load of grains, meats and fruit for the gymkhana, smiled at Mary and we joked 'Oh you are not going to end up married to someone who comes by the tradesmen's entrance are you?' She did and they shared decades, a farm and four children. Just before his end he rambled again, couldn't be talked out of it this time, not when it was dementia, not his frequent melancholia. Year before last he joined his Mary who always had a fluttering heart and never made it to grey in her hair. The dead daughter Meloni and then the death of her saintly son, the favourite, sucked the life out of Edna. Yet she had Ruth, Alex and Karl to be proud of. Pretty much the same with Rachel, still here in body, but the one that the joy of life left first lasted the longest. Why that loveless marriage? And mine? The boyishness in him was wonderful, well most times, but that war, those bloody wars that harm them and kill them and that they love so much. And they say women are masochistic for wanting babies.

The four of us always said we would have children to be proud of, Karl, Alex and Murie certainly, but pride came from names on granite with the other three of our boys and two of our girls. Alison was only superficially a daughter to be proud of, Ruth much more so. Ross, Robert and Evelyn were famous and infamous. Leo was a hell best not thought about or Clarissa, my one surviving grandchild, if she was that. I wanted peace at the end and wanted it to come in the black of sleep perhaps that was what it would be, just a continuation of sleep.

\*

Tom Caufield

Eloura 7<sup>th</sup> October 1939

Thank God for the war. After that bloody court case life went downhill fast. Few would do business with me and I got tired of the bullshit fights for being called a wife basher, a cuckold, a liar, a bullshit artist and a fascist. Even after I stopped going to Eloura, them fights went on. The fights left me in bad shape, even when I won and I was not winning 'em

much now, bit old for acting like a teenager. With both Alison and Jack gone there was too much work, so the farm was going downhill and when she wanted out for selling some land that weren't the best she got out and we got some money coming in from bloody Ross, but it went out too fast. Then Henderson came along and it was on with Esmeralda. Young people should be left alone: he married her and bought me out. He had the energy and skill with money and farming to make a go of it. For me it was a losing proposition and so was Eloura.

Then grazing at Taralga seemed good and it was, long enough to buy a place, but it was not long before the same thing that happened at Eloura started up there and the Taralga place was sold at a loss. Adding to the falling cash with shearing and get a feel for places seemed an idea, but in shed after shed the story would come at me like some lippy biting mongrel that yer can't shake off. After fifty-five my body was stuffed for shearing and I knew it and so did the bosses and there were still too many on the wallaby track, farmers could pick and choose and they always chose young ones or grovellers. The money was running low when Moon said he could help, and he did, for a few months. Most had it coming but the warnings came that yer got the easy work first, to get you used to it, then the more disgusting work has to be done or you're out. If its evicting jabbering wogs or breaking the collarbone of some spendthrift, that's fine, but not crippled veterans or giving some young new prostitute a hard time because she wouldn't.

I used the near to last of my money on a one bedroom Sydney flat, then came the war and if anybody could get me something Moon could, maybe even in Eloura. He had connections.

\*

Ross Clarke

Eloura Recruiting Centre 18<sup>th</sup> October 1939

Alex did legalities, Karl the medical side and Max and I did general impressions and together we were the makeshift recruiting board until the real one came along. We kept Max busy so he would not think of Zelda. We stared at today's first recruit few turned up. Now we took anybody.

“Murie!” Max jaw stayed dropped.

“We deal with other matters at lunch.” Alex was curt.

“I am here to volunteer.”

“Why?” Alex asked.

“Can’t stand that Hitler fellow.”

We waited for more but that apparently was it. We looked at each other and let Alex do the interview.

“Is everything al right on the farm?”

“Much improved these three years past, still not quite over the depression but most of us are that way.”

“Which branch of the service will you go for?”

“Wherever they need me.”

“Murie has the right attitude!” Max boomed to us.

“You may be needed on your farm, producing food is designated essential services.”

“Ruth and the girls can do that.”

“Karl, could you give Murie Fisher, aged forty-seven and with a waistline of over fifty inches, his medical?”

We just waited and listed him as volunteer, possibly civil defence. The thought came to me that Murie did not enlist in the first one because with both his brothers dead, he did not want his father to suffer further, but now Uncle Reg was thirty months underground. After a few down and outs desperate for a pay, some moongoons weary of their thuggery and being hated, schoolboys lying about their age and two young

unemployed who looked suitable, came the man we had heard was back in Eloura and dreaded, Tom.

“You all know me and my war record, so why aren't I up there with you?”

“For the same reason you were removed from recruiting twenty-one years ago.”

He just stared and sniggered. How can anyone tell a man that war has left him such a repulsive physical mess that he could alienate volunteers into pacifists? Ultimately the most violent man in town got the same answer as the most placid, both brothers-in-law were for civil defence. Then came Bach.

“Your reasons for volunteering?” Alex asked.

“I know soldering and it pays. I know jewellery and assaying and they do not.”

*And they would pay even less if I hadn't steered my women to your shop.*

We just looked at each other nonplussed and let him continue.

“Perhaps being over fifty-five makes me too old for long marches, but lasting from Gallipoli landing to Aleppo no worries should count. Perhaps you will use me to train the younger.”

“Yes, perhaps you can.” Alex nodded to Karl. After Bach was examined and left Karl said he had the body of a man of forty. We agreed that as an assayer he could at least train soldiers in map reading and as a veteran NCO, drill volunteers.

Next came Jack Caufield, another surprise and no need to ask why.

“Sydney is overstuffed with lawyers and under stuffed with clients.”

“Other way round in the army with all the volunteers who don't know the rules swamping the system.” Alex smiled. “You are widely

considered a quick study. Study military law fast and well; that you will get a commission or we will.”

Jack saluted - and not in fun. There was something about Jack many disliked.

Four more men came and among the women, Murie's eldest girl, who was wanting to be a truck driver. Inheriting his build and Ruth's sense, we could see it and took her. Next came Clarissa, she had talked about it vaguely a few days back and made the point that at twenty-four it was time to leave home. Alex handled it for me.

“You have put down accountant, flight controller, secretary, nurse, kitchen hand and driver. Quite a range.”

“Practical skills in all six. Copies of my accountancy degree and driver's licence are attached. Any problems?”

They all looked my way and I just shook my head. Next came the laugh. Horace, he would have preferred to be elsewhere, between two men in uniform. He submitted his written application to Karl,

“We know he is not twenty-one as he claims.”

“My son Horace Clarke turns fifteen next year. He volunteered for?”

“Officer School.”

Karl and Alex, by long training kept expressionless faces, but with Max and myself it was another matter. Horace looked hurt, but what could we do? His brief attempt at high school at my insistence ended when the bullies left him bruised too many times and it reached the stage when those who habitually lost to others would use him as a punching bag. When they ordered him to put his hands away from his face he did. Perhaps after a bit of suffering the struggle for self-survival might make a man of him, but after Karl had a talk about the broken bones, his spindly physique, poor eyesight and his mental state Rosalind insisted that we take him out. It was back to home tutoring with Eunice, who fought better

over baiting at school, but preferred home with Clarissa, Rosalind, Rosa and sometimes Alison as teachers and sometimes the children of itinerants and house servants as students. Horace was usually in some alcove with his head buried in books of a military nature. Max decided to have some fun; as this was his first smile since Zelda's death we went along.

“Now what decided you to be an officer?”

“My family has always been very military. My grandfather was a general.”

“Ah yes and your age precludes...”

“My twin cousins Craig and James Clarke are in air force flying school and they are teenagers... so if they are in why can't I go?”

Max, Alex and Karl all turned to me in puzzlement

“To aid the war effort European branches of Eloura Airlines are running a private military flying school – in neutral Switzerland. While they are accepting some as young as sixteen, they are learning basic skills and nobody flies or enlists until they are eighteen and even that is with parental permission. Robert runs it and his sons are volunteers.”

“So why won't they take me?”

He asked me, but I let Alex take over on the legalities.

“For a start you are not even sixteen.”

“And then there is your physical state.” Karl continued. “Will you consent to a medical?”

“Of course.”

“There can be no question of your pluck or your patriotism.” Max added as a cushion for the oncoming fall. We had a cup of coffee while we waited. Australia had sugar in abundance but coffee was a luxury, at least for most. Over the last four months (at last and at the worst possible time!) my planes were making big profits, flying in such things from the

neutral Americas, Ireland and Switzerland and also getting military contracts and oil and kerosene. Karl took longer than expected.

“At this time the applicant lacks the legal qualifications, maturity, and physical and mental health to be accepted. However, with more regular physical exercise and involvement in team sports this is likely to change. This regimen should last for a period of three years six months and so reach eighteen years before a re-evaluation.”

At eighteen the minimum. Horace left looking resentful. After four it was time for Marsha and then Keith with their ideas on rationing and efficiency. These were uncertain areas for us to deal with, more likely in Moon’s domain of security, but he was so feared and hated that people preferred coming to us and he was smart enough not to press, not yet anyway. There was not that mad hatred for Germans that had gone on last war that he had exploited and he had made too many respected enemies. Marsha was not only deputy of New Albion Veteran’s hospital but head of district Legacy and therefore had community respect.

“What do you have for us today Marsha?” Max asked.

“A gas fuelled grain harvester, four formally dilapidated railway carriages refurbished for military use by the children of Legacy and a list of all fuel depots in the three districts and what they contain, petrol, kerosene, oil, even paraffin.” Max nodded his approval at his daughter-in-law and turned to me. “Any ideas?”

“All profits gained since war began went on refined American petrol. My DC3s, Shorts and Lockheeds will fly in two thousand gallons from San Diego tomorrow and the same in November. They are delivered to military bases. Nobody can say Ross Clarke is a war profiteer.”

Max beamed approval and Alex raised both eyebrows and rolled his tongue: that was anybody else’s equivalent to fainting in shock. Max turned to Keith.



“Ah you are in this one are you?”

“Everyone did everything they could to avoid this war, and Hitler has nasty plans that nobody could ignore. It is a just fight.”

“And what do you have for us?”

“Less paper and ink usage, narrower margins, that cuts twelve per cent costs. No charge for recruitment and security ads. Voluntary censorship for security if one of you checks before printing.”

“My, how some people change.” Alex was affably sardonic and Keith replied in the same spirit.

“My, how war changes.”

We nodded in agreement and with fifty jars of coffee coming on tomorrow’s flight, they got one for each shouted. That was wise for ten days later, when we enjoyed consuming another jar Moon turned up and he had General Cullum and several bureaucrats, civilian and military, with him. Their introductions were cordial as they always are in these situations. We, the target, are so supposed to flare up at the sight of them or their requisition documents and then they feel no guilt at taking from those bad-tempered bastards. Therefore, I was cordial back to the general.

“What would you like from me?”

General Cullum handed me a requisition form, good for the war's duration. It listed all my planes and everything else in the name of Eloura Airlines, down to the right number of stationary pads. With a list that exact Moon had an agent somewhere.

“All must do our duty to our nation.” General Cullum intoned.

“You cannot requisition a foreign or neutral company: we are both. Two of our board members are Swiss nationals. Eloura Airlines certainly flies in Australia and has airports here as we do in neutral Switzerland, neutral Arabia, Neutral Mexico and neutral America and neutral Ireland,

but we are a registered Swiss company, even if we do fly Red Cross food parcels to Britain.”

That floored him and them, especially Moon. Rosa took the nodded hint and gave documentary proof.

“This is unexpected.” The general glared at Moon, as if his tone did not convey enough. “Legal ramifications are unsure for now, but I will ask you not to destroy any property or take your aircraft outside Australia while we seek legal advice.”

“The possibility of our two Sanderson flying boats joining Australia’s Number ten squadron flying anti-submarine reconnaissance in England remains; you already have forcibly requisitioned the four Atlas had for that same under-sized squadron. Such a donation will take a board meeting – by phone.”

“And?”

“I feel like making a donation. If I buy three more American DC-3 supply planes, another two Sanderson’s and donate all five for the duration, will my name be off some subversives list and we do not settle this in court?”

General Cullum’s brain was ticking over, but had not quite got it.

“The government has also just started trying to get the Americans to sell nineteen Catalinas to Atlas and fly them here with civilian crews so as to not contravene the Neutrality Act. If that could not be done, because Atlas are a British based company and therefore combatants, as neutrals we could take the purchaser’s role. We could also fly over trained skilled machinists that the new factories are screaming for, Americans, refugees they prefer not to take but have... We will even pay to set up an English Language centre for the Europeans if that does not violate the Neutrality Act. If it does we could set up the school in neutral America.”

Now he got it. Technically neutral America would be supplying a neutral Swiss company. In reality they were arming an Allied power. The implications were immense and immensely in our favour. Max cackled as he got it and Keith gave a grin. Even the general smiled.

“I will toss in a Lockheed-Electra 10 a gift from the peace-loving Swiss company for the purposes of a peace conference between the warring powers. What happens to it after the conference fails... A very stylish plane, so the Canberra politicians don't have to train it to Sydney and spend hours watching sheep and gum trees. I will even pay its fuel bill for as long as a Swiss company can import oil from neutral America.”

“And what do you want?”

“I keep my remaining DCs, which in the Commonwealth you call Dakotas. I keep the other two Electras, and Catalinas and a Sunderland for our civilian purposes. My airline has never made so much as it has in the last few months. Australians, including politicians and judges, get more luxury goods such as the coffee you drink now. Their wives love those imported Swiss chocolates. It is either this deal where you get much, or a court case you might lose or even if you win, winning will take time.”

“You might get a profiteer's reputation. How soon can the Dakotas arrive?”

I phoned America in front of him and was put onto two more second hand planes ready to fly here now.

“Eight days for two. Thirty days for the new ones.”

“Everything sounds satisfactory.”

“Except who gave you the list.”

“A patriot.”

They left. That night Clarissa was evasive and guilty when asked who did it. I ordered her out immediately and even Rosa and Rosalind did

not defend her. Nobody did, she would have left for training after Christmas anyway.

\*

Horace Clarke

Eloura High School 24<sup>th</sup> January 1940

We gathered in the assembly hall, where Principal Kedda, once Brother-in-law to my father and the new recruiting sergeant, sat under crossed Australian and British flags, these being below the portrait of the king. In the picture he wore his full uniform with medals. He had the face of a decent, kindly man, so did Principal Kedda, and our commander Captain Alexander McPherson, who I knew a little bit as he was father's business lawyer. Nobody could say that Sergeant-Major Tom Caufield, nicknamed "Stoney Tom" had a kindly face or was a nice person. It isn't nice to say bad things about people with a facial disfigurement or who have been injured defending us in war, and he was a Gallipoli landing veteran, but as he surveyed us, he made it clear that he hated us.

Then I looked at it calmly and logically, just as my father told me to do and I knew then that I must be wrong. What reason had he for hating us? None. What could he gain by hating us? Nothing. Why might he see us as enemies when we were all here as volunteers, comrades in arms who would defend him and his loved ones as he would defend ours? This was at the core of why the soldier existed: to defend the women, children elderly and infirm, to defend the land by destroying the evil ones who would destroy them if we were not there. We were Christ like and when remembering the hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers' it became obvious that soldiering was the noblest profession of all because it needed so much courage, suffering and unselfishness and sometimes martyrdom. To hold rank showed what a man was made of, so did medals and Sergeant-Major Tom Caufield had plenty of both and this was his third war, so he must be a good man. Principal Kedda began.

“Students, we are deeply impressed by the unselfishness and patriotism of your volunteering and returning to school early to start your cadet training. Soon many of you will be in the trenches, or hopefully you will ride tanks to Berlin and settle the German problem once and for all! However we have much drilling to do, much learning that has little to do with chalk and blackboards and it is not all exciting but everything your instructor orders you to do will be necessary. Such men have suffered and sacrificed more than you can ever know: they are only asking you to do less than what they have done in silent endurance, so show that the torch of the Anzac spirit is being passed on and victory will be ours!”

When approaching the table to sign up Captain Alex smiled and shook my hand and at the end saluted.

“I shook your hand as a civilian, and welcomed you by your first name; but from signing that form until your demobilisation you are addressed by your rank - cadet for now, and you address me as Captain.”

I agreed, remembered the salute and moved down the desk to the roll where the Sergeant-Major was ticking the volunteer list off.

“My name is-“

“I know your name!”

He snarled the last word and then the snarl was gone and he just stared at me with this cold expressionless face while everybody stared at him, then Captain McPherson ordered 'Next!' in this loud crisp voice like he used in court and the bad mood was broken. It started again on the first day on the playground where we drilled.

“Clarke! Bloody mad idiot! Don't you know your left foot from your right?”

“But it was my left foot Sergeant-Major.”

I held it up, and his jaw dropped in amazement and then some giggles started; that really set him off.

“You think Clarke is funny young Kenneth Marshall? Ten laps round the oval. Three o three at rifle ready position. Five for giggling on parade and five for getting my rank wrong! I'm a Sergeant-Major! Now go!”

He started off and it was eighty degrees hot, so even we who had to stand and watch got tired. By the second lap Kenneth was sweating so much his shirt had gone dark green. By the third we could hear him panting and when he started stumbling Sergeant-Major Caufield bawled out “Marshall! Who gave you permission to stumble? On your feet and on the double!”

When he had collapsed four times and was ordered up each time by a smiling Sergeant-Major Caufield he said enough and then was bent over double and taking in as much air as a person possibly could, he was told to fall in and Sergeant-Major ordered us to stand easy.

“Now after being in two long wars and being not much older than you at the start of the first and training many, let me tell you the first thing you should know. In every bunch there is one rotten egg, one real stinker who lets the team down. They are ratbags, dags, limp wrested sissies, dopes and cowards and traitors and it takes a while to weed them out. Sometimes they come of good stock, sons of officers and grandsons of generals even. It is up to you to watch them and stop them getting you into trouble. I cannot protect you all the time or sees what happens every minute. Kenneth Marshall, do you understand?”

While Kenneth was trying to stop his panting long enough to answer Sergeant-Major Caufield's glittery eyes was going along the line in a way that scared.

“Yes Sergeant-Major Caufield, I understand.”

“Parade, do you understand?”

“Yes Sergeant-Major!”

“Now when parade hears parade dismiss you will all shower immediately!”

Something bad was happening and I did not like Sergeant-Major Caufield or the way they all chorused 'Yes Sergeant-Major!'

Perhaps it was just my imagination as people said I was very imaginative and should not be so scared of things that were not really there, so I went into the showers. They held my arms and stuffed a towel down my throat while they all used the same toilet, laughing as they made me wait.

\*

Rebecca Petit

Paris May 26<sup>th</sup> 1940

France had only summer left, if that. It was in their faces, their hollow stories of victories not really won, their sullen way of marching to a front that was not a front any more; German paratroopers and tanks had seen to that. Hitler either had a madman's cunning or some very clever generals while France was lead by tired old men trying to refight last generation's war. Anybody with brains was leaving; the roads to the south were clogged, some were even in uniforms and nobody arrested them. For a trip to America my employer was first possibility, Uncle Manny next. With these two possibilities and Ross in reserve Etienne and I were safe. My manager was packing and reading my face, he knew why I was there.

“The army may hold, even if they don't all Hitler probably really wants is Alsace and Lorraine, so long disputed. Hitler knows money and it would cost a fortune to occupy France - and for what benefit?”

“To plunder us for whatever can be carted away. Including people.”

He actually laughed like you would to a child scared of the dark.

“Oh really. Not even last time were the French held behind German lines treated badly. No babies were really boiled down for soap. Stories, just stories.”

“Stories coming from wherever Nazis go, sounding the same, firing squads, slave labour, plunder and bombs, stories told by people unknown to each other.”

“Stories. You translate stories so you know how much veracity they have. This may be a blessing in disguise for you.”

“What do you mean?”

*Yes you callously stupid man who goes whichever way the wind blows and who gains that carefree self-confidence from being a citizen of the world's greatest power, what do you mean?*

“Scott Fitzgerald has been much less prolific these last few years as he is passé and the public know it; the twenties were his golden years. Staffing was actually cutting back on work for you, but now you can go all the way to Australia, you will be safe there. It seems that old flame Clarke of Eloura Airlines, has enlisted you and your husband as flight attendants.”

“Why didn't you tell me this earlier?”

*Yes why, you dangerous idiot!*

“We knew you would be in for work today, besides why rush?”

We had to raise our voices over the sounds of ambulance sirens taking the wounded to some hospital.

“You have the documents.”

“They should be at Eloura Airlines.”

He started on his amiably pompous set speech given to sacked employees so I ran down the stairs and ran all the way to Eloura Airlines. Although it was not even seven yet, the queue stretched for sixty metres outside the doors. Many had the look of those who had slept on concrete



for a place, even in their expensive clothes. Rabbis, Talmudic scholars, Russian, German or Czechs and were fleeing again. English tourists, radicals, Quakers were fleeing for the first time. A woman with an odd accent, speaking brushed up school girl French came out with a list.

“Swiss citizens with identification only for a flight to Geneva, form a queue.”

She repeated it in English. Everybody was obedient.

“American and Latin American citizens only with identification and proof of citizenship form a flight to New York, form a queue here, next.

British Empire citizens only with proof of citizenship for a flight to Geneva and then connecting flights, form a queue here, next.

“Anybody trying to falsely pass themselves off as a citizen of any of these nations will be under arrest at the first available opportunity.”

She then looked at the rest of us with a firmness that attempted to conceal pity.

“Flights to Athens, Cairo, Beirut and Jaffa are under consideration, but no guarantees can be given. As all our flights are booked out several months in advance you must find other means.”

A few left. I stepped forward. She sighed and was mentally categorising me as a problem person.

“You have tickets waiting for me inside.”

“That is rare, most rush the first available plane.”

“Ross sent the tickets some time past.”

“Ross who?”

“Ross Clarke, owner of this airline.”

“Co –owner actually. Now why should he do that?”

“Because we were once married.”

She smiled vexedly and sighed.

“This is your unlucky day. I know his wives, both of them, because I am his sister-in-law and a company director.”

“Alice. Wife to the aviator brother Robert.”

“That is common knowledge and so is the fact that special tickets are on the display board and the board has been empty except for one New Zealand family. Now we are on twenty-hour workdays here and have to save those with priorities. Do not come back again or gendarmes will cart you off. Here comes one now.”

Back at the office my American employer had already fled. Etienne had tried phoning Uncle Manny, and eventually got his agent but he was off on inspecting film location shooting in Mexico. His overworked agent would be angry if we rang every day so we agreed to ring in a week.

It took me eleven days to get into that Eloura office, and then by pretending to be among the takeaway catering staff making deliveries while Alice Hughes Clarke was out of sight. I spoke to the receptionist, amiable, happy to be munching.

“Are there tickets reserved for Rebecca and Etienne Petit?”

“Oh them.” She strained her face to remember “Their tickets were on the board for weeks but they got them, oh about three weeks back.”

“But I am Rebecca Petit.” The amiability suddenly vanished as identification appeared.

“They also had identification.”

“Forgeries are very widespread.”

“As are confidence tricksters!”

“Ross told me of your Ulster door, with all the names of all your dead from the last war on it.” That stunned her. “He will be angry when he hears how we were left.”

“Checking revealed that the real Petits flew out and decided not to go on, but to stay in Palestine, being Jews.”

“Ask me about how you met your husband when you flew to Clarkestead seventeen years past. Ask me about the scars on Ross’s body. Ask Rosalind about when we met in 1927 her in this very office and we walked to Makhno’s stall. Here is the address of my husband’s Swiss sanatorium. Find the name of Ross Clarke on the bills 1927-1930.”

“We should have accounts in our archives if the cheque was signed here. You may search; my time is very rushed. Ross Clarke currently must be in America doing another DC-3 deal and will not be immediately contactable.”

It took me till evening to find the records, the news improved, Alice Hughes Clarke was amiable.

“My husband phoned Eloura, Rosalind remembers you. She did say you were a mistress, not his wife, no matter. On June 12<sup>th</sup> there will be a flight - Paris to Geneva and immediate connections from there to Cairo and then all the way to Sydney -”

Six days away. Smiling, she handed me a folder with tickets.

“Ross and Robert could see how it would all go. The incredible profits Eloura Airlines has made from the refugees went into more DC-3s to get more refugees out. With the bookings full up your tickets and my ticket are for seats on a new plane. Scheduled to arrive in two days, the pilots must sleep, crews must recheck and refuel and away we go. By autumn France will probably have gone under, but it won't collapse in six days.”

But France did and its officer corps and politicians knew it would. Etienne and I turned up, determined to sleep on the benches there for the next three nights if need be and we found the assigned plane already being loaded with the wealth of its seated passengers and smug faced guards, rifles at the ready telling us we could not board and so smugly butting in to what we were saying with “Viva le France” with their cruel

curling lips and they swiped the rifle butts at us with a smug little smile that aimed to scare, not hit.

The Nazis came tromping down the Arc De Triumph, led by a drum major and his troop of drummers with those silly little drums that looked like upside-down cake baking dishes and that silly aptly named march, the goose step. Everything about them was silly in an evil way, but none watching laughed, many wept for France.

We had a week's grace where nothing seemed changed, then coming out of the lift, there was a German officer chatting with the concierge. He had a cloth folded over his arm with lines of large yellow stars of David pinned onto it, just like Trotsky's commissars, although from news of Hitler's Germany, we would not be wearing them for being middle class as with Trotsky, but for being Jewish.

“Fur das Juden. Yervol?”

The concierge, who had liked us, now stared and nodded with an iron face and following her gaze, he turned around, eyes gleaming.

\*

Torrance Betham

Betham Lodge Kent May 26<sup>th</sup> 1940

“Colonel Cuthbert, welcome.”

He followed my gesture to chairs and awaiting now rare tea and sandwiches before the fire, nodded and with the walking stick made his way to it. The serious faced secretary and police while not greeted or invited, followed the same invitation, but only the secretary, well she sat, but Cuthbert looked at the sandwiches as if they were poisoned and at me as, well as if I was Satan. The men just stared expressionless. Cuthbert did the talking.

“The village constabulary say that you follow all advice about being under house arrest admirably, given your seaplane for coastal surveillance. You are trying to be the village's most patriotic resident.”

“Which hopefully I am.”

“Understandable, considering we are at war with your former idol.”

“I was never a Hitler man. While thinking he could be useful against the Reds and their Jewish masters, he always remains a German who hates all things English – and look at him now! Stalin’s pal, well really. Strange behaviour for a fascist, isn’t it? Mussolini and Franco were and are my heroes. Like Mosley I have always said it is my duty to defend England against invaders and the proof for the-“

“Yes we are familiar with your record, which is why we are not carting you off to Brixton Jail, just yet. You know that under Regulation 18b, made law four days past, that we can do that and have for Moseley and two hundred others in your organization. Even two of Churchill’s cousins, one being Mrs Moseley, are under watch and restriction. We can hold you without trial, indefinitely.”

“Oldsham assures me that the Clarke brothers and my former wife are-”

“Oldsham also assures me about you and the Clarke brothers' motivations. Which is why Whitehall assigned me this case. We are not fools; we know Regulation 18b can be used to destroy rivals in romance or business - or both.”

“My wife is an absolute bitch and a slut-”

“An officer and a gentleman does not speak on such matters, no matter what.”

I poured myself a cup of tea, best not to drink alcohol in front of them.

“Before you cart me off let me ask you for one thing – a chance to prove my loyalty to England.”

“By?”

“By any measure you feel proves the point.”

“Those are the wisest words you may have ever said. Are you willing to resign from the British Union of Fascists?”

“Well....” His face was stony “Yes.”

“You can sail your yacht and can have it seaworthy within a day?”

“Certainly.”

“Then do so, then await orders and obey them when you get them say absolutely nothing to anyone. We will do another interview in July.”

\*

Colonel Cuthbert

Deal, Kent 14<sup>th</sup> August 1940

War is lies. Probably it always has been so. Sun Tsu worked that out in his *The Art of War* two and a half thousand years ago; I first studied that book in 1876, first taught it in 1922. Learnt it in my first war. We were not out to give civilisation to the Zulu, they had one and we destroyed it and as a teenage ensign, I did my little bit. I killed a man, a Zulu warrior, shot him with my pistol; he died looking amazed, probably had no idea what a pistol was, thought it perhaps a club and he had it all over me with that assegai. He died amazed. War is lies. Another South African war as a land grab, from Afrikaners, whites that time and the muddle of the Great War that so many tried to read meaningful causes into. Ross, Mad McKenzie, McPherson, all should have got the VC twice over and did not. Gallipoli was a cesspool, not a field of heroes.

A rerun of my latest lie came earlier this afternoon when the news at the start was of Dunkirk and the film was of smiling, orderly rows embarking. It was an official secret of what really happened, the panic, or the drunkards, or the fights to get to the boats. The impeccably upper-class voice over talked of the valiant delaying action fought by the rear guard – implying that was why we got over 335,000 off. Nobody knows why Hitler ordered that two-day delay when our forces were exhausted, disorganised and splintered and he could have finished us off, but he did

delay and far from our valiant pilots keeping the Luftwaffe away it was bad flying weather that kept the sky clear of their strafing and bombing when we were sitting ducks. Much was made of the self-sacrifice of the boat owners and many were like that, but Betham wasn't the only one there to avoid, jail, fines, or boat confiscations.

On camera he looked heroic in his efforts if you did not know what he was scared of – jail. At the end what order we had broke down: Germany got tons of supplies and equipment which could have been wrecked by dumping it in the sea eighty yards off. About a quarter of the troops were captured. My last battle was Britain's worst ever disaster, turned into a triumph by luck and clever propaganda. This was done with England's most bizarre and motley military force: fishermen, smugglers tourist craft, tuggies, even rowing boats and yachts. Oh well, perhaps peace would come at last for me and Waldo the silkie; both of us here in my snug little terrace, listening to classical music if the wires were not cut, enjoy a fire, eggs once a month, and tea leaves stretched for eight serves, just boring blackness after twilight, like now.

As usual Waldo heard bombers before me; his fear let me know. Soon they would be overhead, heading for airfields as usual. Then our blasted anti-aircraft started up, as usual. Six nights gone their spent shells blasted four cows in the field nearest this place into particles too small to make steak. Neighbours made them into stew, first meat since June.

Those anti-aircraft shots that miss must land somewhere: obviously, but more lies about that. The Nazis did not kill as many civilians as the radio and papers supposed, bad for morale among the AA crews probably. Then it landed! Too close, the solid two-story granite wall began to hover over and the roof beams groaned and upstairs furniture tumbled. Waldo was clawing the door to get out. I rushed, puffing trying not to die by an English shell, no.

\*

Eustace Clarke

Suffolk 19th September 1940

The sheer weariness of it. The endless wearying sounds. Scramble call in sleep, shrill bombs falling night and day, the steady if different drones of the different German planes, faint at first but getting ever closer. The hearty bunged on cheer of standing round a piano chorusing along to 'Roll out the Barrel' for the journalists and visitors. Voices saying the same sad things. After a time everybody knew not to ask why their seat at meal times was empty: after a time everybody knew not to worry either. Dead, missing, hospitalised or too asleep to be wakened, it was all the same. It was all part of the something happening on the remote other side of the exhaustion that cocooned me.

Even James's death a week past was like that. By that time pilots were falling asleep as they finished taxing on the runway or in debriefing sessions. Even worse they were making basic mistakes in the air, even the veterans. The popular image of green newcomers, making basic slip-ups which cost them their lives while the wise veterans survived was not so by September. James was a veteran who soared up in a fast seventy-degree arc to escape a Messerschmitt. That arc would have strained his plane to breaking point soon, but he collided with a green pilot from my squadron who was doing all the right things. They made a massive black and orange burst and metal fragments seemed to almost drift down.

The last time James and I met was days before when his plane was shot up to the smoking stage and he could not reach his base, he had to make an emergency landing at our field and he made me feel like making an uncomfortable joke about turning raccoon, the black eye circles were so bad, but he had Father's humourless temperamental short fuse, so best to let him do the talking and stick to pilot talk.



“If your squadron wants spitfires like mine there are connections.”

“Wouldn’t swap my hurricane for one.”

“Try flying one.”

“Already have. Beautiful to see and fly, but the cockpit is too cramped. My elbows crush the side. Turning my head back becomes a major achievement.”

“Faster. Higher. Sleeker.”

“By only thirty miles an hour, by a hundred feet and it’s sleek because it has less room.”

To my amazement he smiled jovially, clicking his beer glass against mine. The war was changing him for the better. I knew him as a pilot almost as much as I knew him as a brother and the tragic mistake he made was one he would never have made if he was anything less than totally exhausted.

We were inflicting massive casualties, doing everything right, but Hitler was winning the attrition battle through that sheer exhaustion which was costing us as much as Germany’s relentless attacks with superior technology and numbers. Then one of those little accidents that change the world's fate occurred. Craig the quieter, more bookish twin was in intelligence and gave me little bits, but everyone already knew what a state secret was probably. Do not deliberately bomb our cities and we will not bomb yours. Thousands dead in inflamed Rotterdam not only showed us what the Nazis could do, it showed them what we could do if we had such a mind. Then a German crew bombed us; German prisoners Craig interrogated were probably telling the truth, it was a mistake, but we heard that after we retaliated on Berlin and then ranting Hitler had to keep the suddenly less exuberant about war Berliners happy. He promised to make London another Rotterdam and he was doing that or trying to -

but at the cost of leaving us pilots and bases alone. Sleep so glorious, so deep, so long, so necessary, but the cost...

The drone of the Henkel bombers was so faint it was on the uncertain edge of hearing. Almost like a tinkle played to accompany the drone was the sound of the Messerschmitt escort. It was an ominous sound, full of malevolence and power: it sounded evil even before they flew past us in the Thames estuary, like some massive flock of vultures. They were not moving fast; the Henkel bombers seem to lumber in comparison to fighters and in that slowness it became clear that there was a great evil. The interrogations of the few captured revealed that.

They were not savagely unthinking in a fit of rage, nor were they motivated by fear or operating from some obsession that had led them into unreality. They were not mad, deceived or ignorant. This was calculated; knowing precisely who they were going to kill - thousands of civilians who never threatened them, they knew precisely how they were going to kill them, by burning them alive or blowing them to fragments. They had done this in Rotterdam and knew the effects of their actions and elected to do the same here. And why? For plunder and to enjoy the thrill of conquest and either destroy us, enslave us or make us a reflection of them: in their self-aggrandisement and conceit they would force the world to be their mirror. We had not thought much about it before, just loyalty to the flag and the king and a knowledge that they were mad bastards, but now thoughts came.

Now all England knew the answer to a question that had puzzled philosophers for centuries: what is evil and what is good? Obviously they were evil and stopping them was good.

That was very simple and yet with the bombing, all England could see that truth. Few still carried Peace Pledge Union cards, nobody would after this bombing.

Hitler's change of focus would not only unite England in a struggle to the death, but saved us. That break from fighting for pilots and planes allowed us to not only rest, but to replenish, repair and train. Craig dealt with estimates of how much longer the R.A.F. could have lasted at holding off the invasion if the pressure had stayed. The shortest was three days, the best perhaps a short month.

\*

Rosenthal

London 24<sup>th</sup> October 1940

They were sullen, worse than when Stalin's alliance with Hitler stunned us. They still were unused to the new party line, and fewer were here.

“You say this imperialist war that has nothing to do with us, that once again workers are expected to die for those that live in castles and mansions and we should avoid it. That is what you have said, isn't it?”

“That is what the party says, comrade.”

“Have you or the party seen what Stalin's ally has done to half the East End and dockside with bombs made of soviet steel in planes fuelled by soviet oil? Have you seen our babies burned alive by fascist bombs? Our homes destroyed?”

That last was one of the women comrades. She was proving the correctness of my advice to the central committee: women members should not become pregnant without party permission. It sounds authoritarian, but almost without exception when women have babies their interest narrows to the child's needs not the party's needs: they lose their focus on the bigger picture, the need not to win this imperialist war which will go as it came, but the class war remains permanent until the era of classes ‘is only a dim ancestral memory’ to quote Lenin. It was not only the mothers who were losing a sense of perspective; many workers under the intense pressure of personal and familial pressures caused by the war were slipping back into trade union levels of consciousness.

“Casualties come with any war. The question is who do we fight? Are the Gestapo really as bad as the propaganda of our imperialist warmongers claims? And are you suggesting that we inflict more casualties on ourselves by fighting for those that live in mansions and castles, those who make profits from the war, those who are descended from royalty and peerage? Is it any accident that in England warmongers elected Churchill? Churchill! The man who designed the Gallipoli disaster which left half a million Empire troops and Turks dead! The arch imperialist who has said that soviet Russia is a monster who should have been strangled at birth! And he did his best to do it! Churchill who said he would machine gun the strikers of 1926! Do you want to follow him, a man we should shoot?”

“At least he isn’t Hitler’s ally and quartermaster.”

“That is what Trotsky called Stalin comrade - and where is Trotsky now?”

That got me hisses. They misunderstood; my reputation as a killer of Spanish traitors had reached England; this interjector was safe, the party forbade such methods here. Even so, they were being brave in the dark where only facial outlines showed by the light of one weak candle.

“Look at the advantages the Pact of Steel with Hitler has gained us! Eastern Poland! Latvia! Lithuania! Estonia and a free hand to deal with and defeat the Finnish aggressors!”

“And coffers full of Nazi Gold”

“And offers of India if Russia attacks England!” I blurted and they gasped.

“What if that happens? Do we all start sieg heiling and wear swastikas?”

“Marx and Lenin had it right! The English are infested with petty patriotism. Look at the big picture! Soviet India would be a death blow

to global imperialism and a massive boost in resources, and manoeuvrability. We could have soviet fleets based in Bombay and dominate the Indian Ocean!” Think big!”

“If you don’t mind, we should be preparing both my teenage daughters' for burial blitz victims.”

“We don't have time for such bourgeois luxuries, let the dead bury the dead!”

She ripped her party membership card up and threw it in my face and about half of those followed. The rest just stared. Somebody informed, as they should have done and the Central Committee requested an interview.

“Comrade your skills as a translator, your loyalty, courage and personal sacrifices are exemplary. Your skills as a branch leader and public speaking skills, manners and sense of discretion however, are not so well developed. The indiscreet reference to India, the refusal to give former Comrade Perkins permission to miss a meeting to attend a double funeral and what is worse saying so in public; the reference to shooting Churchill, which could be seen as a call to individualistic assassination attempts, all suggest your services to the party are best in the back rooms. You will go through self-criticism sessions, receive an official reprimand and a transfer by ship, we have seaman’s papers ready for Australia.”

\*

Alex McPherson

Eloura 28<sup>th</sup> October 1940

The General and Civil Defence people who had recommended Tom could not be found or had urgent matters to attend to. Mcphee and Anstee with their note books at the ready and two civil defence personnel and one officer were observers and acted as bailiffs. The parents and witnesses were outside. When called Tom marched in, stood to attention and saluted, in full uniform with medals clanking.

“Sergeant-Major Caufield, this is an enquiry not a court martial. We are a board questioning witnesses, although statements made here and our findings may later be used by courts. Now due to the war we have been unable to put together a board that is made up of people unknown to you. Principal Kedda was once brother-in-law to the father of Horace Clarke, is this a problem?”

“No sir.”

“Marsha Chapman, president of Legacy, is known to you.”

“Slightly, she married a schoolmate; we have exchanged pleasantries at Anzac Day and RSL events over the years, no objection.”

“I was your commanding officer, and have since then been involved in giving legal advice against your interests, and sometimes advise Horace Clarke’s father. Any objection?”

“No objection.”

“My brother will be a medical witness, still no objection?”

He shrugged his shoulders; this was either very clever or very stupid. He could claim later that we were all his enemies, so to his surprise I had Moon and Crutchfield, brought in, they were also on the board. He did not object to them. We asked him if his son was going to be his advisor as he had said, but he claimed Jack was busy. Even so we understood. One by one we called the boys in. We thought Horace would be the weakest, but no, one actually wept with fear as if the questions were torture, screeched he knew nothing when Caufield looked at him and then he pissed his pants.

“If that is how he goes on if his sergeant major glances, how would he go in Gestapo hands? He would tell them everything and start seig heiling. I was tough with those boys, but no more than necessary to get them into shape to beat Nazis.”

Horace was better than that. His bruises were unhealed; his hatred

and resentments lead to open hostility, even so, he was still too scared to implicate Tom. “Young man the police report Communist Party propaganda has been found in your school locker. Why?”

*Please tell them it was planted as part of Tom's hazing process.*

“Because they tell the truth about this silly war. The Axis and the Allies have got more than alliteration in common; imperialists are making a fortune out of this war and my father is one of them. Greed causes wars and also the way men fight because they like bashing and killing each other. If there aren't any men from any other countries around to kill, they bash each other in locker rooms over nothing, just to show how tough they are and puff themselves up like silly roosters. The officers are not heroes, they are just bullies who got where they are by sucking up to the next ones higher up the ladder...”

And so on with talk of making friends with Germans and Italians and Russians so that all the peoples of the earth would live in harmony once the war profiteers and militarists and capitalists were 'gone' This confused schoolboy had half-made the point I had to complete.

“Exactly a year ago you were brought in here for trying to volunteer for active service, officer school wasn't it?” It was better to have him look muddled and ridiculous than a dangerous Communist.

“I had a lot to learn about the military.”

“And you learned it from Sergeant-Major Caufield?”

“And his toadies.”

“And from Communist propoganda?” Crutchfield asked and Tom grinned.

“Yes certainly.”

“So who actually committed the bashings?” Moon asked.

Horace was silent and Crutchfield saw his chance.

“Did Sergeant-Major Caufield actually ever lay a finger on you? Did

he ever actually bash you or say to anybody else bash him, kick him? Just yes or no to all those questions please.”

Horace glared until Moon asked us to note his refusal to answer. We did thirty such notes, the whole platoon. At adjournment we asked Mcphee for his opinion.

“No evidence, no case. The bruises are at best weak evidence without either confession or testimony that names him as connected and apparently even his instructions, are at best, ambiguous. We do not even have enough to charge him.”

“He has a fine record that any soldier would envy!” Moon started in. “Decorated in two wars, nominated for a V.C. and a Gallipoli landing man crippled and scared in defence of his country, brought low in the twilight of his career-” Crutchfield added smugly.

“The man is a bully, not an instructor.” Marsha began. “He took thirty patriotic volunteers and now only four, the ones he turned into bullies like himself, wish to re-enlist for next year. Horace Clarke must definitely be the worst example, or perhaps just the most articulate, but did you see their faces? Thirty patriotic potential service personnel turned into hostile cynics: few Nazis could do worse to us. For the good of the war effort, he must be removed.”

“I agree with every word Mrs Chapman said.” Kedda spoke glumly.

“As do I.” Mcphee added.

“He was always just a bit too tough and overbearing – with hardened veterans.” I mused. “So what would schoolboys make of him?”

Except for Moon and Crutchfield, we all assented and Kedda spoke.

“Although he cannot be charged, he should be dismissed and Mrs Chapman’s apt words should be the basis of our summary.”

They were and when we read them out only Moon dissented saying what he said before. When asked if he had anything to say Crutchfield



came out with: 'When a drillmaster cannot toughen up recruits, a war is bein' lost.'

We recommended dismissal and General Cullum filled out Tom's discharge, not enough evidence for a dishonourable one. Tom made the Sydney bound night train.

That was getting out of it easy, I would have to face Ross and that gave me little sleep. Four days later there was a request for an interview at his Ahmegodheho office. Unsmiling Rosa opened the door and gave fearful facial warnings. As expected, he was in a mood.

“Did you know it was Horace who gave the government the list, not Clarissa?”

“Of course not.”

“Did you give him bus money? We know he caught the bus to Roydton, probably where the Communist leaflets originated.”

“Nobody has seen him since the enquiry.”

“Strings were pulled to get him accepted by an American military academy to make a man of him and was arranging the flight when he ran off. I am fifty years old and have four living children, and the best hope to take over everything we have built up is a twelve-year-old schoolgirl, at least she seems level headed.”

This was the first time I had ever heard him refer to any but Horace as his children. On my way out Rosalind, even more coldly angry than he was, glared at his door with hatred. They should not have married and realised what they once had was dead. He should have accepted Brionny for what she was or failing that, Tom and Alison should have realised it was hopeless, divorced and she and Ross should have married, but since when do people make sensible choices? If they did my profession would not exist

\*

Rosa MacDonald

Ahmegodheho 21<sup>st</sup> November 1940

Moon and Crutchfield were even crueller than Tom Caufield, and not just because of what they did to Horace and making him sound a liar. When the Lockheed with all the politicians and the big high up general aboard crashed in Canberra this August, Moon rang Ross and I took the call and Moon said Ross was for it now as the plane he donated was faulty and probably deliberately sabotaged and with cabinet ministers and the chief of the general staff dead there was no way out of this one. Ross never panics but his face went pale when I told him and pretty quickly he recovered when our donated Lockheed Electra turned up in North Africa, but Moon and Crutchfield told everybody that Ross was trying to kill Menzies because the Prime Minister was onto what a war profiteer he was and the Prime Minister only survived by a fluke. What was true was that the Prime Minister was meant to be on the plane but got out of it because he liked the long train trip so that he could read detective novels. Crutchfield's lies became Eloura gossip and how many people questions if gossip is true. They should. Eloura people disappointed me, especially Rosalind, who could be so mean and curt and make smart comments about my relationship with Ross. People believed those silly stories because Ross had more than them, was not a sly manipulating charmer like Crutchfield and could attract younger women like me.

\*

Rosenthal

Darling Harbour Sydney 28<sup>th</sup> November 1940

“Comrade, Rosenthal, as you did intelligence and propaganda work for the Eloura district see what you make of this.”

She passed me two documents, one was an application for party membership from one Horace Clarke, aged fifteen. The other was a code letter soon deciphered.

The bearer of this letter Horace Clarke has applied for party

membership. Like many youth in the ruling class, he has, with an insider's viewpoint, partially grasped the exploitative imperialist nature of capitalism and sees the need to overthrow it. However, the very proximity that gives him such insights also fuels extremely subjective and idealistic views: when he sees his father and the drill Sergeant who organised his bashings (Caufield, the same New Guard fascist behind your bashing) not as a monster but as a product of his time will he stay with us? Will we become targets of his idealistic wrath once he experiences what we must do as the cost of progress?

This potential comrade requires much education, he may be worth the effort as he will inherit much of his millionaire's wealth - partial owner of Eloura Airlines and the Clarkestead Estates. He is currently homeless and so nervous as to be useless for most physical employment.

\*

He had his mother's looks, not his father's. A frightened, resentful, homeless boy who should have been my son. We shook hands, my face was frightening, and many could not look me in the eye.

“It is not a war injury, Caufield gave me this and more for trying to organise the unemployed down your way. It seems we have things in common.”

“I want to kill him.”

“So do we all, but in politics right timing counts for much.”

“The world should be at peace, but there cannot be any peace till his kind and those behind him are dead or jailed.”

Not bad for a fifteen-year-old millionaire's son.

“From my vantage point you seem acceptable. We can start with provisional membership and had best complete your education. We will have room for you at the Red House.”

\*

Lynda Taun McPherson      New Albion Hospital 17<sup>th</sup> December 1940

The earliest arrivals among them had been here a quarter of century. Few arrivals had died off or looked like they would. They ate, slept and sat around loafing at government expense and excepting the quadriplegic and Leo, they could have been earning a living somehow, not eating up taxes needed for the war effort. For once I agreed with Moon, even Max and Marsha did. I assembled them.

“As you know everyone must make sacrifices for the war effort and thirty of you can make a little sacrifice. Indications are that New Albion needs space for casualties soon. With so many men being conscripted and a new munitions factory starting up in Melbourne employment has become available for those who lack legs but can use your hands. You can help make the bombs that will teach the Germans not to start wars.”

“We taught them that last time, that’s what they said to get us in then.”

Nobody else told him to shut up. That same sullen attitude recruiters and journalists commented on was evident here.

“Yes, well Hitler does not listen to us, does he? We have to do more than ask him nicely. Look at how he has gobbled up country after country. If we all sit round basking in the sun saying we have done our bit how long before they turn up here?”

“What quarrel does he have with us? He coming here sounds far-fetched.”

“Which is precisely what the Danes, Dutch, Belgians French and Norwegians so sagely told the world. Now they are all under his boot.” That had some effect, maybe as much as I would get voluntarily.

“Now who is for regular work, regular pay, and a chance to meet women and enjoy life in Melbourne?”

“Me! I’m no slacker.”

“Makes more sense than sitting around moping, working out how we could have won at Bullecourt in 1917.”

“Never meet any birds here.”

Three enthusiasts and five following their lead. Smiles for them, handshakes and a form. After these carrot eaters left, time to bring out the stick.

“Another reason for taking this offer is that changes come in New Albion. War means rationing and that means more than just shortened hems. Petrol for excursions and trips into town will be non-existent. Our budget will be slashed, no more newspapers, books, or records. There will be less food and no luxuries. The inspectors and I will see what else can be cut. If these luxuries are important to you pay them from your wages in Melbourne. Consider your futures and let me know by Tuesday; this splendid offer cannot last forever.”

“May I say a few words?”

By asking that in public Max had already got the permission he wanted and I would not willingly give. Hopefully Max would not refer to Queen Victoria, or if he did, he would remember that she was dead.

“If any of you think that you should not follow bad leaders or that your little bit of slacking doesn't count or that the Germans won't be so bad have a look at France under the Hun's heel. They had about the same strength as Germany and slacker attitudes and thinking they could get peace by being pals with Nazis led to their destruction. When our pilots were ready to bomb Italy hundreds of French sat on the airfields to stop us because they were scared of retaliatory bombings. Better to lose divisions and cities than the will to fight and sacrifice.”

He paused for puffing breath. Every last one was expressionless.

“Now everybody knows that you fellows have done your duty, and that you did it when many a slacker stayed home and prospered while you

suffered and still do, you would not be here if that were not so, all this is obvious. What's also obvious is that a younger generation must now do their duty and they will have their slackers, and there will be profiteers and inequalities, every war has them. Still, we must sacrifice; you were the young men who sacrificed last war, be true to yourselves and those young men you once were... by not becoming the slackers of this generation."

They did not say anything. They took the leaflets and I left them and Max and Marsha, who now lived with him and looked after him since Zelda's death, were in my office. He spoke.

"Who are the ones hopeless for the war effort but able to look after themselves. No balmy types, nutters, brain damaged."

He got the list with a few lines through.

"We have space for six, for the duration. And I'll see Ross, all that space at Ahmegodheho; he will do the right thing,"

*Oh no he won't! Wake up to what he is old duffer, wake up.*

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Ahmegodheho 4<sup>th</sup> January 1941

Oh no not again, no, no, no! I don't deserve this. Nobody does.  
Wasn't suffering through the last war enough?

We knew what was in his mind from the Boxing Day Ball when he looked at the walls, not the things on them and Max's weirdly smiling gaze went along the wall as if counting the beds that would fit in. The first Australian casualties from England's air war and soldiers from the Middle East arrived at New Albion last week.

"We could easily fit at least twenty wounded in here. Fifty if we crowd and the offensive casualties are high."

"We haven't had many Australian casualties yet." Not even a hello to start with.

“Oh but we will, we will.” He was smiling at the thought of the casualties to come and I knew what he was like with that childlike stubbornness once it started.

“Ahmegodheho has already been committed to the war effort.”

*My war for peace and quiet against people like you.*

His eyebrows arched and his eyes gleamed. He loved this war.

“It has to be very hush hush.”

“Ah, it wouldn’t have anything to do with flying, would it?”

An inscrutable face answered that while writing a note for Rosa.

SCATTER MAPS AND PLANE DIAGRAMS ACROSS ROSS’S STUDY DESK IMMEDIATELY. HAVE NEWSPAPERS OPEN AT WAR STORIES AND SCRAWL TOP SECRET ACROSS A MANILA ENVELOPE WITH THOSE NEW DC-3 47 DESIGNS IN THEM.

As usual Rosa came quickly at the bell and took the note while I asked for tea to be brought as a cover and a delayer.

“Max, an old soldier like you knows better than to ask questions.”

He laughed and got onto the war. In his home he had maps of the fronts pinned up and troop movements were made clear with toy soldiers and disused matchboxes were lovingly made into tanks and aircraft, each with their nation’s logo in correct crayon colours. While we chatted about the merits of differing tank shells in North African Rosa had time and had sense to let me know with a curtsey and a glimmer in the eyes as she knocked.

“Oh Max, can you see if Ross has returned to his office? Always organising home school leaves me busy just now.”

He puffed his way down and soon puffed his way up aghast. I kept a straight face.

“Good lord! Top secrets left lying around a desk! Anyone could read them!”

“Anyone will if we have casualties, their relatives and nurses will be here won’t they?”

“But why here?”

“Well it is a long way from the coast so there's less chance of raiding parties.”

“Ah Ross’s fuel dump!”

My eyebrows went up as I continued making it up.

“And spies and bombers. They will both be looking for us in the coastal capitals and Canberra. That plane that crashed near Canberra with all the important politicians and the general aboard. Do you really believe that it was an accident?”

“I can keep a secret.”

“Good man. Can you keep a sharp eye?”

“Like a hawk.”

*Hawks do not have reading glasses thicker than your beloved vegemite jars, but we have to get you out of that house before one of the vets clobbers you or Marsha becomes a psych patient.*

“You know of our merchant ships Germans recently sunk in the Tasman Sea?”

“Of course, of course!”

*Of course. You put little plastic ships down on the map with painted fire circling them*

“Well Ross will donate two Catalinas for coastal surveillance. He flies, but I cannot be a spotter all the time... the children must have my attention”

“You know that I’ll do it! Of course you know.”

“I knew you would!”

He beamed. This was better than being a nurse again and him staring into space with tear-stained eyes, pointing to the church gates where he



said he first saw Zelda. Who knows? Maybe they would find the killer submarine or more likely scare it off. It was U-boat policy to dive and evade at the sight of enemy aircraft, even spotters. I got on the phone to Ross.

“Dearest husband, can you do a little something for me?”

“Uhm?”

“Start up a submarine surveillance service from Wollongong to the Victorian border, make the aerodrome fuel area into a major fuel depot and get this house declared a top secret planning centre. Turn your study into an operations centre. Start on all this today, because if you don’t you can share the place with Uncle Max and three hundred traumatised war veterans, but not your wives, mistresses or children.”

\*

Horace Clarke

Minto Sydney 21st June 1941

Perhaps the Communist Party was not as wonderful as it had first seemed. Japanese-Australia Friendship Organisation fascists or some such thing were giving out anti-war leaflets and they read much the same as ours. Then there were so many rules and regulations and strange twists and turns within them and so many strange and nasty people. At the youth group party at the study camp after days of studying Marxist theory I was so mentally tangled up and exhausted I would have agreed to anything if Marx or Lenin or Stalin said it. Then things got too simple at the party. They had this American singer, Barry O, I didn’t like the look of him, he had cigarettes that dangled from the edge of his almost always sneering mouth, daggy, brushed back, greasy long hair past his grimy collar and he smelled bad and wouldn’t look you in the eye, His guitar must have had diamonds inside, it went everywhere with him, even to the toilet.

At the party they had him up to sing and I couldn’t believe how bad

he was, even out of tune with his own horrendous strumming while he looked at us with contempt. He thought we were too stupid to see and although he spoke sounding Yankee, he sang in this false southern voice:

Franklin D! Franklin D!

Ya ain't gunna crucify me Ya ain't gunna crucify me.

I'd rather be a hawg, or a critter holed up in some holler lawg  
than be a soljer an' a killer in yer US American imperialist  
armmeeee!

That was it and he sang it ten times more while the more party minded plastered fixed smiles on their faces while Barry O held us in contempt.

“Okay let's see if I can teach it to yer, see if we can get it right after a couple of times now!”

*He's a horrible singer and a worse guitarist and the only reason he is in the Communist Party is so he can pretend he is a great singer and have a career. He puts on that unpolished southern act to cover the way he has no polish.*

These bad cynical thoughts came to me, but so did party teaching, that cynicism reflects the outlook of decadent capitalism's drone class and I banished such thoughts; he was a comrade.

When dancing was on I was rejected by everybody except Rima, a study group comrade. Six years older than me, Polish born, not a smiler and with a sharp face and a thin body, but she said yes. The music was Australian folk songs like it always was, because they came from the working class and other songs were suspect and took time to investigate. Barry O was hard to dance to and he confused the drummer and the pianist who gave up trying to follow and played properly. I said so.

“Follow objective truth comrade, no not objectivity, that illusion of petty bourgeois academics, but objective truth, which being based on our objective, which is global communism, puts petty bourgeois truth as a

secondary consideration, the world needs communism and that at this point of development, that is the ultimate truth and all objectives are geared to it, therefore Barry O is a brilliant singer because he aids our aim. Follow? Unlike Satan, Hitler or Jesus, Paul Robson cannot be everywhere.” All this was said in what may have been the blank faced way party people have of reciting things, or Rima may have been doing a parody, for she changed her face back.

“Ask me what I think of Barry after we achieve world communism.”

I laughed and sharp-faced party people stared. That was another thing, they did not like laughing or smiling, but Rima was, slightly. “Let’s go outside.” She suggested.

I thought she meant on the steps, but she meant on the other side of the creek, which was hidden by reeds. She sat down, using the cardigan against the cold and finding a horse blanket behind a nearby tree. When I sat next to her my heart was palpitating. She put her hands to my temples and smiling, pressed her mouth into my tongue with vigour; it was wonderful and I was abandoned to it. Then she broke away, eyes gleaming and I started to say something.

“Oh don’t look so worried, if you enjoyed that, well that was just the start.” She reached into her dress with both hands and pulled her underwear off, folding them neatly on the blanket, and then she lay with her hands behind her head.

“Best keep your clothes on, its cold.”

When we got back they were packing up and they stared at us, cranky.

“Where have you two been?”

“Over on the lake, enjoying the music.” She said that level faced.

“Rima, know the rules, party members must be on call and have their whereabouts known at all times by their immediate superior. This is

one more infraction of party discipline, you will be disciplined in the morning session, along with other Polish comrades.”

I waited until we were outside and then asked her what it was all about.

“Purging the Polish comrades. Many of us want to fight the Nazis and are no longer so fond of Stalin after he sold Poland’s Western half out to Hitler and invaded, whoops liberated, the East. We are not pro-Nazi enough. Now if you are sensible leave, excepting Rosenthal, who protects you, the others hate you, hate your chatter, your awkward questions, your ruling class ways and the way they are using you to get your father’s money. So why not come with me and learn more pleasant things?”

I smiled at that wonderful idea, then she said the worst possible thing.

“End this quarrel with your father, finish your schooling and work for him.”

“Have you met my father?”

“Have you tried to survive without money?”

“Perhaps we should discuss this in the morning.”

Rima’s face lost its light and she said goodnight very level in the party voice and the mask returned. In the morning the radio said Russia was attacked and sitting next to her she just said “This changes everything” and it did.

Everybody just sat listening to the radio for hours but if I asked a question or speculated they just glared. All day and night it was like that and at breakfast they said nothing; it was like being in Max’s emporium where all the clothing dummies were stored. At announcements Rosenthal said we were doing Marxist revision starting with his *The Civil War in France*.

“Why study things from eighty years past when Soviet Russia is under attack!”

“Oh really?” One comrade snarled and another joined in.” It is the height of petty bourgeois snobbery and opportunism to reject Marx for fads.”

“Such as peace movements, which whatever their value always attract the gutless.” This was from Comrade Bertha, with her face screwed up like she had bitten a lemon but was staring at me, eyes all glarey and she just held that gaze.

*She means for everybody to stare at her and get that message that she means me. It is all an act they are meant to see. She is just paying me back because Rima and I are together and she can't get a man.*

Bad cynical thoughts came to me again and so I remembered again party teaching, that cynicism reflects the outlook of decadent capitalism's drone class and once more I banished such thoughts; she was a comrade. Every time bad cynical thoughts come I remember where they come from, a bad background and the in calculated passivity of capitalism that conquers us by dividing us and so keeping us, well passive.

“So when will we talk of what happens in Russia?” Rima asked.

“When Stalin's generals get him sobered up!”

There were horrified gasps all around the room. All eyes were on Comrade Gerry and many had scared faces and open mouths. One older comrade even had the shakes in his fingers and chins.

“Oh don't look so horrified! You heard the stories of those parties in his underground home!”

“Comrade Gerry!” Comrade Bertha stamped her foot. “Perhaps you are the one who should sober up!”

“Wake up you mean and bloody hell, I've done that!” He looked at us with this sneer that was half pitying, half contemptuous. “The Nazis

attacked three days past and obviously if Stalin is sober or he sobers up soon he'll try and do a deal with the Nazis and offer them bargain price oil or a list of all Greek or Yugoslav comrades for the firing squad wall if Hitler backs off. If that happens, they'll agree it was all a fiendish plot by the warmonger Churchill to split up pals and you will recite that line, but if Hitler continues his attacks and war goes on you will say you were always antifascists, there was never any Pact of Steel."

"This study group will adjourn." Comrade Rosenthal had a face as expressionless and hard as steel, like Comrade Bertha's. "An immediate special committee to consider the future party membership of Comrade--"

"Here's where I save you the trouble mate." Comrade Gerry had his party card in his hand and shredded it, then he sprinkled it over Comrade Rosenthal, who just stayed absolutely motionless for a few seconds and then very calmly brushed the little paper flecks away. There was something very scary in that. Gerry sensed it as well.

"Bet I'm lucky not to be in Spain four years past, hey Rosenthal."

"Extremely lucky. Now leave, you are a nonperson."

"If you have half a brain in your head you two will leave. You think he likes you boy? Pray that the great Barry O here does not persuade the central committee to order him to slit your throat."

"Why should he do that?"

\*

Rima Buchinsky

Minto Sydney 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1941

Everybody else but poor bloody Horace knew why he should do that. Why on earth did I do it with him? At least Gerry was attractive and considerate and seemed honest. Two of them in less than a month would get me a reputation. Gerry leaving may have actually had something to do with Stalin and Hitler, but it had more to do with me being pregnant, perhaps by him and he saw me being sick in the mornings. Oh, he said

the right things when he was told, but the tremor in his voice and the fear in his eyes made me realise I was trapped with someone who did not want me. I knew better than to even ask Barry. Horace on the other hand wanted me and I wanted to be wanted. Being honest with him was preferred, but I knew what everyone there knew, that he could not take it. Telling him might make him into another Rosenthal, once cuckolded by a lesbian wife according to party gossip. The women comrades discussed his celibacy and total lack of interest in women and why. Some felt he was homosexual and that Horace was a target, but the divorce and the murder of his second wife seemed to have ended the world of romance for him – and the party was hardly an organization to rekindle it.

There were several more days of *The Civil War in France* and listening to the radio, which the party usually disliked because it was uncontrolled by the party and therefore not congenial to party mindedness. The days were matched by nights on the pond's far side. He was more attractive than he knew, both in looks and listening to what I wanted and when a man still can't take his eyes off yours afterwards, and after a dozen times, well it was a new sensation, and very flattering. Even being a naïve boy was a welcome change. I went ahead with it after the involuntary vomiting at breakfast. He was scared and bewildered, what sixteen-year-old boy wouldn't be?

Rosenthal called him in for a private meeting and Horace came out looking a little more mature. I asked if he threatened him.

“Not at all. He just said childhood was over for me and that whatever way I chose would decide what type of man I became. Then he said that he hoped he did not have to tell me which was the right choice and which was the wrong one.”

“And what choice did you make?”

“I said I had already made the right choice. Let’s go for a walk by the pond.”

I hoped Rosenthal, who never had a pregnant wife, did not know that vomiting does not start so soon. He was best man at the wedding two weeks later, fortunately the party line had changed and we were now two hundred per cent behind the now much-admired Russian people and party work kept us busy and popular. Some of us stood collecting for Russia in what westerners considered Russian peasant girl costume, colourful long scarves, sown roses on white blouses, leather boots and a skirt lace decorated with scarlet lace trim. These were my celebratory Polish clothes. It wasn’t pure Hollywood, the better off, the kulaks wore such things to weddings and dances and celebrations, but I was not Russian. Passers-by cheered, including Rosenthal and my husband, driving past in a propaganda flat board truck with a gallows in the back and the slogan “DEATH TO ALL NAZIS” on all side in big bold letters.

“Too right!” One cheery old worker called out as we got the clink of a donation and admiration for the Russia's determined fight. This might be as close to seeing communism here as we would ever get.

\*

Francisco Druetti

Sienna June 28th 1941

The infernal loud-hailers summoned us to the city square for an emergency meeting of vital importance - as always. Typical Mussolini bombast: he must have been a terrible schoolteacher.

“What emergency is not vital in importance? Yes?” My aunt (once one of his students) sneered. “Hah he could not control us! Eight-year-olds and he had to bribe us with sweets to be good! Now there are no sweets so he uses secret police and thugs with clubs!”

Perhaps her words were right, could it be as simple and as stupid as that? Even so, listening to his harangues was preferable to the rumoured



alternative, the trucks full of thugs came and the slackers ended up bashed. Some said sometimes they were cast on some rock in the sea with a net, a hat, a fishing line and bread, and told if they did not want to be part of Italy they could live alone.

So I turn up, like everybody, knowing not to wear a wide brim hat as these were considered disrespectful and concealed dislike and boredom. I avoided sunstroke with a beret and like the wise, went to the toilet first.

We hear yet again of the glories of the Caesars and yet again of how he had been chosen by destiny to return to Italy her glories and yet again of our string of glorious victories. Those glorious victories show his wisdom in joining Hitler's attack on France (which Hitler did not want him to do, knowing our military) and Russia (which proved Hitler was a bigger idiot than Mussolini) he got to the point. He needed more armies to achieve more glorious victories, so we were levied for the task. We looked around. Apart from the street thugs with clubs in hand and pistols in the belt there were blackshirts there with those ridiculous Arab fez hats which have tassels bobbing around their foreheads and those cradled ugly little submachine guns lovingly pointed our way. Who else but a fascist is so stupid or masochistic as to wear woollen hats, knee high leather boots and belt to match and thick black shirts in summer's midday sun – and stand at attention for hours? They may hold Europe in fear, but they are also silly and grotesque. Their recruiters wandered through, telling all boys and females to go.

Everybody else was marched off.

As I knew it must be, I was passed. Loving to work with my hands outdoors I worked as an Argentinian gaucho every spring to autumn and usually came home for late harvesting and winter preserving time. In the last seasons in Argentina since Hitler invaded Poland I knew it would have been wiser to stay there, but the family is large, poor and lives with

pressing debts and my foolish older brothers and brothers-in-law, one dead in the Spanish war, another at Bardia and two others alive in an Egyptian prison camp, left dependants. Everybody relies on me, including it seems, Mussolini's conscriptionists.

Training was terrible, but worse for those who were brave.

"Mussolini's victories ha!" One young rebel called out on parade ground. "Libya's Arabs lasted years with flintlocks against tanks. Sure he beat Ethiopians, they had spears, but the British know-"

"Forget what the British know!" The parade ground sergeant roared as he stormed over, blew his whistle and his underlings moved in. "What I know is that you are a traitor who will not live very long!"

He got savage blows and was carted off, his knees in the dust, his head down and a small trail of blood behind him. We were not supposed to look up, but I raised my eyes and there were blackshirts with submachine guns pointing our way. I knew how to wait while Fascism's enthusiasts dwindled: either by spilling their blood in Africa's sands or waking up to a reality, that unless change came that was their future. There would be no outbursts from me or turkey brained escape attempts.

\*

Captain Jack Caufield Internment Camp 4 Alexandria 9<sup>th</sup> August 1941

It was all so boring, but regulations rule and we have to let them have their little say, I give them the usual quip and the crucial question, they refuse to join us and they go back to the overcrowded prison camp where they get less chance of release and worse conditions than here in the internment camp. A ten-minute process if that, sometimes thirty. He spoke a little English. Clarissa got ready for a translator. Ross, who never knew how I helped Moon behind the scenes, paid me to look after her: she was efficient, loyal, polite and laconic, an excellent secretary.

“Captain, this current translator makes basic errors and conceals them. Here are notes and complaints from the department’s chief and even I am picking up errors with my basic Italian.” She handed me scores of pages with red notes through it. A poor Copt with an Italian mother had bluffed his way into a pay cheque.

“Then you give translating a try. Anything unusual?”

“A lot. First this one was mentioned in an escaped prisoner’s report. A traffic policeman at the camp, he gave them the key, maps and water. Second he was found in the condemned prisoner’s enclosure; facing execution for refusing to execute Arabs who helped us and for denouncing Hitler and Mussolini.”

“Pity he doesn’t have good English, oh well let’s hear the usual.”

He was good looking in the way of somewhat happy simple farm boys and was either extraordinarily cunning or incapable of guile. His hatred of his government and its army seemed genuine after a few seconds, let alone the five-minute rant I allowed.

“Well if you hate Mussolini and every Italian we ever come across does, why does he stay in power?”

“Because he keeps many of his enthusiasts there to keep Italy secure and sends the lukewarm and the reluctant to the war and both here and there he has his secret police to keep his will. Hitler props him up.”

“Yet it seems you rebelled.”

“All I want is passage to Argentina.”

That was a bit hard to do, but we did owe him and if we did not reward such help as he had given, we might find others would not give it, but if we did reward...

“We can put you in internment, any good at gardening? Miss Clarke, could you drive him over?”

“Could I pick up the other four and get vegetables from the market, more’s here than anybody could carry and the sellers do not bother me with hefty Italians around.”

\*

Clarissa Chapman            Internment Camp 4 Alexandria 9th August 1941

From the first day it was blatantly clear to me it would happen, but not to him, although from that puzzled assessing look; he was suspecting. On the first drive to get the others I just said if he wanted to get ahead here to learn English and he nodded. My learning Italian had little to do with him, translators were annoying, unreliable and actually increased the workload, mainly by taking up time. I could not remember a work week of less than a hundred and twenty hours, but I wanted one. After a month the learning-shopping routine was clear and both our language skills were improving. I once absent-mindedly gave him the truck keys to shop alone and he returned, no running off to enemy lines. He was genuine in his hatreds, polite to me and apparently was without the boasting conceit most men had somewhere. One day the time was right I thought: I was certain and it had been so long.

On the menstrual cycle it could not have been wrong. I was two days past safe, so where was my flow? Then morning vomiting started in front of Jack and office staff; to make it worse and I could see that they were blaming him – and so could he.

“Miss Chapman, you obviously have food poisoning, you need to see a doctor.”

I got the innuendo in that last sentence. I did see a civilian doctor who confirmed it and then I saw Francisco, who was both less worried and more dependable than expected. Fortunately, Catholic priests believe any marriage must be better than adultery, just so long as one turns Catholic, fine. I spent days saying yes yes yes to all conversion instruction and

keeping a straight face about miracles, saints obeying popes and all the rest. In just over a week after getting sick leave for food poisoning we were married. Jack wanted me out before he either came under suspicion or got into trouble for not controlling his subordinates, so hey presto! Phone calls to Rosalind got the grease my palm with silver routine working on wheels going from Cairo to Sydney. It also got Francisco's Argentinian citizenship emphasised over his Italian, without it his military record and Italian nationality would have got him interred.

\*

Francisco Druetti

Sydney November 10<sup>th</sup> 1941

How much life changes, so fast yes? This year started peacefully at home in Sienna, but I became a soldier, was almost executed, miraculously saved by becoming captive and by another miracle a husband to a beautiful blonde and soon to be a father, next March and out of the war, safe in the last place on earth I would expect. From the plane I could tell little of this new land. Even Sydney was only seen from its airport. Little Eloura airport was our nearly last stop, a secretary with car waited.

Clarissa said that her father was a wealthy grazier. I asked a prisoner who had worked rurally there and they said "Ah if he's a wealthy farmer he will have no rust on his corrugated roof and it will have stone pillars, not timber. He will either slap you on the back and cheerfully give you a beer or order you off, shotgun in hand. They are very simple people, very easy to understand."

Within minutes I knew that prisoner had never worked for Major Ross Clarke, Lord of Ahmegodheho, owner of Clarkestead, Eloura Airlines and master of very much else. High granite walls surrounded the property and it was five minutes' drive from the gate and massive, more like Dracula's Castle than any farm, granite and stucco on the mortar with

stained glass and Romanesque towers, why? To keep an eye out for the Moors or the Ottomans? He sat on the wide veranda, stiff, unsmiling, a handsome man, a ramrod straight warrior without the flab around the face that usually comes by the fifties. An old school padrone after the old school has gone the way of the Caesars, yes? It seems that I had married into the aristocracy of the cowboys.

He shook my hand, merely nodded to his daughter.

“The Electra flew well?”

“All the way.” My wife answered.

The question was saying what it did not seem to say. In actuality, *I am a very powerful person who has his own luxury plane and flies my daughter half way across the world at a time when even cabinet ministers or generals have problems doing that.*

“You probably know that Nazis have started sinking American shipping. Much more of that and they are in; good for the Allied war effort but not so good for Eloura Airlines. We are registered as neutrals and so must trade with other neutrals; the last big blocs will be Latin America, some of the Asiatics or the Arabs. After my experiences twenty years past Latin America is the best choice.” No pleasantries, small talk or flattery, probably no deceit or manipulation there either. “A local man there doing connections and trade would be invaluable.”

“I am not born Argentinian.”

“I am not Swiss, but my airline is.”

“Every year I go for spring to autumn to work the pampas: so many Italians go they call us swallows. So many Italians that perhaps forty percent of Argentinians have Italian blood. I had Argentinian citizenship but keep it secret.”

“So you will not be a stranger.”

“I know little of business, just family farm.”

“Was it a success?”

*Why did this man want me so far away? And why now was I resistant for the place I once longed for when it comes as a gift?*

“You can do well for yourself, your wife, me and my company.”

“What do you import from America?”

“Food, medicine, surgical instruments and spare parts mainly, but also films. Our picture show gets Hollywood movies before Canberra or Sydney does. We do import luxury goods like chocolate, tea, coffee, whiskey, books, but most go into war charity raffles, they never become more than ten per cent of the total imports and fifteen per cent of the net profits I make goes into war bonds or outright donations, sometimes an entire DC-3.”

“So your own Electra and a Catalina flies for you in this war?”

“And because the company is Swiss.”

The man was no fool, making a fortune in wartime - and yet offering strong evidence of his patriotism and philanthropy. And yet he would be hated. Even at the gate I could sense this was no happy house, even more so at the dinner table where Rosa, the young secretary who was really a mistress and his other daughter by her sat with the wife, who did not seem to mind, and the Uncle Max who did not seem to know.

Bizarre and strange to find myself in a world of immaculate cedar tables as long as the limousine that drove us here, William Morris wallpaper, claret served in fine Venetian glass, that few Venetians could afford, as many slices of thick roast beef as I wanted, the potatoes and peas correctly garnished, everything on the best silver service or Staffordshire china blue. Only in the films set among the European nobility had I seen things like this, but the wife, mistress and daughter did the cooking and serving; I had been told Australians disliked house servants and those who employed them, this was apparently true. Bizarre

this was, but fraudulent, the aping of the nouveau rich? No it did not seem to be, so what passes here?

The women said little and that of less consequence. El Padrone did the important talking over marzipan imported from Toledo, the world's best and the Swiss chocolates loaded on our flight at Geneva.

“After your flight you will like an early night and a few days to clear your head before you make important decisions. The best guest room is on the right.”

The next morning however was another surprise in this year of surprises. The rapping was far too early and angry and they walked in while we were just awake, police or soldiers of some kind. Their leader who did the talking was in a trench coat, the smallest man there. It took only a few seconds to recognise his type. This work always attracts this kind, but he was more of a human rat than most, those beady red rimmed eyes...the cruel little mouth, I knew pretty well what would unfold.

“Well this is definitely Clarissa Chapman. Are you now Clarissa Druetti, nee Chapman?” The little rat was English.

“And I am her husband, Francisco Druetti.”

“Cuff them boys, and out with the rest.”

“Let us dress.”

“So you can escape or destroy evidence? Take ‘em.”

This seemed her father's doing until I saw him, the wife and the mistress on the veranda, handcuffed with guards around and the little rat gloating.

“Well Mister Ross Clarke, Lord and Master of Ah, me god, he haw! You don't look so hoity toity now do yer? Got you at last. Even if you get off you won't get a penny of the eighteen million dollars the yanks started putting into aviation here. You won't get contracts for shipping toilets.”

Half way round the world, and I was in the hands of more secret police with their dawn raids, a frequent sight in Sienna, bewildered



couples marched away in their dressing gowns, the women with torn negligees to show parts of the body that are not decently revealed and to show that blackshirts violate morality as it suits. Here was the same. I gave my wife my pyjama top, seeing my example, my father-in-law gave the mistress his dressing gown. The wife, in thicker flannel nightie, pursed her already vexed lips and the rat's eyes gleamed. This had vey little to do with me – and even less to do with the war.

\*

Alexander McPherson                      Eloura Court House 2nd December 1941

It was a rushed trial, three weeks prep, but with everyone needed to bring it about under pressure, it had to be this way. Although I could not connect all the dots, some other reason was at work for this speedy trial with the press and spectators barred and the witnesses carefully shepherded. It clearly involved Moon's vindictive desires, even so, there was more that was not evident in the documents. Perhaps damages as Henderson Crutchfield, rather oddly given the prosecution case, was once an extremely successful damages lawyer.

The witnesses wished to be elsewhere, no love of court as theatre, no revenger's tragedies, no attention seeking, on the contrary. We filed in and Ross, Elizabeth MacKinnon, Rosalind, Clarissa, her Italian husband and Rosa, sat beside me. After reading the charges and recording the plea, Crutchfield began.

“We have here at the core of these charges, a conspiracy to aid an enemy soldier, and from this flows many crimes, bribery of his majesty's officials and officers, false statements made under oath, giving aid and comfort to an enemy combatant and in our investigations, we found prostitution and black market racketeering.”

The judge sighed, not overly loudly but it was heard, and he looked at Crutchfield with his thumb on his chin and his index finger at the

temple. I was expecting him to say something like 'The court knows what the defendants are charged with, so please get on with it.' But no, the sigh was enough.

“The prosecution will prove its case through many eyewitnesses of the utmost reliability, through confessions of some minor offenders and through submitted documentation.”

He sat and it was my turn.

“The defence will prove my clients innocent through those same methods, but will clearly prove that the time and money allocated for this trial is wasted due to the vindictive nature of both those prosecuting and also by some of those witnesses.”

The judge merely pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows, as did some on the tribunal, as there were aspects not for common knowledge there was no jury.

“Prosecution, first witness.”

“I call Captain Jack Caufield.”

He stood proud and erect as he took the oath and gave his occupation and explained his connection, then Crutchfield came to the crunch.

“On August 9<sup>th</sup> you interrogated Francisco Druetti with Clarissa Chapman as translator and this is your report?”

“Yes.”

“He was an enemy combatant?”

“Yes.”

“You did not revise his status.”

“Never.”

“Permission to cross examine on these matters.” The judge nodded.

“Captain Caufield, during your interrogation, did the defendant show an extreme detestation for Mussolini and fascism?”

“As they always do, once they are captured.”

“And do they always risk their lives to help Allied prisoners escape?”

I submitted the soldier’s affidavits and the report.

“You are aware that the defendant was to be executed for that and for refusing to execute our allied Arabs?”

“Which is why I made the mistake of giving him a chance. Now look at how he has helped the fascist cause.”

“This is an extremely serious allegation!” A time buyer that, but the judge intervened.

“Captain Caufield, if you have information that proves such a thing testify, otherwise retract.”

“First off, our department lost the services of a first-class secretary; it took four new girls to replace her and six hundred man hours to train them. Second, we have had a doctor and three good officers cashiered and the army discredited over the bribes. Third after we believed she was food poisoned and as others had it and he made his dash we thought he may have done it deliberately. The result, the Italian food growers were back in the camp and we had to buy, cost around fourteen thousand pounds per annum and a whole supply ship reallocated for us while blockaded Malta starves.”

“Would you describe your testimony as evidence or speculation?”

“I would say it is obviously true and I find it odd that you a former officer of his majesty’s forces, believe a fascist over another officer.”

“When you signed Clarissa Chapman’s honourable discharge papers did you have any idea she was pregnant?”

“None what so ever. I believed her to be sick through a combination of heat exhaustion, years of overwork and food poisoning, just as the doctor’s report said.”

Perjurer! We could prove it later. Even so after that all instincts said get him off that stand now. The same went for the doctor and the bribed officers. I did ask who paid to fly them from Alexandria and when their flight was gratis from Ollhdesham Airlines I knew I had found the previously smelt rat and made something of the airline rivalry after calling Betham, then made a charge.

“Are you or where you ever a member of the British Union of Fascists?”

“Objection! Relevance?”

“My relevant point is that the defendant has motives both financial and personal for destroying Eloura Airlines with these allegations. He accuses others of what he has done to cover his own actions of dubious legality. He has flown witnesses half way across the world for free at his own expense. He was involved in a messy divorce with one defendant, and an altercation with another and bitter rivalry with all. And to quote Captain Jack Caufield I find the prosecution’s belief in the testimony of a fascist over a former officer of her majesty’s forces to be most puzzling.”

Both the judge and Crutchfield suppressed rueful smiles. When I questioned Betham and reminded him that he was under oath and what the penalties were he admitted to all the things I had just alleged.

“And if your competitors are knocked out by this case your airline will move in to take over and-”

“Objection speculative and about the future!”

“This goes to motivation.”

“For?”

“Suborning perjury, setting up the defendants,”

“You had best have good evidence for this and now.”

I called up the air hostess who would swear to Francisco being on the plane, and who claimed she left after being offered money by Eustace

Hughes (!) to perform sex during flights and that the other air hostesses did this. There was no sense of triumph in this. She was just a Depression Era girl lured into lies by men with money.

“Your occupation.”

“Unemployed.”

“I will ask that again.”

“Why?”

“Because perjury is a serious business. Now we know from your deposited bank cheque of fifteen hundred pounds that you are employed by Ollhdesham Airlines-”

“No I am not, I do not start work with them until after the trial ends, that big cheque was for information, not work.”

“Information concerning what precisely?”

“Oh anything good on how to take Eloura Airlines over once this trial wrecked them, anything that dago fella sitting there said on the flight. Let’s see, anything dirty about the directors, anything anybody could sue them for or law breaking. So you see I am not employed by them and those officers ain’t either yet and they weren’t paid either, well not in money, but it’s their business.”

“Well how were they paid for their trouble?”

“Oh just free accommodation at Betham’s hotel and an easy beer tab and free women until they start work. That’s after a bonus payment if the trial ends with Ross and Robert Clarke and his x destroyed. Then when they are on a wage they pay for it, but Betham told the three of us we would get better pay than we ever had before in our old jobs. I am not one of those harlots they employ, I am a decent girl. I didn’t do it with any of them or be employed by Betham, just selling information to Mister Moon who unlike that Betham, ain’t a pimp.”

I let Crutchfield in first

“Your honour I request an adjournment.”

“And I request a mistrial.”

“Granted and granted. Bailiff take Torrance Betham, and Lieutenants Bale and Ribero into custody, pending questioning. Prosecutor Crutchfield! Inspector Mcphee will need your witness list, and an interview with you.

Case dismissed. The defendants are free to go – excepting Mister and Missus Druetti. Enough questions remain. I feel that given the dubiousness of your Argentine nationality and the apparently unpaid testimony of Captain Caufield, you must be interned for the war’s duration.”

While the bailiff politely led them to the cell. I looked at the evidence list; cheques to Ribero, Bale and the Doctor from Eloura Airlines signed by Rosa, Druetti’s army papers and free Eloura Airlines ticket, affidavits about luxury goods and Caufield had been a devastating witness...

Our hero and everything he had achieved had been endangered. He was saved because a stupid air hostess did not know basic law. He would not get any new contracts from the Americans if they got one whiff of this scandal and Moon would tell them judging by his gleaming and gloating as if he had won.

“Well Lord and Master of Ah, me god, he haw!” His face was a mask of envy and hate and sadistic humour, as he imitated a donkey heehawing. “You won last time, you got out of it this time, but your bloody luck won’t last next time! I’ve already got one Clarke brother in the loony bin, and two more for disgrace, death and jail coming right up!”

Ross, like the others, just stared. I did the talking.

“With your name on that witness list, you should be worried.”

Just an hour later Mcphee joined us for lunch at Jan’s bakery.

“I thought former officers would have lasted much longer, they all cracked and confessed in under five minutes, all three. Back before the judge and they did a deal. Five years a piece, three before parole, concurrent sentences for fraud, perjury, suborning perjury, conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, and unfair business practices. A military court will give them dishonourable discharges. That follows them for the rest of their lives.

Thought you should have been there Alex.”

“My presence was not requested.”

Thank God.

\*

Zinada Koval

Ukrainia 5<sup>th</sup> December 1941

I put it off as long as possible, but one side or the other would find me soon. Winter hibernation means lost mobility: heavy frost and snowfalls means you should not find mobility easy, but trackers will find us much more easily: footsteps leave an obvious trail. The Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators and the Russians and the Ukrainian Nationalists were all still tracking each other in a winter war, not me, but they could track me, without knowing I was not an enemy - or rather an enemy to all. If a bullet did not kill me starvation might: for once again the forest was filling with refugees and deserters, all thinking that they could live off the land and therefore denuding it in the attempted process and killing each other off in competition. Exactly twenty years ago it was happening in the aftermath of the last civil war when I survived by going to one of Makhno's storage dugouts, even though by the time we emerged in the early summer of 1923 I had nearly died of food poisoning and one of the others had. Then came six good years in which we learned to hunt, forage, grow, trap, fish, store and be very, very cautious and then came two bad years when the forest filled again with those escaping

Stalin's purges of the peasantry. Fortunately, they often brought their food and animals with them: unfortunately, the Red Army and the Cheka usually followed. We lost two more Makhnovites to them and the last to pneumonia days past, another problem with not hibernating and not having medicine. Now nobody warned, stood night watch or guarded my back.

Better the Ukrainians, with their mishmash of Russian and German weapons, uniforms and civilian clothes; even so I stayed in a concealed dugout within hearing distance of their fire for a night and a day. It was as expected and to the good. There was much griping on Stalin and the commissars and more against Hitler and the Gestapo. Discussions were on raiding Nazis and food rationing. The commander did not throw his weight around too much and did explain. There were twenty-six, men and six women. No boss, no lechery, not too small a number to be overrun, not too large to starve in the forest.

Out came the old white flag I always knew I would have to use one day.

\*

Keddy Taun McPherson

Hawaii 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941

Picnics and sleeping in do not go together and neither does a big hamper, fuel for the barbecue, a family of six, a birthday cake for them and friends and a little car. My husband drove me to the hilltop picnic area, and we unloaded quickly, being early meant we would get a fireplace and tables and benches, the panoramic view made it much in demand, especially on Sundays. By myself I could get the table set and the cooking started; let dearest husband supervise showers and clothing for once. He would arrive when the other parents and party kids did.

I thought they were flying far too low, even that far off. The red circle was probably a new symbol to show training pilots, they needed it



as a warning it seemed, as they were flying so low and in such a tight formation through steep ridges and hills, they would be lucky not to crash into a farm, or me. Their slipstream blew off the tablecloth, smashing two glasses on the stone barbecue and sending coals from the fire over everything. With no children around I could indulge myself in the swearing at the defence personnel who kept us awake nightly with their raucous parties, who harassed and degraded me every time I went into Honolulu with their wolf whistles and hey baby routines, but then I stopped, for these were no trainees.

The thing that hit so vividly was not the amazement, nor the brutality, but the way such screeching chaos, could come out of such symmetry, such order. The planes went in such perfect lines, so precisely spaced; few sewing machines could place their needles with the precision those planes placed their strafing bullets, few cars parked with the efficiency of those bombs hitting their targets.

Such order produced hurtled bits of people, brick and tin, timber and cars and planes on the ground soaring willy-nilly into the air, great ships listing and heaving as they plunged below the fiery surface of the water, made black by spilling oil, cars crashing into each other as they tried to avoid both the casualties and the rubble piled onto the oil splashed streets, and everywhere the screams, heard even up here, the screams of the limbless, those being burned alive, the drowning.

Being up here was like being God, able to see it all and not be touched. I even saw my husband and children die. The road up was blocked by an overturned troop carrier. Instead of going home he must have been intending to go to a hospital, for even a tropical disease specialist knows first aid. He didn't drop the kids off, thinking that the car's Red Cross symbol was an inviolate shield. Perhaps it was not pure malevolence. The smoking, spluttering plane was obviously in trouble

and the pilot probably wanted to make some military use of his bombs. and there was a military vehicle right below him. Perhaps he just wanted to increase his chances of surviving a crash. He did not, for the American pilot behind him gave another burst and the enemy barely thirty feet above the ground dived and crashed into a shop. He died just seconds after he killed my family.

I walked down the hill, past screamers, rubble, flames oblivious; the smoke made my eyes water and my cough come. At the hospital they treated me as a stunned casualty at first, but found my nurse's identification tag and soon had me at work and it did not stop, my days went for screamers, bleeders, the dying, the desperate and everything was urgent, no time to think: a mercy, a rare thing in Pearl Harbour.

\*

Zoe Carruthers

Darwin 19<sup>th</sup> February 1942

The nasty nips were overrunning Java fast, and there were rumours that we would be next, but if people brought me as many clothes to repair and orders as they brought rumours to my shop, I could retire in a mansion with servants. If every male who came in here sexually frustrated left a pound, I would have two mansions, for Darwin had become a city of men, there were a few telephone board operators and some nurses, but almost all women and children were evacuated, about three thousand out of about five thousand civilians gone south, on boats mostly, but some Atlas planes and even one of Ross's took a few. I hid, as my dress shop was all I had and it would almost certainly be plundered if I left, but it was plundered when I stayed.

The day began peacefully enough, a tea and toast breakfast with the French doors opening on my impossibly green garden, with the birds we loved in their birdbath as the sun spread across the lawn following the light, best time of day, before the drenching humidity I would never get

used to started. He liked classics in the morning and got me in the habit. Eight good years and then he found out about the past I thought was dead but it never is and then the war starting in Poland ten months later provided an excuse. He was Darwin's first volunteer, at eight a.m. on the Monday morning after Menzies announced war on Sunday night.

I opened the shop and news would come with customers. The war was making me rich. Men! They can repair a complicated car motor with just a spanner and I saw the recruits learning to disassemble and reassemble rifles – blindfolded! But ask them to sew a button straight, repair a tear or polish an escutcheon without leaving any powder and it is beyond them! Make an appointment to see Mrs Carruthers. Strictly against military rules: all soldiers must take care of their own equipment. Even so, with parade coming Saturday morning see the lady who performs miracles. They were making me rich, especially the few Americans with their immaculate manners and tips worth a week's wages for a fixed button.

One regular came in, Radio Operator Konarski, tense.

“Mornin’ Mrs Carruthers. Better pack this time. Heard it in the pub, just now.”

*Pubs where rumours flow faster than beer. What is this one?*

“What is this one?”

“Missionaries on Bathurst Island radioed it in. A hell’va Jap air raid comen' fast.”

“Why no sirens or air raid wardens?”

“They don’t believe it, yet.”

*Then neither should I.*

I thanked him and took his shirts. We had heard something like that one many a time before. Usually, Aborigines being credited with supernatural hearing and sight. The whirring in the sky meant nothing:

Darwin was an overcrowded base for all three branches of defence wasn't it?

The screeches came sudden and loud enough to go from one ear to another and leave everything in between reverberating while the hurled glass, stones and earth attacked my skin and blood came everywhere and through the hacked-up glass on the edge of the frame there was only blue sky where the post office was and big chunks of it were on my floor where I was and then something smashed into my skull.

Through sleep I heard their voices and then feel them, crushing me as they walked over the corrugated iron that was over me, that had been over my shop.

“She could not have survived this, nearly a direct hit.”

“Oh yes I can!”

The effort to yell made me breathe deep and I took in something acrid that nearly choked and when I opened my eyes and they lifted the sheet off me I saw it was black smoke, oily and everywhere.

“You're a lucky gal!”

“Yes, oh yes Radio Operator Konarski.”

Konarski and an Aboriginal helped me up and over to a makeshift casualty station where six women from the telegraph section of the post office were laid out straight with blankets over them. Nurses did for me what they could, a face wipe, a check to see if I could count my fingers, a bex tablet and the empire's solutions to all woes, a cup of tea, not that I rejected it, or left them, for they were an island of order in a sea of hell. Flames were everywhere, from little flickers on windblown straw slivers to the towering wall of flame that came off the water, now black with oil and smoke and the smoke it was everywhere too black and oily and in everything, our skin, tattered clothes, hair and lungs and the sun burnt where the flames did not, for there was not a roof left on anything. The

sounds were worse, the screams of those being burned alive in the harbour or under rubble. Closer were nasty bully boy men trying to be top dog hero by shouting at each other. They disagreed because their idea had to be best and the best way to make that clear was to show that the other's idea had to be no good. They could do this because no officers were around, but they came soon enough and so did everybody else – but in a rush to go south.

“It is the invasion!”

“They will be dropping paratroopers soon!”

They rushed past, on bicycles, horses, trucks, cars, even a sanitation wagon fully loaded, but most ran on foot, soldiers, sailors, officers, Aborigines, nurses, civilians, ditch diggers, missionaries, prostitutes, even a few children and three or four mothers with babes in arms. The great shrieking babble of humanity like one big mad centipede after being jabbed: all the mad frantic arms razed up and jerking fast, legs rushing to stumble. I prayed that it pass away soon, but that was very foolish. Within minutes of the last of them passing the sounds started fading away and in another forty there was an ominous quiet that when you listened carefully, was not so quiet. The burning made a muffled noise in the background, but there were no more shrill screams, just burning paper and a wall crumbling away somewhere. Then the two legged rats came out. Quietly and individually at first, with their gunny sacks or army issue rucksacks. They usually went for wallets, wristwatches, wedding rings, off the living and the dead, no matter. Then some drunk came out with what was left of the bank, in a black suit with the pockets carelessly stuffed with money and firing a pistol randomly: one ricochet sent brick dust into my wounds.

“They gone and tha bank is full! Cash! Cash! Cash!”

They came out, furtively at first out from around corners, up from

playing dead on the street, one from under sheets of corrugated iron and then they ran in for it. Four army lorries with servicemen on soon came. I thought “wonderful, the soldiers will protect us.” Especially as tough old Sergeant-Major Caufield was on top cradling one of those new things like a portable little machine gun. I had done mendings for him twice or thrice. Then I saw what was in the lorries, crates of alcohol, expensive furniture, even children’s toys. Bundles of money. Some were drinking with their arms around prostitutes. Australian, American, Dutch evacuated from Java, British from the failed Malayan campaign, all men, all the same. They stopped in front of me.

“Here’s where her shop was, there’d be money there for sure.” The Sergeant-Major spoke gleefully.

“Maybe dresses too!”

“Nah, ripped to shreds in the blast.”

The expert putting down someone else’s idea, another one. There was always something about him I disliked.

“There she is, alive.”

“Not any more, she knows me.”

The shot was aimed to miss, just. I hobbled away.

“Talk and you are really dead.”

I rounded a corner and hid in the remnants of a grocery store, living on tinned stuff. Eight days later when I heard our planes were not far off, I got a lift and one on the makeshift field was the Eloura plane.

“Is Ross Clarke here?” I asked a young aerodrome supervisor. His brows knitted in amazement.

“Lord no Missus. He lives down south. If you have any enquiries -”

“I would like a seat on this plane.”

“So would ninety per cent of Darwin. Generals find getting a seat difficult.”

“May I use your phone? Ross will be very upset if you don’t let me. I will put through a call. Take this slip; it has his home number.”

Perhaps the way I said his name did it. Or perhaps having his home number in my old address book. He shrugged his shoulders and gestured to the phone. I gave him money and the call went through. He remembered my voice.

“Ross the Japanese have left me in a terrible fix. I need medical treatment urgently and must fly out. This flight w71 goes to Adelaide in ninety minutes. I must be on. We can talk in detail later.”

“Put on the top man there.”

Amazed he took the phone.

“Kick off the most junior officer there and give Zoe his seat. If that plane lands without her on it I’ll have your job and they won’t have an aeroplane northward bound. Only play the trump card of being a Swiss based airline if they really kick up.”

Then he hung up as they drove to the runaway. They kicked up, but I was the one with the seat, and the awaiting booked taxi that took me to Adelaide Hospital with a waiting bed and specialist in attendance. It was very nice of him not to turn up, I could hardly come out with the cliché “I do not know how I can ever repay you.”

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Ahmedgodheho 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1942

Every weekday Rosa brought me brunch, the mail, newspaper and news at 10:00. Sleeping in and unrushed breakfasts are too of my favourite activities.

“A visitor today.”

“Deserving of silver service tea on the veranda?”

“Very much, she’s very nice and very pregnant.”

“Does she have a card? A name?”

“Rima Clarke.” She looked at me, very seriously.

“She had a wedding ring on, she’s about twenty-five and foreign.”

“You usually are. Have her wait.”

She was pretty, blonde, blue-eyed, probably a Slavic refugee by the blouse, boots, and accent, which gave the impression she was in a European folk dancing troupe.

“*Mrs* Rima Clarke.”

“Yes.”

“Not married to Ross.” That puzzled her. “Widow to James? Wife to Eustace or Craig?”

“Horace actually.”

“Horace.”

“Yes. Is there something wrong?”

A swaying sensation nearly overwhelmed.

“You obviously have the wrong address or perhaps some confusion over similar names. My son Horace has just turned seventeen.”

“On January twenty-second.”

I sat down and Rosa knew to leave. My breath exhaled and inhaled very fast.

“When did you marry?”

“On July 7<sup>th</sup> last year.”

The approaching baby was the explanation. The way she read my face but did not affirm he was the father said much.

“A sixteen-year-old boy cannot legally marry without parental consent and we certainly did not give such consent.”

“His guardian did, Rosenthal.”

“Does this guardian have a first name and an occupation?”

“Comrade. He is a full-time organiser. Horace works with him.”

“Organising what?”



“Party events... membership drives... our travelling library...”

“Who can afford to put on parties when this country is on an austerity drive?” She suddenly looked scared. “Membership in what?” She refused to answer. “Membership in what? Did you slur the word Conrad or did you say Comrade? Surely even Horace is not that stupid.”

“We are members of the Communist Party.”

That was like a punch, this time the room did sway and it took some time to calm myself and she was feeling sorry for me. She was not a witch or perverted, and yet not apparently naïve, like some young ones they caught.

“And how did you became a Communist?”

“My parents were Polish liberals and the liberals in Poland just melted away when the militarist Pilsudski launched his coup sixteen years past. They dreamed of being like Adam and Eve in some tropical paradise so they named me after the heroine in W.H. Hudson's novel, *Green Mansions*; it inspired them to think that way.”

“And?”

“North Queensland was no tropical paradise, the festering mosquito and sand fly bites, the heat like living in a sauna... It killed him. They thought they could escape the world of money and repression, but there can be no real escape: you either bow down to the world of money or you fight it to build a better world.”

*Like mother like daughter: still looking for utopia and still finding it hell.*

“Who was at this wedding? What witnesses do you have?”

“When I asked Horace to invite some friends or relatives all he could think of was the milkman and Rosenthal.”

“You will get no money from us. You had best leave before my husband Ross returns. That means now. Rosa!”

When she came I absent mindedly told her to get the dog cart ready and went with them so that this Rima would not talk. On the way the realisation of what a lie my marriage, motherhood and respectability was. I felt vile, that life was stupid and so was I and everyone else. Although we had car fuel, we knew better than to use it and cause enmity. We had the dog cart ready and dropped her off at the station without a word to her.

“Return home!” That was as much as I could manage until at the gate I saw Ross’s car in the garage. “Not one word, ever.” Rosa nodded and we found Ross and Max in his ostentatiously silly Ottoman Room. They were laughing and clinking glasses, so rare to see Ross laugh.

“That will show Moon with his stories of this being a lurk and there not being any Jap subs about!”

“You got one?” Rosa was incredulous.

“Nearly!” Max boomed. “It was Japo al right, they were actually on deck so we could see the little yellow devils and it had the rising sun insignia on its turret, so they tried to dive pretty lively, but whacko! Four bombs tossed before they could and even if they all got down the hatch, they left a trail of air and oil bubbles behind em! Oh we got one, we got one!” Max chanted and soon there would be phone calls and perhaps newspaper interviews and floods of calls from sub watchers and I was glad of something else to think about. Errol Flynn would be proud.

\*

Rima Clarke          Paddington Women’s Hospital Sydney 4<sup>th</sup> April 1942

Like many first babies this one was late, thank God for that because I needed everything to convince him that it was his. The baby was Horace junior of course. Because it kept growing beyond the nine months childbirth was much more protracted and painful than usual; that worked in my favour for I had screamed so much and looked so weak that he

could not be angry with me when the baby had Gerry's red hair. From his face it was obvious Horace had doubts. Rosenthal tried to help, paying an elderly Danish refugee with red hair and green eyes to pose as a solicitous uncle, but he was such a bad actor that he fooled nobody but Horace and suddenly I could see the other side of naiveté and political idealism; it might be charming when young but there is no fool as big as an old fool and he was heading for that. As a mercy nurses and doctors told him about blue eyes changing colour, so with the bedside uncle's visit he was expecting green. I was lucky, better a child with Gerry's genes than bloody Barry, the permanent brat. Rosenthal was wise as usual.

“The best solution comrade, is to have another child as soon as possible.”

“This is exactly what I was thinking comrade.”

“The other involved is a non person so party rules protect us.”

Thank the leadership for those rules. Once a Communist Party member leaves or is expelled they are treated as if they never have existed. No mention or contact can be made without permission. If their paths cross with ours they are ignored, not a word of abuse, not a glare or a glance. That was very convenient for this situation. It sounds calculating, but my punishment was being married to a fool.

\*

Lynda Taun Fisher

Eloura 1<sup>st</sup> June 1942

Oddly the littlest things shape our lives: in this case a chocolate and a glimmer in the eyes for a second. At the double feature intermission at the Pharoah Max offered Marsha a choice from a tray of fine-looking chocolates.

“Oh Max, more of Ross's imported luxuries?” She responded.

“Of course! Who else can get Swiss chocolate imported these days? Only the Swiss and only to the secret HQ!”

“What else does he have up there?”

Up there meant Ahmegodheho, which Max had insisted could not be used as a hospital because it had a supposedly higher purpose so secret it could not be discussed. A steady supply of Hollywood films got showings here before Sydney: no other country town did that. Jamaican rum, Argentine beeves, Indian cotton, all had ways of appearing around Eloura and now I knew where they were stored. Moon was a human rat, but he had his uses and if there was only one thing in this world he could be trusted on, it was to do damage to our great lord and master of Ahmegodheho

Ross Clarke

Eden 4<sup>th</sup> June 1942

He went over the top by trying to top his scaring off the Jap submarine. In perfect spotting weather for them or for us; no sub commander above idiocy level would be near the surface today, but bloody Max guffawed with excitement.

“It's coming up! It is coming up! Ho! Ho!” The murky tube shape under seaweed was moving and massive, maybe and maybe one of ours, but before I could stop him he tossed a bomb.

“Down you go! Down the spout!”

Literally. The blubber blew high enough to splatter the fuselage and one particularly large piece with teeth sent cracks along his side window.

“Oh good lord, We've brought whaling back to Eden! The town can live with extra meat rations for a month! Meat not fish! Did you know that whales are mammals not fish because they suckle their young?”

*Did you know that you are the biggest idiot in this war?*

Trouble came four days later, in the form of General Cullum, who interviewed Max first, while still in a jolly mood, at least before he left that office. He would not look me in the face when he came out and was

clearly upset. Cullum's face revealed nothing and was meant to be enigmatic.

“Is this secret centre at your house covered by the Official Secrets Act or authorised by any official military or civilian body?”

“I set it up.”

He sighed, shuffled papers and looked out the window.

“It is extremely fortunate that you have donated as much you have. Now you need to donate more.”

“Our flying boat.”

“While that old duffer blows up whales Sydney was shelled by subs. We may have stopped them with planes like yours. And don't give me that Swiss shit. Your planes may be Swiss, but you are not – and neither is that prostitute you got out of Darwin by dumping a courier.”

He held up a folders with *Investigation for Prosecution* in big bold letters my name was on one, Max's on the other.

“He did not even look for an enemy insignia. We had a sub out from Jervis Bay, not twenty miles north. He is a menace and you are a shirker. Retire the menace and put the shirker where he is desperately needed.”

“Shirkers don't volunteer, fight in the front lines from Gallipoli to Megiddo and volunteer for Russia!”

“And returned a multimillionaire for your services and you seem to be heading for more money in this one!”

He pulled out maps which had the Japanese menace marked by red arrows, and not that far north. I noticed how the flight paths of the Dutch Airline KLM, Atlas and the powerful new British government owned airline BOAC, which had once been our old rival Imperial Airlines, were broken by the red arrows of the Japanese.

“In a country facing invasion against an enemy that has bombed from Kenya to Alaska and regularly bombs us, we do not have time for niceties. Now we can approach your rivals Oldsham, who will do anything we say to stay out of internment camps, we can approach the new bunch Teal, who are owned by a mixture of the New Zealand government, Atlas and BOAC and are therefore very powerful, or your airline can be useful to us, which is it?”

“Let us make a deal.”

\*

Murie Chapman

Broome 7<sup>th</sup> August 1942

Oh I want to go home! But knew I should not, one reason why we were not doing so well was because our side had the slackers and Hitler and Hirohito did not; they shot theirs or put them to slave labour, but oh I want to go home.

They said this was a very sleepy pretty pearling town that nobody ever bothered about and we were lucky to get such a quiet, carefree posting. Try about five thousand screaming desperate Dutch from Java and their Javanese servants, all refugees, always asking for something. Try Japanese bombers and strafers in March the week after we arrived. Five months of it.

We do night spot work for anti-aircraft with our beams, but it gets too hot and sticky up here to sleep well in daytime. Everybody wakes up with sweat on their necks and the nets are as much of a pest as the things they are meant to protect us from. Now I know how a fly in a web feels. Even so we are the lucky ones to have them, the poor refos get bitten terrible and have more fevers than doctors can identify, so we let the refos sleep under our nets when we don't. I hate the stinky, sultry, stormy tropics, but every pest God ever invented likes it up here. Flies and mosquitoes galore, big lousy ones that buzz buzz buzz and get in your

face and annoy you, except when they bite! Crocodiles on the beach, sharks and stingers in the sea, rats, spiders, mice, green ants, and every conceivable type of deadly poisonous snake hidden somewhere on anything resembling land. At least doogites, the ones that leave you seventeen minutes of life once they bite, are off in the desert, along with the red dust that seldom blows this far. That is at least what the Captain says, but it might be true, but then it might be a fairy story to keep up morale; after all we have enough to worry about without bloody doogites and dust storms.

We have each other to worry about. When ‘mango madness’ starts crime figures go up. They call it ‘mango madness’ because it starts when temperature and humidity go up and the mangoes ripen with spring, not that spring really comes, it just starts hot and then gets hotter. People lose their tempers fast, see things that aren’t there and yell and scratch and get drunk and go mad.

And all that is just in peace time! Now everything was worse with everyone going batty watching for Japs and they had this way of coming at the worst time!

“Bloody ratshit Japs left our open- air picture screen shrapnelled to shreds!”

“How did them piss weak mongrels know our only cool breeze in months came tonight?”

“I didn’t tell them!”

“Yeh, ya did ya bloody great tub o lard! Ya wanna fight mate?”

Then like an angel from heaven, like a protecting hero-saviour, like an answer to my prayers that couldn’t be said out loud at service, came that horizon blue Catalina with the salmon logo.

Surely Ross couldn’t step out, but oh he did, in an officer’s uniform. I felt like stowing away. Surely, he saw me, but instead he went inside

with the commander while others unloaded his supplies. Normally I would have been glad just for the tons of medicine, food, mattresses, even some films, but being so upset at break, I got through my weekly tea/sugar ration in about two hours. Then the batman came into the canteen.

“Report to the commanding officer in precisely twenty minutes. Have your personal possessions packed and ready. Have your bed ready for inspection.”

I started to ask, so he just shrugged his shoulders. “Some bastards have all the luck. And if you try really hard, could you remember to salute?” The commander just glared at me until I remembered their silly salute. “This is very remarkable. You are seconded for some top-secret purpose. I have decided to attend service on Sunday... to pray for the men under your command. Dismiss!”

In the plane Ross just nodded smiling. His co-pilot was a beautiful blonde last seen in the distance at Eloura. Just us three. “Hello Corporal Fisher!”

“Hello Ross, but I’m just a private!”

“Hello Major you say! As you salute and it is corporal!” He tossed me a corporal’s stripes. “We will catch up later!”

We flew south over the sea but not far from land, then over desert, but just for a little bit, that was good, it would be very bad to crash in the desert with all those doogites about. We came to the coast and passed a dirty big Aboriginal rock art painting that went along a double-sided cliff and we landed before the beach sand near a lighthouse on top of stone house on a rocky outcrop. There was a breakwater, a big corrugated iron shed and a landing strip office shed, where four Aboriginal men in uniform sat smiling. I heard Ross say that he had an airport near Port Hedland.



“What’s this?”

“Your kingdom.” The beautiful blonde replied. Her voice was beautiful as well.

“Let’s get a drink.”

The lighthouse house had three bedrooms with four cots each, a working electronic fridge, a freezer, electricity that connected to somewhere and a generator in case it didn’t. He had a plane and enough fuel in the shed for a squadron and spare parts galore. The office was set up for radio contact. There were things to read and a record player and a wireless so we would not be bored. The Aborigines fished and promised to bring in buffalo beeves and berries for a fresh diet.

“Murie you are so tired you won’t take much in. It is nearly seven anyway. We will teach you tomorrow.”

He taught me and the Aborigines how to operate the radio and the lighthouse. We practised landing his plane from the control tower and after thirty bad goes I got it right three times in a row. We were to work in six-hour shifts, all round the clock, even Sundays. The blonde supposedly slept alone but she would go to Ross’s room after lights out. I remembered hearing her name back home, Elizabeth MacKinnon. A bad one Ruth said and Ross was always one keen for bad women.

“So what’s it all for?”

“Murie we were hoping you would not ask that question or where we are.”

“We saw Port Headland on the flight down, so it’s Shark Bay or North West Cape. Is this a new airfield for refugees?”

“No, and remains highly unlikely to become one. Now when important people arrive, see as little as possible, say less. I’ve given you an easy wicket, but an important one. I expect loyalty for that, yes?”

“Yes.”

After a few landings it was not hard to work out the big secret. This was the last land before the Cocos Islands and they wanted a connecting flight line that went all the way to England, one far enough south that the Japs would not know of it or be able to bomb it if they did. Just sometimes generals came with their red tabs on their collars and civilians in la-di-dah pin stripe suits. More often we saw aircrews needing a night's sleep and a shower before going north-west or south-east. Big or little in God's scheme, Ross's advice to stay out of their way was obviously good and neither they nor the Aborigines washed up or made beds, so that was left to me.

Sometimes we saw what they unloaded here for trips south: all types of odd stuff; maps, foreign newspapers, Japanese-English dictionaries anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns in bits, mosquito nets, quinine, and dysentery tablets. Mainly people went north-west, some were commandos going to training in Ceylon. Aborigines overheard much and told me. Everybody else but me and Ross thought they spoke only kookaburra. They told me that they got the gift of their tribal language from them in the dreamtime.

There were flies a plenty but the heat was dryer, more bearable and nobody picked fights and no Jap bombers came. Neither did doogites. The Aborigines insisted they were way off. Even so I even paid the Aborigines sixpence a snake, but had to make it clear they must be dead first. I found their catches in *What Snake is That?* and got Ross to import four mongoose? Mongeese? Mongeesi? whatever! Anyway there were four of them here on my request, these being mighty snake killers, likewise with birdseed I encouraged kookaburras, also mighty in anti-snake defence.

All this was very needed as Ross insisted we put in a very big vegie patch and set up a chicken and turkey farm. Having looked after them all

my life and it hit me that this was why he chose me: he needed someone who knew poultry farming more than he needed someone who knew plane landings or lighthouse work. I was more in the line of eggs than butchering, Ruth and the daughters and hired help did that, now the Aborigines did.

The flights became odd. Ross sometimes landed with around twenty refugees, sometimes they were colonials and their house servants from Burma, Malaya, China, Philippines or Java or even India and Egypt where the enemy were supposed to have taken over. Once he had a whole Filipino platoon with their weapons, another time it was a motley group of American survivors from the disaster there, but the oddest were those who came from Europe, many of them Jews with so little clothing that some still wore the little yellow star that the Nazis insisted they wear. When Ross landed with them they were smiley and sometimes blessed us and usually thanked. One old duffer actually kissed the ground. When they flew in with Robert it was different; one spat and others had sullen faces.

Even so, all this seemed to the good, but then a whole plane would be filled with coffee from Kenya, or Ceylonese tea, or bolts of Egyptian or Indian cotton and Robert or Elizabeth MacKinnon would be on those flights with a face and manner that I did not like at all and that made me pray for wisdom but wisdom did not come. Trouble came and bad in early in the new year after five good months. I was out one night because the chickens were making a persistent ruckus and I thought it was snake, fox, or rat; it never occurred to me that it could be Japs – until the big orange explosions started and the brief ratatat of machine guns, then a neat row of explosions along the runway and a big one each for the lighthouse and the control tower.

I might not have been hurt at all but for using the shotgun, but they were out of its range and they returned fire and I was not out of theirs. It felt like being kicked by a horse like I was once, so I fell back among the chickens. Somebody else also fired back, from the toilet block.

Perhaps it was us scaring them off or more likely those Jap people had finished what they came for. Whichever, silhouetted figures stood out against the flamed backdrop going for the beach. I limped after them and found a Jap rifle by a dead one and shot at them as they paddled back to their sub, its great ugly turret standing out even in the dark. The youngest of the Aborigines came from the toilet with his rifle and together we shot at them. We could hear the pings of our bullets as we dented the sub, but it was too far away to hole, but we must have done some damage, for one limped towards the turret hatch and another had to be carried, and we made them go in such a hurry to avoid our shots that they left their collapsible. It was their victory though. In the burning lighthouse rooms we rushed over and before the flames got too bad we found the crew that were staying and two of our other Aborigines. Some had been shot dead in their beds. Three had woken up and tried to put up a fight for another Jap commando lay dead with them. The eldest Aborigine had been on watch on the top of the exploded tower.

With all the radios shot out we could only wait for dawn and the flight to Ceylon due with it. They saw us waving and circled, It was like their fear and surprise was so great that we could feel it coming out of the plane. It was an Electra and with the airfield so bashed with holes they couldn't land if they wanted to. The next plane came a day later and it was a Catalina piloted by Ross, so he could land on the sea. He was more concerned with my injuries than his losses. While alarmed intelligence men went over the wreckage a medic tended to me.

“You have lost bone slivers, war's over for you mate.”

They were expecting me to make some joke to show my toughness but I could only nod and wince as he probed to get the splinters out. Meanwhile high-ranking officers were shovelling in the pot holes, stacking sheets of corrugated iron, and at first it looked like they tidying the place up, officers always being so fussy, but after a while I thought they were trying to make it like it never existed – and they were.

I did hear talk about the route not being far enough south and it would have to go from Perth with Atlas Catalinas and to curtail public fears by saying the waters round here were too rough for flying boats, but the waters weren't rough, we had a breakwater: it was the Japanese who were rough!

They talked with Ross about flying in bulldozers. They talked with me about keeping my mouth shut and I got that message. No sense in spreading panic. No sense in hurting yourself either. Ross was a villain when it came to fighting and women, but he looked after me and mine in the depression and now. He had a flight back to Eloura and put me on it with my honourable discharge and my limp that I didn't care all that much about.

“It is alright girls!” I called out as Ruth and the girls had concerned faces just as they saw me limp down the driveway, “They could cut me off at the knees and it would be fine just so long as I am home!” I swear if I outlive Methuselah and all the ancients, you'll never see me further north than Jan's bakery.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Port Moresby 8th July 1943

McElroy was a blonde-haired, red-faced, burly Major. He gave an impression that he had won too many fights in childhood, where he was inspired by Jimmy Cagney and that he would love to gasp for breath in this horrible tropic heat, but would contain it for the sake of his tough guy

image. He would always be in that role. He certainly disliked the tropics. Even the wide veranda was netted and the fans and refrigerators went all day and night by generator power. His badly concealed feet were bare and he incessantly rubbed them against a towel mat and he had three iced drinks in perhaps twenty minutes. A little army of houseboys chased geckos, searched for snakes and wiped away humidity from everything (including him) with immaculate white towels. All this should have warned me.

“My boys are suffering and I want you to stop it”

I now considered myself warned. Nutter, selfish but self-deluded and obsessive as they always are.

“Icy cool water for drinking, not this muddy mozzie infested estuarine shit, icy pure ice for washing wounds, maybe an R and R base up there out of this god-damn heat. Any one of these three will raise morale and give us an edge over the Jap and over our biggest enemy, this god-damn Papua or New Guinea or whatever the hell you wish to call it, yeah. Hell, that is what we should call it.”

“How do you wish to involve me?”

“Already have. I’ve seconded you, your brother the pilot and your Electra for a reco over mountains west of Hagen. We refuel there. Snow here so close to the equator? Even if these are the highest mountains before the Himalayas it still sounds like Rider Haggard bull to me, but hell, if ice is up there, I want it and so does my officer's mess and so does my squad.”

Fresh pure water came down in such torrents that the drainpipe was choking. He shoved paper at me. A general demanded full compliance with his orders. By the time I read the page the sun was out, give it twenty minutes and it would be blazing.

“You don’t seem enthusiastic.”

“Several Australian units that have been in the front lines since July last year were given exhaustion leave. I arrived last July, no leave yet.”

“Eloura Airlines are not an Australian unit. You are seconded civilians and somebody with clout does not like you.”

He smiled and stared. Robert, pilot to my navigator, was also mentioned. It was less than a decade since the first planes had been able to fly the heights needed for these mountains and there were no detailed charts, just worrying bar room stories based on old memories.

When do we fly out?”

“Seven hundred and its gone six now. Now don't give me any shit about overloading just because nineteen people are boarding and an Electra takes twelve. I've tossed out all blankets, food, and the rest of your cluttering bullshit. Like your faggot brother the all-volunteer specialists are ready.”

“But that doesn't give us time to pack anything.”

He shrugged his shoulders as if he had some secret plan involving an empty plane. He did, being happy as a child at Christmas when nearing Hagen, we saw the snowy ridges. Laughing he slapped his knee.

“Ha! The boys will love it! No more fighting the crocs to drink their piss!” Fly me round to get a feel of it!”

His new squad of ten gave a cheer and like him most were laughing. The pensive faces were on the specialists, who had flown with him before. They were, all too sullenly quiet, but not Gee, Crompton or Kiehne the water men, technicians reluctantly in uniform, they hated the army and made it clear with muttered griping. Their kind was more common in this war and the mapmaker, the radioman and the now at work aerial photographer, were the same. These three having flown before knew to worry about metal straining sounds. The radioman was trying to warn me with a facial expression and he got and understood the

slightest of nods. Robert and I looked at each other. Major McElroy obviously thought that the Electra was something like a car that could do a sudden U turn, and even this dependable old warhorse of a plane was already straining. We did have seventeen passengers on board when the maximum was twelve and the gear was almost equal to the maximum. Age perhaps, perhaps overwork. The plane with me piloting it had arrived last July and went through the worst of the Kokoda fighting and averaged four supply missions a day; supplying by the few roads and tracks which were just mud slips was something to wish on Nazis. Now we had to be well over twelve thousand feet as the mountains were sometimes that high and we had gone from the fierce tropical heat to freezing so perhaps the fuselage, or even worse the rivets, were suffering expansion/contraction strain. The DC-3/ 47 would have been the best plane, but the army had commandeered them and most were now wrecks; not so much from enemy fire, but from horrendous local conditions. There were the lousy airfields, usually either mud or stone paving, the mists that some said were the worst in the world, they made for crashes, and then tropical storms, monsoonal rain, the theft of any spare part not guarded, fuel shortages, and the tropical sun and humidity, that rotted or at best, aged everything fast. The pilots were almost always greenhorns. Thank God for Robert, whatever else he was, he was a very professional flyer. Whatever the cause, the plane was straining and Robert was already quietly worried after a brief inspection while refuelling south of Hagen. Within an hour after refuelling the plane was straining worse than before.

“Okay Aussies, any landing field around here will do.”

Robert and the squad smiled at the absurdity of it: everybody knew he was not joking. Despite the ridges having edges so sharp a goat couldn't balance, despite most slopes being around sixty to seventy degrees and icy, that was bad enough for traction, but they could conceal



boulders and this Electra couldn't go over a tennis ball without major problems.

"There is absolutely nowhere possible to land." I said levelly.

"Where there is a will there is a way! That's the problem with you Aussies isn't it? No will power!"

"We held Kokoda and we held the Japanese, on willpower!" Robert was angry at last, and with Robert, as from childhood on, this led to a tantrum.

"Worse than Oldsham! Sillier! Stupider! Even more dangerous!"

He was going to say more, but Major McElroy was louder and faster on the mouth draw and Robert was arguing with a more egotistical child than himself.

"That ain't why the Japs waited. Twenty-five miles from Moresby and victory and on the last mountain range? Nah! They knew they hadn't the men or material to wage a battle there and at Guadalcanal as well, so they obeyed the first rule of war: go for the biggest and toughest first and after he's defeated mop up the weakies – 'cept they didn't mop us up, we mopped them and saved your candy asses!"

Fortunately Robert was calming and carefully, while Major McElroy was ranting about the worthlessness of all things Australian and Papuan, he was edging the plane away from the mountains. We could even see green foothills in the distance; then Crompton, the idiot in the back who apparently lacked the cautious silent paranoia of those other specialists who worked with McElroy, called out.

"Hey look! That landing ground marks quarter way back to base."

That got MacElroy's attention. "So it is. Aussies aren't so dopey after all, huh?" He started looking around at the ground. "There over there, that plateau land there."

“That’s no plateau.” the mapmaker exclaimed; these were first wise words heard with an American accent so far since dawn. Robert also spoke wisely.

“The slope’s angle must be at least twenty degrees. The plane’s weight will be imbalanced on the right wheel strut and will snap it, pushing the right wing into skidding on the ice, which will probably snap it as well. The ice will possibly skid us along over the slope’s edge.”

“Shirkers always find excuses. Now you land that plane.”

“I will call base.”

“And I will call you a faggot from Moresby to Melbourne. Think we don’t know? I know! Now land that plane, on that slope, now fella.”

Robert bit his lips and went into a landing curve while I tried to talk sense to the iron major. The landing went just as Robert said it would. We should have ended eighty yards back, but were just ending as the Electra slowly slid on the last five yards of ice, and stopped with half the plane over half the precipice’s edge. The weight of everybody rushing off the precipice side was not quite enough, it hovered, then careened over, spinning cartwheels three times then the swift rush became a metal screeching thud. Mercifully the wing took the fall and we three in the cockpit had on our safe belts and were no more than shaken. The team lay amidst the hurled debris of ice collection gear, the smashed radio and each other. Crompton had his neck at an impossible angle and wide unblinking eyes, some justice I thought then, but oh no, God was kind to the man who helped McElroy send us to hell. An infantryman was not answering to the shaking and name calling of his friends. Of the others the radioman had hopelessly smashed legs and the others were merely shaken.

“Goddam you Aussies! Look what you have done!”

“Look out the window at where we are and then you will know to move very carefully. Everyone note that. And note why we cannot stay here.”

We were about a hundred and fifty feet down from the plateau. Wedged into a crevice, but that crevice now had fault lines in it thick enough to take fingers, and two of the worst were a hand span's length from joining: a wrong move by any of us and it could go, and so would the plane, for several thousand feet. We tried the radio but it was wrecked. The mapmaker got out the maps and we gathered around, except the private with the shattered leg.

“This ice and snow melts and trickles down, forming headwaters which become rivers. All rivers here have settlements or farms...”

“Good idea Vannucci but first we have to get down to where the headwaters form. Now look at this precipice's sheer face and angle, mountaineers would give up on this one as its many a thousand feet down. We have parachutes. Any volunteers?”

Incredibly the youngest did. McElroy smiled encouragement and gave him quick revision. He had jumped twice before but never would again. The poor boy did not even die quickly. The chute opened, but it did not billow out for long, although it did so six times, but the narrowness of the crevice walls kept compressing it, he would plunge hundreds of feet, hit ice and then it would pillow out in a wider space for a little while, before compressing and dropping him again. The worst shaken of the squad wept. McElroy could only shake his head.

“Okay were gonna have to be mountaineers and good ones. We will use the parachutes for rope climbing very, very slow and very, very careful.”

He turned to the soldier with smashed legs.

“All we can do for you boy is pray - and get the coat off the dead man, for you.”

“I know that sir.”

McElroy could only bite his lip and the others mumble help about getting help soon. McElroy's words about being slow and careful now were perhaps the wisest thing he ever said - which was not saying much. We crashed just before nine and by dark, at nearly midnight, we had managed to go down perhaps a thousand feet.

“Do we sleep here boys, or do we go ahead in the dark?” *Major* McElroy *asked* his command, losing any credibility he had.

“Sleeping upright in freezing cold is rather difficult sir;” Vannucci started, “But it gets impossible when dangling by a flimsy, makeshift rope over a chasm.”

“Okay boys! Let's go on then, we have got a half moon for light and ice and snow are white and don't get dark.”

More words of wisdom that were not so wise. Ice and snow cause snow blindness and they numb the fingers and when at three in the morning one of the exhausted team made a mistake and slipped, tumbling another who followed; the parachute was not enough. With fingertips we tried holding on to a fault line maybe a quarter of an inch thick, but the first two in our tied team dragged me and the American behind me down and the four of us fell. I thought it would be over, as there was rock below us, but there was snow in the centre and three of us swung round to land in it. The squad man behind me didn't. The sound of a body smashing into rock sent horror through me; there was a feeling of whiteness, and cold. Then fainting.

\*

I dreamed of sleeping next to Brionny, on a cold Otago morning, when

the fire goes out and the fingers, nose, ears and toes that can't curl round someone else freeze.

“Sorry, no Briionny here pal.”

I awoke to find myself clutching an infantryman. On his other side was the mapmaker and on mine a yard away was a private, laid out straight, arms crossed on his chest with a little snow piled on him.

“That's the best we could do; even that was enough to start it trembling, look up but don't move. It could tumble down on us at any minute.”

Our fall made a hole in soft snow about thirty feet deep and now it overhung us, ready to bury us alive and soft or not, we would probably freeze or suffocate before we could dig our way out.

“Best talk softly, even that could reverberate it down on us. Snow death is an easy way to go, but personally I want to go home.”

“You talk like someone who knows snow.”

“Like most from Minnesota. You really nominated for that Victoria Cross and were a major in the war with Bolshevik Russia?”

“And Gallipoli and the desert war in Palestine.”

I held up my hand with the fingers missing. They nodded, with some respect,

“An' its my guess the dames have something ter do with not getting it. So far we had Briionny and Rosa each on one side, Rosa and Elizabeth each on one side, Rosa and Rosalind each on one side, Rebecca and Zinada each on one side, and Alison and Helen, the selfish fusspots or prudes in the gang, wanting you all to themselves. Did I leave anybody out Al?”

“Zoe.”

“Sure Zoe. With Rosa, who must be really something.” Al for Alvin, gave a too familiar gleaming gaze. The other, a Minnesota man Ivar

Bardson, saw and butted in.

“Well we sure wish they were here now. Because I reckon McElroy is our only hope, which means we are in deep shit, even if it is white and clean. “

“Nah, Vannucci’ll save us. They have to save us, we have the scarce maps!”

“We fell over a thousand feet; they must have given us up for dead, we have been here for sixteen hours. Let’s sleep, I’m exhausted. Major you are awake, can you keep guard.”

“I prayed for cold,” Weary Alvin smiled wryly. “Prayed for ice and snow and prayed that the story of the high icy mountains was true, that we would get relief from the horrible heat, even a winter holiday in Florida was more than I could take, now I wish God had not heard me.” Alvin rolled over and slept.

After around ten hours there were voices and Bardson called out. After another hour Vannucci’s head appeared over the edge.

“We aren’t abandoning you, but we have to get long round timber and vine ropes to winch you up, the snow will crumble in on you unless we can rest some type of timber on rock.”

Where can we get timber?”

“We reached the end of the snowline, little villages started soon after, no trees yet. They say there is a plantation with a winch left by gold miners a days’ walk west. Now we’ll toss you some yams and fruit to keep you going.”

The falling food woke Bardson but it just dropped on Alvin. Bardson shook him as if knowing, but going through the form, the checked the pulse and sighed.

“A good kid, never had a bad word for anybody, not even Japs. Just

loved his maps, belonged in a map maker's shop. He had a fever of one o one, you know the rules, One o two to be an official fever hospital case, even before we started. The plane crash crushed his ribs but he wasn't one to complain and the fall shook his insides up bad and then snow death comes just so pleasant, so relaxing, like sleep that comes when you are exhausted. Got caught in it once back home, didn't give in, had the stamina, you got stamina to."

Even so, by the time we were winched up four days later we could not walk. We had lost toes to frostbite and patches of skin were going from blue to frost white. Major McElroy proved poor dead Alvin right; he grabbed the maps and with his glinty eyes and tight grin studied the maps, oblivious to the gaunt sullen stares of the twelve of us who had survived with him – so far.

"Ha! Fellas! Now I know where we are! And thanks Australia. You crashed the plane on the wrong side of the mountains! The north west side of this island where the Japs still hold sway!" We are behind enemy lines!"

I scanned the faces of the other Americans. They did not believe it and had the still, sullen look enlisted men have when they are truly dangerous. Robert and I heard some bar room stories of officers found shot in the back by snipers, miles behind front lines, and the 303 bullet left an identical hole to that of the Japanese rifle.

"So how do we get back to base?"

"First we get to Van der Linden's, owned by a Dutcher, she works for us, drives a truck and she has an airfield and a plane, the villagers drew it in the mud – with DC-3 on the fuselage, she is actually just a mile over the border in the Dutch East Indies. Eighty-eight miles as the crow flies, that's three days easy march, two if we push it and a track works, so why don't I see some enthusiasm?"

*Because you are a dangerous idiot.*

Two day's March if we pushed was really twenty-four. Eighty-eight miles as the crow flies assumed horizontal ground was flat. It was not, never for more than a mile. I counted the first supposed ten, it was really around forty with ravines and endless little gullies and the track which looked straight even on a detailed map was never straight. Even this problem was not the worst part. The map was from 1940 and somebody had assumed we knew what '*gold miner's track abandoned 1938*' meant. Everything was overgrown, we had to hack our way through. By great good fortune we found a gold miner's dump which contained rusted blunted machetes and shovels. With seven- foot-high grass with edges that cut one of the men as well as any bayonet, those machetes saved our lives and the shovel was good for low vines and snakes. Thrice we killed them and ate them raw. Amazingly Kiehne found fruit trees. Here humidity could be one hundred percent. Rain came in massive drops large enough to fill a soup bowl in seconds or in sheets of water and lightning. The ground actually steamed at times and not in piddly little emissions: I mean three times my height. Mists were so thick you could just see your fingers, and when the sun came it racked us. After nineteen days on this walk ten of us, half the original team, were left.

Because McElroy had thrown out our snakebite kit we lost the photographer to snakebite and without the first aid kit on that nineteenth day a cut soldier had died raving as the wound festered and all the washing, and mud plasters and piss we tried could not save him. By our estimates we had come eighty-two map miles and no plantation was in sight. Exhausted, after burying him, even McElroy had given up and four miles after that we found a straw hut, nearby were some potatoes and yams.



“Maybe this is it; maybe it is the plantation.” McElroy sighed.

“Intelligence in Moresby relies on hearsay.”

“Maybe, we should rest here, patch this straw roof, we could get proper sleep without rain, dig up potatoes, get a fire going, maybe there are chickens or pigs gone wild, we could look.”

Vannucci had the strength to be optimistic and inspire others. After two days we were debating about following the map’s trail when we saw a muscular native man walking up toward us, with a machete, and a loaded shoulder bag, smiling.

“I speak English, you no shoot.”

“No! You are safe.” Bardson called.

“Mrs Van Der Lind, send me because I speak English. Villagers say you come.”

“How did they get ahead?” McElroy asked and then did the talking, unfortunately.

“Drums, then message bird, message in metal band on claw.”

“Can you take us to her?”

“She sent me to find you. Breakfast now. Roast chicken late lunch, before sun sets, message to Moresby yesterday. She fly you tomorrow. Night flying no good.”

He passed us some type of lettuce-tomato pattie wrapped in leaves.

“What is this leaf shit? You think we are rabbits! Don’t you people even know what plastic is?”

While we winced the Papuan just stared with an expressionless face for a long time. When he spoke his voice was now expressionless as well.

“Best eat, then walk. No eat, no problem. Truck make track good in two more miles.”

“Say fella what’s your name?”

“Name power, no give power.”

“God, ya probably believe in spirits”

“Bible says them who conjure spirits put to death. Sorcerers evil.”

Everybody went quiet and we ate. It was as he said and his machete work made ours look weak and getting out became a minor job. The muddy truck track was like a boulevard to us – for two miles. We were actually smiling when he stopped and went motionless.

“Japanese!” He hissed, low.

“Hell where? I don’t see or hear any Japanese?”

“Major,” Robert began, just keeping my temper, “If there are Japanese within a mile or two your loud voice will alert them!”

“Hell! I can’t see them, anybody see any Japs coming this way?”

“They gone.” He pointed along the road. I could see no tracks.

“How the hell can you tell that, Sambo?”

“Japanese eat rice and tin fish, drink saki - all very very strong smell.”

He mimicked pissing.

“Fella there ain’ no tracks.”

“Walk in grass around big puddle. Like me on way to you.”

“Fella there ain’t no puddle.”

“Dry very quick. Tracks soon.”

Even McElroy had the sense to be worried when the tracks started: probably a squad, perhaps a platoon. The butt of a cigarette was rice paper and a tobacco nobody recognised; while looking at that we heard a plane.

“That gentlemen, is a DC3.” Robert commented.

“How far to the plantation?”

“See that big tree in front with red flowers, the only one very, very, taller than a man?” He pointed to a massive tree, wide as a truck and ten times my height and twenty yards off, directly in front of us. Even

McElroy got the message of what our guide thought of his intelligence. It was as far as a black man could go. "Ten times as far from us to tree. Japanese very blind and stupid, no hear. Now if we hide."

"I'm not missing roast chicken, they have gone; we would have heard them."

He moved forward, realised nobody was following and shrugged his shoulders. "Okay I'll reconnoitre, wait." We heard rifle shots and he returned, a Japanese rifle in one hand and a chicken leg in the other. "I mad it safe now. There are many things there we can use and you should all see what happens to those who fall into the hands of the Japanese."

They had not burned the house, probably because they wished to use it. The plane was gone and so were the Japanese. Except for the two axed to death in the lounge room, another on the veranda, the one who had been shot while pulling up his trousers while coming out of the toilet and the other still alive, squatting tied to an outside post, weeping and speaking rapidly in Japanese.

"Most of the platoon flew out on the plane, Japs have even more of a plane shortage than us. I got the squad left to guard."

"We heard a noise under the settee and Esterbauer and Bennett pulled out one very terrified, sobbing white girl. Amazingly McElroy's face was showing more pity than anyone else.

"Mumma said hide there and not come out no matter what, but I could see."

"We are very sorry, we will give her Christian burial."

"I heard you murder them. First you got the axe from the tool shed and while they were sitting down to eat the chicken..."

"It was five to one and I had no other weapon to start with.... Okay? Find whatever you wish to take, because honey I am terribly sorry about this but your home has to be burned, the Japanese could use it for..."

“Burn it please!”

“The plane could see the smoke!” Robert added.

“There’s no way we leave a fuel dump, a runway and an ideal headquarters in enemy hands, lets save something of this fiasco. Now there’s a submerged canoe under the wharf, Vannucci, Hislop, Gee and Bardson, lift the rocks and its my guess it will float. Load it with all the food we can carry, there’s plenty. Bennett, Kiehne and Esterbauer and the Clarkies dig graves for Mrs Van Der Linden and the two native women; they are over... there.”

“He means in pig pen, they laughed while they took turns with the samurai sword. We left Holland for here after Munich because mother said Hitler would conquer Europe and nobody would bother with a place so remote and unpopulated. She worked it out scientifically; this was the world's safest place.”

She just stared, totally still. We looked around: blue willow china on the imported Dutch tall boy, Vermeer and Van Gogh reproductions in heavy gilt frames, finely embroidered lace doilies, antimacassars and tablecloth, sweet little porcelain statuettes of ballerinas and smiling Dutch children in clogs and peaked caps on the windowsill. The dead and us as well were a horrible violation,

“Did the one tied up take part?”

“No when he vomited over the veranda, he saw me, but did not tell.”

“Honey, help us pack the food into the canoe take this load down there.”

McElroy gave us warning glances, waiting until she was out of earshot.

“Do not mention what happened here, or even mention here or ask anything about the past. Keep her busy with little things to do.”

Everybody nodded and sensed that he had more to say.

“I know real well that some in here think I’m just a lunkhead, but by God, single handed and unarmed, exhausted to shit, I killed five fresh, armed men and captured a supply base single-handed. Everybody makes mistakes: God made a mistake when he made New Guinea!”

“Oh yeh!” Bardson exclaimed and McElroy ignored that.

“Now it’s about a hundred and thirty miles back to lines, the good news being those lines are downriver and easy, no worries about crocodiles our guide said.”

“That is because they live below the rapids and you will not survive the rapids.”

It was the girl standing motionless at the door, speaking in a too calm voice.

\*

She was right about herself. Sitting stiffly upright at the back of the long canoe, staring at the terror of the rapids listlessly she seemed almost oblivious. Perhaps she was the sanest of us, for McElroy was going to kill us all.

When Vannucci and Hislop said we should leave before the Japs returned, McElroy laughed and said 'Nah, we’ll eat what we can’t carry and leave in the morning. If they come we will turn this place into a fortress, like the Alamo! Let them besiege it, we will tie them down.'

“Just like at the Alamo!” Vanucci exclaimed; McElroy missed the sarcasm.

“Sure. I had ancestors there!”

He sounded like a liar. We had already heard track talk about great-grand pappy at Valley Forge and Indian fighter turned rough rider Pa dying at the crest at San Juan Hill. The Japanese disappointed him by not turning up. So we left after setting fire to the fuel spread on the runway and the house, great black clouds burgeoning up, the best possible signal.

Soon we heard the motors, surreptitiously Vannucci steered us under overhanging branches. Robert and I knew the sound of every allied plane in this war theatre and we did not know this one. We told McElroy that and to show us who was boss he came out with 'Nah! It's a rescue plane' and lit an oil lamp and started waving. They flew back extremely low, searching across the river and fortunately missed our stupidity. We could see the rising sun insignia, even the pilot's thin moustache.

“Look like rescuers to you major? Snarling Bennett, who rarely talked, asked. “Keep your voice low.” McElroy boomed. “They might hear you!” “Oh really Major?” Fed up Robert asked. “At a mile away, ninety feet up in a sealed cockpit?”

The guide trying to be helpful, only made it worse.

“Before the Death Falls the walkway starts, very easy one yard wide, no rocks, very very easy all the way to white man's camp.”

“Why do they call it Death Falls?”

“Spirits very bad. Kill all who try to go into taboo area, In English The Many Hidden Little Knives and the Two Great Knives in the Always Cloud, very taboo place. Even white man never go through to still waters on other side.”

“The hell you say!” His eyes were glittering and his breath was increasing, so was Kheine's and Bennett's, being the more quick witted.

“Nobody has ever done it before you say?” The guide suddenly started to understand and his eyes enlarged in terror and his skin started to look grey. He looked at the bank and then looked at the girl, sensing he could not leave her. In his own way he was the bravest man in that canoe. How many of us would have stayed if we knew what was coming?

“Now listen everybody! I 'm tired to buggery of walking and I know a quick way back. It has some danger to it but by God there is glory and where is glory without a bit of god-damn danger? Okay there are rapids,

but we will be the first to raft through them, that's glory for eternity! Now in my off time I'm a white-water man, I've done the Colorado, some unpronounceables in India and the Clutha in Kiwiland, so this will be a piece of cake, easy to what we have gone through so far!"

Everybody was totally silent, totally motionless, the current was so soft, so gentle we were obliged to row. By the time we were in sight of the bridge and the easy path the current was worrying and from off in the distance came a great muffled roaring. The girl was ignoring the imploring guide, who now was sweating with fear and babbling his pleas.

We saw why. First there came the rocks sloping eventually down, but like a roller coaster, then after a fast patch, they were another hundred yards off, probably the first of the little knives, about a dozen of them in sight so far, being about eight to fifteen feet out of the water. Sleek and grey with sharp edges up to their points and maybe just enough space between them for a madman to think of getting through in the seconds the rapidly speeding water compressed between them allowed.

"Hey Sambo, how many of these do ya think are there?"

"Many, many."

"Looks like they could be dangerous if they aren't handled right."

McElroy nodded sagely agreeing with his own deep wisdom.

Bennett began to weep in vexation. We hit the roller coaster and I counted to six slowly while each bump sent the canoe was in the air. The girl who had stayed upright and expressionless even with the bumps let go, the next bump set her backwards out of the raft and we could not see her. After the rolling in a comparatively safe patch Robert was screaming and standing up trying to slash him with a knife.

"Go Australia!" Bennett called and when McElroy reached for his pistol I slashed his hand with the Japanese bayonet. Then the other knives in the water loomed. By a miracle we got through the first two, then the

current swung the canoe broadside on. Robert foolishly upright, stumbled onto Bennett and the two of them toppled out. As they reached one of the “knives” the canoe reached them, whacking their bodies into the rock.

Vannucci, Gee and Hislop tried hauling up Bennett but he was weeping and feebly clawing at their hands.

“Let me die, let me die, I can’t take any more of him, give me peace.” Esterbauer, Kiehne and I had more luck with Robert, who had a crushed hip. The current soon moved us off again and Esterbauer, who would not let go of Bennett, went into the mist and spray with him. Soon we could see nothing in the Always Cloud. Before he could see it Vannucci’s hand was sheared off on one of the little knife’s edges and we managed to tie it and then looking up, saw the “great knives” - two sharp ravine edges rising out of the spray and mist and the river's speedy wake, surging to maybe twenty feet up their sheer sharp sides.

“Oh well at least the little knives are behind us and not in the way.” McElroy was taking optimism into new levels of insanity as he commented as calmly as a card player saying that aces were out - to me who had slashed him and to the petrified guide, Vannucci in agony cradling an arm without a hand, hate- filled Kiehne, Gee weeping and screaming, Robert in agony on the bottom of the boat, the Japanese tied up to the mast jabbering with fear and perhaps insanity and Hislop and Bardson, driven beyond terror into a stunned, bewildered dead look. Hislop apparently preferred drowning, for he deliberately slipped over the side.

McElroy had also taken optimism into error, for the next of “the hidden little knives” were just below the surface and we found them when their tips gashed even through our thick heavy log canoe and all of us yelled in the agony of it. We did not have time to sink, for the surge tilted us at an angle and hurled us into the grey cliff and with enough force to



pound the shattering of Kiehne's bones into our ears. The surge protected us from death, but I knew that the wrist and femur of my hand holding the canoe had broken and Robert had it worse. The water hurled us down and up, then down and I learned fast to grasp for breath on the up because my lungs nearly burst on the swirling, whirling, bewildering down and then amazingly I could feel gravel in my mouth and see it all around me in the water. I was hurled into it, feeling it firming and my good hand above my head could feel sun. A human touch was pulling me up. Even below the surface his distorted, cheery face looming over me. I had never hated anybody as much as I hated him, not Tom or Allen, Kemal, Yasir, Betham, Trotsky or the Turks, not even Albert Moon, nobody.

“Looks like we are the survivors Aussie. The canoe went that away.”

He talked to me while staring up at the cliffs, smiling, although it was blatantly obvious that we were trapped in a gravely, malarial mosquito-filled eddy: swim eight feet out and the current would take us.

“Cliffs are a problem, ninety feet high, nothing an ant could grip on, water makes them sheeny to boot. We are stuck here together.” Suddenly all those jokes about the men of different nationalities stuck together on an island and the humour of satirising the national characteristics came to mind. Those jokes somehow did not seem so funny now.

“Now I know what yer gonna tell me, ter stay tight till we are rescued. Trust the Aussie to think of the laziest way out. Well?”

I was coughing up gravel and water before and after he spoke.

“Nah waiting gets too damned dangerous. We may have the Jap on the run in the east, but not here. Here we are sitting ducks for the next plane that passes. We have to use our resources to get on that path. I'll put off being the first to do all of the Death Falls. Hell! after the war I'm going into white water rafting tourism and will make a fortune out of this

place. From the way that dopey guide talked it seems the natives will be glad to sell this place for peanuts. I'll bill it as the ultimate white-water challenge, the most dangerous place on earth, watch them flock in."

Kiehne's blood and bone were still on the ravine wall and my eye picked up something carried by in the current, Bennett face down and motionless. He saw and showed no response.

"You mentioned resources, all I can see are plenty of boulders."

"Then you see half our resources, and when you work out what rhymes with boulders you get the other half!"

"Shoulders? You think we can bridge this thing? I went down three times my height and look, its over forty feet to the other side!"

"Thirty-six actually and you must have gone down in the middle. We can use boulders as stepping stones, wading the first thirteen feet won't even reach your shoulders. If it's the same on the other side we only have to jump eight feet in the middle."

"You want me to push boulders with a broken arm!"

"Quitters always find an excuse, but okay I'll make it easy! We both lie on our backs and use our legs to push, there's more strength in legs than people think."

It was not as impossible as it sounded, but not as easy as he said; after ten hours we had one in. It was useless trying to sleep there so he was right about that, when I did drop off hours later I felt like dying of exhaustion, but he woke me up, smiling in strong daylight.

"Good news Aussie."

I looked around, he had tied a rope to a boulder and there was a captain's chair hovering above me and there was a large platoon of Australians and Bardson on the bank trail. Hislop and our guide were with them.

“I can get there arm over arm, but I suppose with a broken arm you’ll need the chair so you can go first.” He said it as if patronising a weakling.

\*

“We found the bodies first, the girl and Bennett. The canoe got through to the still water before it sank, speed probably kept it afloat. Your brother and Vanucci are on stretchers, they were sent back yesterday. They say Kheine died, but Gee isn’t with you?” The young lieutenant who was asking was holding something back, probably what he thought of the madness. McElroy butted in.

“You mean a darkie, a Jap captive, a faggot, a wog and two enlisted men got through the Death Falls and I did not? Don’t that beat hell! God hates me!”

While McElroy kicked up mud in vexation everybody else just stared at him expressionlessly.

“Actually the Japanese was probably the last to die, it seems of fright. A regrettable loss, he seemed the type to talk and such Japanese prisoners are rare.”

“Well, the dead Jap is a little better. So why are you here, after prisoners, don’t seem to be many Japs here.”

Something made me and Bardson stand behind him and point down the trail

“We were originally here to get fresh water for the Americans, so we will get some water and return.”

“So where is the water?”

“Here.”

“Just where we happen to be?”

The Lieutenant’s face showed fear and evasion under McElroy’s scrutiny and he put his hands on his hips and gave his order.

“All enlisted men take a break fifty yards off, better go for a swim.”  
He waited spending a full minute staring into the lieutenant’s face.

“Now tell me your full name and rank son.”

“Lieutenant Joshua Edward McCann.”

“My God, Scot descended and you have come to this. God I hate that big island to the south. Fill it with good stock and it leeches all the courage and energy and stamina out of them. Now don’t lie to me son, where are you supposed to get the water from?”

“Above the Death Falls.”

“Then that is where we get the water from.”

“Major, we have badly injured people here and at our camp. Your survivors and four of my wounded and guards are there waiting for us, in enemy territory.”

“Above Death Falls orders say. Death Falls we go *lieutenant.*”

“Four of my command have already died and four were wounded battling the Japanese on this mad mission to cart back the same water that flows past the camp.”

“Because you are obviously new to your rank you get an order explained. You need to see what foul water does, not to a man, not to a platoon but to a division. Sick soldiers are more detrimental to an army than dead ones. They devour time, supplies and manpower. No disease can live in fast flowing streams, not much else either - so let’s go.”

“Our native intelligence said the Japanese flew in a regiment to Van Der Linen’s yesterday and they started marching this way last night.”

“Probably a platoon. The DC-3/47 can’t carry more. We could ambush them an’ getcha some god-dam prisoners to carry the water back. Two birds with one stone. Now don’t worry, one thing I learned yesterday was that natives exaggerate.”

\*

Even after he saw that it was a regiment, almost a thousand men, he would not abandon the ambush. With his survivors and McCann's men we numbered forty-one. By a miraculous piece of luck his idea of picking off officers first worked. The two Bren guns also had their effect and the Japanese probably thought we must be a massive force and regrouped two miles back, probably to follow their usual tactic, to probe, then encircle: McElroy would have his beloved siege. We even picked up four wounded prisoners. Eight of ours died, including Hislop; others were not far off from it and only nineteen were unhurt. That made Bardson and McElroy the only two of our seventeen nineteen original passengers not to be casualties.

Our luck with the ambush was followed by another lifesaving miracle. We heard a plane and saw the fluttering pennant tied to a coconut.

“What's the pennant say lieutenant?”

“Return to base immediately, signed Brigadier General Blake.”

“Oh hell and god-dam!”

\*

We trudged into camp and an unwelcoming colonel got me, Vanucci, Bardson and McElroy into a jeep and drove us personally to a bunch of tents under large trees. Several natives and an Australian company waited tensely. Captain Jack Caufield was there with glittering eyes and some trick up his sleeve.

“Pilot Ross Clarke, we delayed this so you could see it, Pilot Robert Clarke should, but remains unconscious. Now watch what we do to men who commit treason, this being helping the Japanese.”

He led me to where three bewildered, very scared natives, stood on a table, under a massive tree with nooses around their necks. One smiled thinly, thinking it was all bluff as a warning. Knowing Jack, I knew they

would die. He then read out a sentence of execution for treason and smiled as natives pulled away the table.

“Wait!” He ordered those trying to leave. Hanging is an obscene, filthy process and some soldiers vomited. He waited till the natives were dead. “Natives need firm guidance, strong vivid examples and clear punishments and rewards.”

“Hell, captain you gave them that. Now there’s a white fella ya gotta court martial and he's right here. Assaulting a superior officer.”

He held up his cut hand while Jack beamed.

“Oh very good, we will fix this in a minute, after a chat, but first like your brother, you are to be shipped back to Australia, under arrest.”

“For?”

“Treason.”

\*

Nothing, it seemed, could be worse. After hospital where they treated me as an enemy but got a cast fitted, they flew me out to MacArthur’s requisitioned villa - once Government House at Port Moresby. It had high ceilings and wide hardwood verandas with magnificent views. It was much envied, but little used. Intelligence was located there and they were all over me. Delirious Robert stayed in hospital. The arrest order was confirmed. Jack Caufield made a point of delivering it personally. I awoke sweating, finding him standing over me smiling gleefully.

“You are gone this time Clarke. I hope your heart keeps beating long enough to see you destroyed in every way possible. Permanently wrecked health, disgrace, exposure and imprisonment are coming. Financially you won't own a thing, you are going to end up racking your guts out in a prison cell.”

“You are still Daddy's boy. You would still set fire to Alsatians if you could get away with it.”

“Why should I do such school boyish things when I can see natives dangle at the end of a rope? See you back home real soon.”

He shrugged his shoulders and left smirking. He must have spread the gossip among the staff, for the coldly hostile treatment was on again while I was questioned by intelligence, almost all of it about the geography, flora, fauna and climate of the area we had gone through.

“Let me describe what Major McElroy was like, he -”

“Under no circumstances are you to mention his name again or discuss any matter concerning that mission.”

“Do I need a lawyer?”

“Not yet. That treason stuff is not our field, back to nutritious fruit.”

Trying to find any comfort was nearly futile. The war news at least was good; MacArthur wisely cut off the supply and transport of a hundred thousand Japanese at Rabaul and then did not attack them, but left them to rot and he was going on with attacking key Jap bases to the north to use to retake the Philippines. Ten thousand of the Jap bastards were literally holed up in Bakia, putting up a stubborn, costly fight and clearly my interrogators needed information for possible flanking attacks and to estimate how long the Japanese could last in a live off the land guerrilla campaign. I was happy to help; despite everything McElroy could do I still was on the Allied side. Keeping myself off the gallows was now my major aim and they would not proceed with the charges until I was no longer useful, so for three weeks information was spun out, then came welts and ugly tropical ulcers, even under my cast. After returning from a week in hospital to the Government House a new, grimmer interrogator took over.

“Just answer the following questions yes or no at this stage. Do you know a Captain Betham of Ollhdesham Airlines?”

“Yes.”

“Hauptmann Hans Stoeger, a Rebecca Petit of Paris, Elizabeth MacKinnon, Zoe Carruthers, and Brionny McNamara Clarke?”

“Not the first, otherwise yes” He wrote that down.

“And what of these people?”

He handed me two lists and suddenly a picture was coming together. The lists were of the aircrews doing the secret North West Cape run and of the refugees who we flew into Australia through there. Had we flown in a German spy?

Nothing could be worse, McElroy with the relentlessness of a madman, Jack Caufield working with him to see me dangling and arrests upcoming, then after feeling seedy something woke me up screaming, a feeling that a lightning flash had gone through me, then another and another.

“Can't be faked, might be self-inflicted, mosquitoes all around.”

“It would be better if he dies.”

I could agree with that.

\*



Book Eight

Outcast

February 1944

Keddy McPherson

Honolulu 12th February 1944

“It would be better for you not to fly Australia on this flight or any other Eloura flight.” The officer's grave face worried.

“Do you know how difficult flights to Australia are?”

“Yes, now wait here.”

*No way mate. I can't take the death and suffering any more. I can't take the boy's advances everywhere I go. I can't take all the reminders of my dead husband and children and there is no escaping them on Hawaii. I want to go home. My mother has already sent me a curt if vague warning letter.*

Shrugging my shoulders, I went ahead. The police were waiting at Mascot, asked my name and with fake soothing sounds got me to strip search and asked me about my two-night New Zealand stopover. Did Ross Clarke visit me? Did he pay for my luxury accommodation? It was free because Eloura Airlines owned the hotel I confidently explained, aha! A visit from Brionny McNamara? She was a legendary name. Many others they asked after were unknowns, apart from Uncle Ross. After flying halfway across the world, they told me not to leave the country!

Just to make my day lousy on the chronically overcrowded train down a group of noisy GIs decided to have some flirty fun when all I wanted was quiet. One tried to impress me by boasting of how many Japanese he had killed in the hills of New Guinea and proved it by pulling out a bag full of their teeth.

“Theirs gold ‘n them thar hills!” He boomed and the laughter boomed through the corridors. I got up and stood for the remainder, so one of them smugly and quickly sat in my chair as if that was the game: maybe.

Nobody welcomed at the station. The once beautiful waiting area was fading and looked smaller than remembered. They were at home -

with the police. My mother was quietly angry, her usual state. They had visited five years past, nothing had changed, except that I did not belong here now.

““Keddy” My father began clearly vexed, “Your bedroom is prepared, you look tired, we will talk in the morning”

I picked up the warning tone and so did the police; who realising they would now get nothing, soon left. It began soon after the ritual breakfast pleasantries. She had her hard and nasty face on. Father was more pleasant, but beneath that was also angry. She began.

“Why did you ignore our warning?”

“I wanted to come home?”

“Why did you accept that free passage from Ross Clarke?”

“Because he offered.”

“The considerable number of powerful enemies the Clarke brothers have made are now gathered and they will destroy them this time. Not even your Uncle Alexander, the famed smart Alec, will get them out of this mess. They are dragging others down with them; Poor old Max, Robert’s wife, Rosalind Clarke, Keith Anstee, Jan the baker, Poor Murie...”

*Including you.*

The thought came, I don't know why, but for the first time my mother was scared and insecure.

“But they are some of the most respectable people, anyone could know....”

“We know that and you will be among them and perhaps be under suspicion of being part of Ross Clarke’s harem.”

“That is ridiculous.”

“Henderson Crutchfield has a way of making the ridiculous sound true. He will be leading the attack for the prosecution and you must be

careful. Just tell the truth and do not say one word more than you have to.”

“About what?”

They sighed and looked at each other and then my father did the talking.

“If we answer that we could also end up in court, either as witnesses or as defendants. Bad enough that the niece of the defending lawyer is in that situation, let alone his brother and sister-in-law. We are related to the Clarke’s. Now just do not exceed your ration card system and guard every word you say.”

“What is the ration card system exactly? Or more precisely how does it work?”

With relief they explained Australia’s rationing. The goods I expected to be rationed, coffee, chocolate, cocoa, and whiskey, were so scarce as to be not even on the rationing list. Even so, those things were on crates being loaded in Honolulu onto my Eloura flight, with sugar and tropical fruit, things grown in Queensland, marked for New Zealand. I was beginning to understand.

After we finished the lesson I excused myself and had an afternoon lie down, but restless for a twilight walk around town, I left and soon was scowling at what the Americans call “fresh” American servicemen - and ours.

I ended up outside Jan’s store; at fifty no grey in the hair and just a little in the goatee, a few crow’s feet and thin as ever. He smiled in genuine welcome, concern in his eyes. After ritual pleasantries he invited me to free tea with milk and sugar, sandwiches and cake, not such a small thing anymore, as I began to realise.

“Did you know I’m a crook?” He asked cheerfully.

“I know your name is on Henderson Crutchfield’s list, mine too.”

“We are both too polite to ask each other about our criminal activities.”

“I’ll go first.” He listened to my account about the flight and much about my staid, if happy life in peacetime Hawaii Little was said of the war.

“Deepest dark villainy has a new face in the pantheon of evil ones. I baked cakes that were too large.”

“And?”

“They had more icing than regulations permitted.”

“So what criminal act did you really do?”

“I really baked cakes that were too large and they really had more icing than permitted. Special Agent Reverend Jervis served the papers.”

“What type of mad world are we going into? The only reason I know you are serious is because of what happened to me.”

“They say all these rules and rationing will help win the war, but unharvested cane rots in Queensland while a famine in Bengal starves millions to death. Australia has massive grain fields. They could bring in Bengali refugees to do this work as Ross intended, but government enforced uniformity and control - that they will not abandon easily.”

“You talk as if this will continue after the war.”

“Many say so, it does equalise and this is the era of the common man – Churchill, Hirohito, MacArthur and Montgomery excepted.”

“And here, Moon and Crutchfield?”

“Very much so, all too much so.”

We talked politics, people, fashion until upon mentioning Valentine’s Day he suddenly started up.

“Gus Gott! It is nearly midnight and the Valentine’s Day baking! And the Americans have paid ahead!”

For the first time since Pearl I was happy. Midnight? It seemed we had

chatted for minutes. Mother rapidly cut into that remaining mood next morning, virtually snarling at me from the breakfast table.

“Where where you last night?”

I was stunned. It was as if I was a sixteen- year- old late from a first date again, not a widow twice that old.

“At the bakery, chatting.”

“With Jan Van Groendhal.” She picked up a spoon and threw it into the immaculate table, leaving a scratch mark. I waited for her to exclaim something like ‘Look what you made me do’ but she went for my second expectation. “He is a dirty old man facing charges, a cripple, and a strange foreigner and...”

“They were here when Queen Victoria ruled, that's before you were!”

“Do not answer back! You should find out his perverted role in that scandal!”

“You mean that one that happened about the time of my birth?”

“Ask Jan why he gets on the train to Sydney every so often. Like competing with streetwalkers for his affections, do you?”

I walked out and walked through the town waving to my old reverend, Ian McPherson, now far into his dotage and with trembling hands, and blinking eyes, but he remembered me, but like my mother was remembering me as a teenager. Ruth arrived after a little while and made us tea, with homemade wheat biscuits, the only type anybody could eat now.

“At least they are abundant!” She joked and then filled me in with the upcoming case. “Don’t stay in a tense state waiting for it. They issued subpoenas for the Clarke brothers in August, but they came out of the jungle nearly dead, with fevers and broken bones, so they held off till they knew they would live, then judges and politicians, well they argued

about holding the trial. It might reveal state secrets and military things, then the papers said it was a cover up and the Clarkes were getting away with it while ordinary people like Jan were arrested for using too much icing sugar or like Murie for giving extravagant Christmas presents. Henderson Crutchfield began this campaign about one law for the rich and one law for the poor, so they had to prosecute. Now they delay so they can find more people and more evidence.”

“Of?”

“Smuggling goods and people. Ross was apparently paying a Nazi to get his Jewish girlfriend or mistress or perhaps wife out.”

“Wife? How many times has he been married?”

“That’s another thing. They aren’t sure if he really divorced that Brionny. They think she may be part of that smuggling ring like she was before. After the tribunal have finished with him, he may go on trial for bigamy and if the stories are true he can only be a rampaging sex maniac. Robert however, might be the worst kind of sex maniac, it is so bad I won’t say it - and his wife and sons are so nice.”

“It sounds as if the Clarkes are done for.”

“It gets worse. Ross and Robert are accused of attempted murder, of an American officer. My brother wants all the charges in one court, we might get everything dismissed on a technicality.”

Grandfather McPherson, who I thought was dozing, came out with 'But King Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites....' His lost the remainder of the verse, so his eyebrows came down in concentration 'Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods; Solomon clave unto these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses and three hundred concubines...'

“Hopefully Ross cannot be that bad Father.”

“The Russian was a princess.”

“Yes Dad, she was.”

He nodded and in doing so, fell asleep. Ruth waited a few seconds. “Two of my girls live here now, Work keeps Alex busy, so they take turns to look after him. The eldest will be announcing her engagement next Saturday, to an American GI from Sacramento. Like most of these war bride marriages he seems very nice, but she will go over there, so the family worries. Perhaps you could give advice on life there.”

“Certainly, but Hawaii differs from the mainland.”

“Do you think you will ever remarry?”

“Oh yes, well perhaps, actually I have not had a single thought of romance, since... My marriage was happy, but life goes on.”

Jan was frantically busy with a group of cheerfully noisy Americans, all with Australian girls on their arms. I recognised Eunice, daughter of Rosa, now in high school and still in uniform, cheerfully hugging a GI, and Ruth and Murie’s engaged daughter doing the same: at least hers seemed husband material.

“Everybody’s got a Valentine!”

“Except the man who makes the cakes!” Jan laughed.

“I will be your valentine!” It came from my throat as I sort of realised.

Everybody laughed sweetly including Jan. After they left I helped out the back. He did not even ask if I was staying for tea, I just did and walked home by nine. The blinds were down early. I forgot what that meant. Old Sergeant Mcphee was there with my very sad faced parents and weeping Ruth, Murie, their daughters and Uncle Alex. My mother, less upset asked me to sit.

“Grandfather died peacefully in his sleep on the veranda late this afternoon.”



“Oh.”

Life can be so horribly cruel, moments of happiness change too fast. After commiserations and arrangements I left a note explaining and asked Jan to go with me to the funeral. At the church portal my mother glared, then ignored me and hissed.

“Now you listen to me you crippled lecherous old pervert! I have only three words to say to you, go away immediately!”

When he looked at me I mouthed no and he stayed, I thought that was handled well, but at the graveside I needed his support to hold me up. Unlike my mother I did not wish to add to my father’s double sadness. As a doctor he had not kept his father alive, even though he reached eighty-four, the last nine in a bad way, since Grandmother’s death. As a son he had buried his father with his wife more concerned with creating dramas at the funeral. So I stayed another week, not seeing Jan.

It was my father who brought up the topic, when she was on hospital night duty.

“She is essentially right about him, or rather his character. He and his brother were knowingly involved with a pair of prostitutes, who had a side-line of theft and smuggled goods for Irish revolutionaries. The Van Groendhal twins were like that while going on at great length with some type of puritanical religion, Calvinism or Lutheranism, I forget which. Now he will be implicated in the new smuggling racket and be assured, there must be at least some truth in it and the enemies of the Clarkes will turn it into a sex scandal.”

“But Jan has nothing to do with this.”

“That remains to be seen. Even if he is innocent will his past convict him? Do you wish to have a tarnished reputation?”

“I wish to live elsewhere.”

He sucked on his pipe. “Uncle Alex has a spare room, close to the

hospital, where qualified nurses are deep-”

“No more nursing, perhaps I will work with Jan in his bakery.”

He sighed and shook his head. “Children have to be protected; adults can only be warned and then make their own choices.”

“I wish mother knew that.”

He sighed and went quiet, which was his most common reaction to the world. In the morning I left the house, staying with Uncle Alexander, who wanted as many of other people’s problems as possible, to avoid thinking of his dead father. He got them.

In a week I was seeing Jan again, and soon I was working in the bakery, and then preparing for Easter, the work was massive and it was Indian summer with ovens and covered in flour, we sat on either side of the small table, sipping much needed ice tea, enjoying the classical harp on the ABC, letting sweet slow, sounds flow over us. He took my hand and gently smoothed my skin, smiling.

“We could marry.” He said calmly sweetly.

“We could.”

“Soon?”

“Oh yes, soon.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Eloura Airport 4th April 1944

It took six weeks to get into one of my own planes for a flight to Eloura, not that I sat waiting patiently. Maybe mad Major McElroy, had a point about pure water: after having dysentery I was not so keen on Moresby’s water. Even so, they could have bottled rainwater, sooner. The executive up there listened to me and McCann and did exactly that, maybe that could be used against McElroy. The judges and lawyers had finally worked out the trial’s procedure and rules for precedent.

Home. So good, I could even see waiting autos and the little group

waiting in welcome. I looked again, thinking that I was hallucinating. There was McElroy, wan by colouring, but with that self-confident grin that nothing could wipe out. Beside him was Betham, paunchy and balding now, lacking the good looks that had got him so far, but the conceit and the overwhelming impression of a human rat that he gave off remained. My mother had on her glittery eye look that meant she was winning in some cruel mind game. The faces of Reverend Jervis, Henderson Crutchfield and Albert Moon were similar. In front of them, and in their centre was probably their chairman of the board or aged war chief. I knew him from photographs, Oldsham. His great broad bearlike figure was hunched; his mostly bald head peaked like a Boeing's pointed stubby nose, a few long strands of fine white hair poured down. He clutched a cane as he would collapse without it. The left eye was habitually closed and that side of his mouth dropped, but the other eye and his face and body conveyed the pomposity Robert described, but not the foolishness. This was one very dangerous old man, possessing some advantage as he fixed his glittering triumphant old good eye on me.

“I may not have long to go young fellow my lad, but before you see me in my grave I will see you and your brother in hell and see all those pretty blue Eloura planes painted white with a red O.

“That o stands for me Ollhdesham and they will fly on our routes, maybe one day you will stare up from between bars when you hear their hum.” The courtiers behind him snickered, grinned and laughed while he stared with a fixed grin. “Well that is all I have to say about you – for now.” That brought more knowing, sly snickers and laughs. “So go on home – while you still have one.”

I walked slowly over to the car where Rosa waited, with an absolutely expressionless, too calm face. I waited for her to open the door.

“Open it yourself and put the luggage in the back seat.”

The luggage compartment was loaded, on the drive back she said nothing.

“Something is wrong.”

“Ross you are so perceptive!”

“What is it?”

“Let me focus on my work, which is at this point, driving.”

At the gate, she stopped the car with cranky motions.

“We might as well settle it here.”

She pulled out a letter.

“This came a decade ago Brionny said to give it when you asked for news of her. Paragraph one begins 'Dearest Ross'” She started in a cold voice. ‘It is symptomatic of our problem that I remarried recently and have a child on the way. You are so preoccupied with the airline and the war to the extent that you do not see me for months at a time, enquire after me or know what happened. Even for a decade before that our arrangement has been fading. While appreciative of all your financial help and support in many moments of adversity and tolerance, we are no longer in our twenties, colon sexual revolution is for the young. Being in three relations at once now feels emotionally confusing. I need peace, stability and the deep love that comes from one-to-one relationships. Despite all your money and loyalty, despite other qualities, you cannot provide these. I am married to someone who can and I post this from Christchurch airport, we leave for America.

Paragraph Two. As to what should be done with and for Rosa, the dilemma remains the same, protect her and she will stay that same naïve sexually exciting adolescent, but should not really be used that way. Do not protect her and she will be in the same situation that we found her in. Try to help her grow up and spend more constructive time with Eunice.”

All the best for the future, you are a survivor and a toughie, and will beat everything life throws against you. Part of you goes with me.”

Brionny'

It is dated January 18th 1934

You are the father of my child; you have had nearly twenty years of my life, but I was never really your equal or theirs, was I?”

“We should spend more time together.”

“So I can nurse you now you are sick? I am useful, aren't I?

Rosalind finds me so, you both do, and your mistresses, especially when I have my head between somebody's legs. Every word that Brionny wrote is true, and is truly the way I feel, except I have nobody who really loves me, three women and one man who sexually use me, but... nobody and not our daughter either. At least you do not secretly hate me the way Rosalind does.”

“Something else has happened.”

“Our daughter Eunice was dating a very decent polite American serviceman on leave, but his leave ended and the next one... everybody warned her – except Rosalind, who encouraged it... Eunice now boards at Armidale Presbyterian Ladies College. Lynda Taun Fisher suggested that as hopefully that rather now typical scandal will not reach that far north”

I could say nothing at first.

“Brionny has left. My daughter is implicated in a scandal and is now apparently out of my life. My son has vanished. My brother is half dead. My health is broken. A third of the air fleet is downed and rotting in the jungle and I am welcomed home by the worst collection of enemies a man could have. About the only mercy I have had today is that Tom Caufield was not there.”

“He is listed as a prosecution witness, as are Horace and Eunice. Ross I do not want to see you destroyed, and this time they will. I have

taken out ten thousand pounds. After Briionny's letter I looked at union wages and I think after twenty years I have it coming. Can I keep the car as well?"

I nodded, she got out of the Bentley and got my luggage out.

"We have had many good years together, but it is best we end it here. My daughter needs me. Suddenly I know what approaching forty means and suddenly you are going to find what treachery means and you won't see loyalty like mine again."

She then drove off as if I was not there.

I watched the car zoom off towards the north and being unable to carry weight, any more, I left my luggage behind a tree. There was my wife sitting on the veranda, knitting socks for the troops, waiting patiently with a stance I did not like because it resembled the stances on Oldsham's welcoming committee.

"You are not looking well. What? Did the fuzzy-wuzzy women exhaust you or give you a social disease?" She continued knitting.

"Could you get a servant to pick up my luggage?"

"Could you pick up your own luggage?"

"No, I am exhausted from dysentery, malaria, tropical heat and nearly two years of continuous war service."

"Well, you had best learn to do things for yourself because there are no servants now, all off to war or essential services. Quick off you go. Look at the rain clouds, we can't have that genuine polished leather portmanteau water-damaged can we?"

With stops I made it, there and back, puffing. She was as she had been before.

"Uhm, fifty-four and sick and running out of puff. Alice and your equally sick brother are staying here as your mother serves the other side; Robert was exposed and Alice lost her temper with her, blaming her for

the way Robert was. They can't rely on Sir Eustace any more as he died in December, gave up his struggle after the scandal broke. Apart from all this, your mother likes winners and at last the high and mighty Clarke brothers are going to be brought low."

"You sound like you are on the other side."

"Not yet. But you had best not try seduction attempts on your sister-in-law and I am not going to be drawn into this scandal; I am not going to end up in some tenement dump, thank you very much. And don't trust Robert; somebody close gives away all our secrets, personal and business, to the other side."

After three needed walks to bring all the luggage up I walked down the hall and put my luggage in what had been Clarissa's room. Walking up the stairs was too much of an effort. I could see Robert asleep or unconscious on his bed. He had the unmoving body and composed posture of somebody drugged for deep sleep instead of the painful tossing of the feverish; I should know. Alice was watching with the face of one who has lost too much.

"He has had a relapse; it returns."

"Yes, it does; it did for me too."

"He will never fly again, they were able to save his legs, but his hip - when he walks it will be with a cane."

She sighed and looked down at him with an enigmatic look.

"Ross you should show more care with your wife."

The house was miserable, sheets covering things everywhere. There was plenty of time to consult with Alex before the trial and a car could get me there.

\*

Alison Caufield

Lake Conjola 24th April 1944

"Alex! I was genuinely glad to see his battered old and old-fashioned

T Ford crawling down the deliberately potty, rocky road. From the first minute Ross arrived it was apparent how his stay would go. Happy memories of our shared, youthful past and past times here were being eroded quickly. Nothing equals waking up beside someone having a dysentery attack in their sleep to dispel romantic illusions. Then there was that voice; the new one that had a whining tone in it, and the way of being lost in his delirious world and going “uh?” vexedly when I intruded. On the other hand, when he wanted something, his yells reached me – and the neighbours.. Sickness saps character; Rosalind said that verbatim about a quarter of a century past, in her military nursing days and Lynda Taun Fisher also there back then, nodded with a bitter twist to the mouth and recalling that, I could see why and see why they were the way they were.

I had put him in the guest room. Talking with him or reading to him was useless as he would merely screw up his face trying to work out what “Would you like a sandwich?” meant. He could be petulant; being delirious and having little if any control over his bodily functions he could not use that iron will that had always immediately rejected any approach of self-pity or weakness. His will was not there anymore - and in a sense, neither was he? There was just this physical wreck, so I used what Rosalind said - the common nurse’s tactic of isolation, limiting myself to silently bringing him his meals and helping him to the toilet and bath. I even rebandaged his suppurating, stinky tropical ulcers and anointed them with cans of Rawleigh’s salve and goanna oil, almost literally worth their weight in gold in this world of rationing. I was packing it all up with Ross asleep when I heard Alex’s car.

“You are looking well.” He said it as if he meant it.

“Cuppa?”

“Certainly, but I brought my rations.”



He held up a bag of tea and food and then he saw the salve and raised his eyebrows in simulated amazement and gave me a meaningful glare. He then looked at the well-stocked pantry and gave me another stare. I got the message, legally he could not say much or eat contraband.

“We may have to fish for lunch, is that illegal?”

“Depends, but if an inspector arrives, he may reduce your rations if he finds out.”

“More likely ask for a bribe from what I hear.”

“Careful, there are slander laws.”

“So how goes the war? Haven’t heard much this past year.”

“Stalemated in movement generally, but the Axis powers are being worn down, and are pushed back by the Russians, but they are holding their own in Italy. Australia’s been declared out of danger of invasion.”

“Who is in Italy?”

“Everybody but us. Even New Zealand, Brazil, and Morocco.”

“Didn’t even know the last two were in it.”

He just stared at me enigmatically.

“Alison, you must be very, very careful. Having prohibited or an oversupply of rationed goods is an offence.”

“Surely you have read your ration book instructions.”

“What ration book? I don’t need one, I grow things, shoot, fish and trap and Ross provides-”

“Every Australian adult must have a ration book and the laws are strict! Smuggling is a serious offence! Now if Ross provides things from his rations so be it, but be careful, even growing your own might be unwise, you pay taxes?”

“How? I do not earn money. Ross provides some generator fuel-” He raised his eyes and banged his fist. “What? Fuel rationed as well?”

“More so than food.”

“So what isn’t?”

“Air sunlight and water, so far. In reality film and sports tickets are not, but were under consideration. You remember how in the last war hems went up to save cloth usage? Well know we have people in coats made from burlap bags. I suggest that we make an appointment to get you a ration card, and that you donate everything gained in the last two years to a war charity. Obviously, you cannot remember back the names of donors or people who traded for fresh fish can you? You will get off light if you step forward, this happens a good deal. There is an office in Milton.”

“I would prefer Nowra. Sounds like the government will take over everything. He eats a can of illegal tuna so they take his airline?”

“Very much so. Eloura Airlines is listed for nationalisation.”

“Ross needs doctors, he is in no condition for a trial.” I described his symptoms.

“This must be a relapse into recurrent malaria and they won’t grant an extension. We go to trial in four weeks. You had best steer clear.”

“You will need to sleep on the couch; its quite comfortable. He has to have a room to himself.”

“Did you intend to drive him back?”

“Yes.”

“He will need a few days at least.”

The next day I absented myself while patient Ross, a little better, conferred with Alex patience incarnate, They stayed like that for twelve days and although Ross was still so tired he would sleep on the veranda chair in the sun, the more extreme symptoms were vanishing. We drove up to Nowra, with fuel and food, records and books in the trailer. The world was coming to me and four days after my appointment with the Nowra inspector, it came in the form of Albert Moon, that nasty little

Eloura government inspector. He had a warrant to search my home and a subpoena to force me to testify in the Clarke treason trial.

\*

Alexander McPherson

New Albion, Eloura 29<sup>th</sup> May 1944

The trial began Monday morning and was expected to have a three-week run. The courthouse would have provided too much attention and this was supposedly a secret trial as it involved classified information. It also involved the military world as they made up over half the twelve-man tribunal, so it was on their territory, ironically in the old ballroom with beds, bookshelves and recliners relocated.

This was where thirty-five years ago, virginal, radiant, fundamentalist Christian Rosalind was captivated by charming, dynamic Ross. Now the fruit of that captivation, Horace sat at the back expressionless with Communist Party badges as prominent as his willingness to testify against his parents, sitting together as defendants. Rosalind's face wore a fixed cold sneer: Ross sat there sallow and trembling with fever, was striving to know what was going on. Beside her was Elizabeth MacKinnon, their business partner and his rumoured prostitute lover that rumour said they shared. A fruit picker claimed he saw her and Rosalind kissing on the veranda.

At the very back so that they could not hear, was their son and Eunice, the daughter by another lover, both waiting to testify against them. Robert who had been there the night they met, with his ruling class arrogance and his great military future so obviously before him in that ostentatious uniform, now looked so drab and pathetic hunched over in his wheelchair, all colour and strength drained away. As he coughed he racked his body and his broken half-healed bones must have hurt badly, for he winced in an effort not to scream. Beside him his sad wife, in black mourning, both for her recently deceased father and the son killed four

years past, held his hand, while their Craig was as still and cold and expressionless as a mannequin. Bright eyed Brionny who had been there in 1909 was now not to be found. She was represented by a piece of paper and an empty chair.

The lesser defendants on smuggling charges, Murie, Ruth, and Alison who had gone searching for Ross and Rosalind that long ago night, were also there. Jan, who had ended up taking a waltz turn with Jenny that night in 1909, was there, his dancing days ended at Gallipoli. My brother Karl and sister-in-law, Lynda, looked like they wanted to sink through the floorboards. Marsha Chapman, nee Trevelyan who had been the epitome of happiness as she announced her engagement that night so long ago, now looked so old, so tired, so hopeless. Her husband Leo, that good decent man, so handsome and cheery then, was somewhere in this building, in his oil bath. Evelyn and Helen were also in the dock, a little bewildered. Evelyn now in his sixties and with long silver-grey hair and a goatee and stylish scarf to half hide the neck rings, still had some jaunty defiance, which he shared with Helen, who had aged well, approaching sixty. Saddest of all was Max, devastated that he should be there, when he mentally came back to where he was, trembling and drooling would start and he would go off into an escape in remembrance of things past.

The Anzac Day poem about the Great War's dead never growing old or being condemned by their actions never seemed so true. Hendrik Van Groendhal and the Whaley's were sanctimonious lechers, Kenny Moon the village idiot, Eakins McKenzie a dangerous lunatic, my cousin Allen a psychopathic bully, Trevelyan and cousin Douglas plodders and my brother Andrew a naïve cuckold, yet they would be enshrined in the town's memory as the shining, guiltless heroic children of an empire, a halcyon time that died on Gallipoli's shores.

As a reminder of how much the world had changed, about twenty

sad refugees, a few with yellow stars still on their clothing, sat by themselves, they would be charged with bribes and illegal entry. Crutchfield and Jack had agreed to have them held in custody once they were charged. Esmeralda was there in the audience, with her child, little Tom, but not for long; she suppressed a snarl when an attendant told her to wait outside. Five-year-olds are not good at keeping state secrets.

Now in this drab room were three more survivors representing the new world coming and they would make that old Edwardian world that was not so wonderful seem like a paradise. Jack Caufield, who was second counsel to Crutchfield, had been there teasing Rosalind, was now not far behind and clearly out to enjoy the process. His three major witnesses were Moon, my aunt and my nephew. Albert Moon, who had been clowning around with a kangaroo while dressed in long underwear in that 1909 night, was now the most powerful man in this room. Aunt Rachel, was despite some deepened wrinkles and hair gone iron grey unchanged, still as she had been long before that 1909 night. Glinty-eyed. Reverend Jervis the same, why they never married is beyond many.

All four were clearly enjoying the process. The most dangerous of all was that bush lawyer, Henderson Crutchfield, the new boy leading the prosecution. Horace and Rachel Clarke and Moon as witnesses left. As the tribunal entered and he started off after all rise and we dealt with the refugees as agreed, before going on to the big fish, the ones who own the airline everybody wants now it runs at a profit.

“The first charge the prosecution will prove is that Robert Clarke and Ross Clarke together with their cousin Murie Reginald Fisher, Jan Van Groendhal, his wife Keddy Van Groendhal neè Jervis nee Fisher, niece to Murie, former brothel madam Elizabeth MacKinnon, now a company director of Eloura Airlines and mistress to Ross Clarke, likewise Eloura Airlines company secretary Rosa MacDonald also known

as Rosa Clarke, and Brianny McNamara Clarke, first wife to Ross Clarke and Alice Hughes Clarke, wife of Robert Clarke, have been the heads of a smuggling ring in defiance of wartime regulations, smuggling both people and material into this nation.

The second charge is that Robert Clarke and Ross Clarke have regularly maintained contact with Hauptmann Horst Voss, an officer of Germany's notorious SS, paying him cash, both payment and contact being forbidden by the Treason Act.

A third charge is that Robert Clarke and Ross Clarke and Rosalind Clarke also they have also withheld vital war material, notably aircraft, for a false military purpose under Section of the aforesaid act.

Charge Four is that to commit the aforementioned crime they have purposely fabricated a secret war department, supposedly authorised by the government.

Fifth, that these brothers Robert Clarke and Ross Clarke have been accused of the wilful, even spiteful destruction of government property, an Electra 10, named *Rosalind* serial number x02881c This destruction occurring on July 8th 1943 in the New Guinea Highlands.

Sixth, on or about August 8<sup>th</sup> 1943 the Clarke bothers, Ross and Robert, did wilfully and viciously assault Major Henry Percival McElroy, with intent to murder, causing grievous bodily harm.

Seventh, on September 8<sup>th</sup> the Clarke brothers did without authorisation, persuade the 217<sup>th</sup> United States Bomber Squadron to repeatedly bomb an area of New Guinea commonly known as the Death Falls and for no valid military reason.

Of the other defendants Rosalind Clarke, and Maximilian Basil Chapman also stand accused of Charges Three and Four.

Craig Clarke, formerly of MI5 English Intelligence faces separate charges of failure to inform of treason and aiding and abetting his Uncle

Ross Clarke's unauthorised contact with an enemy of His Majesty's forces. These charges come under the Official Secrets Act."

The judge spoke to that. "Then the defendant should be held in custody and only brought before this tribunal pursuant to his charges."

The bailiffs took Craig away.

"The following are accused of the receiving and usage of smuggled goods from those previously charged with dealing in such goods: the aforementioned Rosalind Clarke, the aforementioned Murie Reginald Fisher and the aforementioned Maximilian Basil Chapman. Also charged with this offence alone are Jan Van Groendhal husband of Keddy, her parents Karl McPherson, his wife Lynda Taun Fisher, and Marsha Jane Chapman, daughter in law of Maximilian. His son Evelyn Chapman and his wife Helen Chapman."

It should also be noted that Rosa MacDonald, frequently calling herself Mrs Clarke or Rosa MacDonald Clarke, and Brianny McNamara Clarke, have absconded. They have knowingly fled justice and must be tried in absentia."

"So noted."

"Objection!"

"Grounds?"

"First, evidence allowed before a tribunal? Second, has the prosecution had any contact with these witnesses and if so, have they fled after contact was made? If they have some contact point the defence wants that point for interrogative purposes. To me they merely seem difficult to find. Please prove otherwise."

The presiding Tribunal judge, a former court martial specialist, looked at Crutchfield asked for such evidence and it was first blood to us.

"The prosecution will also present ample evidence of bigamy."

"Not in this court!" That brought some smiles. "Seven complicated

charges are quite enough. Anything not involving the defence of the realm should be presented before a court of law. Likewise bizarre allegations of sexual impropriety. Now does the defence or prosecution have any objection to those charges six and seven those involving American personnel being heard first and separate to all others?"

"No objection!"

"No objection."

Damn! Crutchfield was following my lead and not making powerful enemies on the bench. The Australians on the tribunal did not want to wash their dirty linen in public and the Americans did not wish to see it. The desperate band of alleged smugglers were given a breakfast break. Crutchfield made his next mistake, a big one, putting McElroy on the stand and going on in great detail about his glorious war record, from Mexico 1914 till now. His record was just too glorious: all those battles and medals and leading from the front and not a scratch. First off I established that he was a liar, bringing up his faked old American ancestry - Valley Forge, the Alamo and the rest and getting him to insist on his Scots descent and revealed him as being born Erasmus Tserdaum in Cracow, descended from generations of Polish butchers. He migrated to America aged eleven. He was obviously also lying about the crash. Ross had him worked out and some on the tribunal were starting to.

"So when you and five others galloped forward at Ojos Azules in 1916 who else survived?"

"Bell, bullet to the kneecap fixed his career though."

"And of your squad at Château Thierry when you captured a machine gun nest?"

"Nobody."

"And the Argonne?"

"Nobody again, it was a tough war. The Philippines was a hell of a



lot easier. I had a company then and half survived and casualties at Guadalcanal landing were hardly nothing, barely two thirds.”

Barely nothing? Even at Lone Pine two thirds gone was a tragedy. Military men, the tribunal were getting it, so was Jack Caufield, who got Crutchfield’s attention.

“Objection! Relevance?”

“The prosecution spent forty minutes on his war record, all I want are four on questioning this and on his New Guinea service.” I got the nod and of six missions he was the sole survivor in two and in the others less than half returned. He cheerfully admitted to being called Murderer McElroy by his men, thinking they meant the enemy.

“At the battle of Buna?”

“Nobody.”

“Nobody survived or nobody killed.”

“Nobody on their feet, that I can recall.”

“First rebuttal witness Private Jason Esterbauer who served at Buna and on the Clarke expedition.”

“Whadya mean? Esterbauer’s dead.”

“Esterbauer was found in the jungle five weeks past.”

They brought him in, wearing a strait jacket, despite the facial sores his terrified angry eyes were his worst feature and when he saw McElroy those eyes nearly popped out of his head with a weird mixture of glee and terror. “Murderer McElroy! Murderer McElroy! You killed all the others so you could enjoy canoeing down Death Falls so now its your turn to die!”

He lunged for him and got a bite in before bailiffs and Crutchfield and Jack were able to immobilise him, but they could not shut him up.

“Yer think yer could make a million out of mad tourists off ta Death Falls but the Clarkes got it bombed ta spite yer, Murderer! Murderer!”

He kept yelling that as they carted him off and Crutchfield got it dismissed as evidence, but everybody could see the bite going across the scar Ross left. I asked that the native guide be held in reserve and only used if the need for clarification arose. Putting a black native as a witness against a white officer was a dangerous business and I had made it clear to the tribunal that I would follow the convention of using white against black only as a necessity.

“I have other witnesses from the Buna battle and the ice expedition.”

“Hopefully saner.”

Bardson testified to McElroy's behaviour and gave a vivid picture of a simple, short ice gathering expedition turned into a nightmare by McElroy. When he said that Robert reluctantly landed the plane on his orders Crutchfield went in on the only point he could use without me bringing in the guide, not an eyewitness to that point.

“How on earth Private Bardson, could you hear what your major said above loud engines?”

“How could I not hear him? You think he's loud now, what till he roars to be heard!”

“So if it was as foolish to land a plane why did Robert Clarke land the plane?”

“Rule one, day one Boot Camp, obey orders.”

I knew he was not telling the full story there, but instinct said not to pursue it. In separate but matching testimony Vannucci and Bardson then described how McElroy insisted on going down Death Falls against warnings and talked of turning it into a tourist attraction to millions. Bardson then described the battle at the falls and praised Ross for keeping him alive. Crutchfield and Jack then conferred in whispers, they were not even game to ask Bardson if he had seen the Clarkes attack McElroy. Crutchfield had to let it all go or I could rebut with the guide. Bardson

spoiled it at the end with “Hey Clarkey that Elizabeth and Rosalind are high class dames, but where’s that Rosa?” Vannucci was better, but just a collaborating witness to them.

As an officer Lieutenant McCann was best of all, not only by giving a confirming account, but because the tribunal of officers would give more credibility to another officer. He also divided them, describing how in resentful tones Australians died following orders to get the same clean water that flowed past American positions. American and Australian tribunal members stared at each other.

“Objection! Lieutenant McCann is not an expert witness on water!”

“Indeed he is not, which is why I flew three fully qualified experts to take samples for testing from the falls and the camps. We even filmed the process and have that film, those tests and the experts outside the door. If my learned friend wishes to dispute Lieutenant McCann’s opinion, we can have it verified quite easily. Is there any dispute?”

A tribunal member, an American came to Crutchfield’s rescue.

“We are straying from the charges. Please restrict yourself to them.”

“Lieutenant McCann what did bombing the Death Falls effect?”

“It made the river navigable for rafts that could carry our artillery and large numbers of men upstream so we easily captured the vital airfield at the Van Der Linden’s plantation. The path was good for patrols but too narrow for equipment. With the river navigable we won.”

“What did Major McElroy say to that?”

He said he was going to see the Clarkes destroyed and if the courts did not do it he would, gun or law is all the same he said.”

“Oh surely he was just venting justified anger?”

“After hearing the fate of his men at Buna I am not so sure.”

The room went so quiet I could hear the veteran’s wheelchairs squeaking outside and eighty yards off. The tribunal were scared.

“Is this hearsay or are you a witness? “

“Speak to Corporal Vannucci, he saw it and he survived it.”

“Certainly.”

I had Vannucci recalled and reminded of his oath.

“You were under Major McElroy’s command at Buna? January 4<sup>th</sup> 1943?”

“Yeh, but he was only a lieutenant then.”

“He has testified that nobody under his command survived that battle intact.”

“Nah, fifty, maybe sixty did, but most died in his mad missions soon after. Some transferred out so they know what happened. I can make a list of maybe ten like that, check what happened, they will verify what I say.”

“And what do you say?”

“After twenty minutes of battle we broke and ran. We were green and New Guinea was well, unnerving, so were the Japs. We shouldn’t have ran, we should have obeyed him, but he shouldn’t have machine gunned us. Killed two GIs that I saw personally. Here’s where I copped one, lost its force going through my rifle butt.”

He pulled up his shirt to show the scars to twelve absolutely still mannequins on the tribunal bench. Even now McElroy did not have the sense to be scared or even to shut up.

“Hell cowards have it coming! One way or another soldiers die! Yah think I worked my way up from trooper to major by coddling cowards?”

The presiding officer smashed the gavel.

“This tribunal is adjourned and will reconvene Monday June twelfth at nine.”

As expected, the American section went one by one door, the Australians by another. They needed two week’s adjournment to work out the wisdom in proceeding and their escape route. In the toilets, which is nicknamed the conference room among those in the know, Jack soon

appeared at the next urinal, sighing.

“A dozen witnesses to slashing a superior officer, and he will walk. Launching his own silly bombing mission against rocks and you get the court to believe he won the New Guinea campaign. My father said you were brilliant.”

“You are not here to flatter. What do you want?”

“Eloura Airlines. Sell to Oldsham and Betham and they all go free.”

“Ross won’t sell.”

“Then he’s a damned fool. He’s losing nearly ten per cent of his aircraft a year in the Pacific War alone and the Nazis and Japs have got years of fight in them yet.”

“So why do Oldsham and Betham want to buy?”

“Because my fools for clients are bigger idiots than yours – or its payback about something or someone, probably the blonde, MacKinnon.”

“I’ll let you know after next Monday.”

“Even if all the tribunal call it quits they might still go elsewhere with the bigamy thing. Settle this mess, nobody will go to jail over a bottle of whiskey or wrapping paper too large. Too many do it and it makes the law look contemptible.”

He made his piss hit the metal to make a noise.

On Monday morning June twelfth all the Americans were gone. After all rise we heard from the presiding member.

“Charges five, six and seven made against Ross and Robert Clarke have been dropped. Ross and Robert Clarke and all other defendants will remain.”

“General Cullum has urgent matters to attend to, wishes to testify to today.”

He was initially a good witness for them; the wearily vexatious tones just kept under control by an enforced self-discipline enforced his image

of a soldier forced to deal with three law breaking clowns who did more harm than good, Ross, Rosalind and Max. He even got round their exemplary records in the Great War by suggesting that they were foolishly trying to relive their youths. He did factually establish that their coast watching had no legal or military authorisation. He then painted a picture of a wasted plane desperately needed in New Guinea and that was his mistake and my opening on cross-examination. .

“General Cullum are you aware that in 1940 two merchant vessels were sunk by enemy submarines in nearby waters?”

“Yes.”

“And how many vessels were sunk in the defendant’s patrolled area by enemy action in the time the defendants patrolled this area?”

“None.”

“And after?”

He bit his lip and sighed.

“Are you aware that several Australian fishing boats were sunk off Bermagui in October 1942 with the loss of eight lives?”

“Yes.”

“And are you aware that the coast off Bermagui was patrolled regularly by the defendants after sightings of Japanese submarines?”

“Suspected sightings.”

“And are you aware of government report X65 dated June 18<sup>th</sup> 1942 which describes the seaway between Melbourne and Sydney as crucially important for our economy and war effort and one which was a prime target for Japanese subs?”

“Yes I read the report very carefully.”

“Before or after you sent the defendants and the only plane in much of that vital vicinity away to an area where the Japanese had not yet arrived and where an incomplete record of Allied aircraft on that front

lists over sixty planes?”

“After and everyone knew they were coming.”

“No recall for a crucial supply line?”

“I asked him to donate other identical planes which would be used legally. Not one ever came.”

Clever, he was putting me in the position of asking questions I did not know the answer to or letting it go. There was a way round that trap and Ross could see it, writing me a note.

“General please give the exact words Ross Clarke said to you when you asked for the donation. He remembers and others were in hearing range of his phone.”

“Good idea, but the American factories are going full blast and cannot meet even their own demands for some time. If I can get a plane off any neutrals it may not be as reliable or easy to service. Should I wait or try among neutrals now?”

“And what did you say?”

“Wait, get DC3s.”

“General I remind you that you have taken an oath to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth? If you omit vital testimony such as that again I will request to the tribunal that you be treated as a hostile witness: charges be laid.”

Jack and Crutchfield objected to bullying and slandering the general.

“If this tribunal hears any more such evasive and deceitful testimony we will press charges and request custody without bail, general or not.”

“General Cullum are you aware that Eloura Airlines has donated seventy-four planes to the war effort and that Ross Clarke’s personal donations are over four million pounds? That his son and all four nephews are front line volunteers? That one of those nephews, Craig Clarke was a fighter pilot killed in the battle of Britain and another,

Carson, just eighteen, was serving with the Canadian paratroopers in the Normandy landings was, two days past, reported missing in action?"

"This has nothing to do with this case."

"You consider official applications more important?"

"Legally here more relevant. The stooges must apply and they did not."

"Do you know of Denis Hunter general?"

"Heard the name."

"He has served as a Bermagui's civil defence officer since war was declared."

"With the court's permission I will read a relevant document."

"Dear Ross and Max, Your offer of airborne surveillance is gratefully acknowledged and accepted contact the local radio with any urgent news any time on BE 24.7 that's our frequency.' This is dated two days before the first flight and their plane is clearly listed as among the assets to be used in that area for 1942. That list was sent to your office."

"I cannot read every ordnance list for every little town under my command."

"Are you saying that you did not know that there was a plane doing surveillance in your area, broadcasting to a local radio from a plane you thought until now was illegal and you did not know of for seven months?"

"After they mistook a whale for a Jap sub at ten yards distance I knew. After I found out about a false top-secret centre at their Ahmegodheho lounge room that nobody ever authorised I knew. After that plane was used to visit secret mistresses or wives at Conjola and Otago I knew. They were lucky to get out of it without prosecution."

"What do you think this is?"

"They wasted resources. They think forcing a sub to dive was



glorious and that was their sole achievement.”

“Actually they sank it.”

“They did not!”

“Permission for material evidence in rebuttal.”

I got the nod held up the ship’s log of the *Ohira* and the accompanying translation and had a stat dec by the rare so-sorry-but-too-busy –to- be-here translator read out and submitted. I then did readings from the translation and the ship’s captain created a narrative of vexation as easy target after target had to be let go due to fears of destruction by the *Rosalind*’s bombs. After the sub was eventually hit by her bombs he was just able to keep her afloat to make Japanese held territory on the northern coast of eastern New Guinea. The log with its code book was found amidst a pile of half burned supplies on the beach nearby in June last year and sent to intelligence. I concluded with the last paragraph of the stat dec where the translator wondered why there was no reply to the personal thanks to the crew of the *Rosalind* for their invaluable work and a recommendation for Australia’s highest civilian award which Douglas MacArthur had sent for them care of both Albert Moon and General Cullum.

“Can this tribunal give this award?”

“It cannot, but can pass this information to General Cullum’s deputy and presumable successor. Does the prosecution really wish to press on with this case?”

Another day another victory. Max had a Cheshire cat grin. Thursday was looking good. Except the Clarkes, waiting for good news from Normandy that may never come, my clients were smiling, at least initially.

“The prosecution requests that the charges against those accused of receiving smuggled goods be heard first.”

“Defence?”

“No objection.”

They were going after the little fish first as bait to lure the big ones into surrender or to build a prison made of the little bricks, to mix metaphors.

“The prosecution will call Rachel Clarke.”

It went even better than her statement led me to expect.

“Please describe what was going on at Ahmegodheho, on December 25<sup>th</sup> 1943.”

“A Christmas party! That was what was going on!”

One of the tribunal openly got uncontrollable giggles and two others had laughter in their eyes but the one at the end had found a kindred soul in the dock.

“Please continue.” He asked in humourless, genuinely encouraging tones and the giggler stopped.

“They were engaged in illegal activities. I present as evidence a standard issue wrapping paper government approved size and style and on display at the post office and the local inspector’s office. Here is their wrapping paper nearly twice that size and look at the waste of ink on this gaudy frippery! Look at these Santa Claus decorations, after the government banned Santa Claus!”

“Uhr Mrs Clarke, on a point of law, this is a fallacy. The government under the Dedman Laws did not actually ban Santa Claus; the laws actually banned extravagant decorations and presents.” The giggler did not like her and she sensed it.

“Tthey should have, pagan rubbish!”

“The witness will confine herself to testifying as to what she saw during the raid on the Clarke residence on December 25<sup>th</sup> 1943 and to presenting material evidence from that raid.”

“I saw whiskey in the hands of Maximilian Basil Chapman, Rosalind Clarke and his harlots Helen Chapman, Rosa MacDonald and Elizabeth MacKinnon were all promenading around that Ottoman Room which should be called the odd room, wearing the latest fashions flown in from Geneva, and in front of children.”

Crutchfield was in control again and requested that the clothes be displayed. Probably royalty was wise enough not to wear such things now. Lynda and Ruth were clearly bitterly envious, the whole district would be. Suddenly I saw what Crutchfield and the rest were doing with these apparent trivialities.

“And what other illegal things were found in this raid?”

“At a time when lead is at such a premium that Walt Disney had his famous statue of Bambi melted down for the war effort, Rosalind Clarke gave her nephew Carson a set of lead toy soldiers, five hundred pieces, each the size of a bullet that could kill a Jap or a Hun.”

“Could this be an heirloom or a purchase from before the regulations?”

“With made in Argentina June 1943 stamped on the box?”

“Was there an import permit attached?”

“Not one thing had a permit. We asked them.”

“Where other things from foreign countries?”

“The massive amount of paint and paper from Max Chapman for that son of his, that scoundrel and wastrel Evelyn Chapman, who ignores the war effort as if he lives on the moon, the glazed fruit that was given to that harlot he and my son share - “

“Objection!”

“The witness will refrain from personal comments. Stick to describing and presenting the objects confiscated or be held in contempt.”

“That jailbird for receiving stolen goods Stepan Bach, was at it

again, a twenty- pound box of tobacco when our troops could not get basic food flown into them. The wines, the gifts of books, gourmet foods, well let us present them before the court. They come from Spain, Argentina, Ireland, They did not even trade with our Allies!”

“Who was there and with what illegal objects?”

“My worthless sons were off in New Guinea; apparently they could not get leave, nor was Marsha Chapman there, nor Karl and Lynda Taun Fisher. All the others named as receiving smuggled and prohibited goods were there.”

The rest of the day went on who got what and where it came from, showing it to the court and having it registered. Horace was mostly support for his grandmother, confirming things from the early months of the war and that his father had made big profits. He was easily clobbered on the easily proved financial losses sustained from mid-1942 onwards. Questions concerning Jan’s cakes being the regulation size where the only things not presented as material evidence. On the Wednesday Moon and other officers testified corroborating Rachel’s testimony? At lunch that day Marsha, Lynda and Karl sat by themselves and would not talk with us. Next morning proceedings began with them sitting together with other representation, without cost, who turned out to be Jack. He requested to give their testimony. Marsha went first.

“As local president of Legacy and therefore much concerned with war effort I took assorted gifts from Ross Clarke, both before and after war regulations took effect, believing them honestly purchased from before war regulations took effect. I have taken nothing since before he was persuaded or conscripted to fly his planes in New Guinea in June 1942. Listed here are his donations, all of which were raffled through the war effort. Nothing was used or kept by me.”

“No further questions.” Jack had sense enough not to look smug.

This was devastating and there was nothing for it but to attack.

“Mrs Chapman has District Inspector Moon intimidated you into lies again?”

“Not this time. I thought the Christmas raid on the Clarkes was another of his schemes to destroy them until I saw the evidence presented in this court.”

“What set-ups?”

“You know and so does everybody in this district.”

“Please explain.”

“Objection! Relevance?”

“If this tribunal is being used for a personal vendetta by a government official abusing his authority we should know of it.”

“Go on, but proceed with caution.”

“Ross Clarke and Albert Moon have had a personal feud for years over Rosalind Clarke. Ross found him threatening her in the barn-”

“Objection hearsay!”

“You are objecting to your own witness?” That was from a formerly silent tribunalist.

“I have to! She is going to make unsubstantiated suggestions of gross indecency and blackmail!”

“How do you know that?”

The presiding tribunalist just continued his stare. Suddenly even Henderson Crutchfield was losing it. Moon had gone a sickly sweaty white with eyes that darted hate around the room. Jack was rolling his tongue around his mouth.

“Oh, everybody has heard this old legend of how the Clarke brothers found his now wife with a rival and what they did to him and then to her father.”

“This tribunal has not and perhaps we should hear it - one at a time,

now who else was directly involved in the old legend?”

They were taken out under Bailiff’s guard and one by one, Ross, Robert, Rosalind, Aunt Rachel, Jervis and the man of the moment himself, the evasive Moon, mumbling, grovelling, offering simpering guilty smiles testified so the court got an accurate picture of the past. I moved in for what might be the coup de grace.

“As one of the defendants has endured attempted rape and blackmail from one of the chief witnesses for the prosecution, who has also been the chief instigator of all these charges, I request that all charges be dropped.”

”Albert Sylvester Moon. Please rise and face the court.” He did so, gulping.

“Extremely serious allegations have been made against you, but evidence is not proof. Even so, you must not leave the jurisdiction of this court and endure suspension from your position for the duration of this case. The tribunal noted before this case began, the intense personal rivalries, conflicts of interest and family ties involved in this case and decided to proceed, putting the national good above legal questions, which due to the nature of the case and the interwoven civilian and military aspects and the few precedents we have, leaves much unclear. Your request will be taken under advisement.”

Jack got up “I wish an adjournment as a representative for those defendants.”

Suddenly they were all looking at me as if I had done something wrong.

“Granted.”

“Defendants Marsha Chapman and Karl and Lynda Taun Fisher we will adjourn until nine am. Monday June nineteenth, have another debriefed attorney by then. Now to Alexander McPherson. There is such a thing as being a little too brilliant. If we find that Marsha Chapman was

a plant organised by you, the only mercy you will get will be a final unfettered look at the sky before the wagon takes you off to being behind bars for the next twenty years. In a treason trial we can do that and we will be looking at this case very, very carefully.”

“All rise.”

I looked at my remaining defendants.

“We have won, we can get any verdict thrown out on appeal even if they don’t cave in and dismiss.”

“But have you won?” Bach asked. Good question; McElroy was last seen being bundled off in a jeep in handcuffs, Cullum and Moon would be retired, and Aunt Rachel made a fool of, but from Crutchfield’s glinting eyes and Jack’s still expressionless face I knew I had made dangerous enemies for life and a reputation for being too clever. And they had something up their sleeves.

That something arrived in a fresh immaculate blue suit that nobody below the level of a state governor would dare wear in these days of cloth rationing. His English was equally immaculate and with a Germanic accent even more daring than his clothes. He was a state employed detective in Geneva, set to watch the people smuggling that Eloura Airlines indulged in. Crutchfield let him be the star.

“At first we welcomed their flying out refugees to new homes as Switzerland’s resources were being strained with such large influxes, but then we started hearing of extortionist prices for flights, of payments made first to Ross Clarke and then on to Nazis to search for particular individuals for escape. Sometimes these people smuggling flights would be delayed with literally fatal consequences, just so that cargoes of luxury goods could be flown in.”

“And when did you first definitely know of these flights?”

“In August 1942.”

“And their end?”

“Late March 1943.”

Ross was smiling for some reason.

“No arrests were made?”

“It was discussed, but to arrest them would have led to the deaths of hundreds.”

“Why did it stop?”

“We believe that it was because Ross Clarke was transferred to New Guinea.”

Ross was writing notes.

“Do you have evidence for what you say?”

“Over a hundred photographs of Ross Clarke and his nephew Craig Clarke with assorted Nazis, entering the German Consulate, both sworn statements and cheques made out to him by refugees, the confessions of witnesses involved in the smuggling, confessing that he was the ringleader, the recent defection of Hauptmann Horst Voss, an officer of Germany’s notorious SS who has his own records of a prolonged search for Clarke’s mistress and many other extortionist dealings.”

“How many times did you watch Ross Clarke?”

”By log record ninety six, sometimes on a daily basis.”

“And is he in the courtroom?”

“Most certainly.”

“Please identify him.”

He pointed to Robert.

“Let the record show the man accused has been identified.”

“Let the record show that the witness has mistakenly identified Robert Clarke as Ross.” I added.

“No it is this man in the wheelchair, not the one with fingers missing. Look at the close-up photographs.” Crutchfield did and was



puzzled and quickly withdrew and I had a puzzled witness.

“My client also is puzzled. He has communicated to me that he arrived in New Guinea on July 8<sup>th</sup> 1942 and served there until invalided home in April of this year. His only absences were two flights to India which then landed in West Australia carrying important passengers. While in India and in the time span you say you saw him, he met not only his co-director Former RFC Lieutenant Conrad and his family, but the Viceroy and his wife. In New Guinea he claims on one occasion General Douglas MacArthur was interviewing him about terrain he had flown over, that he flew Australia’s commander general Thomas Blamey four times and that he was interviewed by American generals Sutherland and Eichelberger on intelligence matters. If these prominent figures are not enough to give his alibi credibility he can name scores of others and supply photographs and handwritten logbooks.”

“I know nothing of the man with the missing fingers who says he was in New Guinea. I know much of the man in the wheelchair and the photos prove it.”

They did indeed. Goodbye school pal. It was Robert with Craig chatting with well-known Nazis and the tribunal were deliberating on if they could force him to testify or if he should be handed over to interrogators. I spoke to him alone at lunch. Somehow, I sensed that this was the result of school days together, forty years past, bullying and buggery at school, total control by the mother.

“If I plead guilty, take sole responsibility and hand over the money can I keep out of jail?”

“Perhaps, the longer this trial goes on the more chance there is someone will blab an official wartime secret and the tribunal know it. I will see what I can do. The tribunal have asked for a two-day adjournment while the Swiss Consul comes visiting.”

I made that latter point about secrecy, mentioning the Japanese codes, the illegal smuggling, Moon's activities tarnishing government watchdogs and McElroy's doing the same to the officer corps. I asked what other secrets were in danger of revelation and everybody agreed that I had a point. Crutchfield wanted to keep going, but Jack could see something else and had just enough integrity or self-preserving instincts to speak up.

"I believed what the Swiss told us in good if mistaken faith, that it was Ross, but clearly it was not and like the Swiss I now believe that Robert was being blackmailed by persons unknown to impersonate Ross for reasons unknown."

"And I have suspicions that the blackmailers may be among my learned friend's witnesses."

"The court will need a recess to consider such a possibility and will appoint a special investigator. The Swiss also have a petition to present to the court for consideration. Therefore this court will adjourn until sufficient time elapses for the investigation."

And they would be in no hurry to reconvene.

\*

"All rise!"

We did. Craig, Ross, Rosalind, Alice who was so far gone she barely seemed to know where she was and Robert, who knew too well where he was, and had his wrists still bandaged. The tribunal had already noticed.

"After considering the evidence we find that Robert Clarke has been blackmailed into impersonating his brother Ross, so as to bring discredit to him and ultimately to Eloura Airlines. Such a dishonourable tactic opens itself to differing interpretations, all of which are distasteful and uncertain and no tribunal member wishes to enter into this sordid world – especially as no clear picture which can lead to a guilty verdict on those

charges already before us has yet emerged. We have also considered the way this involves neutrals not covered by our laws. The way all allegations so far have been dismissed is another point as are the number of highly sensitive issues which have arisen here and which if revealed, will give comfort to this nation's enemies - and therefore we are willing to dismiss all remaining charges against the defendants - if the following conditions are undisputed.

First: Craig Clarke will agree to a dishonourable discharge and the loss of all pensions and entitlements. He will be interned for the duration of the war.

Second: All other defendants will immediately resign from all positions involving the war effort and will not renew their positions at a later date.

Third: All defendants must reaffirm that they are bound by the Official Secrets Act and not discuss, allude to or refer to this trial or any of those matters raised here.

Fourth and finally: The Swiss government has de-registered Eloura Airlines. Those people in charge may now place all assets connected to Eloura Airlines regardless of where they may now be located under the control of the Australian government for the duration of current hostilities.

If these conditions are not met, we will enquire further into the activities of Eloura Airlines and expect no mercy if we reach sentencing.”

This was what I expected.

“On clarification are the defendants allowed to keep their bank accounts even though some profits come from Eloura Airlines?”

“Yes.”

Are they allowed their capital? Shares? Land connected to offices? Some of these offices are in neutral countries or still under Axis

occupation.”

“All other forms of ownership apart from recently acquired cash flows into personal accounts will be held in abeyance for the war’s duration.”

“We will need time to consider this offer.”

*No we will not, not really.*

“We will adjourn and meet at two o’clock precisely.”

Everybody got the emphasis and the vexation in the last word. Craig went 'off for a drink.' He gave the impression that was what he would do for the rest of his life.

On my veranda there was a discussion when there was not much to discuss.

“Will we get it back?” Ross asked.

“Do we want it back? His wife commented and it was only half a joke.

“If we try, will we face fresh charges?”

“Do you have a choice?”

“Robert does not.” Ross replied “and frankly brother I do not care what happens to you next. Guess why.”

“Then care about us!” Mrs MacKinnon joined in. “Us being me and Rosalind, who will have our lives destroyed in a scandal. They virtually said it in that courtroom that it would all come out if they held an enquiry.”

I nodded and they could all see it.

“There is something else.” Ross spoke wearily. “It took nearly fifteen years to make a profit and the problem was not so much with planes or weather, it was people. Envious, spiteful, mean, narrow people who could not bear to see us succeed with our vision of a better, freer world, but only saw a chance to squeeze us for a little money or enjoy

humiliating us for a little self-gratification. Well let them kill each other off for years more. I can live on what is left of Alessandra's money."

He would and we would sign the deal.

\*

Carson Clarke

Normandy 19<sup>th</sup> June 1944

Everybody who knew my age said I was big and bulky for my age, but not many guessed my real age: I could shave off thick, hard stubble before my sixteenth birthday.

Perhaps the weight did me in. The roof glass may have held a less weighty man and the iron frame did more damage than it should have and I picked up velocity very fast between the high greenhouse ceiling which I calculated at twenty-eight feet and the cement floor. Not enough to kill me, just yet. Like poor Dad on the other side of the world last year, my hip and legs were goners. I could smell them. With the one good arm I got to the water bottle and my one piece of luck was the tap within arm's reach: I would not die of thirst, starvation maybe, but I was pretty certain I knew what I would die of: it smelt above the stench of my own piss and shit and if I lifted my head I could see the protruding bone and the horrible green.

Oh well I would die at peace. There was nothing in this world more peaceful than a rich man's greenhouse, especially now that the birds and rain came in through the hole my fall made. Another hole I had in a sense made was almost ready. A day ago I had asked in my schoolboy French what the hole was for and the gardener said for me. He had seen me at lunchtime on the first day and ignored me. Apparently I was supposed to be a problem somewhere else. On the third day the whole five of them stood over me staring puzzled and differing on what to do. If they had either contacted the French resistance like they do in movies or handed me over to the Germans like they often did in reality I would have been

under medical care with a full stomach now. Instead they had kept on ignoring me. Problem go away: except I could not. I could hear them talking and could basically follow it. If either the Germans or the advancing Allies found me they would not believe that I had remained undiscovered for so long: to the Germans that would make them Resistance supporters, to the Allies collaborators and if found by either side I would get them a firing squad wall. Therefore, underling gardener solve the problem. Here is three hundred francs and a ticket back home to Nantes for your holiday after you tidy up the stench in the greenhouse.

I remembered on my last leave finding Cousin Horace distributing Communist leaflets in George Street Sydney and him at length expounding how the middle class never commit until they see a winner and will do anything to preserve their possessions and their place and then delude themselves by getting underlings to do their dirty work. Oh well, he got that right, even if he got his marriage wrong. Her grey blue eyes and his brown do not mix to bright green in their baby. The gardener had given up on holding his nose as he walked by me. He was sharpening the shovel he used to kill rats with. I had seen him do that and he was unaffected as he was now, methodically sharpening, then a slight look of irritation came over him and with gloves on and distaste, rifled my pockets, nodding agreeably to himself at the wallet full of English currency, pocketing it, he turned my head the other way and returned to his methodical sharpening.

\*

Tom Caufield

Cowra 8<sup>th</sup> August 1944

I was in bloody luck, a double dose to match the bad. After a second dose of dysentery and a subpoena to bring down the Clarkes, I was on what started as a blighty leave back home in May. That was really engineered by Crutchfield and Jack, but they decided they did not need

me in court. Eenough were testifying to the Clarke brothers bastardy and maybe that was luck my way as well, for among the witnesses on our side Alexander the Great had got Moon and Cullum dismissed from their jobs, an American officer carted off in handcuffs and the rest being investigated for possible blackmail. Jack was not as clever as I thought and Henderson was not as clever as Esmeralda thought. Even so, Ross had lost a mistress or two or three or four, them perverts Rosalind and Robert were being exposed for what they were and many of them la de das around town, so respectable, ended up in dock for being crooks. Ross and Robert were ostracised. Good one Jacko, not a hundred percent of what could have been, but still, over the pass mark my boy.

So in May it was light duties, easy enough to guard the Jap POWs in Cowra camp. They had resentful faces and our informers said that incredibly they were expecting a Jap army to successfully invade Australia any day. We needed better spies. It was my night off and after a few beers and a ride on the town whore I found myself woken to find myself four times lucky, two of them now.

“Sergeant Caufield, the Japs have launched a mass escape, hundreds of them.”

“Lord, lousy guards!”

“No they killed them and the guards killed many.”

“Well time to chase and kill the rest.”

“That’s the orders.”

“See? Stay in the army long enough and you get an order you like.”

*And a childhood dream come true over fifty years on. A manhunt with certain death at the end of it; rabbits and roos are just dinner.*

\*

It was a great time and everything I wanted it to be. Eight to me, four in one go, and on seven bullets; one ripped apart by dogs: one weeper

begging for mercy on his knees, but he did not get it. He had this womanly face like a lot of them Asians do and bloody weeping like one to boot, possibly limp in the wrist, unlike the others who were tough, brave warriors, killing him was no fun, rather degrading really, he nearly spoilt the hunt, but then who said life was meant to be easy? This was my time. I saw Cullum and Moon, and Craig Clarke around with the hunting parties, their resignations in, but not effective until September and they were putting everything into it to go out looking good and they did.

Basically, it was a twenty-four hour operation from Jerilderie in the west, east to the coast and from the Victorian border up to the Shellhaven River. A few even made it to the Albury railway line where they lay on the rails rather than be taken back, but few got anywhere near these outer perimeters and after the first few days few were anywhere but six feet under. Even so for three weeks it was riding around in that area, much of it at night in a truck with an Australian flag on it and hunting guns and dogs in the back. Virtually every farm had a man with a gun at the gate and if it didn't we found out why. Nobody was ever killed though. Still, they were glad to see us and I've never drunk so much tea and chewed my way through so many bush cake recipes in my life, ration restrictions or not, the bastards always had something hidden. Good oh!

One place we didn't stop at was bloody Ahmegodheho. There was Ross, at the gate even if it was granite, brick and mortar and not barb wire, iron and a gum post like the rest of us. Always thought they were better than us, them Clarkes, but they never were. Same as everybody else at night, in winter clothes, gun and torch at the ready.

"I would prefer not to stop here sergeant."

"Oh why is that?"

"This fella, he's a war profiteer. And a sex fiend. His own mother will not have anything to do with him, testified against him. Went on trial



but got out of it.”

“Oh then we had best keep going.”

We did. I did not want to stop in Eloura either.

\*

Rebecca Petit

Meersburg Germany 30<sup>th</sup> January 1945

“Does anybody want to save Rebecca from going up the chimney?”

Nobody did. The warders continued their card game and the others in the cell knew to be silent. Even if I had been willing to meet their perverted tastes they had an ocean of younger and therefore prettier women to choose from. After Hauptmann Horst Voss became another of Germany’s ever-increasing number of deserters my days were numbered; I had probably survived this long only because somebody was trying to perpetuate Voss’s lucrative deal with Ross to keep me alive. Now an SS inspector and Jew hunter who had a quota to fill so he would not lose his freight car allocation and accompanying bonus pay would arrive at three o’clock and I was for it, as my handcuffs showed.

I considered doing whatever they wanted sexually, but a memory of being in the Ukrainian forest and being on my knees clutching Ross’s boots came back to me and I would not be like that again, not for these who were at their best, much, much less than him at his worst. My last memories were to be of Etienne, dead now. I looked out over the lake where on the other side, the mountains were freedom. Why hadn’t Voss waited? Ross was still paying. Why, last July, had Hitler just happen to move his leg against that briefcase with a bomb and then put it on the other side of that thick table leg that took most of the blast a few minutes later? Why had he been unable to endure a little heat and ordered the windows opened so that the blast had lost what would have been a fatal impact? Now I - and perhaps millions of others more would die for those little whys. When it happened the guards here were openly discussing

surrender. Even so few expected Berlin to last beyond this coming summer. I could hear the approaching footsteps. They were SS and railway workers.

I was ready.

\*

Eustace Clarke

Rhineland 28<sup>th</sup> April 1945

We were winning and winning fast. Bomber escort was a picnic, at least until we were in flak range and then it was easy enough to rise high and we usually did, unless the Luftwaffe were so idiotic that they flew under us into their own flak to rise to the attack and sometimes they actually did that. In interrogation I asked why and sometimes it was because they were ordered to do so by incompetents and sometimes because they did not have the fuel for climbing. They did not have many experienced pilots either, not in the air or in training bases. This info came from when we interrogated captured pilots, really senior schoolboys who did not know they were supposed to say nothing. All they knew was that they were supposed to die for their Fuhrer and so many had already done that over the last few weeks that we found ourselves frequently flying missions without encountering opposition.

It was hard to maintain my belief in total German evil when talking to those naïve boys who usually genuinely believed it was their duty to defend Germany and their families from the total destruction we were giving her. Reports from our destruction of beautiful civilian dominated Dresden reinforced that.

With James and Grandpa Hughes dead, Carson missing, Dad and Craig disgraced I was needed at home after I went on a missing in action search for my little brother. With five years front line service with no leave I requested and got a long one. By the time the red tape was cleared and I got to Sydney it was over anyway.

I was expecting a happy greeting with the European war over but all three, well they were like something out of a zombie movie, and Craig kept on darting glances to the wine cask. Dad sat just with a paper in front of him that he did not read, just held. He was not even near sixty yet, but he looked a bad eighty and had to walk with canes. Mum stared out toward the Sydney Harbour Bridge as if it wasn't there and she made little sense, then I wish she did not.

“Only James for this war's door, really. Perhaps I should be grateful. Perhaps your brother is holed up with some resistance fighters somewhere and we will hear soon. Perhaps he escaped to Switzerland. You could not find a trace?”

“No.”

“Craig survived. No jumping out of aeroplanes or charging machine gun posts on horseback for him. Alcohol will do him in, all by himself! He can't even act the servant, someone has to! All we have left is dividends, thank God for my father investing in neutral Ireland and Switzerland!”

I wanted to escape Sydney soon and sympathetic Uncle Ross was offering a job for pilots. It would have been better to go somewhere new, Canada, work with Conrad in India perhaps, but the pregnant girlfriend was adamant about staying.

\*

Alice Hughes Clarke

New Clarkestead 24<sup>th</sup> June 1945

He was more alive just before sleep than at any other time so I spoke into the darkness.

“We may have to take up your mother's offer. With the bills and creditors we cannot maintain this house for more than a few months. We pay her bills, and I act nursesey nursesey to Grahame.”

“So why is Ross being so generous to us?”

*Why indeed? To the brother who set him up for bankruptcy, treason, and who wrecked his life work in aviation.*

“Perhaps it is me he feels sorry for. Perhaps he wishes to keep Clarkestead in the family and we are the only family he has got.”

“Perhaps.”

I remembered my first day at Clarkestead, my first day with him, so handsome, immaculate, self-confident and charming. Those magnetic bright eyes focused on me and now there was this bewildered old man coughing as he shuffled his canes aside to lie in bed with his back to me and smelling of the farts that he gave off all the time. His tangled white hair looked like a ruffled bird’s nest.

“My father warned me, he tried so hard. ‘There’s something wrong with all these Clarkes,’ he said even on that first day we met, a third of a century ago. ‘I knew there was something wrong with the mother back in Ulster and now it is in the boys, pray tell me you don’t want to marry him.’ But you seemed so wonderful and when he was dying he said it again and added ‘now they come to their downfall and I can’t live to see it or help you my poor girl.’ *So here we are, after our downfall, and we could save more for groceries if you would stop buying that paper you never read.*

“Should we sell this house for a cheaper?”

“Oh God you do not understand.”

“I did not cause the world wars and the other problem seems over.”

“So are our wasted lives.”

\*

Zinada Korval

Hospital 64 Austria 16<sup>th</sup> July 1945

“Commissars are coming for a check.”

All of us who had been partisans tensed, for we knew what this really meant. Stalin's secret police had their quotas of spies to catch and if

they failed to fill that quota it would be topped up with the lax – themselves. So who would go? Anybody who did not quite fit the peer group, women who did not give sexual favours when asked, former partisans who had been independent and outside Stalin's control, anybody in any one of these categories was a high priority and I was in all of them. After roll call which would give me twenty-four hours I decided to take a risk. Like clockwork the Captain was taking his morning shower while his old uniform was in the dirty clothes wash basket and his new one waited ready on the hook. The courier's daily despatch bag and motorcycle were both at the ready and the small change gladstone bag, full of different currencies, was behind the desk. The old clerk had filled a quota and the new knew little. I took everything just mentioned.

My big mistake was stopping at the British internment camp for refugees. In retrospect I should have stayed on the bike until I reached London, but since Himmler was caught disguised and Eichmann and Bormann were on the run, and even Hitler was rumoured to be still alive, everywhere there were checks for disguised Nazis, so being a civilian refugee seemed the safer option and surely the camps were only temporary? Six months after arriving my application for Australia was still being processed. Ross was welcoming in his reply but warned that mentioning his name would be harmful. I had heard rumours and kept my knowledge of English to myself and that saved my life, for nobody would have picked it up from their faces.

“Do you really think Stalin would kill his own people for being captured?”

“He said himself that there are no Russian prisoners, only traitors and spies”

“How can you be absolutely sure these people aren't what he says they are? Suddenly nobody was ever a Nazi. Suddenly everybody was on

our side.”

“I want another job before those Russian trucks come. Slave labour or firing squad, surely the world has seen enough of that?”

I certainly had. The security was rudimentary, just barbed wire and sentries; hope of America, food cards and a roof kept us here. Forty pounds got the feeling guilty guard to look the other way.

\*

Rosalind Jervis 1<sup>st</sup> Blue Mountains Internment Camp 1st December 1946

“You can see by the approved stamps this regulation extra hamper is for Christmas.”

Clarissa’s weary wary eyes scanned over it, trying to suppress her desire, while Elena, tugging on her skirt, was old enough to know it was rare food, but young enough not to know to conceal her desires. She began to cry for food and the cardboard divider of the fibro Nissan hut meant the other family began to howl for food as well.

“Not now Elena, we have just had lunch.”

A scrap of wizened carrot skin and fragments of lettuce striped brown with rot were on the plate. Even those little bits smelt. Clarissa followed my gaze.

“Francisco did not grow them, he does better than that, but they won’t let him or us have our own patch. Here the fascists are communal.”

“Communist minded fascists among the guards?”

“The guards are not too bad, it is the other internees, about half are genuine fascists and more are coming in every day. They say they screen the refugees and anybody who hates Communists or Socialists gets in, anybody left of centre or who fought for the Spanish Republic or is Jewish does not get a visa to stay in Australia.”

“I heard that they bring in Nazis to work on the Snowy Mountains Scheme.”

“True, they are already here. That is why Francisco won’t go; he prefers the Port Kembla steelworks, we get there soon, but only for a year or two, until we can save enough to start a vegie farm in Argentina. Some here say it is richest country on earth now, because they stayed out of the war, but sold supplies. So how is Dad doing?”

“Another mistress, a Ukrainian this time, she teaches geography at Eloura High.”

“Making another fortune is he?”

“Still losing the first one actually.”

“Oh?”

“The federal government is trying to take over all airlines and merge them into one big government owned and run airline. Eloura Airlines, Oldsham’s conglomeration, all the others are in what will be a costly legal battle to stop it.”

“From what I see of that endlessly costly, time and hope devouring airline the government is doing them a favour.”

“If only Ross could see that. For over twenty years Sir Eustace could keep them all together, but since that trial not even he could manage it. They don’t have board meetings any more, Ross and Robert do not speak to each other. Robert just sits slumped on the veranda with his mother, both of them watching your Uncle Grahame playing in the dust with toy soldiers.”

She just stared and sighed.

“There are times when I miss Ahmegodheho, but Max and Zelda, well, I miss them more.”

\*

Eunice MacDonald Clarke

Oxford University 1<sup>st</sup> March 1947

First day of spring, first day of term, first freshman year and by a miracle and fifteen months of hard study and saving I was in – and in

history/archaeology, so rare - and rarer for a woman. I suspected something of my father's money may have helped – he was on the annual donor's list last year and the one before, even so, that seemed inconsequential and he a distant figure, not just in the literal twelve thousand miles away sense, but in the remote past sense and in the excluded sense. The war was past - and passé. Today was exuberance, crowds of freshmen like me laughing chattering walking around the stalls arm in arm on a rare early spring glory day that gets the sun - worshipping English cheery, wonderful! Not even this peace that was not really peace with the dreary world of rationing, colonial wars and unrest over much of the fading empire and war looming between the Communists and us could dampen it today.

Our eyes met over the archives stall and I realised that he was returning my look with equal interest. Over the weeks of first term we began as most university romances began, topic talk over coffee and bit by bit his details emerged. He was Norwegian born and raised until his father, a naval historian, had been writing up the Sutton Hoo find when the war broke out and wisely stayed here. Rolfe Haast still had his accent and even at eighteen had a receding hairline and glasses as thick as jam tin bases, yet he was the opposite of the stunted shy bespectacled academic. At about six five tall and nearly a yard across the shoulders he won every shot-put competition, tossing them as if they were golf balls. That must be easy enough if your muscly arms are nearly as thick as a small dinner plate. That receding reddish blonde hair was thick. His eyes were as blue as indigo. I am not sure when we knew we would marry. He was the first man I could relax with and say what I thought, not always have to be on my guard and calculate what impression I was making; our minds clicked together on things. With the exception of his agreeable father he was the only man in my orbit who loved history as much as I



did. There was no falseness in him: it was in me. After months when we could both see how we were going I decided deceit was a barrier that could turn destructive and facing it I would brazen it out, very literally.

It was a windblown day on the southern coast chalk cliffs in term holiday; we were excavation volunteers on a medieval farm and had gone for a walk. The waves were choppy and white frothed and at least the wind kept squawking gulls away.

I butted into his farm assessment with “What do expect from a woman?”

“I expect her to be you.”

“Very flattering, but that is not what I was asking.”

“Several times you turn the topic away from your parents and Australia and the war. So I do not ask.”

“My mother is nice but has become very strict on anything romantic. Before university we lived in a stylish Kensington apartment which my father bought for her.” It took him a few seconds to grasp the implication there. “My mother is very nice; you should meet her. It would be best to avoid my father and that is easily done; he resides in his palatial splendour in Australia.”

“He wishes to control you?”

“Not at all, my mother does that. After my... romance with a serviceman I was sent to a private girl’s school in disgrace.”

He didn’t like that and was sighing to himself in his absent-minded way.

“School days are over, what of the future?”

\*

Helen Chapman

Mossman 24<sup>th</sup> July 1947

“Who will pay a fiver for this? Now the painter is an unknown oldie and the painting mightn’t be to current tastes but look at the frame!

Mahogany with jade inlay! A fiver! A fiver at least! Just a fiver!”

Evelyn was trying to hide how this unmeant cruelty hurt. It was one of his early works. Nobody was even interested; I paid the fiver. If he had listened to me and not come here he would not have suffered, but as usual he got his own way. He actually wanted to spend what money we had on buying Pre-Raphaelite cast offs, as if making it at a loss was not bad enough. While he was shaken I was able to bustle him out; he was getting more confused more regularly these last few weeks, well into his sixties now, the luxuriant silver locks looked like what they were, a sign of ageing, if only the brain cells under it were so luxuriant and prone to waving with the wind of fashion, but they were ossifying.

“It will all be worth a fortune one day.”

“That day had best come soon, or we’ll be too old to enjoy it.”

“Now all that sells is that reflection in a shattered mirror stuff and clocks that look like cheese and emus running through gum trees. The world’s most boring bird with the drabbest tree.”

I waited for him to start up on the rest of the speech, but he was screwing up his face trying to remember it. I would have to see Max very soon. He would not last much longer by all accounts.

\*

Max Chapman      Albion War Veterans’ Hospital 19th December 1947

“Well what have you been doing with yourself?” I asked Ross.

“Fishing at Conjola.”

“Catch much?”

“About four a day.’

“Your returning health shows.”

“I wish the fingers and toes would and the malaria would go, following the recurrent tropical ulcers’ lead.”

Ross said it with a genuine cheery tone and a smile, thank God.

“The Boxing Day Ball will be held in the Town Hall, thought you would have held it at Ahmegodheho.”

“You remember two years past, the last one held there?”

Poor devil, I could only nod to that. We thought fourteen months after the charges were dropped and the end of the war would soften people up a bit, but no. Alison, Murie (without Ruth, a rare quarrel) Rosalind, Alex, Marsha, Jan, Keddy, Stepan and myself were the only guests and we could only stare at each other among the now overly abundant food and decorations. We could not even find a willing bloody dance band and had to make do with records for dancing. Best to the next subject.

“When you get your health back you should run for mayor, the way Henderson Crutchfield runs this town hurts us badly and the mess will worsen.”

“Returning health could take years. You are right though; they have to be stopped. Oldsham’s tied him in with the airlines, made him a director and they think that after they win their case this town will be their centre because Crutchfield and his council mates will zone it light industrial. I was thinking of running Bach for mayor and perhaps my nephew Eustace as councillor; he has a strong war record and good manners, fine brain.”

“Uhm sounds like you know what to do. Another matter has come up.” Suddenly I knew I was squirming. “Evelyn’s health is not all that it could be.”

He brought his eyebrows together in puzzlement.

“Mental not physical, too fond of the spirits, those out of the bottle and those out of the pipe and the hookah, if you get my meaning, memory’s gone a bit or going. Heart and lungs of a Clydesdale though. Could we set up a pension fund? Helen will soon be too old to work and he has not produced a painting for three years now.”

“That was the gigantic one of Australia’s spitfire pilots, started at the start of the Battle of Britain and finished days before Berlin fell.”

“Oh well Ross, the Pre-Raphaelite style cannot be rushed.”

“Or sold these days.”

Oh Ross! He had that right! The painting’s commissioners would not pay. We tried to raffle it off at an air force benefit but the winner traded it for a block of chocolate. We donated it to an air force canteen wall. My boy painted pilots like they were medieval knights as seen by William Morris and people wanted them to be like Hollywood stars.

“What will happen to him without me? He politely listens, but then goes his own way – and it is not a wise way.”

“Helen will look after him.”

“And you?”

“From behind the scenes.”

“I have not done well when both my boys have to be looked after.”

“War wrecked them, not you.”

“And you? I knew better than to give you too much advice about women, they were always your Achilles heel, but every man has one weak spot and if it is women, well it is a manly vice and such a common one.”

Ross could only sigh and nod. Best not to tell him that so many argued against him as a cold, ruthless tyrant and lecher and many were decent people, ones he would not suspect – Karl and Lynda, Mcphee, Ruth, even Zelda. I would say to them 'You have not seen him in battle! He was like a warrior of the olden times! Just as great! No, greater! You did not rescue me from the Turks! He paved roads through the air for our empire! The man is a hero!' They were all the same, they could not see it and would just stare blank-faced. They could not see it because they were not there.

“Perhaps my vice was seeing the world too simply, thinking the Empire would last forever when nothing lasts forever. Now the jewel in the crown, India has gone, and its been cut up into little pieces. This Pakistan stuff, one country in two halves east and west Pakistan, and they are all slaughtering each other by the million! Jews and Arabs in Palestine much the same. Terrorists in Kenya with machetes, and Communists in Malaya stirring up the natives, God what a mess! Even Blind Freddy can see the empire falters and disintegrates – just like I am!”

“Oh Uncle, you’re a duffer!”

“No Ross, the empire and I have had a good innings, eighty-four not out yet, but we go out together. I thought you would be another great empire builder, but the game went against you. Not your fault. The world does not want heroes, they want little men. Even men like Churchill and De Gaulle couldn’t stay in, they say Truman, Smuts and De Valera will be next to get the boot. The heroes who smashed Hitler are voted out by little people...” I could hear myself and it was whiny and he was trying not to show it. “Well give me some good news!”

“Clarissa and Francisco have a healthy son. They named him Craig. The courts have rejected the government’s takeover of the airlines, at least for now. They have set up a government financed and favoured airline that will make it difficult for us, difficult at the least. Oldsham, Crutchfield and all that rogue crowd think that they can beat it and have offered to buy us out and Robert, Alice and Elizabeth agreed.”

“And you?”

“I do not have the health to fight it, or the support. Clarissa reckons the only difference between our pilots and paperboys is that they are on bicycles and we have wings. When the reality comes do come down to it much of our money comes from carting goods.”

“Is that such a bad thing? Clarissa was always the sad pessimist. Try

as we did, Zelda and I couldn't get so much as a smile out of her.”

The DC3Ss, Sunderland Shorts, Catalinas and Electras are still good work horses that will last for years, but few are left, two thirds of my fleet were war casualties, but the bigger problem is that now jets are the coming thing. They are expensive in themselves and the mechanics and pilots will need retraining, the runways lengthening, costs, costs, costs. Always costs and the BOAC airline are ending the flying boats. A few still do the Pacific runs, but they go to the scrapyard at the year's end. We could run ours for a while, they are durable, but to replace them or even parts we would have to buy up their builders and if Labor wins the next election, we have bought all that just to be nationalised...”

“They might try again and win the next court case, so take their money and husband it for wise purposes in shares or resources that cannot be taxed or nationalised. Ross! Enough of money and the world: think of God and eternity a little more.”

*As I am.*

\*

Robert Clarke

Clarkestead 30<sup>th</sup> March 1948

It would be today, this cold, grey, sad, not quite rainy autumn day. There were the fields where we first met when her plane landed the year the Titanic sunk. My mother's nagging and abuse every time I started to recall, was for once in my life, having a beneficial effect. Thinking was often clearer now and the physical exercises were having some effect. However all three medical experts agreed such effects may only be temporary.

“Going to see Francisco and Clarissa off?” Alice spoke to me as you would to a slow, irritating child. I knew why they were here: to get money out of Ross. They had a new baby boy and therefore expenses. Before the baby was born they were here asking Ross what he would like

to call it. When he showed no interest and Alice did they named him Craig to please her, thinking we would share the money coming from the airline sale, perhaps, Alice could do what she liked with it and with my share, half a million. There would not be that much at all once the government took the lion's share in taxes and paid bills would devour much of even what little was left.

“Grahame!”

He had enough brains to look into my face smiling.

“Like to come flying with me?”

He did not have enough brains to be worried though, getting into the indicated car seat, brows furrowed, as if thinking of some complex problem. No mockery of me now or wanting to be an officer, hey little brother?

“This is a car, not an aeroplane.” He went into his disappointed, grizzly face, “Cars don't fly.”

“The car will take us to the airport, then we will fly.”

That made him happy. Inside they were cooing over the baby.

“Does anyone need any groceries in town?”

They did not even notice me. She sat as usual, never smiling with her gnarled knotty hands clutching the walking stick like it was part of her, the longest finger going down the stick like discoloured ivy on a branch. Alice was hardly De Havilland playing Libby Custer to Flynn's gallant General Custer in the farewell scene in *They Died With Their Boots On*. Even though that was what I wanted, suddenly I was glad to leave the lies, well half-lies actually. Soon I was on the road with Grahame and I barely noticed, another of the black outs.

“Why are we going today Robert?”

“Because it is our last chance to fly. Ross collected his plane, now I have to collect the one plane they have allowed me, all the others have

been sold.”

He just nodded, happy with that. He would feel only the animal fear the rabbit felt, all those years ago. The tingling in my fingers and tongue only started when I saw them outside the office. Betham, Oldsham, Moon and four of his goons and our new mayor and rising power in the land, Crutchfield and his wife Esmeralda, the daughter of my cousin and former schoolteacher who used to order me about and patronise me in that voice filled with cold dislike. Soon Esmeralda and Crutchfield would not be so smug. They had their brat (aptly named Tom) with them. Grahame spoke as I pulled the car up to the gate.

“Can I undo the gate and then tie it up in the hard knot like you told me and play with the gushers?”

I nodded; he smiled innocently. Gushers were what he called taps he loved playing with them and he saw ample toys today. Oldsham’s gang did not have a clue. They stood there on the office steps positively beaming. Moon spoke.

“Got you now, never thought I would live to see it, but here’s come comeuppance. You exposed, your airline sold for a song and big taxes will wipe out what we pay you Clarkes. Today is the first day of a new era for this district: the tyranny of the Clarkes replaced with the democracy of Ollhedsham Airlines. We will take this district into the twentieth century. No more aristocrats and their mooing cows, the hum of machines and the common man in cloth cap rules. Your day is over.”

“Yes, certainly. Every dog has his day and all days end in blackness.”

That puzzled them and they might have worked something out, but Crutchfield looked like a man who had stayed up all nights pouring over accounts and consequently was not on the ball today. That consummate game player did not know the game was really not yet over. I looked at



the ugly chicken wire fence, the monstrosity of a corrugated iron shed hangar, the useless gravel road and the grey people who served all this and felt glad not to be in this world of the common man.

“You are entitled to one plane, the one you specified.” Crutchfield began. “Please read and sign.” I did both. Oldsham was waking up and wanted me off, he looked for Grahame, who had vanished. By great good luck he had probably started on the back taps and smell and sound had not carried. Oldsham spoke again.

“My foolish young fellow my lad. You are so greedy for fuel you will have trouble with lift off.”

I shrugged my shoulders at them. Let them think I was stupidly greedy for expensive and rationed fuel. Even so lift off was difficult, and there would be no sharp soaring like there was when I planned it imaginatively. No! I just lifted and circled, below they were a wakeup to Grahame, grabbing his arms as he swirled round, but I could see the dark petrol stains, three of them connecting tanks and the planes tightly parked together, and their insurance policy not coming into effect until noon. I tried to think pleasant thoughts but nothing would come. The holding down at school with one prefect wrenching on each wrist, but my mind blanked out the rest. I tried to think of Alice young, but only the old woman was there. If I waited for much longer they would work it out and my angle for descent had to be exact. After those bombings at Megiddo I knew how to drop a bomb to destroy for maximum effect. I was as near to directly overhead as was needed and just turned everything off; it was that easy and on such a short fall it did not matter if I tried to pull up. The spinning vision looked dull flax yellow – winter grass, then the rusty old petrol tank rushing up: I could even see the bolts and in the screeching the glass shattered. Red blood: mine at last.

\*

Clarissa Dreutti

Clarkestead 30<sup>th</sup> March 1948

We all thought it was an earthquake at first, the shock of it made old Nana Clarke literally lose her grip and she spilled her tea with while the chandelier tinkled.

“Oh fools, those miners at Roydtown blowing themselves up again with too much gelignite.” After the first explosion came two more and her mood brightened; God providing evidence that she was right always made her as glad as she ever got. Elena, my mild tempered, easily scared child who always looked at the unfamiliar with puzzlement, was on the verge of crying, so I took her out to the veranda, just so she would see nothing was wrong, but something was. We could see the great thick black clouds curling back on themselves as they rose, and there were little tongues of fire just visible. As I was holding Craig, I told Francisco to get the field classes from Uncle Robert’s display in the parlour.

“The airport, it comes from the airport.”

I was not aware of Nana Clarke beside me until she spoke. She stood motionless and expressionless, her cane propping her up. Francisco beside her, also understood and looked at her with such an obvious way of revealing his distaste and his thoughts, wondering what type of hard, mad family he had got himself into. Seeing my face, he used the field classes to cover his. Alice seemed to glide out of the house and was also expressionless, but expressionless with shock. We heard the wail of the local fire brigade truck as it stopped at the gate.

“Both at once, a mercy.” The old bitch sneered.

I did not particularly like pompous, self-absorbed Uncle Robert and Uncle Grahame was pathetic and embarrassing, but to say that....

“Something a wrong with a gate, people clambering over it, God, two men running burning; they cannot get through ana the fire engine....”

Another massive explosion made me wince and Elena cry.

“That was a petrol tank neara the gate. It blow an’ blow the engine over. Now the fire spreads in the grass.”

We sat there motionless and waited for what we did not want.

\*

Esmeralda Crutchfield

Eloura Airport 30<sup>th</sup> March 1948

Old Kenny Moon was in a panic, and my brother not much better. They ran for the gate. Mischief Mickey, Jack’s son, had gone with them but was not with them now. I was on the office steps chatting with Betham, (a distinctly ratty human, no matter how polished the accent or immaculate the expensive clothes) while little Tom was using the office toilet.

“What is the problem?” My sister-in-law, now standing beside me, asked smiling

“Clarke’s!” Jack responded. “Move it everybody! Should have known better than to let them in! Move!”

She just smiled smugly; with all the drums being brought in for the sale’s stocktaking some spillage was likely I could smell it but to run like that... Robert’s plane was low, alarmingly so and then it was shrill for a second - maybe five. When the blast hit it knocked the walls over and the roof caved in with a massive sudden crack. It sent me and Betham flying into the road, my legs hitting the veranda post with a whack and I took a gash along the arm and cracked ribs and it was as if all the air had been knocked out of me and petrol was suddenly all over me - in my hair, face and clothes. Betham lay beside me, dying so suddenly the amazed expression was still on his scratched to bloodiness face. Henderson was safe; he could have stayed safe, standing there near the gate, looking for the right key on the cumbersome clump, but eyes wide, he rushed over to me and carried me over to the gate and it was obvious why when I saw my legs.

“Where’s Tommy? Did he come out?”

He read the no in my face and rushed back to the office rubble. Petrol was flowing in flaming rivulets in the drains, flowing straight to the unexploded tanks. The plane had only exploded one, but it had cracked others with such a mighty force that great globs of petrol and iron flew through the air: petrol was absolutely everywhere, on stored timber, paint tins, and dried flaxen grass. Slivers of timber and ashen paper floated almost playfully around, their edges gleaming red as they slowly fell to the muddy road and the grass. Henderson was frenziedly lifting debris and calling out for Tommy. He got bloody hands lifting the sharp fibro when we saw that somebody was pushing under the rubble. A dust grey egg like head emerged; the eyes opening through dust. Oldsham was gasping for breath like a landed fish. Trying to get help by waving his bloodied hands.

“Where’s Tommy?”

Oldsham waved to the corner and Henderson rushed there and started clawing through the rubble. As he did so that idiot Grahame Clarke ran past bellowing like a cow because he was on fire from head to foot. He had no clue where to go and crashed full blast into a fence, rebounding into the mud, he was lucky as he stumbled into mud, the best thing around for quenching flames and in his screaming agony rolled around in it and was soon no longer on fire, but black parts of his skin were peeling away and he lay there whimpering. Henderson had found Tommy. He grimaced and bit his lips shaking his head as he cradled him and the black smoke mercifully hid them from view as the fire engine roared and helpers and survivors ran back and forth. One of those rivulets of fire must have reached a second tank for the second explosion came and while not as bad as the first, it blew people over. Henderson came running, the flames coming after him in the grass. He was splattered with

oil. I tried more keys, trying not to fumble them.

“We do not have time for that. Over the fence. You first.”

He hoisted me over and when I turned round I wish I had not. He was still standing there but motionless with his arms a little out from his side, but smoke was pouring out of him, his body, his mouth and his nostrils, and his blue eyes were enlarged in terror. His hair was on fire and the flames were shooting up his legs. Now I was screaming.

\*

Clarissa Dreutti

Clarkestead 30<sup>th</sup> March 1948

Stepan Bach, my father's manager now, arrived with a face meant to give bad news.

“Sergeant Mcphee both asked me to come. The accident was caused by a plane falling onto the airfield. Some survived, some did not.”

He waited for somebody to ask the obvious question, but nobody did.

“Grahame Clarke and Oldsham survived horribly burned, they are hospitalised Jack Caufield and his wife were a wakeup and got out the back gate fast. Esmeralda Crutchfield survived because her husband helped her over the fence of the front gate. He was burned alive. Betham is also believed to have died, as did the government inspector, Micky and little Tom Caufield, the accountant and two of the four security guards. Two of the fire fighters are definitely known to have died in the accident, seven are badly injured.”

“It was no accident.” Nana Clarke sat there immobile, expressionless. She probably knew she had said almost the worst thing possible, but did not care and proved it by saying worse. “I always knew they would make a bad end, the pair of them.” Eyes went to motionless Alice.

“That field there is where we met when he came in a plane, when the

century seemed so young and golden and promised so much, but men... they were given wings and look what they did with them...my father warned me, but he looked so handsome and that smile....”

She drifted off and soon a car came tooting up the road fast and Bert Beoteller, Keith Anstee’s new cub reporter was so young, so eager, ambitious and conceited that he had no idea that we could see through him. He was broadly smiling but had brains enough to gloat at his scoop. With at least six definitely dead and more likely, we would be front-page news across the nation and he was the man on the spot. He also had enough brains not to say anything obviously gloating, but it was on his face and in his tones. He started off politely enough by asking what he already knew, if this was Clarkestead.

“Is it true that this was the day the airport, and Eloura Airlines were to be signed over to Oldsham and that Robert Clarke was blackmailed into signing?”

Wordlessly Alice went inside.

“Mummy I do not like this man.” Elena pointed as she spoke.

“Child, I do not like him either.”

Nana Clarke started telling him to go, brandishing her stick. Suddenly his smile vanished and was replaced by a too calm face.

“And I do not like the Clarke family and soon nobody else will either.”

\*

Maurice Ollhdesham

Eloura Veterans’ Hospital 5<sup>th</sup> April 1948

I wanted to die now. The feeling was so pleasant and it flowed over so soothing, it was coming out of anaesthetic and feeling the burns; that was hard.

“We cannot give you more anaesthetic.” The matron, a Chinese and wife to Clarkey boy’s friend and physician Doctor Karl Taun Fisher, had

a firm bossy voice.

“I must live, I must, even though I am old and want to go and he has broken me, I must survive so that there is justice in the world - oh I will bring him down!”

“Robert Clarke is among the dead.”

“I know. We saw him hurtle that plane down. It is Ross that still lives.”

“From the first day I met him nearly forty years past he has inspired nothing but hatred, envy and conflict. “She sighed, most vexed “Do you wish to see a visitor?”

It was Bert Beoteller, brash and loud and not knowing his overly inquisitive ways were offensive: in other words, a cub reporter - and new even to that lowly position, but after a few questions I sensed he was on the right side.

“You don’t like that Ross Clarke do you laddie?”

“Not at all.”

“Then why doesn’t your paper say the truth?”

“Because my editor Keith Anstee keeps on defending him. Nobody else does – except the local Sergeant, Mcphee, who should have retired years ago. A corrupt cop in my opinion and I would reflect public opinion if I were editor and denounce all that Clarke clique. That would stop cancelled subscriptions and falling sales.”

*I had lost one Betham and found another.*

“And how would you become editor?”

“I would find an investor who shares my viewpoints and get him to buy the paper. Our editor Anstee is old, tired and hits the bottle and four thousand should do it, but don’t tell him why, he is Clarke’s man.”

“And what would you do with the paper?”

“Reveal Clarke’s motives for murder. Investigate his role in the

Canberra crash and then this one. His blackmailing of the Nazi collaborating brother who betrayed him, his motive for wanting the husband of Elizabeth Betham his mistress dead; the rivalry with Ollhdesham Airlines. The feud with Albert Moon... Oh I am sure you know more than I do and you could delay the enquiry until the press campaign has set the stage.....”

“Four thousand pounds for this failing rag?”

“Nine hundred more to pay off outstanding debts to local tradesmen to get them onside and the same for my wages. You are not going to get them without the power that comes from money.”

Oh wise, wise. Betham never was.

\*

Alexander McPherson

Eloura Courthouse 24<sup>th</sup> July 1948

“All Rise!”

An attendant whispered to Oldsham that he was exempt from rising. With one eye permanently shut, half the mouth in a slur, the laboured breath reverberating through the courtroom and the wizened, thinned out, obviously useless legs dangling in the wheelchair he never left, he had earned his exemption. He had also been clinging to life the way a mollusc clings to a rock so he could see this day, perhaps that was why he gained so many delays – and to get the press campaign prepared for feeding the public. Investigating the sudden disappearance of Stepan Bach, who retired as Ross’s manager in April and vanished days later. That took more time and made everyone suspicious, until he was found, interviewed and gave sworn statements – in Israel. The tribunal went through the usual rigmarole and then came to the crunch.

“The tribunal finds that the deaths at the Eloura Airport on March thirtieth this year of Robert Clarke, Ollhdesham Airlines manager Mister Charles Betham, Mrs Jack Caufield, her child Michael Jack Caufield,



accountant Richard Vincent Perry, day watchman James Peter Roberts, Henderson Crutchfield and his son Thomas Henderson Crutchfield and firemen Alfred Siems and Micah Boyd and the injuries sustained by seven others were primarily the result of misadventure. This accident was caused by the failure of Robert Clarke's plane to stay in the air. Whatever caused this failure must remain unclear. The tribunal has heard reliable evidence of petrol overloading, and of Robert Clarke's failing physical abilities, but the explosion and the subsequent fire have destroyed any physical evidence of why the plane suddenly plummeted. No evidence of suicide by Robert Clarke has emerged.

The testimony concerning Grahame Clarke supposedly unleashing petrol minutes before the plane crash would be strong evidence for murderous intent, but as our respected defence lawyer Alexander McPherson has made clear, Grahame Clarke was found near the petroleum taps in the company of the child Michael Caufield and may have been turning off the taps the child turned on. Evidence of motivation for murder by Ross Clarke and Elizabeth MacKinnon remains thin. The dispute in the love triangle between Ross Clarke, Charles Betham and his former wife was resolved over twenty years past and in thirty years of aviation rivalry no such similar action has occurred here or anywhere else. As for blackmailing his brother into carrying out this action for revenge for past actions, what threat would induce such fear that a man would prefer to burn himself alive than face it? No member of this tribunal could find one. We find that no individual has a case to answer for and that the deaths and injuries caused in this tragic incident were by misadventure."

*No they were not. "I will pay every single one of you back for what you did." He screeched in the playground and then he hurled himself into the brick wall screaming like an animal.*

Despite that fifty- year-old memory, Ross and Elizabeth had been given a fair verdict by the court, but newspapers and gossip really decided who was innocent and who was guilty and we all knew what all the local faces in the gallery meant, so did Ollhdesham who was smiling. Ross was nobody's hero now.

\*

Book Nine

Patriarch

February 1965

Cora Druetti

Gringila February 3rd 1965

“What do ya want?”

His face looked like it was always in a snarl and he had thinning white hair on his head and chest and arms. They looked like they were so strong once, but the muscles had drained away so his too tanned skin was empty and wrinkly and the colour of a wet chamois. He wore a white singlet and flannel trousers, even if it was summer. His house was small and dirty fibro with an unpainted cement veranda his wife was sweeping. She had the washing hung up in their laundry with the door and windows shut. We did the same. So did everybody in Gringila; people who were new found their clothes and sheets black and grey from steelworks smoke and ash. She was much younger than him, in her forties and he must have been seventy at least. She was also Italian with long black hair. She was often around our street on the way to the corner shop and never smiled, just like now.

“If you are collecting don't waste your time.”

“Mister Tom Caufield?” He nodded almost imperceptibly, a little bit puzzled. “Our class has an assignment on Gallipoli for the fiftieth anniversary celebrations and I heard that you were really actually there at the landing, so could I...”

“I was there... RSL, they also want me for a big to-do, been in three wars.... yer want my story?”

“Yes please.”

“Not many of us there that landing day left now, bloody smart Alec, Jan Van, Bach the German and bl-.” He stopped remembering that you don't swear in front of children. “No, even Bach gave up on the Clarkes after the airport burning an' moved to Israel, o seventeen years past, turned out ter been a secret Jew, whatever God he believed in he went to meet him beginning of year before last, getting old... forgetting... No,

four others of us left out of the old team....” He sat down tired trying to think. “Turned eighty, so silly bloody Maria just had to have a party and steelworks picked up the gossip and forcibly retired me, might as well give you the interview, makes a change from silly bloody tv all day....” He screwed up his face again.

“Maria! Bloody Maria! Yer think a woman would have sense enough to get us a bloody drink on a day this hot!”

She came sullen faced with a tray holding beer for him and a lemonade for me.

*I do not like this man.*

“The sandy beach was short and hard, not like soft sand round here, not like the sand those bludgers in indecent costumes who never done a hard day’s work in their lives wear their arses out on... It had hard round rocks scattered and in the dark one got me, bruising my heel, slowed me. Not that many copped it in the sand and surf, maybe three dozen, but they included a good mate, our chaplain Hawkins and in the sand hills my brother- in-law...”

His gaze went elsewhere, over to the dull Prussian blue mountains just above the nice old farms that had not been subdivided into ugly suburbs yet and then I knew that he was one of them, the bitter men from the country who would never see here as home or live wherever it was they thought of as home. He was trying to focus, but losing it, then he mentioned that incident where Grandfather got the Turkish flag on landing day and killed the men to do it and when asked if it was Ross Clarke he snarled yer and stared. Jan the baker and the lawyer Alexander the Great McPherson last Eloura trip had been right, this was him. I had to travel well over a hundred miles to find a man blocks away and so far he had only confirmed Jan’s interview and what little Grandfather Clarke said.

“Where did you hear that one? I thought it was agreed to keep him out of the records.”

“He is my grandfather.”

Behind me his wife was amazed, then scared and then mouthing go. Now he went suddenly quick for someone whose memory was going, assessing my face, seeing I was not lying.

“Yer, you must be the daughter of that wog POW Clarissa married. Yeh you got his face, strong jaw, squat build, black hair...

*I am useful to him somehow, but I can't see how yet. This man is mean and dangerous.*

“Thank you for the interview, but Mum expects me home soon.” I nearly ran the blocks home. Elena and Mum were preparing a salad. Craig and Ross squabbled over which tv show to watch. I hated the thing, it was always blaring, all through the house, most shows were worthless and even if they were not ads were on every fifteen minutes now.

I used to dream of escaping to the Italy or Argentina father told me of, but going back to Tuscany meant trouble. The eldest son usually inherited, but Papa and Mum were interred in the war and for long after, so his younger brother worked the farm and when wages came in from being a steelworker so did requests for money from Tuscany and so did four children, me being the last. Getting back home to take over the farm was always delayed and the man who was there, my uncle, well he was boss. If we returned Papa would be a hired hand taking orders from his younger brother on a farm that should have been his – and us? Mum was like totally Australian and the four of us Elena, Craig, Ross and myself were also, maybe more so, for none of us had ever been overseas, Tuscany may have still been unspoiled, but we would have been permanent tourists there.

As for Argentina, visitors reckoned that the Argentina now was very

different to the place Papa knew of when people said 'Rich as an Argentine.' Papa's friends returning from there said we were better off here. I felt like saying 'If Port Kembla is so wonderful why not live or work here?' but knew bad manners were one of the few things Papa would not tolerate.

If Argentina was worse than here Argentina must be very bad. Steel must be produced everybody says. Making steel is a dirty, noisy process, the same people say. True enough, but apart from the dust settling on everything and the dull smoggy air and living with the coal trucks rumbling all the time and the highway's traffic roar one street off when the thousands came on to their steelworks shift and coal dust in everything and thousands of noisy cranky men pouring in to work in the steelworks that was so close our sports balls went over their fence, well apart from those things Port Kembla was not so bad. Oh yes people make a place. Hardly anybody spoke the same language and few were women so I was getting leering looks from grown men, well apart from all that, there was just this hopeless deadness that few would face.

Nearly everybody had dreams of escape, but few ever did. There was one dream they all had: winning the Sydney Opera House Lottery. One of the few places where people smiled was the newsagent's lottery ticket window and with some it was – well bloody mad. They were worse than kids younger than me wanting lollies. Grown adults would get together from different shifts- day, afternoon and night, rent one single bed and sleep in it in turns. They bought cheap food or even dog food and every penny from their wages went into the big lottery with the big return because someday they would win – but they never did, nobody around here ever won.

The other dreams were usually of saving up enough to buy the family farm in places like Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Bavaria,

Yugoslavia, Northland, Otago or even Gippsland, Darling Downs and Riverina, really and truly. Many rural dreamers were Australians like that, those who wouldn't inherit the farm or the small business drifted into the steelworks, bitter men dreaming of a home over the blue-grey mountains that they could see from windows in their cubicle flats. The nearest hamlet, Marshal Mount had a Saturday Night Bush Dance with an old-fashioned band, the Marshall Mount Merrymakers playing old-fashioned music in a federation era hall. We expected the place to be half empty with locals, but they were scarce: instead it was so crowded with that exiled rural type that we could not get in.

Anyway the one thing all the feuding Balkan men from different, reluctantly federated provinces that we called Yugoslavia all of them, all they had in common was wanting to have enough savings to go home and be landlords. Reds, Fascists, political cynics or Moslems, all shared the landlord dream as under that nation's Communist government, landlords prospered. The English were usually more tropical island yearners; if every English steelworker we met who wanted to run a beach bar ever really did that people would not be able to walk on sand anywhere in the Pacific. The Scots rarely seemed so impractical, usually keeping their dreams to themselves. Few ever made it: fridges, tvs, stoves, cost on lay-by and higher purchase and most were sending money home. The biggest drainers were beer and cigarettes. Aged eight I took a vow never to get into credit or the smoking and drinking habits and now at fourteen hadn't, but many kids in school were already starting and a few were even actually hooked.

Elena was a disc jockey and had her dreams – of being married to a big musical star. She had our bedroom walls so plastered with cheap pin-ups of them that I forgot what colour the walls were. Dreaming of



marriage to Elvis made the steelworkers dreams look intelligent. Saying that to Papa got me his serious and disappointed look.

“Never do that. Every so often somebody wakes up; they cannot bear the reality and they fall apart even to madness, yes? Even to suicide. In the steelworks men have thrown themselves into ovens. This is true. Few predict which ones go that way. Elena dreamed of being a music announcer on a radio show and she made it so. And you also have your dreams you do not wish exposed. You also look longingly to the purple mountains and perhaps you also will make it so, yes?”

\*

Papa always worked several triple shifts to get the days each side of Easter off. Within about ten miles of where we lived the two-lane highway south choked with holiday makers every weekend, let alone Easter. Papa even had us ready to go straight after day shift Wednesday, so as to be at Ahmegodheho about midnight. Elena had tape-recorded shows so she could come. I always looked forward to the trip through pretty farmland countryside after leaving the last industrial suburb Unanderra, but last year subdivisions started at Dapto, the first pretty little town after the spread of steel and suburbs. Now we could see the regimented lines, the advancing army of fibro and tile on quarter acre blocs and the redbrick flats on corners, like towers on Hadrian’s Wall – or watchtowers in a jail. They would chew up the coast first before moving inland, but we had decades before they reached Eloura, my refuge.

We reached Ahmegodheho as expected, in the dark, hungry and tired. As always Elizabeth MacKinnon had the gate opened and lights on and prepared a collation for us and the ABC was on low to either the classics or the jazz, she loved both; although the old 1925 console radio I suspect, was on as a welcome, a way of saying ‘I am staying up of my own accord, not for you.’ She was always sunny, but Ahmegodheho

needed that cheery radio music, being like a mausoleum. I liked old things, but time stopped here a long time ago, not just the old radio, everything was like that. There was the chocolate brown dado, and sideboards, the table as wide and long as a small yacht, the genuine Stretton landscape, over the wood burning chocolate coloured brick fireplace, the William Morris wallpaper; I was amazed that the magazine carried a story about Churchill's funeral, and pictures of Beatle maniac riots, I was expecting to read that the first talkie *The Jazz Singer* had been a smash hit, that Huns had sunk the Lusitania or Queen Victoria had just died. At Clarkestead the front parlour was like a museum for the Clarke family, but that Ottoman room was like a museum or shrine to him. In films and novels British aristocrats had the stuffed heads of tigers and bears hanging as trophies in their dens; he would have had Turks heads stuffed and mounted there if he could have got away with it. Preserving the captured blood-stained Turkish battle flag underneath glass was as close as he could get.

Everything showed aristocratic wealth and had the correct outward form of the aristocracy, but left me feeling- well that it did not quite make it. Where the lower levels being obedient and knowing their place? Where was the respect and admiration? The massive first storey, perfect for concerts and dances, was supposed to be for celebrations – but where were the celebrations?

Elizabeth MacKinnon was part of this, being perfect on the surface but really something was not quite right. Her conversation, like her clothes and movements, would be perfect in pronunciation, topic and timing, being not so short that we would feel that she was staying up for us, nor so prolonged that we became tired - and in the morning there would not be a sound before the nine o'clock radio news. We were here for every Easter, every Christmas, every Grandfather Ross birthday in

February and for weeks in the all the school holidays. We were also fruit pickers and farmworkers when needed as they could not get local people.

“So what are you doing in school, boys?”

Craig and Young Ross, who were both military mad and selfish and insensitive, prattled on. They loved to come here, Craig for the military things, the stories of the old soldiers (especially grandfather’s) Young Ross more for a chance to broadcast on the radio and the free films at his picture house, the Pharaoh. These things brought more happiness to them than the relatives, fresh air, country quiet, beautiful views and ample food Elena and I enjoyed. Elizabeth MacKinnon politely rounded off their prattle and led us to our rooms, all immaculate, one each with mattresses that were so heavenly that you just soaked in them before floating off - and without faces of Elvis and his many imitators staring at me while I tried to sleep. Instead, Uncle Evelyn’s beautiful Pre-Raphaelite maidens, probably grandmother’s at least in reality now, acted as guardian angels while I slept.

\*

“Grandfather we have been given an assignment on Gallipoli and-”

“I was there, start to finish, ashore at the first dawn and being a captain and supervising, one of the last to leave....”

Like nasty old Tom, he started staring off towards the west, but now we were in those mountains Tom stared at, so he was staring at the Western plains. I wondered if Perth’s aged Anzacs stared into the Indian Ocean.

“Suppose you want the story? Oh well get out yer notebook.”

His eyebrows furrowed down in bewilderment at my tape recorder.

“Elena uses it at her station. I’ll show you how it works.”

They had been in most shops for nearly twenty years. People said he had shut himself off from the world since the war and now I could see it

was true. There was no tv and even the 'new' radio here in the Ottoman room was one of those old bakerlite things that they stopped making around the time I was born and second-hand dealers kept in stacks these days. He owned a radio station here, but knew little of their workings. Elena and Young Ross were down there now, she was teaching him. Craig sat silent, enraptured at being able to hear Grandfather's story at last. This was his last year of high school and after that he would try for Duntroon Military Academy near Canberra. Our famous Great Uncle Robert who died in the famous Eloura Airlines crash seventeen years ago was one of its first graduates.

Grandfather's memories pretty much matched the stories the other three told me, but where nasty old Tom had told me that he got the maps off the Turkish officer by "killing him first with a bayonet thrust that went so far in it came out a foot beyond his back, and then mad Ross Clarke blew him off to buggery with a rifle shot." Grandfather merely said that "he got the documents off a Turkish officer" and while the other accounts had him killing or crippling two dozen Turks, he just said "he snatched their battle flag off them and fought his way back." He was wary of the three Victoria Cross recommendations in one day story and apparently 'it was only two and there were many unacknowledged that day who should have got one, most in our unit should.' Craig sat there motionless mouth open, like Charlton Heston as Moses after having seen the face of God. It was a long shot, but I asked could I take the Turkish flag and the commendations and all the Gallipoli things to the talk at school and then the district's inter-school special fiftieth anniversary Gallipoli speech night and he just stared for a while. 'Uhm perhaps. For the big night anyway: We can hire a security guard and he can hold them up.'

There was horse riding before twilight and 'only a light tea of steak and baked vegetables' (what no entrées, soup or desert?) filling up plates the size of a family baking dish. We had to rush to see *My Fair Lady* at his picture show. Going to Sydney to see a new show was a Druetti family annual treat, our one little taste of extravagance. As in most small towns, films got to his picture show many months late.

Breakfast was also late and for equally good reasons. The first breakfast was at Clarkestead, where all the women but Elizabeth MacKinnon lived, so conversations were guarded and Craig was silent for once, having been warned by Grandfather God that if he wanted to be a soldier he must learn to obey orders and the order was not to talk of military matters or aeroplanes in front of Great Aunt Alice.

The big meal came at breakfast. A bowl of some expensive imported gourmet cereal full of expensive berries came first. That would have been enough for most people but then came the main meal. Steak two inches thick and hanging over the massive plate's edge formed the pyramid base. Each plate had piles of bacon that would be more than a working-class family could afford to share for a week. Chicken breasts, steamed baby carrots, sweet corn and beans went with another luxury food, mushrooms. 'Have as much as you like.' Decanters of fresh orange juice went down the middle of the long, long, massive lacquered cedar table. It was actually half a great tree, the full length. It had been with the family from the 1820s, the time before cedar had been logged out on this part of the south coast. Up to about sixty years ago it was the school bench. The whole kitchen, (about thrice the size of a standard Gringila flat) was the school. Grandfather's cousin had been the teacher and he and the great uncles and that nasty old Mister Caufield she married were among her pupils. The stone fireplace with the great chimney could have held a cow's carcass to roast and still sometimes did. The floor was genuine

slate, its colours highlighted by the morning light that came from the French doors and cute cedar-framed lead-lighted windows that opened out for glimpses of the azure blue sky. The slate was also a light blue. The couple in the flat next door saved for a year to put a little slate veranda in. This floor must have been twenty times the size of their little veranda.

When Grandfather said the World War Two collaborator-profiteer and Eloura Airport stories were just nasty lies to cover envy I could see he was telling the truth, if not totally. Anyway, the less fortunate locals and the Illawarra kids paid us back. From primary school onwards young Ross frequently got his head kicked in for his lunch money 'because yer grandfather's rich an' yer can afford it.' They spread it round that he was poofy and I was leso. One gang up attack in the toilets and obscene graffiti happened here at Eloura and at the schools we were expelled for causing trouble.

Anyway lunch was always generous but never really free. As locals would not work for Grandfather and all the women were old and could only do so much, we worked hard and long. Fortunately it was fun. The boys loved cutting firewood and painting, rat catching and getting possums out of roofs. Picking was good with breaks and we set to. Nobody liked leaf cleaning, so we all pitched in, great. They were grateful (I thought) and didn't push. Even before lunch and tea the day was very hot and the last of the apples looked scrumptious so I leaned up against the back wall, not even realising that doing so put me under the kitchen window and concealed by the woodpile. Uncle Grahame, who seldom spoke, apparently felt the same, for he lay on his back staring at the sky, making gurgling noises to himself. I wasn't aware I was asleep until the voices woke me.

“Only another three days and it is back to quiet again.” That was

Grandmother Rosalind, his wife.

“Oh be grateful, we are too old to clamber up ladders, to get leaves out of gutters, soot out of chimneys and what else?”

“Chop wood? My back aches this last year.” That was Miss Zinada, Korval, the Russian teacher.

“Even so, they disturb.” That was usually smiling Elizabeth MacKinnon.

“Oh let them have some space and happiness. Have you seen their house?”

“I meant they disturb in other ways. What will become of them?” Miss Korval answered her.

“Craig has clearly inherited the blood of generations of Clarke soldiers. His career is clear. Young Ross also very likely, yes? Perhaps. Elena does very well as a radio announcer and like Ross is a walking encyclopaedia of her topic.”

“That is my point. Ross and Elena are human encyclopaedias, but encyclopaedias outdate very quickly and they both refuse to update. The technicalities of warfare Young Ross knows stop with Iwo Jima - at best. He is inspired by writers who lack reality and he thinks that officers are good, being inspired by the chivalric code. He prefers cavalry to tanks because the horses are more stylish and fun. Clearly, he lacks a real killer instinct. What happens if he wakes up?”

“Best he wakes up on the school assembly ground where cadets start experiencing military life.” This was Elizabeth MacKinnon. They seemed startled. “If his illusions persist until Duntroon he will be dishonourably discharged and that follows for life. Being the scion of generals can as easily mean total alienation as total attraction to the military world.”

“Ah yes, you would both know. The general’s daughters.”

I thought Miss Korval was really going to blow it, to use American playground slang by bringing in Rosalind's son; Horace the alcoholic in the Communist Party, just turned forty, but acting like a confused teenager, probably always would. Fortunately, the conversation went elsewhere, as it usually did on the rare occasions when Horace turned up, either as a topic or a personage.

“Ah yes Zinada.” Elizabeth MacKinnon spoke, “Rosalind and I may be general's daughters, but who served in three wars and saw more of war than our combined experiences put together? Many times I have felt like killing a man, but never did.”

Nice quiet Miss Zinada with her iron-grey hair in a ponytail and her iron-rimmed old fashioned round glasses, engrossed in planning for her geography classes. This did not fit. Grandmother Rosalind continued.

“As for the girls... Even at my age I can see what Elena can't. For the last year or two a revolution in popular music has been wiping out what she likes. This Dylan person – she can't stand him or Peter, Paul and Mary. As for the Beatles she says she might play their songs if they stop pretending and take those silly wigs off. She cannot understand that all the Las Vegas crooner crowd with their bow ties and crew cuts are passé.”

“Not here. When she plays them she plays local requests and apparently the same pattern prevails in the Illawarra District.” That was Elizabeth and Rosalind responded.

“That is my point. Eloura District went into some Rip Van Winkle sleep with the 1948 airport disaster and these children are growing up attached to a past that each year becomes increasingly rare anywhere else. This jet age world changes so fast.”



“And what of Cora?” That was Zinada Korval. “With my tutoring she has developed excellent skills. At fourteen her command of English is university level.”

“And her appearance denotes lesbian on sight!” That was grandmother and Elizabeth giggled uncontrollably. “Well look at her, she has the stature and jaw of a Brunhilde! Where is the interest in boys? Does bashing one in a playground squabble constitute interest? Look at Clarissa, the unaffectionate uninspiring mother...the masculine build...She will be lesbian, Have no doubt on that.”

There was a long silence, then Elizabeth spoke. “Actually I was just down here to see what you might like for your birthday.”

“My husband.”

“You stormed out on him.” Elizabeth had laughter in her voice.

“You were supplying him with girls.... o. Ridiculous! You are over sixty.”

“What is ridiculous is you spouting morality and detecting supposed signs of lesbianism and being concerned with outdated militarism. Your father was outdated before the Bolsheviks came to power.” Elizabeth MacKinnon’s voice was losing the humour.

Grandmother stormed off and the apple trees in front of me, the blue slate veranda and the impossibly bright blue sky with its fleecy blue clouds did not look like heaven any more. I hoped for heaven to be a place for myself.

\*

The quarter to nine bell rang and we all sat as told.

“And now Cora Druetti will present her assignment paper on Gallipoli.”

“My paper is not only based on the writings of historians John North, Basil Liddel Hart-”

“Scuse me Miss McCulloch, did Cora just say a bad word? One I dare not repeat in a classroom. One that means bad smell and another that rhymes with fiddle and means like, you know going to the toilet sort of?”

Miss McCulloch just stared with a glimmer in her eyes and a slight curl at the end of her lips because Jacko was popular and I was not. They got her signal. We would be subject to the usual Jacko rodomontade. Eight weeks work was going to be made a nasty joke.

”Pray continue.”

“Other historians and writers include E. Ashmead-Bartlett-”

“Sorry Miss, she has done it again, another toilet word! This one rhymes with V! She loves them big words because they make her feel better than us.”

“Aubrey Herbert, Granville Fortesque and Alan Morehead and eyewitness and later official historian Captain Charles Bean.”

“Oh miss listen to those la-de-dah toff names! They sound like poofers! That type live in castles and imitation castles here in Australia and they show off that they got more money than us!””

“I have also included interviews with four survivors who were at the landing: Sergeant Tom Caufield now of Gringila, the esteemed lawyer Alexander McPherson QC and Jan Van Groendhal of Eloura, and then Captain, later Major Ross Clarke, also of Eloura, my maternal grandfather.”

“Knew it miss, knew it! She’s using them Lordships because she’s one of them – or she thinks she is, aristo’s bastard bred off with a wog Nazi! And that grandfather was a Nazi collaborator and a war profiteer and the biggest sex maniac of all times, women aren’t safe around that one - nor their husbands either. He tried to murder Menzies and did kill his cabinet ministers in that Electra air crash, then he murdered his

favourite mistress's husband and lots of other people so they could get a fortune-"

"Jacko hold with questions until Cora finishes and then ask with manners."

"But she's got her Grandfather confused with God; in the playground she reckoned at Gallipoli they started burying him after three days and while they were praying over him he rose from the dead." This got some titters and outright laughter.

"Perhaps we will hear more about this remarkable resurrection afterwards. Pray continue with your stories Cora."

I got as far as the Eloura regiment being just behind Lalor's Victorians in holding the ridge and then being blown off there.

"Cora no history book I know mentions this. It is best not to believe tall stories from old men with minds that are going and are probably just trying to please pests."

"Miss! Miss! I have my hand up!"

"Jacko is this relevant and polite?"

"It backs what you say miss and Simmo an' Roy an' Macca saw it to. That old duffer Caufield, well maybe he took one in the head because he was fishing cig butts outa the gutter week before the ambulance came. Won't get much outa him now miss, he went ter the Dapto crematorium an' I don't mean as a visitor."

"Perhaps Miss McCulloch, you would like me to bring my grandfather, Mister McPherson and Mr Van Groendhal in and you can tell them they are liars."

After fearful gasps the room went deadly silent. She was puzzled for seconds.

"Yes, I would like that. Incidentally has anyone else heard such rubbish?"

Tyrone was the class outcast because his parents were Communists, but he gamely put his hand up.

“Tyrone has heard such rubbish!”

“Yes miss. Ma’s friend Rosenthal who was at the landing told me of his friend the first husband of his first wife, he got the maps, then the flag and killed so many Turks that they nominated him for the VC twice on landing day and made him a captain, but they did not award him cause he tried to kill his mother with a poker.”

The whole room went into prolonged outrageous laughter.

“Ma was with the Turks, was she? Or did she go along to darn his socks?”

“I suppose this Rosenthal is a Communist? People known for their veracity, are they?” She looked around the classroom with a smirk, waiting for servile laughs and getting them. “Light horsemen at Gallipoli landing when there were none. Aboriginals in the light horse when there were none. An imaginary unit in an imaginary place which detracts from Lalor’s achievement. A battlefield commission from corporal to Captain in one day? Oh really Laura!”

“My name is Cora. Laura sits next to me or have I got that wrong as well?”

Once again the room went fearfully quiet.

“And let me see, taking a Turkish battle flag from a regiment after killing half of it, oh really Cora. Grandfather gaining two Victoria Cross nominations in one day and nobody seems to know of it but you, well we have had a totally new and unexpected view of Gallipoli. Are we to say thank you for this?”

She smiled at the class: a signal for contemptuous laughter. I did not even think about it. My fist sent her tumbling over her desk so that her legs formed a v and with her dress falling to her waist everybody could

see her underwear. I picked up my project and walked out to the office writing 'I resign from this school' and left the school forever. At Elena's radio station I asked her for money and promised to repay.

"Oh when you can, you can." She was more concerned for me than I was and she had a generous heart.

"Tell them at home I need a break."

Despite the wolf whistles and abuse I knew would come from bodgie hoons in cars I wanted to walk and did, to Unanderra Station, where some moralistic little old busybody told me I should be in school. I acted like Jacko and his mates and told them to go, using the f word. Her mouth dropped.

"I shall call the police!"

"Your kind always do."

"Oh stationmaster!"

Fortuitously it was just off-peak hour and the station was unattended and soon I was on the south-west bound train, off to my never-never land, yet I knew a schoolgirl's uniform was a give-away in the middle of the day and old people are often busy bodies, so I buried my head in the books (which no truant would ever do) and suddenly there was Eloura Station. Jan the baker looked surprised to see me.

"Keddy! Keddy, look who visits us just as school ends."

"Ah, Cora, a sudden visit."

"Yes I need to see Grandfather. Can I get a pie and a drink and a taxi after? I have money."

"The town taxi refuses to go to Armhegodheho." Keddy responded. Like everybody in Eloura when she spoke of Grandfather and Armhegodheho she spoke like a Transylvanian villager talking about Dracula and his castle. She was usually nice and cheerful, but like now the smile always vanished whenever Armhegodheho or grandfather or

Elizabeth MacKinnon were mentioned. "I'll give him a call and she will pick you up. With arthritis starting he does not drive much these days."

"Is it true that she gets young girls for him?"

They looked at each other, not with surprise, more like 'oh no not more trouble.' Jan sighed raised his eyebrows and went back to putting trays in the oven while Keddy gave me the type of serious stare my mother gave when any of us were way out of line.

"Don't know that one Cora, nor do I wish to. Your grandfather has made so many enemies and collected so many scandalous stories that nobody knows what the truth might be any more, nor do I wish to. For over fifty years now we have been hearing the stories and true or not, they are spread by the envious, the revengers, the bored and the malevolent. Do not become one of them either by intent or by innocence."

Keddy handed me the pie and lemonade and gestured to one of the tables. They had tables and chairs to eat at, two inside two out. Three years past this caused a furore. The ancient Methodist minister, Jervis so old he was supposedly grandmother's guardian, actually denounced them for encouraging layabouts to sit around in the street and not be prosecuted for vagrancy. His sermon was reprinted.

"And what type does not have a table of their own to eat on? The same type that has nothing better to do in work hours than sit at a table and watch others work and gossip about them."

Below that Jan had written that the reverend was so exhausted by his sermon that his sleep on the manse veranda started soon after. I believed Jan for there he was, sleeping there now. He usually woke up for tea and biscuits, breakfast, newspaper readings, sermons on Sunday and otherwise he just slept.

The town also seemed asleep. Time seemed to have stopped in 1948.

There were tvs, transistors and electric fry pans for sale in the hardware and goods shop. Chevrolets with big fins, ford falcons, Volkswagens, all were in the street, but so were several cars from King Edward's reign. His mother dominated in death through an impossibly pompous statue in the time warp park, where angels in diaphanous robes were guardians to Anzacs. The little clap board bank was unchanged since bushrangers robbed it and the newspaper office still had faded gold Gothic lettering and printing presses with the big black wheels for hand pressing and lead light over the light bulbs. Nobody could prove that any changes had been made to the office since the big renovations of 1883. The picture show was brand new – in 1923. It was called the Pharaoh and decorated in the mock pharaonic style that was a 1920s craze after the Tutankhamun find in 1922. The local fish and chips,/hamburger and milkshake café had been renovated – in 1941 and was still decorated with a big orange V and admiring pictures of cheery Churchill and spiralling spitfires on the wall. The two- storey hotel that grandfather owned had been built in a luxurious style in the 1860s and lovingly restored with its black lace decoration, lead light windows, marble floor and dado and everything just right. The Mcphee brothers ran it for him and everybody thought they owned it, so business went well, but then how do you go broke running a pub in Australia? Be as unpopular as the Clarke family perhaps. The Grand was nearly as old but not as well cared for, perhaps to its owner Looney Tunes Moon's advantage, for almost dilapidated, it tended to attract down and outs and battlers and hoons and that made up a sizeable part of the population.

These observations were not complaints. No gaudy plastic and noise was wonderful, I loved the whole concept of a place where eras left their imprint in genuine ways that were often pleasing.

With the curve in the bakery wall the view went beyond the

newspaper to the veteran's hospital, once a glorious mansion. There were two dozen occupants in total - from Korea, the Malayan emergency and training accidents, but most had been there at least twenty years; some even from Gallipoli and other 1914-1918 disasters. Grandfather's cousin Leo was one such, the man in oil. Down the street came Barbara Fisher, the wife of Great Uncle Murie's brother, dead at Gallipoli. She had long white hair and widened as possible light blue eyes gone vacant and she mumbled to herself. If that was odd the way she seemed to glide rather than walk was odder, for you could not see her feet for her long dress and crape were black muslin widow's weeds. Her hat matched and both would have been out of fashion within a year of their purchase, for in studying women in the war we found out about clothes rationing fashions. She displayed extravagant grief, for her weeds were in layers and hung in trails from her wrists and her hat. The fact that it was a hot day did not bother her, it never did. When I asked Grandfather's manager Keith Anstee could I interview her he looked stunned

“No! Can't you see the pain of that time is still fresh for her?”

“That is why she is perfect to interview... No clouded memories or forgetting.”

He gave me this long glare I did not like.

“You will make a good journalist.”

Then he went back to accounts as if I was not there. Now school cadet practice was out and the boys came and while the chatter wasn't clear, the nasty up to something tone was. By the time they reached Mrs Fisher I knew the type, servile, oh so polite in class to get high marks, they resented being like that and would pay out any adult who did not have power or protectors. Sure enough it started.

“Gallipoli Girl, Gallipoli Girl! Wanna date!”

“Give the old girl six inches!”



I could see the types. The big burly one was the initiating leader able to get the second strings to quickly follow. Next were the second strings, those initially reluctant who followed, wanting to be part of the gang. Last and always at the back in such situations with their guilty faces were the very reluctant acting the role with fake cheer so that somebody else - anybody else would be the target. I spoke to the leader.

“Let her go, just leave her.”

“Piss off leso bitch! Nazi leso! Everybody knows that yer a bunch of murdering Nazi sex perverts, killing off the cabinet in the war crash to aid the enemy, then sixty dead at Eloura airfield an’ he celebrates in his castle.”

I did not think about it. There was the outdoor chair nearby. He did not know what hit him, literally with the first blow and instinctively I knew it was not enough, before he could get some more blows in with the splintering chair I had to pulverise him to the ground and I nearly did it. Whack, whack, whack, and then down on his knees, he got one punch in that got me at coughing road dust at the foot of Mrs Fisher and my eyes so close I could see her paper thin worn away muslin, stained and never washed and disintegrating.

\*

The jail was old limestone and mortar outside with a wide veranda, but was mean and narrow inside: limestone whitewashed and cold stone floors. So old that one piece of graffiti read “Sein Fein will win” and another “It looked like a winner Josie 1873”. The rest is too obscene to describe, but when I ordered the constable to wash it off he just brought me a bucket full of thick white paint and a brush, and instructions:

“You do it.”

I did, until the boy I bashed arrived, with his father, the newspaper editor, Beoteller and jubilant old Mister Moon.

“Ha! A Clarke behind bars! I knew I would live to see it! Oh MacKinnon, you proved which side you are on at last.”

“Moon this has nothing to do with you, so off you go.”

“Constable MacKinnon, you have me as a witness and I must make a statement.”

“Then wait outside.”

“Beoteller before you press charges and create yet another hate Clarke campaign in your paper, do you really want it known that your son picked a fight with a frail old woman and then was beaten up by a girl? And do you really want me to get a fingerprint investigation team down here? Because your son swore in court he had never been inside the stolen car and if his fingerprints are in there, that means perjury.”

“Backing the Clarkes in the great Mcphee tradition?”

“Watch what you write, he’ll take you for slander and I might Perhaps somebody might send off something to journalist’s ethics committee.” They left and the snarling boy gave me the clutched at the elbow clenched fist sign. It was ambiguous, meaning either up you regardless of what you wanted or symbolised an upper cut.

“Are you a relative of Elizabeth MacKinnon?”

“Oh six greats back our granpappies may have stood side by side at Culloden - and may not have. The MacKinnons were shot around the globe after that one”

*Another local obsessed with the past.*

“What happens now?”

“You keep on whitewashing.”

“Am I going to be kept here all night? Can you do that without charges?”

“Only a total fool asks for charges.” His face changed “Wait till your grandfather turns up.”

“How does this concern him?”

“Everything in this town does.”

This did not fit my image of him as a recluse spurned and hated by all.

“That does not make sense.”

“No, it does not. Eloura hates his guts, yet every year he puts a hundred thousand at least into the town to keep it going. The Veteran’s Hospital would only be on subsistence without him. Nobody wonders who the kind benefactor who gives them their billiard tables, books, entertainers, movie nights, birthday celebrations and albums might be. That massive picture show doesn't make a profit, it keeps the kids off the street. Likewise, the radio station. With the drought being so bad he put in an extra twenty thousand for farm relief. Everybody thinks the Mcphees own the paper.”

“That can’t be, Beoteller hates him and runs all those campaigns against him.”

“Ever wondered why your grandfather never sued for slander? When he wants Beoteller gone he will go.”

“You seem to know a good deal about my grandfather’s finances and plans.”

“It was made my job to. When old Mcphee finally retired, your grandfather's enemies, being his cousin’s children Esmeralda Crutchfield, and her brother Jack Caufield, him being local MLA state parliamentary member and Moon who you just met, had another go at using the law to disgrace and jail him.”

“Was that something about the old lost treasure? Adults wouldn’t talk about it.”

“Basically they said his marriage to Alessandra was something out of bad romantic fiction, a weak cover for the treasure and his wasting it.”

“Oh they had enough evidence; his marriage to one of the thieves, their secret fleeing to America and teaming up back in Ireland – so we investigated his wealth.”

“And?”

“It came from his second wife, Alessandra: still does. She left him over twenty million pounds. By 1947 only six and a bit were left, the airline, the Great Depression, the Second World War, high taxes....”

“People say he was a war profiteer.”

“Profits from the airline and farms only picked up to anything meaningful in 1937 and then increased for five years to just three million pounds. For the second half of the war massive donations and the increased destruction of confiscated aircraft meant he lost over four. War profiteer? The facts say otherwise – and then the documents show his commendable war service record. He went through hell in New Guinea.”

“So he was not rich?”

“When the airline was sold to Ollhdesham all the directors got half a million and sold off the prime value real estate airfields in Europe and Asia. No more money went into aircraft. Instead they left it in blue chip shares. They just left the profits and compounding interest. Farm and pub profits have been good and accumulated for sixteen years now. Can’t say what he’s worth today, but from 1950 to 1958 profits accumulated at around four hundred thousand a year – after his local donations. That puts his worth at around ten million seven years back and despite this drought he has not lost anything in the last seven years that I know of, probably gained another million or two.”

*So is he going to buy me out of jail?*

“So why do people hate him?”

“Because he is even more violent than you are, because he has more than others and because he does not know how to be liked and probably does not want to be.”

\*

It was nearly ten when they came. This was an hour after police station closing sign and there was no hello. There was a quick glance from him and whispered discussions with the constable and a long level glance from Elizabeth. The constable came over and I have seldom heard a more welcome sound than the key in the cell lock.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Jan’s pies were filling, nearly finished a second before the fight started.”

“The fight is now a resolved issue, say nothing more on that topic.” His voice tones conveyed I should not speak at all so I did not. Elizabeth led me to my guest room, bidding me good night with 'You will be right here' – but I was not. It was too still a night, too black after the highway lights getting past the curtains edges, back home, after the noise of night shift traffic, trains and the mills. Our bedroom stank of laundry and coal smells, here the air was fresh and there was something else, my whole body was tense, stiff as a board.

Elizabeth slept alone usually. Light came from under her door. I knocked softly, she was reading by the fire.

“Cant sleep, don’t know why.”

“Could it be tension caused by being in a police cell for hours? Or two fights in one day?”

She got down several eiderdowns and made them into a bed before the fire.

“You can sleep here like this until you are used to having your own room.”

*I was in.*

Suddenly I was aware that her face was not compassionate any more, but knowing, with the ghost of a smile and just a hint of a cynical leer and it was directed to me. I don't know why.

\*

For a couple of days absolutely nothing happened. I helped Elizabeth with the cleaning, every day two rooms were vacuumed and dusted. Every day three barrow loads of firewood were cut. I had this image of them just relaxing in their mansion, but there were no house servants any more. At least with the recently installed massive dishwasher and washing machine much time was saved, but dusting and washing and then polishing their beautiful but massive veranda took three days – and every month! Fortunately wall/window/gutter cleaners came regularly, but all the way from Queanbeyan. Being Swedes they just shrugged their shoulders when people talked about avoiding Clarkes because of the war – or women, or the 1948 disaster.

After a week of cleaning and reading in the hammock I was summoned from there to the office where Grandfather, Elizabeth, ancient Mister Anstee the manager, Miss Korval and Grandmother, Great Aunt Alice and my Uncles Eustace and Craig, these being her sons. As always Uncle Craig smelt of stale beer, had rumpled clothing and would not look you in the eyes.

“Well except for the Mcphee boys and Alex the core of the commercial side of the Clarke family are all present, those missing have work – and so do you.”

“What work do you want as a career?”

“It was fun with Elena in the radio but we like different songs.”

“Uhm, English is your best school subject, Keith, your father and your English teacher all separately reckon you would make a fine journalist, perhaps on radio or papers, what about both here?”

Mister Anstee spoke up. I’m getting too old for managing. Papers and radio are worthy fields and I will teach you both. And English for school.”

“What about my school?” I looked at Grandfather.

“Thought you did not like the place.”

“I don’t, but I have to be educated.”

“Which is why Zinada Korval, retired from Eloura High year before last, will tutor you and young Ross in geography, history and maths. There is also distance education by radio.”

“Young Ross?”

“He does not like Gringila either. Took and gave a few black eyes in your honour and mine. You are both being pulled out before being expelled. Told them I did not like being slandered: we made a deal. Are you agreeable?”

There was more going on than was being said, but what did that, or my parent’s opinions, matter?

\*

Young Ross came the same week the Beotellers left for the Gold Coast. 'Problems between Mum and Dad at home, lots of yelling mostly about money.' That was all he would say, and when asked again he would shrug, but here it was heaven. Just to be able to breathe fresh air and eat healthy food instead of rationed cheap brands and to be able to hear birds twittering and the wind rustle through leaves was so wonderful. For a few days Young Ross and I were both actually sick from fresh air, being slightly dizzy and coughing or sneezing phlegm with black in it. I thought black lung was only a miner’s disease but it seemed it could be a minor’s

disease. Old Doctor McPherson (I should not prefix names with old, it seemed everybody else in Eloura was old) said it wasn't the black stuff people spat out that was the problem, what went down was. With generations of the Roydtown miners coming in to his surgery, he knew all about black lung and emphysema and gave us thorough checks and even x-rays. We had got out in time and now life was happy.

It might sound like we spent our time between arrival and the summer holidays lazing under a willow tree daydreaming as butterflies fluttered by and that happened – twice, but the time went in a rush of happy housework, tending the orchards and most of all school work – even more than in school (Mrs Korval and Keith were amazingly strict about school work) and learning newspaper and radio journalism, from Keith Anstee, an energetic eighty something. He was, happy now he was back in his element. Doctor McPherson and his brother Alex together warned Young Ross and I to never mention the lost treasure or his former wife and to deflect any such enquiries or stories. Next day Jan and Keddy said much the same.

They added Winston Churchill, as a non topic, but he brought him up – or rather the television did. Churchill had died during the school summer holidays so the government used it as an excuse to raise donations to fund university scholarships, and absolutely flogged it at us in television and radio advertisements every break. I could see the adverts were making him grumpy and one day in the lounge room when the ad was on yet again, he really lost it:

“Churchill! Churchill! Churchill!” That idiot! Idiot! Idiot!” He then threw the nearest thing available (an aged marble-based clock on the mantelpiece) at the tv screen and actually shattered it. He babbled on while the tv spluttered to its death. “Everyone babbles about how good he was at beating Hitler but they weren't at Gallipoli or in Ireland or Egypt



in the twenties – well I bloody was! Still mired in his messes those places! And I was lucky not to be in Singapore in forty-two! His biggest mess of all! Sent their tanks to Russia! Wanted our divisions for Burma when the Japs were going to invade us!”

There was much more in this line with obscenities, then he stared at the television, cranky and befuddled. Old people are supposed to be serene, bull!

“Churchill! Churchill! Are they playing this advert on my radio station?”

“Yes.”

“Well get them off.”

“How? Get that limp wristed sissy who plays them off, sack him, no I'll tell Keith and you will work under him!” He went back into befuddlement for a few seconds looking around before getting the plot again. “And that ad for that breakfast serial that comes from Japan, first they starve our boys in the camps and then they try to make money by feeding us... All you need is loyalty, a good voice and obedience.”

Sometimes Elena would visit and teach us radio technology updates; Keith was not so good at that, time stopped in the station when Menzies won the 1949 federal election. They actually had his picture on the wall, along with Nellie Melba, Caruso, Mo, Joan Sutherland and that bright new star, Elvis. I would escape him when I was manager. Keith taught me basics and Elena taught me new technology, but I learnt that technology as much as knowledge was power.

\*

Elizabeth MacKinnon

Wollongong Town Hall 30<sup>th</sup> April 1965

“And our last presenter is Cora Druetti, of the Distance Education Centre, who has something special for us, so bear with us while we set up.”

She was too clever, too precocious and she learned so fast. Nobody would blame her from going to Eloura from Cringila, but she had the Clarke ruthlessness and arrogance. The documentary started with a clear overview of what she would do and did, recollections of the landing by Alex, Ross and Jan and a read speech while a photograph of Tom Caufield was projected. That photo had an imposed caption: SERGEANT TOM CAUFIELD VICTORIA CROSS NOMINEE, VETERAN OF SOUTH AFRICA AND BOTH WORLD WARS, DIED WHILE THIS DOCUMENTARY WAS MADE.

After that came an overview of the Gallipoli campaign as seen by the participants and an account of what the home front hospital life was like by medical staff Rosalind, Karl and Lynda and me from a New Zealand standpoint which excluded the realities of being married to an officer who was a misogynistic pimp. Little Cora, only fourteen, certainly understood power politics, all ranks and awards were captioned in and with Rosalind and I we were captioned as general's daughters. She made sure that every single thing that her incredibly stupid former teacher (who was in the audience) questioned was proved. She even had a display featured behind us with what Eloura RSL president Alex got on loan and assorted Clarke souvenirs. The Turkish battle flag and his recommendations for the Victoria Cross were prominently displayed and guarded. All this and the documentary would have won the prize, but she overplayed her hand - and with Ross's backing. Excepting Karl and Lynda, there we were on the stage ready to take questions while Cora held the microphone. It started well enough but went the way I broadly expected and my paid plants with polite questions were not aggressive enough.

“Heard you didn’t get the VC because yer killed yer own poor mother with bashings to the head.”

“My mother died sixteen years ago, and in hospital from a stroke, aged eighty-five!” Ross was snarling and getting the security guard to get the boy’s name which Cora knew Jacko.

“So why didn’t yer get that VC? Nah there’s somethen’ funny goin’ on here mate, where there’s smoke there’s fire.”

“In New Guinea our wounded had to be carried through swamps to lie in fetid air; you were flown out to MacArthur’s private residence. Money talks.”

“How much didja make outa tha war? Me grandfather left a leg at Pozières and his brother is still there. Nobody we know made twenty million pound out of the first one and lord knows how much, you bloodsucking profiteer got out of the second.”

Before Ross or my plants could respond another one jumped up.

“Didja have it off with that Caufield’s wife? Even if he was your NCO an’ she were yer cousin, well didja?”

“An’ me poor daughter barely twenty, kept by him with her as the temptress with their offer of big money.”

She was pointing at me and this woman was too stagy, even hostile people could sense it. The other hecklers also seemed too practised, too sharp, as if trained. An aged man at the back smirked at these questioners, watching with a glittering smile coming through his scared face.

“Who is he?” I asked the chairman as Rosalind squinting at him.

“Rosenthal, a top communist of the imported European variety.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, he has a pronounced German accent. With him here best to round off.”

So Cora got the winner’s certificate, the cameras and wan applause among boos.

\*

Rosenthal

Wollongong Town Hall 30<sup>th</sup> April 1965

Fifty years, but truth is the daughter of time. They were like mannequins from some past display and unlike me with Magda, she did not look like she had ever found true love. If she shared his life let her share his punishment. I considered asking Horace and Rima to join us here, but that would have been cruel, but they were at the Railway Station, watching the train go and arguing after it left.

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Crown Hotel Wollongong 30<sup>th</sup> April 1965

Perhaps it was the strange surroundings, the strange night that recalled the war most of us would prefer to forget, but we tolerated the event for the children who were innocent of the reality, however much they tried to understand - or perhaps it was the strangest thing of all, that evil face. It was so twisted with spite that the cruel mouth was barely recognisable as a human mouth. The glittering eyes coming out of that hideously slashed face and the almost bald head like a skull were the worst and that face was at its worst when smiling - as when the photo of Tom Caufield was shown and Ross was being humiliated by those Red thugs. The dream came in the early morning hours, all blackness at first and then just a head, Andrew's calling for help and I was there saying I was trying to help, but then the face merged into that of that red German Rosenthal's snarling and threatening me with exposure. I woke up screaming. Our foray into the world outside Eloura was best ended. Ross had promised us a trip to Sydney, but I wanted home.

\*

Cora Druetti

Wollongong Railway Station 1<sup>st</sup> May 1965

Waiting for the train and the family was boring, and the old clap board building was interesting with its posters about May Day, so I strolled over. It's faded exterior paint and lack of it inside said something and the

books looked strange, but the one that attracted was *Ten Days that Shook the World*. On the cover was the Bolshevik revolution with jubilant workers and sailors storming the winter palace, waving red banners as they urged their comrades on over the parapets, to do more than storm a palace, to take the world and make it bright and new. And yet the colours on the cover had once been bright and bold, but they were pallid and the yellowing pages behind them were old and dead flies were at the base. That book had been there a long time and the blurb was as forlorn as the scene. 'Written with the initial optimism that greeted the 1917 revolution, John Reed's account encapsulates the utopian hopes and spirit of the early days of the revolution.' I felt that if I could understand how that book was in that forlorn locale, permanently unsold, I could understand one of the most important events of this century, the failure of Communism and what that said about people.

Suddenly I was aware of being stared at. He was motionless, staring at me with knowing, cruel eyes – the nasty old man behind the trouble last night. Soon he was joined by this weak looking man with a shrewish looking wife and all three just stared at me as if it was extraordinary that I should be there. People with banners were arriving. Suddenly being bored at the station seemed wise.

\*

Elizabeth MacKinnon                      Wollongong Railway Station 1<sup>st</sup> May 1965

The station was on one side of the square and on the other was the Trade Union Centre and next to it the Communist Party HQ, a little dilapidated clap board building, but today being May Day was their big day and there they were, many being hecklers from last night. Seeing them there however made me pity them, for they were also people locked into another suffering time: the world wars and the Great Depression. The youngest were well past forty, their children (if they were political at all)

were enraptured with Bob Dylan and Martin Luther King; hardly men of orthodox Marxism – an idea now much disputed by his assorted adherents, as some little squabble here with Trotskyists or Maoists demonstrated. There was that Rosenthal and the sight of him got Rosalind tense and squinting or perhaps it was Horace and Rima next to him that was the more likely cause.

“Get Ross out of here before he sees them.” Doctor Karl spoke quietly.

“Already have and I don’t know them, don’t want to know them and just want to get home, the Commos can have this place.”

Mercifully the train whistle blew and we all were glad to go, excepting perhaps Rosalind, looking back at her son, it must have been for him.

\*

Rima Clarke

Wollongong Railway Station 1<sup>st</sup> May 1965

Watching the train pull out with his father on it was the very last straw. I would force it now.

“That is what it is all about, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Paying the world back for Daddy, by destroying and concealing the process from yourself and your dupes with lovely utopian talk of a Communist paradise.”

He fell for it, believing I was making a fresh sudden insight, as if it was not egregious the first time I heard him speak of his father.

“What are you talking of? You have been a party member for decades.”

“And a believer for only the first nineteen. Stalin exposed and Hungary marked the final irrevocable blows. And don’t try to show me

pretty pictures of smiling soviet peasants with their balalaikas, smiling wives and cheery cows.”

“Who said-”

“Know what this is?” I handed up my resignation slip.

“It is dated New Years Day 1957.”

“Update it and give it to Rosenthal. This one is for you.”

I gave him the draft of the documents that would lead to divorce. He behaved exactly as expected, stunned and then almost in tears.

“But our marriage, our son.”

“Our marriage is a sham and always has been. Horace is my son, not yours. Remember Comrade Gerry with the bright green eyes just like Horace’s? Bumped into him in a Sydney street nine years past., The Women’s League for Anti-Imperialist Activism does not exist and the donations you have made to it for nine years were divided between the cost of a hotel room and the saved amount to pay for a divorce, being so extremely expensive in this country. Know what I like about Gerry? Apart from the fact that his penis is twice the size of yours and he knows how to use it? He is smart and he is cunning and he thinks people as spoilt and mild, naïve and silly as you deserve a bashing to make you see reality. Facing reality could start with you and your pal Rosenthal. You should be honest and first turn into bum buddies and then he should tell you what the comrades really think of you.”

\*

Horace Clarke

Wollongong Railway Station 1<sup>st</sup> May 1965

I went through the motions on the march, but people noticed. Something was also wrong with Rosenthal and it came to a head at drinks, few followed the party injunction against alcohol any more. I gave him her note and he seemed unsurprised.

“You will pass it on to the central committee?”

“No, Horace you will, and this one as well.”

He gave me an envelope. I remembered how he had taken the Peking line in the dispute that had hit us over the last few years.

“You are going with the splitters.”

“I am going with those still loyal to Marxist-Leninism. The Moscow liners will soon find themselves overwhelmed by middle class trendies who do not understand Marxist-Leninism. Mao does. He has it right, Stalin was seventy percent good and thirty percent bad and Mao will revitalise China, a revolution stirs there, even now.”

“Like that great leap forward? Thirty million dead from starvation?”

He just sighed wearily, picked up his walking stick, patted me on the shoulder and left without a backward glance. I finished my beer and his and had more. The world seemed simpler and happy seen through amber, as many workers rightly told me.

\*

Cora Druetti

Ahmedgheho 27th December 1965

A summons came for Grandfather's office. Fortunately, his mood was ok.

“Well school marks are in and like Craig and Ross, you have done exceptionally well. Time for a rest over the holidays and a reward. Great Aunt Alice, Elizabeth and I are going to Europe in the New Year, would you and Ross like to go?”

I stood there wondering what was going on. The thought came *Nothing really comes for free, I was being used*, but I banished that, a trip to Europe! I would learn to trust my instincts.

At first it was wonderful, we stopped over in the Maldives for a week where amidst all that wonderful sun and bright blue water I learned to snorkel and swam on their glorious beaches, which were so bright and hot. The Maldives sucked the energy out of them, but being so old that was no surprise, when I fell asleep it surprised, then on to Athens, but not



for long, there was political unrest there. London was a wonder with the youth rebellion, rock from pirate radio stations was everywhere in the background. London hummed with it, and everywhere this zest for colour and sensuality, miniskirts, and men in long hair past their collars and bright shirts that would have seemed outlandish on the stage a few years ago, not that I could do much more than watch protests and window shop for music and fashion with my elderly chaperones. Another warning bell rang when I stood outside a decorated music window.

“Oh please let me buy some of these albums, please.”

They just looked at each other, leaving me feeling that they knew some secret I did not. I found out that was so when without warning we were on a flight to Belfast and a taxi ride to the Hughes estate and tea and biscuits with Great Aunt Alice’s Anglo-Irish relatives.

“Well it is an extremely generous offer, much more than expected and of course there can be the daily use of house servants. Best that we could hope for, keep the tax man away from the door for several years more and the property within the family. Surely you would like a look?”

We were taken to a one-bedroom stone cottage of great age. There was a fireplace in a kitchen, a lounge room and a small bedroom. The bathroom laundry was comparatively recent having been added about a hundred years ago.

“Very cosy very fine, goodbye Cora, Elizabeth.”

We just stared. It was back in the hotel room that I spoke.

“What was that about?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No.”

“She wants to spend the remainder of her life where she was happiest, there. She bought the game keeper’s house.”

“Is it really so she won’t have to see Uncle Craig drink himself to death?”

She just stared at me enigmatically. Suddenly I felt that things yelled out at the speech night were true. So why would Grandfather entrust me to being taken to the other side of the world with a former brothel madam in places where women were kidnapped and sold into white slavery? After a time she spoke.

“It is unwise for a child to question about adults, and you are still a child.”

“You clearly think so from the birthday presents you gave me and sickly-sweet desert. Fifteen means something different now, the world is changing.”

“Oh yes, we can see that.”

The sarcasm and contempt in her voice was thicker than the sugar in my birthday cake. She did not like me at all.

“What is this trip really about?”

“From now on, things to your benefit. We had to make sure Alice reached her destination safely and that her cottage purchase went through.”

\*

When we turned up at the little classic English cottage which branched off on a narrow, muddy country road it was obvious that the reason concerning me was here, whatever that reason was. The cottage was almost at the top of a slight green slope, concealed even from that apparently seldom used road by carefully tended hedges. The thatched roof, whitewashed walls, tiled window panes, old glass and massive size all said big money and I had been in England long enough to know that most English people lived in piled up little flats in crowded cities; only bankers, celebrities, rock stars, peerage, retired officers and the highest

public servants could afford to live in such places. Few farmers survived in such well-restored old farm houses. The gigantic bearded, balding man was burly and affable, roughly dressed, even to gumboots and designer raincoat. His wife wore expensive, but old plaid beneath her designer raincoat. From what I had seen of Great Aunt Alice's family and the visit to Elizabeth's relations, and her forewarnings, this was standard rural ruling class day wear now. Bowlers, waistcoats, (pronounced weskits just to be difficult) top hats, brollies and those cumbersome watch chains had become so clichéd and satirised that in the last decade the ruling class had quietly abandoned them and expecting to see them was a sure sign of being nouveau rich, an arriviste, a parvenu. I knew enough to be expressionless and to wait to be spoken to. Elizabeth did the introductions.

“Professor Haast, Mrs Eunice Haast, this is Cora Druetti, youngest daughter of Clarissa and Francisco.”

We shook hands without surprise, puzzlement or curiosity on their faces. A prepared cold lunch waited on the kitchen table with settings for us ready. They knew why we were here: I didn't. Eunice Haast spoke.

“Mother lives in Scotland now, well from spring until autumn. Says too long in Australia ruined her for acclimatising to cold. If you travelled to the Greek Islands you may have crossed paths.”

“Ross bought her accommodation.”

“By a highland loch. Church is her life, but she interprets it her way.”

They smiled at some in joke, which the professor got but disliked. I wished to be gone, but knew that was not going to happen. Then we heard yelling from upstairs.

“Stop going on about diggers and levellers and what happened to Gerard Winstanley! Your focus should be on Cromwell and Charles.”

“Why? One was a fanatic and the other a tyrant. Winstanley had the answers to England’s Civil War! Turn it into a revolution and establish Anarchist Communism!”

“When you come to your history exam the board will ask you about Cromwell, not about some obscure ultra-leftist.”

“That is because they don’t know what is important.”

Something crashed, a rush of feet sounded down a stair and then a frazzled little man carrying textbooks rush past muttering to himself.

“Goodbye permanently; absolutely as impossible as all the other tutors stated, he will never pass university entrance exams.”

”That was tutor number fourteen.” Eunice Haast spoke levelly with a sigh.

“Come inside for lunch and meet him. Naming him Byron was a mistake, he became one of his role models.”

From the scraping of cutlery on plates he had already started. We went in and there was the handsomest boy I had ever seen. He had his mother’s finely wrought features and slender build, with his father’s bright blue eyes and blonde hair and his own air of beguiling insouciant mischief. He wore jeans and those new-fashioned shoes they called desert boots and an army surplus shirt and coat. I could not take my eyes off him and was vaguely aware of a warm glow going through my body and almost unaware of the adult’s conversation until his mother spoke.

“Byron, why don’t you show your cousin round the estate?”

He did so, in a parody of a tour guide and starting with his bedroom where pin-ups of the Beatles and Marianne Faithful jostled with a collage of abolitionists Frederick Douglas, Byron Jackson and Malcolm X and in pink writing.

PROGRESS IS PAID FOR BY CONFLICT.

NOBODY CAN ESCAPE THAT LAW OF NATURE.

FAVOURING FREEDOM AND YET THINKING ASKING IS  
GETTING IS DANGEROUS FOOLISHNESS.

POWER NEVER CONCEDES.

TAKE WHAT IS YOURS! FREEDOM!

TO GET IT AGITATE! PROPAGATE! DECLARE! SUBVERT!

DESTROY ALL THE OLD.

BYRON JACKSON 1861.

“Were you named after him?”

“Wish I was.”

I looked at. Apart from the Marx Brothers and Aldous Huxley, the stacks of books were about radical politics, rock or psychedelia.

“Do you believe those slogans?”

“You don’t? I live by it.”

“Your parents must hate it.”

He laughed with this maniacal manner that resembled a jackal. It unsettled as he clearly intended..

*Beware of this one. Everything he does is about him.*

“Of course they do, of course; they loathe and destroy any threat to their comfortable world, such as well-connected students insisting – and getting marks they don’t deserve.

On with the tour! Note the mock Gothic spires in the distance, meant to give a sense of stability to the landscape, and like the sheep, ensure a feeling of tranquillity, even pastoral bliss. When looking at such a view you are meant to feel that nothing bad could possibly occur that would disrupt such a green and pleasant land.”

He then sang the hymn ‘Jerusalem’, once again in mockery.

“So what has happened to disrupt here?”

“Me! Oh and Malcolm X visiting Oxford uni two years back, I snuck in and he had it right, talking of how we live in a revolutionary

time when there's got to be a change to gain a better world... He was probably the only disruption here since bells were rung to warn of the Spanish Armada not really coming up the Bristol Channel and everybody grabbed their arms and stood at attention till dawn but no Spaniards meant it was a non-event. Then there was also the vicar who in 1900 announced from the pulpit that he was convinced of the truth of evolution and therefore lost his faith and therefore no longer believing in Christian morality and heaven, intended to flee to the Hawaiian Islands to live a happy life in the here and now. His father had him committed, another non-event."

"And does your father intend to have you committed?"

"Only as a last resort."

"So what is the first resort?"

"Oh we are beyond that, talks I think it was...Then pocket money was cancelled and no trips to concerts, suspension, expulsions to the count of three, court appearances... psychoanalysis... Uhm were are now on a revival of transportation. I am England's last convict."

"Does that mean that you are in so much trouble that you have to go to the other end of the world to get out of it?"

"Yes."

"And that is why we are here?"

"Yes."

"And we have been sent out here wandering around to see how we get along."

"While the adults conspire in private, my poor parents dare to hope that they can have a world of BBC Bach with morning tea and crumpets, then vehemently discuss dating recent finds of Jacobean middens while steak and kidney pie bakes – and they can look forward to second helpings because there is no Byron to feed."

He said this while sneering as he looked at the house.

“Oh surely, you exaggerate, su-”

“They want me gone and far far away.”

“That is because you should be gone for your own good.” We had not noticed his father around. He stood behind us very still, with a severe face.

“Next arrest will see you in Borstal, and there will be a next arrest if we do not get you elsewhere. You are so in love with that image of yourself as the heroic outlaw that perhaps only jail will cure you. As for nasty stories about pies, we baked three and as our guests can see we serve ample amounts.”

“We always have steak and kidney on Thursdays. The Worcestershire sauce is always on the left and the tomato sauce to the right, with mint jelly perhaps two inches to the left of the tomato. How soon before we leave for Australia?”

\*

Byron Haast                      The Seppelts Manor Oxfordshire 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1966

They let us stay up together in front of the fire chatting as we sipped on milo: they would not have let us do that if they heard our chatter.

“Grandmother Rosa was one of your grandfather’s mistresses, so we are not legitimate cousins, that matters to them, not us, so it is more like concealing all this from us serves as an excuse for fooling themselves.”

“They are using me - or us.” Her inchoate suspicions were being clarified by what I was telling her,

“Of course. Why they want me out of the way is obvious. The guard I bashed being a son of father’s colleague in the archaeology department, and he insists psychoanalysis cannot be enough. Then the girl who I taught to give me oral sex was one of his students and her parents put a complaint in.”

“Why did you attack the guard?”

“It was the best concert to come by here in years, Rolling Stones, Orbison, Marianne Faithfull, Chad and Jeremy. Took me months to save the money and this loud, pushy, fat old slug of a guard says ‘You can’t go in’ and when I asked why he says ‘We have more than enough of you nancy boys on the stage without starting a poofter epidemic’ so I smashed a garbage tin lid into his face. You don’t expect me to take that do you?”

“And the parents complaining about kissing? Isn’t that extremely puritanical?”

I couldn’t keep a straight face. She sensed something was not what she meant, but couldn’t work it out. She was a virgin and probably of that type that are so engrossed in study and/or horses that they do not think about sex very much, if at all. She could be fun.

“Do you want to know about oral sex by practising it?”

“Not just yet, well I hardly know you.” She was so kitschy, but the straight face went. She paused as if mentally searching for thicker ice and quickly found it.

“Who are your favourites, musically?”

So we talked music and books far into the night and it wasn’t until the Dowager Mistress of the antipodes came down insisting it was after three that we realised we had chattered for hours. She was growing on me. Not exactly as svelte as Audrey Hepburn or another Julie Christie in the looks department, she was okay, that strong jaw needed the more sensitive mouth and something almost yelled extreme about her.

Silly to say it, but it was in the raven black hair, the thickset body, the way she moved and sometimes in her eyes. The extreme was in her attitudes, her likes and dislikes and her ambitions and her desire for freedom. She and everybody she came into contact with were lucky that she was also witty and nobody’s puppet. Most kids gripe against bullies



and teachers: back in Australia last year she pulverised one of each in a single day. Most kids listen to whatever pap the radio dishes out: she said rubbish and ran her own show. In politics she did not know much factually, but she had the idea, never trust the bastards or anybody else in authority. She understood a few things about me straight off: my long hair was not about being a sissy and I wore army surplus daggy style to annoy and mock, both military authority and the brainwashing world of fashion.

It happened late on the fourth night of chat when I told her she had still to learn about oral sex.

“If I want to.” That surprised me, she was calm, almost indifferent.

“Do you want to?”

She nodded and we began kissing, lightly at first and she was awkward and as she said she had never kissed a boy before, but it became passionate, so passionate that our tongues were down each other's throats and so into it that I was spontaneous, not really aware of it and it was so exciting that when I came to I was surprised. Suddenly we pulled apart smiling as we panted for breath. Smiling still, she undid her nightie and exposed her breast and held her smile – and my eyes.

“Well Byron, after asking around, about what oral sex is, it seems wiser to initiate you into it.”

She put one hand onto the nape of my neck and pressed my head down to my face was at her breast. It felt odd at first, then delightful. After a long time she slowly pushed my head further down to her navel and she was soon trying to stifle the giggles. I undid her jeans and she slid them down to her ankles, there I took them off, while her hands went to my belt.

“Don't cry out, if you do they will come down.”

\*

The hours we spent at it led to too long a sleep. The sunlight on my face woke me up or maybe they made a sound, for when I looked up at them standing over us, they were as motionless as mannequins and about as expressionless. My mother did the talking.

“You people had best pack and leave within the shortest possible time and you will take our only child with you, as agreed.”

They wondered why I smiled: The wide world was for me. Goodbye phonies.

\*

Cora Druetti

Ahmegodheho 26th July 1966

We were summoned to the office; no surprise. The locals would have hated Byron anyway just for being a Clarke, and perhaps even just for his enthusiastic way of talking about things few of them ever cared for, literature, new music, the sexual revolution, politics. His accent and vocabulary were English posh and wearing purple, orange and lime green paisley and silk shirts with hair past his collar in a place where anything but a white shirt on workdays and a cream one otherwise was “sus.” That was short for suspicious –of Communism, homosexuality, madness, sissy ways, Nazism, weirdness, witchcraft or combinations of the previously mentioned. Annoying as such narrowness was, Byron decided to have fun with it. Provocative graffiti in annoyingly bright paint appeared in obvious places.

SUKANO WILL INVADE – HAVE A CUPPA READY

CASTRO AND CHE ARE FRIENDS TO ME

THEY LIKE ME GOOD OL AUSSIE COMMO POOFY POETRY

ARE YOUR DAUGHTERS PREGNANT?

Out here serious people believed the Reds would take over Indonesia and then invade us, the apocalyptic Cuban missile crisis when most thought we were going to blow the globe up in a nuclear war was a

fresh memory and pregnant unwed daughters were the ultimate middle-class nightmare.

Some of his humour was cruel. He would walk behind people all too accurately imitating them, like the legacy lady, sad old Mrs Marsha Chapman, married to one of Grandfather's cousins. She waddled and had a puzzled weary face as she did red tape work for the orphans of soldiers killed in action. That had been absolutely necessary in the twenties when with over sixty thousand dead and tens of thousands more crippled out of a population of less than five million, but now? Even the last few orphans of the forties were adults. Even so, despite encouragement to retire, she continued, as if Saint Peter would shut the pearly gates in her face if she did not. Anyway he mimicked her waddle and facial expression, bad enough but then he called out, "Hey Marsha, you must be rich ! After all you are married to an oil man!"

People outside the hamburger shop, already washing intently with blank faces, became angry, some were snarly and we could hear obscenities about Clarkes. He wanted a fight and I had to push to get him away. Jan and Keddy and Keith next door were watching through their windows with disapproval, faces he mocked.

When we walked over to Keith he looked angry: "Cora we have journalist's work to discuss."

"I said Cora, not you. Best get the taxi home. If he will take you." As Byron sauntered down the street Keith stared after him and started to say something he did not want to say.

"Probably many adults have told you he is a bad one." I sighed. "They have it right, my poor girl, they have it right and he looks like someone who will not outgrow it. Byron will only worsen and I know the face of someone who will not listen." He paused in awkwardness. "Those

new contraceptive pills... next time you are in Sydney see a doctor and get some.”

“This is nearly word for word what Elizabeth MacKinnon said. She even made the appointment. Byron is not as bad as you say, last week on the picnic he put himself between me and the brown snake, it is a miracle he is still alive.”

“When you get back to Ahmegodheho Ross will be in a fine old temper and it is hard to blame him.”

Byron was on at the radio station playing weird music filled with foul obscenities. The phone rang and he answered.

“Yes she’s here now. I’ll get one of the Mcphee’s to drive them back.”

Keith was right, at least about Grandfather, but Byron was right about how people do power plays, like the office in the tower at Ahmegodheho. Grandfather God sat centre stage swivelling in the big high chair behind a massive red cedar desk. His phone was placed there, probably so he could spring surprises. The walls were not white as they usually are in offices, but ochre coloured, making the room more domineering. The hexagonal walls were covered in framed accolades; wartime citations, certificates from charities and other civic groups, photos of him with the famous: Douglas MacArthur, Eustace Hughes, Thomas Blamey and our recently retired forever Prime Minister, Menzies. If the photos of the famous, the desk and the restored décor said 'I am a rich powerful person' the framed documents, said 'I am respected and powerful' The one window which gave a view of the outside world was right behind his right shoulder, so if you tried to escape any of his room power plays by looking at the view, you had to look at him. To the left was a comfortable, overstuffed chair, cherry red leather to match the cedar. This chair was placed slightly behind me, so whoever sat there

could watch and assess the sitter without being seen. Like the whole room, my chair was deliberately designed to make people like me uncomfortable. Inches off the floor my heels dangled, there were no armrests and no plush red leather for lesser beings.

A few days before Byron had a look around Ahmegodheho with his usual fixed sneer on his face and his eyes lit up when he saw the office and with his usual amused contempt, he explained everything, just as I have.

“They will probably call you in here to tell you that I am a manipulator.”

He told me that with a knowing smirk. Since returning I was learning that he was the only person I could trust. Everybody had easy and obvious fun mocking the slogan ‘Don’t trust anybody over thirty’ but it seemed so to me. Even Papa was not being honest when his response to how was life in Gringila he would just go ‘fine, fine.’ in a fake way. Jan, Keddy, the McPherson brothers and Keith Anstee were all nice people and kind and polite to me, but Grandfather God was their lord and master and if it came to a conflict between us I knew who they would back. Even being under thirty was no guarantee. Craig worshipped his grandfather. Young Ross was too malleable and Elena was a traitor, as the piles of my records dumped on my desk, a final payslip and the changed lock at the station this morning showed. Young Ross was waiting outside. I was ushered in by the dowager mistress who took the watcher’s seat while grandfather, very severe, did the talking.

“Who gave you three permission to go inside Barb - Mrs Fisher’s house?”

I just shrugged my shoulders. It was a week after the black widow lady’s funeral. Keddy’s father, still a practising doctor, had been called out to an appendicitis attack and in the pre-dawn light saw her bolt

upright on the veranda settee, clutching a Bible. She was in her nightdress and dressing gown. Doctor Karl said it was a common pattern among the elderly living alone, they did not want their bodies to be not found for a long time.

At first going there was just curiosity, looking at photos of her husband with a black band round the frame, their wedding photo and one of the wedding reception. There were my grandparents and Murie and Ruth, Keith, Doctor Karl and his wife, Jan and a twin brother, and even that dead old nasty Tom Caufield. Nothing in the house had changed for at least forty years. She had even worn paths through old carpets. I touched a lace curtain and it disintegrated, that made me feel a sense of violation.

“We could get maybe eight thousand for the painting, that’s a Williams, and these statuettes, maybe a few hundred.....”

*Ring! Ring! Warning! Warning!*

“That silver service alone will fetch hundreds.”

“That silver service will stay right here!” Uncle Craig for once had guts as he stood there motionless behind us. Byron initially jumped but bounced back.

“Oh God, the Nazi is now the voice of morality, bet you sell it all for drink!”

“You can leave immediately or I will call the police.”

“I thought you were better than that.” Grandfather started. And startled me out of my recollections.

“Barbara Fisher was wife to my cousin Douglas. She was reclusive and eccentric, but she had a right to privacy and she was respected by many important people here. You have got yourself a black mark for this, and if that Byron filches anything from her house or mine he's off to jail. He’s a thief and a manipulator.”

I was aware that he was not outside and was not getting a dressing down, and that meant he was given up on.

“On another matter; in life we cannot always do what we want. You play no ads if any, and your style of music...well your Uncle Horace and Aunt Rima probably love it and so do people on their way into the Communist Party, like Byron from the tape I heard, but the rest of us....” He sighed and picked up a single “Don’t deny you played this one, ‘Eve of Destruction’ I listened, and don’t deny you did not understand the lyrics, they are clear enough. Did you know that an American intelligence officer reports that Radio Hanoi plays this and says it shows that America is losing the will to fight? In less than ten months Craig will be facing the enemy and you are aiding them and that is not the only song...”

He went on at length about Byron, then that twisted paranoid Bob Dylan and those deceitfully clean-cut dupes, Peter Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, and Judy Collins. The mastermind behind all this, like Satan sending out his evil angels to cause havoc on decent law-abiding folk, was that closet Communist, Pete Seeger and if I did not believe he was a secret Communist all that needed to be done to see the truth was to read the transcripts of the Un-American Activities Committee.

*The Un-American Activities Committee???? The Un-American Activities Committee????*

I just sat there with my mouth open. Over a decade back all but the worst lunatic fringe of the far right had given up on that bunch. Few of their dupes would now openly admit to once believing them. Grandfather was chronically outdated, but not senile; he sat there realising he had said something wrong and was losing credibility and tried to cover it.

“Well the main thing is we cannot run the radio station at a loss and so far over half our sponsors have pulled out since Byron’s broadcast. Look at the complaints.”

He phoned and Rosalind carted in two overstuffed mailbags and opened them piling up the letters and left. He got out a folder and emptied it on the table, eleven letters fell out.

“These eleven are all the complaints made in the third of a century before you came. These bags full are complaints about you and your music in about eight months.”

One was a death threat for playing Peter Paul and Mary. Byron got mentions.

“Byron has a way of driving people to extremes.”

“Which is why Elena and her boyfriend Fred have agreed to manage the station, they are playing what people want to hear – so let’s hear what people want to hear.”

People apparently wanted to hear about the world being a bright and happy place because she wore his ring, brainless paeans to their stumpy far-gunny rompy wimpy real true funny bike guy, yearnings for the glitter and glory of winning millions at Las Vegas, beer drinking competitions which left the passively watching gals dazzled and stories about dying, blindly obedient loyal horses yearningly licking their master’s fingers: apparently they are rewarded for their faithful obedience by going to horsey heaven where the grass blows free and sugar cubes grow on the tree’ after they get a bullet in the brain delivered with love.

Hopefully I was not supposed to live up to such an example of loyalty. Then came the announcements and the news and even Grandfather became uneasy. The voice was too smug, too artificially happy and the contempt for the listeners was evident to everybody but the announcer. Having heard ones like that before I knew they either knew somebody or did not last long: at least Elena liked her music.

“That is Fred, Elena’s friend.” His voice was suspiciously neutral. “You will meet him later tonight.”



“You prefer him running the station to me.”

“The population of Eloura do.” He paused. “Not all your music is bad, far from it. That Baez and Collins, they started off well and have beautiful voices, it is a pity that they do not know what to do with them.”

He gave me a meaningful stare and the message came through.

“Can I listen to them and the others in my room?”

“Certainly. Now there are some women’s issues to discuss with my wife while I discuss matters with the boy and there will be a surprise tonight.”

He rang and Rosalind came in, her presence here was a rarity and she was not happy. Grandfather and Elizabeth left and she took the chief interrogator’s chair and the power attitude that came with it.

“Everyone hoped that you and Young Ross would get on with your cousin.”

“We get on well.”

“Yes, you make everyone very aware that you get on all too well. You are beguiled by a br-”. She paused, keeping her temper. “After living over seventy years on the planet I have seen a good many Byrons. Slogans, fashions and politics change, but that type are eternal. Perhaps you should read *Emma* and look at the character of Frank Churchill.”

“He is more like Darcy in *Pri-*”

“He is a rogue, a manipulator and that type never love anyone but themselves.”

Elena was the one they should have been concerned about. Fred Hyers was obvious beyond belief. They turned up for dinner, Elena, Fred and the surprise, Craig - as if the brother we had shared a claustrophobic cramped house with for nearly fifteen years was, well a surprise. Even what he was becoming was expected: virtually no hair, immaculate uniform and after dinner chat on how the Vietnam War proved the

domino theory, followed by passing round pal's pictures from Vietnam showing that the Vietcong committed atrocities too. Grandfather and Fred were the only ones to look at them without distaste and when Grandfather launched a tirade against poofterist dupes of world Communism, Fred took up the theme and Craig suggested that 'what we needed was an Un-Australian Activities Committee to aid the war on the home front.' The table went very quiet. After amazement subsided Byron could hardly keep a straight face, Young Ross sitting next to our brother, stayed flabbergasted for longer. He and Craig, once so close, were drifting apart. Playing with soldiers and watching old war movies was passé for Young Ross; his green paisley shirt, long hair and continuous chatter about the songs of Donovan, the Beatles, and other emerging rock phenomena was only broken by his other theme, the stupidity of the Vietnam War and conscription. This conversation would split the relationship that was already fading: Young Ross said close to what we expected.

“Army training has done more than take away your hair. Your sense went with it. Do we have to imitate the Americans with everything? Even with idiocies they gave up on?”

“Enough!” Grandfather interjected. “He will be fighting for his country soon enough!”

“As a private, not the officer he thought he should have been!”

“Private or Lieutenant, I serve my country, as Clarkes have been doing for eight hundred years!”

“Well said!” Grandfather was becoming belligerent.

“And I may get a battlefield commission, as Grandfather did?”

Looking round the table, I could see that everyone else knew what the only soldier in the room did not know. In Grandfather's time battlefield commissions were rare, and were now even rarer. It would take Craig many years to make some type of sergeant and he would rise

no higher. He would live in a world dominated by those dreams of glory that had captivated him from toy soldiers on. Grandfather looked proud, Elizabeth and Grandmother looked identically vexed, as if talking about officers and the military world was like toilet cleaners discussing the fine details of their work. This was odd as both had fathers who were generals and with Elizabeth her husband and brothers were officers. Byron was amused, but Elena looked bored and distressed, her usual reaction to family trouble, but Fred Hyers was the one to watch, not to listen to so much, but to watch.

Did she find him *louche*? Was she so naïve that she could not see the reality whenever he appeared or spoke? Even his appearance was so impossible that it served as a warning, as if a human had bred with a goat. He was not tall, but was so thin he seemed so, and his curly dark red hair pushing up gave him another four inches of height. He had a red goatee, fine red hairs on his hands and even his eyes were red rimmed, pallid blue eyes that some women find attractive but to me revealed too much of his character. His face was shaped like a hatchet, above the narrow chin thin lips curled into a sneer. His nose was so narrow that if anybody wanted to smother him one of the new decimal five-cent coins over each nostril would do the world a favour. His permanently arched eyebrows reminded me that the original phrase for *supercilious* was a raised eyebrow. If his appearance went against him his behaviour was worse. When he walked into the house his eyes darted around the paintings and furniture making rapid evaluations, smiling slightly to himself as if pleased at the value he would gain. His fashion sense in clothing was at least two weeks ahead of its time, and just approaching *egregious*, as if to say “notice me” but not enough to make him look foolish. His politics were the same as his clothes - or what he said was.

His response to Craig's call for an Australian version of the American Un-Activities Committee was to say: "Well although there is much paranoia concerning Communism there are also real dangers and after the head of British Intelligence turned out to be a Russian spy, who knows what they are up to? Nothing is too far-fetched in politics."

He could use different bits of that statement to go any way the wind blew:

right wing – "who knows what they are up to"

Left wing – "there is much paranoia concerning Communism"

Apolitical cynic – "Nothing is too far-fetched in politics."

I was not the only one to see through him, everybody but Craig and Elena could and she missed the just veiled sympathy obvious on the faces. It was painful being there, so I excused myself and wanted that hateful gathering out of my head. The crystal soprano voice of Joan Baez singing of other worlds soon took me away and I was unaware of Byron until he lay beside me.

"I don't want them in my head either."

We would have blocked the world out again except that we could hear Young Ross weeping – either for what his brother once was or what he had become.

\*

Ross Clarke

Ahmegodheho 26th July 1966

Who would be my heir?

In the late night dark I lay awake beside Rosalind, thinking over the family.

Grahame was obviously out, he still played with soldiers and at his most lucid would ask for Katie Dean, again and again and again. The words married and in Perth meant nothing to him.

If Horace was heir Ahmegodheho would become some type of Red centre training camp, assuming that they did not sell it. Keith was telling me that the Reds did not lack for money; even if the Moscow gold payments stories General McCann insisted were true were not, they had enough money from bequests that came from wharfies in the Sydney bay suburbs; what were slums or working-class homes in the thirties were exclusive trendy pads in the sixties. Horace's children owned one of those places. God knows what those grandchildren were like, and I did not want to know unless absolutely necessary.

My other child Clarissa, could not be the heir, even if she survived the cancer that every specialist opinion I was paying for included the word terminal. She hated Eloura and would sell up at first chance. Even if she did not, she was not a shaper or a leader: all her life she just sat there with her resentments and let events flow over her and then complain because she was drenched. If she took over everything would fail. Francisco was better, but he was an outsider, both to the Clarkes and Eloura and what he wanted was in Tuscany, fair enough.

Of their children Elena was nice, naïve and not Solomon's equal in wisdom. Instead, she possessed a finely honed instinct for what was popular and she liked having that, but she could not explain how her own instincts worked and became baffled and cranky when I asked. That was also her reaction to anything in print outside of fan magazines or music covers. How could such a person run a mighty business empire? Answer: she would not, that appropriately foxy coloured little slime Fred Hyers would run it - and for his benefit.

Young Ross, well it was too early to tell for sure, but the way that Byron dominated him and all this radical politics were not good signs. The same applied to Cora, even if unlike Young Ross, she was highly intelligent, assertive, able to plan well, and liked Ahmegodheho.

Then there was Craig, the obvious choice until January this year. Being puzzled by his Duntroon admissions failure I asked General McCann to find out why. He was embarrassed but frank.

“He had no aptitude for command. In his personality we found little initiative, optimism or aggression. His intelligence levels and skills were mediocre or a little less. To make him an officer would be cruel to him and in wartime perhaps fatal to others. His reflexive obedience to superiors, unquestioning acceptance to orders, hero worship of great commanders of the past, exemplary sense of loyalty to his platoon, army and nation, make him an excellent private or possibly an NCO, but those same qualities are inadequate for an officer.”

They would also make him inadequate for being in control of Ahmegodheho.

Brionny, Zinada, Alice, Rosalind or Elizabeth had the ability needed, but they were all old now and giving it to them would only delay the problem. Keith even more so. Even if he was in his early twenties when he first arrived in Eloura in 1910 that would make him just under eighty at least. His mind was as sharp as ever, but there was that rasping cough and the walking stick and the same problem of delayed inheritance. With Alison and Rosa the problem of inheritance was even worse, considering what their children and grandchildren were like.

My nephew Craig - only a total fool would give Craig anything but a bullet: he would sell millions in value for a beer if he couldn't get a drink any other way.

That left Eustace. He had worked for me since just as the war ended, first as a pilot, then for a decade as manager and in twenty years there were no mistakes. His wife had two teenage sons in college and a toddler girl. He was not a visionary, but perhaps the Clarke family had gained as much as we would ever get from past times when visionaries thought the

twentieth century would be wonderful. Now the younger generation were going madder than even the twenties generation had ever been. Solidity counted for much and he would perpetuate Armhegodheho and Eloura.

\*

Clarissa Druetti

Gringila 21<sup>st</sup> September 1966

Even with my cancer he read newspapers as usual and while the radio played Elena's show and it was the worst possible song. The Seekers were exuberant about great things happening to dreamers in a song entitled *Someday One day*. That title was the story of my life, I always thought things would happen to me soon and this is how my life ends up. Elena was six weeks pregnant by that sly satyr and would marry him in three weeks: so much for her promising career in music. Years of nappies were ahead. Cora would probably go down the same road with her villain Byron. What would happen to Craig when he woke up to the way armies really operated? Would he become something like his Uncle Horace? Young Ross was at best naïve and all this new hippy rubbish was keeping him that way.

What happy thoughts did I have? Hawk's Nest, the tower style artist's studio at the rocky water's edge, my mother kind to me and Evelyn benevolent if a little distant, but sometimes children can like that: he supplied the wonderland and then let me enjoy it. All that ended upon finding out who my real father was, when I arrived in Eloura and ended up with Max and Zelda and then happiness was in fleeting moments. Happiness was always someday one day indeed, but with cancer the day would never come now. They first diagnosed it months after Cora decided that her Grandfather's company was preferable to ours, or that Ahmegodheho castle was better than a fibro cottage, that made more sense. Young Ross and Craig were sent soon after I began screaming, a backward glance would have been nice. Elena usually slept over at the

radio station crib, suddenly the quiet and space I had always wanted was oppressive and unwanted: so was my fifty-first birthday.

After double-checking the list the clinic gave me again packing continued, so for the last few weeks I would have cleanness, quietness and no infernal housework.

\*

Helen Chapman

Clarkestead 30<sup>th</sup> October 1966

Wakes are not called wakes now. The reception was at Clarkestead, ostensibly because that was where all Clarke family funerals were, but also because Ross was an outcast. Craig Clarke, Robert's son, was even more so, a man for whom time stopped with his disgrace in 1944. Mercifully Ross organised for Craig to take Grahame for a drive. I had heard stories of what Grahame was like and wanted to preserve the memory of the cheery boy.

Evelyn elsewhere was a good idea, but he was fascinated by the unusual physique of Elena's husband Fred, who looked like the devil in a Hollywood musical, and Evelyn was angling for posing time. Happily two of my grandchildren, Cora and Young Ross, took a shine to Evelyn and he entertained them with a walk around the house, and grounds, nattering on past events there. It kept their minds occupied as well. My grandson Craig was the latest in uniform, it suited him and in that parlour with pictures of Robert in his 1918 plane, Major Ross on his horse in Palestine, their father in his 1897 Jubilee photo and his father in a solar pith helmet amidst the war-torn ruins of 1857 Lucknow, he was obviously continuing the tradition that went back to 1223. If they had cameras in the crusades a Clarke would have been there posing on Jerusalem's walls.

My granddaughter Elena was bringing new life into the world, four months gone. Great-grand parenthood was not far off.

And of my only child? From the earliest at memories until she left



us at Hawk's Nest were happy memories, then she treated us as traitors, as if sold into slavery, not sent to live in a mansion. She never seized opportunities, even when she was with us there was a pallidness to her, a total lack of imagination in a house brimming with it, both with us as people and with the setting. Ross, Zelda, everybody noticed it and a fatal lack of ambition, of taking chances for gain. The chances she took were wrong ones and self-destructive. Elizabeth described her being discovered with the mechanic in the plane only hours before they were going to make her manager. Then there was the continual smoking, nearly four years after much publicised, widespread, scientifically based exposés. Like everybody there it was hard to feel much grief. She could probably see little difference between Hawk's Nest, her drab home and the hospice. Fifty-one was not very old and she was a contrast to the flamboyant, eccentric history making Clarkes, Chapmans and Fishers.

Everybody understood that Ross and I were parents facing the loss of our first born and should be alone together, so we were, everybody but Evelyn who came in, that was a mercy for all. Ross and I could do was stare at each other: once teenage lovers we were in our seventies now.

“Cora, Young Ross and Byron are going to visit us in the school holidays.”

For everybody, planning the trip and telling them what to see was a relief.

\*

Byron Haast

Hawk's Nest 6<sup>th</sup> January 1967

It was fun at first, being at the seaside in summer on sunny days under bright blue fleecy clouds. People in England might, get two or three days as good in a year while Australians got nearly every day so good through a whole summer. Around Sydney were films, concerts, art galleries and even people under sixty, wow! We did not have to pretend

and sneak into each other's rooms and we could be a couple and were treated like one, but did we want to be? Cora did, but did I?

On one hand she did not surround sexual involvement with all the high dramas and guilt and 'if I do this sexual thing, it is in exchange for this or that or flattery' routines. There was just passionate sex of almost any heterosexual type almost any time I desired it, or she did. In almost a year she had only begged off twice. She was also very good at it. Cora was not the world's most attractive woman, but her sleeping next to me was so ingrained it was like she was part of myself. We had almost the same outlook; she got my jokes and innuendoes among baffled faces. On the other hand *almost the same outlook*: that phrase said much. Cora still believed in morality, decency, honesty, romantic love and had political ideals. She wasn't as naïve as Elena and could see through Fred (who couldn't?) but she was naïve about the others. While we were in the gallery where Helen had cajoled people into holding the Evelyn Chapman Retrospective for his upcoming eighty-fifth birthday Cora was prattling on about how wonderful the art was.

"Are you kidding?" I scanned her face. "No, you really believe that."

"Why shouldn't I? Look what they have given us."

"Now why have they done that?"

She did a face scan and was paying attention, but in a wary and disappointed with them way, as if knowing that what I would say would be true and would destroy another of her pretty illusions – and it would.

"Well Byron, it seems that you are going to tell me why these decent people who have given us food, accommodation and almost total freedom have done this."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No Byron it is not."

“They want to think over us so they don’t have to think of their dead daughter; they give us all the attention, they should have given to her. It is guilt atonement.”

“I thought you liked it here.”

“I don’t like being used and Eloura is an old folk’s home, grandfather should put all his mistresses in one. Even here is a backwater, literally. Australia starts to pall.”

“You want us to go back to your parents? London?”

“San Francisco, it’s the cultural centre of the youth rebellion, revolution and psychedelic drugs are going to expand our minds to whole new levels and that will change the world and the music and colour and vitality, the sexual freedom...”

She stared expressionless then started with suspicion. “The sexual freedom... Byron, why pray tell, do you want more sex? Ten hours yesterday was not enough?”

“No, no, that was fine, we are fine.”

She went back to trying to stare me down as if waiting for something.

“So why don’t you ask me to go to San Francisco?”

I did and she just stared, sighed and returned to sweeping the rented gallery.

“This is really just a local hall, last used for a chicken breeder’s convention with framed portraits of illustrious roosters around the walls, now gone, so that Evelyn’s pictures can go up.”

“I like those pictures.”

“Nobody else does. Even Helen just pretends. Do you know when somebody else gained the title of the last Pre-Raphaelite artist?”

“Does it matter?”

“Frank Cadogan Cowper, who died an ancient a decade back. He was considered an eccentric for still painting in Evelyn’s style in the twenties; the Great War killed that waning style off, just as age is killing Evelyn off. Look at the watery eyes, the one hand that shakes, the other immobile; he can’t paint any more, hear that wheezing and note the way he has to think for twenty seconds before he can answer the simplest question. Maybe we are been given so much to make us feel indebted because they can’t afford a nurse. So why are we here, going from one of Grandfather’s aged mistresses to another?”

“Because I have to get my Higher School Certificate so I can go to university and study journalism, which means two more years in High School, which would be easier to do here than in Eloura.”

“You want that rather than be part of the greatest cultural change in history?”

“Byron what is to become of you?”

“I will always be Byron. Who are you?”

\*

Cora Druetti

Hawk’s Nest 6th January 1967

When the Greeks invented the myth of Cupid’s arrows that delivered love with each arrowhead that went to the heart, they should have pointed out that the little bastard was either a fool with his targets or a sadist, for I fell for Byron the first time we saw each other, as if shot full of a love potion and the feeling it gave overwhelmed. Love also overwhelmed those little moments of reality that kept intruding, like the pricks you get from needlework, that are unexpected and soon forgotten, but are really telling you that needlework is not your forte even when you are dazzled by the colours, and the sensual feel of the materials.

I was not the only one to see it that way. While washing up with Helen I noticed her sad face and she spoke reluctantly.

“If you want to go to high school here, at Eloura, or somewhere else it is your choice, but I advise you to get your qualifications, go on to university and succeed at a career job and do not waste your life on Byron, who will quite happily waste it for you if you let him.”

*Like you have wasted your life on Evelyn?*

She was silent, giving me an opportunity to speak, but I let it pass.

“Are you trying to get adult consent to fly to California to follow him? Your father can give it when he visits for your birthday, but I advise no. After sixty years with a drug addict, don't tell me that you are heading for a Californian paradise.”

“Uncle Evelyn takes drugs?”

“Hashish very occasionally. Marijuana sometimes. Even he baulks at the idea of this lsd; Byron does not. He gallops towards it. Already devotees dot mental wards...”

“Yet you ran a hotel for years...”

“Which gave me a hearty dislike for people who cannot handle reality and see happiness in ingesting something – anything into their bodies.”

She gave me a long level stare as if there was a meaning there for me.

“I told him that finishing school is more important than hippiedom.”

“Good, so you can wave him off Saturday morning without problems?”

“What?”

“This is what I mean. He hasn't told you has he?”

“Only in a general way; he did not say he was definitely leaving.”

“The ticket and the parental permission arrived three weeks back.”

“He isn't even waiting for my birthday party?”

Watching the plane take off I knew love had come too young, too

deep and with the wrong person. Helen would tell me I would get over it, but I knew otherwise.

The birthday party was so sad because they tried so hard to make it seem happy, to cover Byron's desertion, my mother's death and my father's state, for he turned up, his hair now totally grey and his face now a stranger to natural smiles. I was feeling sorry for him alone in the rented house in Gringila, but not for long.

"In Tuscany the doctor now advises my brother to retire, but he waits for me to arrive and to readjust and then manage - but not to own."

"When do you fly out from Mascot airport?"

"Three weeks, first to check on your education, finances and other concerns. You like a vacation in Italy? Perhaps after school at year's end, yes? "

"Yes."

Fortunately happy things happened over the next few days and I was kept busy with them. Evelyn asked me to bring out what were obviously wrapped portraits and put them on display. He sat there pointing with his shaky finger, then Helen walked in and her mouth opened as widely as possible and shaking. They were beautiful

"Dabbling! Dabbling! You have taken up dabbling!"

"No choice my dear." He held up his shaky hand as evidence. "Can't do ants or bees or leaf veins now. Even dabbling gets difficult. Usually forty minutes at best before it hits. Besides Robin Hood and then Arabian Nights both ran out of topic matter after sixty years and see what Redon could do with dabbling: his work captivates. He could be serene and vivid simultaneously."

"Perhaps these ones will sell."

"Perhaps. Medical bills are certain to perpetuate, perhaps they will propagate."

“Perhaps, but for now let us get these new paintings up.”

The display opening buzzed with enthusiasm, wide smiles and benevolence seemed to dash around the crowds like fish in coral, the crowd gave off this excited sound that was actually like bees buzzing, and it contained optimism on a large scale. Smiling faces were everywhere and journalists crowded each other to take Evelyn’s photo and ask questions, the idea of a last Pre-Raphaelite still working in the swinging sixties, linking that Bohemian world with this, entranced them. He sat there, red wine in one hand, aperitif in the other, enjoying both with delicacy, rather like a cat after a bowl of cream. When the first SOLD sticker went up the smile broadened and he gave me a quick wink before recalling the old matron in the South African hospital who was his inspiration and only living link to the Pre-Raphaelites – ‘oh and Oscar Wilde when he was still alive, but we never met.’ by evening’s end three paintings were sold. Four papers and the ABC television had covered the event for a human interest story.

“We are made dearest wife, absolutely and utterly made and soon we shall do that extended tour of the Great Barrier Reef that has been delayed, third time lucky.”

Helen turned to me. “First time solid rain that muddies waters; we couldn’t see a thing. Second a cyclone, now....”

“Now we go. After the exhibition. And after we have set Cora up.””

The exhibition ended at Easter and they left me alone house-minding during autumn school holidays: they felt guilty despite everything I could do; refusing to believe that I loved being alone. Nice as they were, it was paradise alone until the last few days when Horace junior turned up. He was the type anybody would dislike on sight, let alone on hearing.

“You are Cora Druetti? Clarissa Chapman's daughter? My mother was wife to your Uncle Horace.”

He had this leering, knowing grin as he looked at me, implying we shared a secret. He had the voice of an Australian ABC announcer trying to sound ruling class English. I did not like his permanently raised eyebrows, the fixed sneer in his lip, the eyes such a vivid green Hollywood would have snapped him up for a horror movie on sight. He wore a custom made suede coat, custom made jeans, chocolate coloured Pierre Cardin shirt and patent leather ankle boots so polished they actually reflected his chin. Bear in mind this was still summer and with a vengeance - ninety six degrees hot. He stood there like a display store window model, to allow me time to admire.

“You are the Uncle in the Communist Party?”

He laughed knowingly. “Oh good lord no, you are thinking of poor bloody Horace who was married to my mother. He only remains in it because they don’t have the heart to kick him out. You should have seen him ten years past, when Khrushchev admitted that the CIA were right and he had denounced Stalin for his brutalities and then he committed many more in Hungary before the year ended. Poor Horace suddenly became an admirer of Aldous Huxley and tried to do without his glasses, focussing on better vision through some exercise and mind over matter method, walked into a stobie pole – his glasses were as thick as jam jar bases, but there are none so blind as those that will not see.

“Why are you here?”

“The recent tv documentary on Evelyn caught my interest. The painting of the Damascus marketplace looked interesting.”

He tried to haggle in a patronising way, which seemed habitual. How had someone raised in the Communist Party become convinced that the world was his servant and he was master? He insisted that it be delivered to their Balmain address. It was no longer working class Balmain, but gentrified. I arrived on a very wrong day. Against a musical



backdrop of not loud enough ABC Mozart, two middle aged adults were arguing. One was obviously Horace's father, the other I remembered from the Gallipoli forum in Wollongong, two years past, this must be his mother. Horrible Horace was on the lounge (Berber fabric and patterns of course, underneath a Leonard French abstract in bright yellows, reds and black) watching with his sardonic sneer.

"Rima, honestly there's no chance of being caught, I've done the run thrice now, as has Horace. We don't want them to see us too often." The man said smugly and as if to a scared child. "Anyway the police are on the take, you are expected."

"Perhaps to be taken and held for a bribe we can't pay, hey Gerry?"

"No Rima no, the risk remains minimal but the rewards are so big because some risk exists. Not much risk for a middle aged housewife. They look for long haired boys wearing jeans. Fifteen trips like this and this place is paid off. How long will it take if the three of us start working behind a counter?"

"Thirty-two years by the calculator, time we don't have." Horace piped up. On the coffee table I saw plastic bags filled with something white and quietly walked back to the front gate, slammed it and not too loudly, but loud enough to be heard walked up to the door and knocked loudly.

"Delivery here!"

The older man Gerry, wordlessly answered the door. Horace asked me to carry the painting in. The packages had gone. I absent mindedly started looking around the immaculate interiors. The kitchen held a Royal Dalton set with gourmet jams and tins beside it. The Scandinavian sound system type had been on display in George Street for a thousand dollars. Twenty yards of records at five dollars per record with each one taking a sixteenth of an inch equalled-

“Who are you to inspect my house?” Rima was screaming. “It is my music, not yours, my painting now- and who are you exactly?”

Horace added more fuel to a screeching blaze. “Ross Clarke’s granddaughter.” That stunned her for a few seconds, then the blaze became an explosion.

“Then why on earth is she here? To take over? This is my house! Mine! Mine ! Mine! March against something with your silly bloody Uncle! Yes that is where I have seen you before at that anti-war demo that clogged up George Street! Like to live under Red rule would you? Then go live in Russia! Get! Go!”

I ran, but even so, still noticed Gerry motionless staring at me trying to work out something. It was probably what I knew, if anything. On the way home I dropped into the second-hand book shop to get one nearly purchased before, *Strange Communists I Have Known* but it was not much help.

\*

Craig Clarke

Saigon 16<sup>th</sup> September 1967

On leave in a bar after a few! My lieutenant said I had done well and my first stripe would come for volunteering for a second tour of duty. Others warned me that he told them the same. ‘He’s after a bloody captain-ship and he won’t get it unless he gets second tour men, a green platoon isn’t much.’ He actually had the pen and the request form and to my own amazement I said no. All my life I had waited for that moment: praise and promotion from an officer and now, it had just passed.

Actually it passed a little bit at a time, starting with the flight into Saigon. It seemed odd the way the air hostesses were all total smiles most of the way and plying us with more and more alcohol the closer we got to landing. From my seat I could see them preparing the drinks in the galley and the smiles vanished in there. Most of us had to be helped onto the

tarmac, very odd. Then when on guard duty my lieutenant says 'Clarke you are an idiot.' And he points to the crates. 'They are all still there.' I responded. 'What they hold is not.' He kicked one over that should have been heavy and it bounced off, then he pointed down to the removed planking. 'They were just Bibles!' 'Printed on paper which can be recycled, bound in leather which can be made into shoes. In war everything boils down to money, learn that lesson.'

Oh that lesson was learned, all right. If we wanted to find out what our next top secret mission was we just paid a bar girl; the Vietcong latched on and had mercenary agents there, it did not worry them or many Allied troops what they did for money. It did not worry the Americans that blasting music through radios when we were supposed to be noiselessly creeping through jungle alerted the enemy. It did not worry South Vietnamese colonels that almost whole platoons deserted after pay day and the only ones that stayed were usually Vietcong agents, learning our methods. They would win and they were welcome to this stay in hell.

The only thing that mattered was avoiding the myriad diseases, rashes and epidemics ravaging us and surviving till our tour of duty ended. In my case the twenty eighth day of February, 1968, when everything will be wonderful and flying home weather fine. Look after yourself is what life was about and armies do not do that, they do the reverse.

\*

Horace Clarke

The Domain Sydney 1<sup>ST</sup> October 1967

Although I was director of Youth Cultural Activities and booked a top rock band and did all the advertising nobody bought me drinks any more and nobody wanted me here or anywhere else. Their smiles vanished when I turned up. In the party events they were bound by discipline to be quiet, but young uni radicals had their nasty fun at this demo.

“Phew! (holding her nose) Don’t pissheads stink!”

“Maybe he’s a spy or a pervert out for young girls.”

“Young boys more likely by the look of him.”

“Should we get the police removing him? Horace the horror they call him, We’ve seen him lurking round Hyde Park.”

“No, he is my uncle, and he has been through much and has been a member of the Communist Party for about thirty years.”

They looked at her and left us, except for a chubby blond Sandy, I recalled her face, unaffiliated she was a well-known radical journalist.

“You must be one of Clarissa’s daughters. I’m certainly glad that someone else in the family is a radical.”

She looked puzzled, and uncertain about what to do next.

“So is Ross, my brother; he is the one over there in the red shirt.” She then introduced Sandy.

“You should come to tonight’s party dance to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution, entry is free, top venue and top rock bands Nosotros.”

“Oh it is short notice.”

“Do you hear anything of my mother?”

“She is well; she lives in Clarkestead with Zinada and Uncle Grahame. Grandfather lives in Ahmegodheho with Elizabeth MacKinnon, everything there seems peaceful.” I did not know what else to say and more politely Cora wanted me gone, Sandy sensed it.

“Hey there’s old Rosenthal; he knew Lenin before the revolution!”

“Actually his wife did slightly, but he was a Bolshevik just bef-”

“The demonstration is starting.” Cora snarled, Rosenthal’s way, most odd. I just nodded in goodbye and was soon nodding to Rosenthal; who gave the ghost of a nod, and a look of sympathy - as much as he could do to one considered a traitor to Marxism by his cult. He had white

hair, what was left of it, and walked slowly with a new-fangled metal cane that bent to fit the elbow, and the hand that clutched his newspapers the other holding a Maoist paper, trembled, but his mind was as sharp as ever and his body knife-blade straight. If he did feel pain he did not show it, but he obviously had a bad leg now. We both had to follow the same rule: if somebody left the party they did not exist, but was that a glimmer of a recognising smile on his face? Absolutely not one person came into the dance hall: a few stood at the door, looked at the hammer and sickle and the portrait of Lenin and left.

I was glad I had not asked Cora or Sandy for drink money. There was enough going for free at the dance.

\*

Rosenthal                      Flight X651 South China Sea 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1967

Truth of a kind remains in the old myths. Like Moses I would be permitted to see the promised land but for my sins/mistakes would not set foot on it. Fortunately others here would and would represent Australia at this gathering of the peoples to celebrate not so much fifty years since the Russian Revolution, as fifty years of a global battle half won. From the Elbe to the Mekong the red flag ruled and in the jungles of Latin America, Africa and Asia men with Marx in their minds and machine guns in their hands knew their day was coming. In the West they carried placards - for now. Their ghettos are aflame, their universities indoctrination centres and their youth lost to them and here in China Mao was purifying his land of confusing and corrupting petty bourgeois influences – and rightly, for in the Warsaw Pact nations and Cuba the overreaction to Stalin's few mistakes had led to confusion which had bred weakness. China would revitalise Communism and then we would conquer the earth. Now conquering my heart had priority. The hostess said soothing things but her face worried. I felt our landing bumps would

finish me, but no, we were on the tarmac, but I saw the white hospital stretcher and a second attendant telling the first something. He rolled up the body bag but it was not taken away. They stashed it, for now.

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Cora Druetti

Sienna 20<sup>th</sup>

November 1967

With some type of school paper due at the end of every fortnight, year eleven senior school passed quickly. Nobody on the end of Sydney's north side had heard of the notorious Clarkes of Eloura, so the usual needling and baiting were unknown. If anything I got some sympathy, due to my mother's death. After term four tests the Italian holiday came true and after the long, long flight and bustling noisy Rome, the farm outside quiet Sienna was wonderful, everything had this strange sense of serenity and order, life had a vividness to it, there was always the strong smell of wet hay, brewing coffee, or baking bread. Cattle bells and twittering birds signified dawn or dusk, otherwise it was usually totally quiet unless wind or rain came. The rumble of a car or bicycle on the narrow dirt road that lead nowhere else was rare. It was my task to deal with the lost or curious, usually English speaking tourists thrilled to meet a real Tuscan farming family who had been on the land for over five hundred years and living in a house that old.

Initially I enjoyed my task, like me they admired the immaculate whitewashed walls, the timber ceiling so old that thick black beams were warped and coloured with age, the solid stone grey fireplace a foot or more thick, the slate grey floors and the hams, hanging from the rafters smoking with age, with carrels of garlic, tomatoes and onions nearby and the barrels lined up against the far wall. Even the rows of blue and white plates, fine lined with age added to the charm. Mama Dreutti knew how

to give the perfect touch, flowers and evergreens here and there and a bouquet on the table.

Like me initially, lost tourists would give a gleam of pleasure at all this and enjoy the gourmet coffee and its accompanying food and like me, gave very correct effusive thanks that lacked warmth or lead to anywhere else but goodbye.

It was hard to blame them about tourists, there were so many of them and if given an opening they would have Americanised or at the least have Anglicised Tuscany and thought they were doing us a favour, but me, from my own family?

One day while working contentedly in the kitchen, humming to myself, I was thinking this is home, how wonderful a home like this is, at last I have found where I belong and then this cutting voice, carefully calculated to be so, came.

“This is not your home you Australian slut! This is my home and you will never be back.” Looking into my face was my cousin Oriana, usually so quiet and sweet faced, not now. She actually gripped a knife. She waited for me to see it, then smiled as reached over my shoulder and put it on its hook and maintained the smile as she looked directly at me. “Oh you are one of those paranoids; you actually thought I was going to stab you, now dearest cousin, why would anyone do such a thing?”

The stereotype of Italian family life of quiet, subservient women in black praying in church before returning home to being bossed around by their husbands while myriad noisy children frenetically ran around the house complaining – well it did not apply here. The few children were quiet and obedient, so were the adults. Mama Dreutti was quietly boss. She rarely spoke and almost always to enforce tradition. She was one of the few Italian women I saw wearing black for mourning and the ones that did were old. Instead one morning my cousin Oriana stood brushing

her hair in a gaudy lime green, spangley marching girls costume, boots to the knee, mini skirt nearly to the crotch, full blast Napoleonic hat with gold braid ready on the side board. In a similar costume little Benito junior was practising his trumpet.

“You may come to the parade in Sienna if you wish.” She spoke as they all did to me, as if to a tourist. The parade only reinforced that - my outsider position. There were thirty other marching girls arranged in five lines into which Oriana blended. Each one could have been a playboy centrefold, nobody less than five feet four, not a varicose vein, a hawk nose, an unshapely leg, flat chest, scar or anybody over thirty among them. Those women were in the marching band or the marchers behind it, who were amazingly waving red flags or pictures of Marx, Lenin and Garibaldi, or protest signs about Vietnam, working conditions or government treachery. The march started to a Glen Miller tune ‘Choo Choo Cha Bogey’ (I think) and at the end of every line the marching girls paused to give a perfectly synchronised pelvic thrust to the left that was both erotic and mechanical at the same time. Their bodies were sensual, but their faces as expressionless as Julie Newmar’s when she played the robot in ‘My Living Doll.’ Nobody could say that about the predominantly male demonstrators behind them, chanting in unison with the faces of outraged fanatics. If all this was not bizarre enough, many faces were familiar from somewhere, then incredulous. I knew where from, church! Little Benito, Oriana, many of the others, including the intense fanatics had been regular Sunday attendees. Oriana had been there in black, a scarf over her hair with every little bit tucked in and a look of sanctity radiating her face. Clearly Communist strangeness went beyond my odd Clarke relatives, or even Australia’s shores. Oriana caught my eye staring at me with cold assessment. Clearly I did not belong in the political world, or at least this one. As usual when meeting a Dreutti



rebuff, the cure was shopping, chatting, sometimes giving children or casual workers money or a drink purchase to talk with me in Italian, which although Dad had taught us it from early childhood and we studied it from junior primary on, I still had much to learn with dialects, slang, Latin culture and most of all, speed.

In the farm kitchen I mentioned this to Oriana. Mama Dreutti and other female relatives silently preparing vegetables. Oriana went into a routine.

“No,” Oriana began, “You speak Tuscan, even many Siennese think you local. Your use of Tuscan dialect will serve you well and fool customers when you open your Italian restaurant in Sydney.”

“I want to be a journalist! Who on earth came up with this?”

“You do not study journalism. You study Italian and copy our recipes, why?”

“For pleasure. I like cooking.”

“Pleasure? I think not. You think your father will inherit and mine will not? Is that why he works twelve hours a day without pay?”

She looked to Uncle Benito, immobile in his chair, so exhausted from his unassisted walk to the toilet that he was half asleep and then she looked to my grandmother - in perfect physical and mental health as she stared at me expressionless. The other women followed her cue while washing potatoes. Suddenly I knew who would inherit, even if she had to wait into her forties. Mama Dreutti had letters in her hands and passed one to me. As always, she spoke little, in low clear tones and coldly.

“This is from your husband Byron, who is not really your husband.”

“He is not any type of husband.”

“Then why pretend? What type of man is this?” She gave Oriana the letter and the nod. Smiling she read.

“You remember the day I suggested that we do everything sexual that was possible between a man and a woman? No American girl will do that. Their puritanical guilt trip is really wearying, back to your loving tongue so soon.” She smiled and shook her head slightly and my grandmother returned to the attack.

“You return to your home now that your pervert returns yes?”

She tossed the envelope, already steamed open, but I only gritted my teeth. She sat there expressionless, no sign of guilt for reading my mail, not even that glimmer of humour or conceit that thieves and violators often have to cover or dissolve their guilt. Whatever I said or did, or did not say I would be playing her game like a loser with no winning choices in chess. Fortunately my traveller’s cheques, passport and bank book were on a table on the way out to see my father. Suddenly the others had faces showing glimmers in their eyes and slight but nasty smiles as they looked at each other out of the corners of their eyes. Papa was weeding the fields along with the ones who seemed more decent, less under the matriarch’s control. It was as pre-planned as a play on opening night. I strode out.

“Papa I have had enough here. Th-”

“So have I. They talk loud.”

“But...”

“No but, no pay, no gratitude, no manners, no loyalty back. I only wait for your holiday to end so no trouble. I have a farm manager job nearby that pays, the boss going to Roma, an old friend, just want his money without problems. He will be happy to see an early start. Wait in the Studebaker.”

Soon enough he came out, twice, each time loaded down with our possessions and followed by hordes of screamingly abusive relatives.

Much of it was rapid fire obscenities but the clearer bits were that he was a traitor, disloyal and ungrateful and he should pay for the Studebaker.

“I already have and from my own money.” He laughed as he said it to them and for some time after as we drove to Sienna. “They will have to buy a new truck now and either work harder or pay someone else to. If Oriana wants to inherit, let her work in the fields for it. See that box with red stripes? I ring your school and get next year’s texts sent. Make an early start and it will be easy yes?”

“Study all day?”

“Half a day, work for me at the new place the other half, earn some money for uni, yes? Weekends for relax, see Florence, yes? ”

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For three weeks it was good, then days before my flight back Papa was hours late from siesta. Near twilight messengers took me to him, motionless in the square, his face a blank, surrounded by sympathetic sad faced friends who seemed at a loss for words of comfort, everybody’s reaction to the power of death. ‘Either Uncle Benito or Mama Druetti have died and good riddance to either’ the evil thought came and feeling guilty, I vanished it just as he saw me and gave me a telegram. Craig had been killed in Vietnam.

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Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Clarkestead 21<sup>st</sup> January 1968

“You made him what he was! Toy soldiers every Christmas and birthday. All those war films! All that talk of wars and all he wanted was your approval!”

Sitting there so abjectly with me standing over him, I could have struck him, but poor young Ross, in tears, already had enough trauma to cope with.

“No it was genetics, Clarkes have always been soldiers, all the

military things in the world would not have appealed if there was not something there to build on.”

“Genetics. Young Ross! Do you feel genetically inclined to put on a uniform and obey orders to kill people?”

He just sat there, cringing with his black eye, his reward for his silly peace symbol, the long hair and the pink shirt, which he did not understand the code for. Another Horace, perhaps worse.

Attempts to arrange a proper funeral were futile, even with General McCann.

“The army feels it would be best for him to rest in peace where he is.”

“Why is that?”

“This is a matter of some delicacy.”

“I am a general’s daughter, a major’s wife and spent nine years as a nurse in a military hospital.”

“His remains were interred in a cemetery wall. In an urn.”

“He was cremated?”

He sighed and hummed around his mind for tact, always in short supply in the military world. “He stepped on a mine meant for a tank. Perhaps it would be best just to have a memorial service.”

“Yes perhaps it would.”

Apart from military and football detachments it was a gathering of the clan, although his father was not there. Weeping Cora had just returned from Italy, Byron was not back yet. Elena was, with a toddler in hand, pregnant again and in tears. That ratty husband Fred attended. Suitably sad Young Ross was in his first suit ever. Keith Anstee, Jan and Keddy, Karl and Lynda, all looked aged, but well. Marsha Chapman just looked aged; she had spent her whole life carrying out such duties. Zinada, Alison (not seen here for three decades) Elizabeth and Helen.

Evelyn pleaded absence from immobilising illness and seeing him at Christmas in a wheelchair, perhaps with justification. Esmeralda Crutchfield and her daughter in her image, Mary nineteen now, was learning to take over the farm. Esmeralda had rapidly gone into permanent sadness and overweight twenty years past with the simultaneous deaths of her son and husband and never came out of it. She exchanged hostile glances with her mother, who was her opposite, being lean and having the face of someone habitually happy.

The service was the conventional flags, flowers, Kipling poems, hymns and speech about duty I had been hearing since soldier's deaths in the 1900 siege of the Peking legations, back when Victoria still ruled and the century was giving birth. Now we were in some new Asian war that was wearying everyone quickly and without a victory in sight, on the contrary, it was hard to argue about Vietnam with Cora, Young Ross, or Horace, if he should ever appear.

Only one thing was different. Mary stood up just before people left.

"I've got one thing ta say an' one only. I knew Craig Clarke and he was worth the bloody damn lotta ya."

Grandpapa Tom Caufield's girl alright.

\*

Cora Druetti                      Kingsford Smith Airport Sydney 29<sup>th</sup> June 1968

Fortuitously being a Saturday no school was missed, otherwise I may have left him to find his own way to Hawk's Nest. No excitement, no great longing came. In the arrivals foyer of course he would look older, but this much older and receding hair at twenty and so gaunt? His hippie clothes were noticeably threadbare and his eyes, well. Already the drugged-out type were becoming ubiquitous in Sydney and recognised for what they were. Although he had a ticket saying he had been thoroughly checked in San Francisco, I did some study in the

approximately two hours long wait. He came out of customs indignant, waving his arms about. Instincts told me to leave or be mired into trouble, but leave Byron out of my life and be emotionally desolated? Too often being with Byron led to invidious choices: what will my brand of trouble be this time?

“Honey I’m clean, and it was strip search and x-rays and these are not my boots, they wrecked my custom-made Navajo boots and gave me this Jap crap pair.”

The arms waved around the airport so flamboyantly and the loud twangy American accent seemed to be a boomerang that went around the foyer and grated its way into my brain. An image of Franco, the Florentine art expert, so cultivated, softly and politely spoken and immaculate in his three-piece suit on the other side of the dinner table, the man who thought kissing on a second date was being presumptuous and whose only dinner conversation was about me and my interests came to mind. Now I wished so desperately that we had been lovers. Best write, and invite soon.

“There are boot workers aplenty in Sydney who do custom designs.”

“Not the same baby, not the same, Navajo bead and leather work is unique.”

*And egocentric, drugged out, vainglorious males like this are ten a penny. Please say my name, please tell me that I mean at least that much.*

“Oh well, and how was the summer of love?”

“Oh man, I was wise to fly when I did and get six good months, it was all I ever dreamed, but the Americans baby, they don’t know when to stop, an’ every god-damn thing that succeeds there they swamp with money and people and noise. Went up to Walden where Thoreau meditated to get the good vibes and baby it was like a circus, like totally plastic, get your Thoreau kits here man! Get um baby!”

The last was yelled and people were beginning to stare and some were in blue uniforms. We ended up becoming residents in a Kings Cross all night café where hopefully nobody we knew from my respectable school would see us and so many were now like this that hopefully the police would not bother. Amidst all the interminable hours of paranoid raving not one word about Helen, Evelyn or Young Ross, who idolised him. Of necessity they had to be bought up as a topic.

“We can hardly go home right now. Evelyn has a heart condition and needs peace and quiet.”

“Cora baby if times up times up? No big deal. They croak all the time in the Haight. Times Square man, one big morgue, Harlem zap! Zap! Burn whitey burn! War-pig America is going down and you seem more uptight about old Ellen or whatever the old faggot’s faggoty name is.”

“And what is my name?”

He frowned in puzzlement and his face went into weary concentration and suddenly I could see him as a prematurely senile old vagrant or duffer. This was the ebulliently mischievous, cheery, flamboyant eighteen- year-old who had seemed three years younger than his age when we met. Now at twenty add three decades and a dose of egregious paranoia into his addled brain. Amid the raving about his trips, of both kinds, sexual conquests and CIA conspiracies, something about being poisoned made murky sense, he had indeed been poisoned, but it was not the CIA. I let him rave himself into exhaustion and got him home in a taxi costing a month’s savings for uni. Mercifully he went to bed quietly. I would have preferred to just let him go, but leaving a bombed-out junkie lover in Kings Cross? That would be setting him up for murder or at least arrest. I was glad Young Ross had the sensitivity to leave us alone for what was initially to be a romantic reunion.

\*

Helen Chapman

Hawk's Nest 19<sup>th</sup> July 1968

How I would have loved to have just thrown him out. There were three good reasons why. Walking up the tower steps I looked down at a street hawker at the gate and from that angle I could see Cora on her bed, naked and him in clothes beside her, booting him out may well lead to seeing her go with him. Last time it was seeing Young Ross learning the finer points of hashish inhalation. The third reason was Evelyn, even he, who seemed to so many of us to be the ultimate in self-absorbed, libertine behaviour was appalled and becoming worried about how much trouble Byron was causing – and with reason. The last thing Evelyn needed was worry, he had not had a full attack, but his heart was fluttering and at eighty-six his body was generally running down. He could walk short distances, but that tired and he was comfortable with the wheelchair. Byron tired him even more.

“People say he is like me, not at all, not one little bit!”

“Evelyn keep your temper under control.”

“I am under control. Now did you ever hear me boast of any sexual involvement? Did I ever get anyone in trouble or hook children onto drugs or preach racial revolution? Those Mau-Mau people were shockers. Did you know that he's talked her into giving him her life savings for university? Do you know what he has said when I told him she may not be able to go to university without it?”

“No I do not.”

“Word for word. ‘She is not going to any university; she will do what I decide. Uni is for phonies and don't try to tell me otherwise, both my parents are lecturers.’ It seems to me we should sell the Ben Hall set and some daubs and put the cash in a trust fund for her, which we administer.”



Strife and bitterness came across his face and stayed there. A mirror image of himself, hideously distorted, was making him care about somebody else. “Who is this ratbag? Related or not, get rid of him and that Horace. With Byron it is little wonder that he was thrown out of England. Remember his mother, one of bloody Ross’s loves and their daughter Eunice? Decent people.” He shook his head to himself.

“Do you want your easel set up?” Painting always calmed him.

“Might as well if we are to paint Cora’s way through uni. And what was the name of that millionaire fellow who wanted his wife’s portrait in daub? Daub I could do in days and you negotiate a good price.”

“You haven’t done a portrait since Churchill was in power. Remember that portrait of him you did for Parliament House?”

“Then best to practice. Care to sit? After you ring the millionaire. Leave getting Byron out for later.”

There was no need. Days later the school principal called and requested an immediate interview. She was known as a fanatical and obsessive anti-Communist as only an eastern European who spent time in Stalin’s gulags could be. Waiting by the gate were some girls who were clearly enjoying expecting something. On the way to her room I could see Young Ross, Cora and Byron all in separate rooms, each with a police officer, Byron handcuffed to his. With her steel rimmed glasses, hair in a bun and jaw like a knife the principal had the look of a warden. She confirmed who I was and told me to sit. I noticed the hippie magazines and anti-war leaflets on her table.

“All the phone calls, interviews and warrants have been done. All three freely confessed. On the spot expulsions for Cora and Ross are in order. The police are of the opinion that Byron will get a hundred and ninety days and deportation.”

“All this is for?”

“Distributing Communist propaganda and obscene material for all three. Trying to distribute free marijuana for Ross and Byron. Your ward Cora has also made statements about sexual freedom and her perverted involvement with Byron to other girls. I will not quote them. They are written down if you care to read obscenities said by a seventeen-year-old girl in your care to seventeen-year-olds in mine. One took her foolish advice and lost her virginity to this drug dealing dupe of Communists!”

She was actually seething with anger as she stared me down.

“Now what is likely to happen next is that Ross will get a suspended sentence and then be flown to Italy under his father’s care. His grandfather will pay costs and his Aunt Rima and her new husband, who are seasoned travellers, have agreed to escort him to avoid trouble.”

“Cora does not trust them. She said to avoi-“

“Who cares for the opinions of Cora? And you are not without guilt in all this. You knew of and condoned Cora’s involvement with Byron, they shared a room in your house for many months.”

“He was-”

“You knew of Ross taking up drugs and did nothing. You let scum number one into your house. You do not know of what is missing from your house.”

She said something into a phone in some foreign language and an assistant brought in six of Evelyn’s paintings and a shoebox full of jewellery.

“I do not wish to prosecute.”

“The parents of that girl Byron seduced do. Deflowering her so that he could get access to the house.... Really he deserves the death penalty. Ross and Cora will not be released into your custody. They must be separated: Ross to his Aunt Rima, Cora to her grandfather. Best not to see them. You are lucky not to be prosecuted.”

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Zinada Korval

Eloura High School 17<sup>th</sup> August 1968

The principal included me as an observer, as part of a ritual humiliation in the process. Cora did not seem to know that she was doomed and that her doom was sealed with the delivery of the last batch of donated library books and sports equipment yesterday.

“It doesn't matter who threw the first punch, two wrongs do not make a right.”

“So what should I have done when her mother blocked the way? It was an invidious setup. I either stayed to be bashed or acted forcibly to remove myself.”

“That is not how the Crutchfields tell it. They are willing to swear to their version in court. Nobody backs you; nobody wants you, not even your relatives. Mrs Crutchfield and her daughter are your relatives.”

“Very distantly and when I have even seen them that is how, very distantly.”

“Miss Korval put her reputation on the line when she insisted you come here and in the short time you have been here there has been nothing but trouble. This school cannot have anarchy.”

I just succeeded in suppressing a smile but Cora got something.

“Who initiates the trouble? Perhaps you should examine the evidence on causes - or the courts will.”

“Perhaps Miss Dreutti you should look at who always appears at the centre of trouble and perhaps you should look at your record in three schools. Assaulting a teacher and truanting and assaulting a student of this school all in one day three years past, and rumours of being involved in your boyfriend's drug dealing and burglaries last month, now this, here. If you think there is any way that I can do anything else but expel you there is nothing. Assaulting a member of the public in front of

witnesses? You think I am harsh? It took two hours of pleading for charges not to be pressed because I have doubts, doubts that increased when an out of court compensation was reached with the Crutchfields after consulting with your grandfather.”

“How much?”

“It was substantial.”

“What happens to my university career? Two expulsions and a police investigation will alienate selectors and no Higher School Certificate qualification, that alone is a prerequisite for entry.”

He just stared at the floor. “I understand you wanted to be a journalist. Keith Anstee was quite impressed with your abilities.”

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After over a month she was worsening and beginning to stare into space with unread books lying in her lap. Her only excursions out of Ahmegodheho were to see us in Clarkestead or the loyal visits to Byron in Goulburn Jail were the worst possible thing for her and she always returned catatonic. The only time she communicated with anyone was when she played with Grahame, on the veranda, toothless, crinkled and white-haired now. He had his toy farm and checkers or snap with cards were major intellectual challenges for him, but he always seemed happy to see her. I tried arranging a trip for them both to stay with Alison, but she said Grahame made her sad. So Eustace flew us and Ross.

Alison was sprightly merriment incarnate, chattering on about her birds, her home, the weather. Sometimes a quiet assessing look passed over her as she looked at Cora, not hostile, but withdrawn, reading or doing her yoga and meditation by the lake. At the end of the second week Cora was talking in full sentences and showing an interest in her surroundings, then Rosalind arrived and nothing could be worse.

\*

Rima Clarke Chae Police Station Maharashtra Province 24<sup>th</sup> August 1968

After his arrest, which went as planned, everything else went wrong. His grandparents and sister were holidaying somewhere without a phone, leaving Eustace, supposedly holding the fort in Eloura, off in Sydney, where on our pleadings his wife had traced him to his hotel where he was in residence with his regular call girl. Wifey phoned back.

“Do you think I have time to work out some mess in India while my marriage falls apart? My daughters were the ones who thought they would surprise Daddy in his hotel room with the birthday cake and oh surprise him they did, they certainly did. Now you work with your troubled children and I will work with mine.”

Inspector Singh, who was motionless on the other side of the table, just smiled. The smile vanished when Craig, (holding the fort for Eustace, who it appeared had his idiotic side by leaving the lazy alcho in charge of anything) answered and Singh could hear every loud word.

“Yer, who is it?” This was said in the tones of a resentful deadbeat who would evade any effort. I got as far as saying the call was from India.

“That's why yer woke me up. Call back after midday.”

The line died. Singh sighed and said two strikes were out. The next call was an even bigger mistake. Helen was not as compliant or stupid as she had initially seemed.

“I don't care what trouble you have got yourself into, I questioned Cora on precisely why she thought you three were untrustworthy and if you embroil us, she testifies about you, Gerry and Horace being drug runners.”

Gerry and I looked at each other while Singh sighed sadly and folded his arms, in a dramatist's gesture.

“Ah four million dollars for not to process the boy and instead to release him, split four ways. Ah yes, so good it sounded, but now the rich old grandfather has vanished into a place where there are no phones in the land of phones. The sister knows that you are not the nice parents, in fact she knows that we might all be the ones to be behind bars if we proceed further. No you must leave immediately and your days as tourists throughout the world must end. Everybody is happiest in his own land, yes? The boy must be dispatched.”

“No, we never wanted him dead.”

“No, not dead, dispatched to jail. As planned we found the massive heroin package in his rucksack and even we had his fingerprints found on the plastic bag and all this was done with you three as witnesses, and yourselves astounded and in the official statement, disowning the boy Ross as a drug addict you tried to reform, as both school documents and Australian police report says.”

“Why not just let him go? We will pay?”

“‘Mohandas!’ My inspector says, ‘We know that there are big drug runners here, but all you bring us is the marijuana smoker, the illegal alcohol maker. We need the big fish, why not some of these Australians who repeatedly visit our dusty roads, our tired little tenement towns to stare at our poverty? Does it not hit you as odd that they do not visit our taj? Our Red Fort? You would not be in league with these corrupters of youth for bribes, would you?’”

He tried to stare me down – and did. Gerry got out a cigarette but his hands were trembling.

“What do you want?”

“From this point on you will need bodyguards and high security accommodation to protect you from the fierce and ruthless drug dealers. After you testify at his trial you will be in great danger and even need an

escort to Bombay airport. Cost in total: twenty-five thousand dollars Australian and to please do not tell me you do not have such money for I know.” He held up a printed bank statement. Singh was one of the most common names in India and I did not connect him to the bank manager, till now. “Thirty-six thousand dollars remaining in the offset mortgage and whatever you get from the sale of a house in Balmain, very rich area yes, very trendy yes. With the money you will move to Canada, permanently and will not be traceable, except by me.”

“And if we go back to Australia?” Gerry had to be the idiot. Singh merely smiled, not with a particularly obvious malevolence.

“On your way to your new home in Canada, where you will live long happy lives, you will stop in London and then overland to Birmingham and then ferry to Dublin and in each drop off some little gifts there, six little cotton horses to a friend who will be waiting. Go by boat from Galway to Saint John’s, this trail will be harder to follow and then vanish into the vastness of Canada.”

He gestured to a row of the decorated toy horses on the shelf. They probably held a kilo each. If caught at Heathrow we would be jailed for decades.

“Now you must put yourselves under my protection or surely you will be killed by the drug dealers. As for young Ross, no visits, for he must totally rely on me as his only friend so he learn the merits of confessing. For the delivery of deferential manners, a nice clean cell and restaurant food he has given me trust. When I tell him that I can actually get him only three years like he has experienced for what should be twenty, the defence will be astounded as they thought five would be a miracle. He will confess, but should he prove obdurate, Sergeant Mehta will get a confession and you will testify that it was freely given, that

stories of beatings and torture are lies, lied! Yes? Remember that your lives are in my hands.”

On the way out we could see Young Ross who was always immature, gleefully playing with monkeys, feeding them peanuts. The freshly painted and swept room was decorated with carpets, curtains and wall hangings. He had a bookcase filled with requests, a radio and a brand-new mattress with a hammock on the other side and a table, chair and stationery, for letters that he gave to Singh, letters that went nowhere.

“Mohandas!” Singh suppressed a wince at the familiarity, but smiled. “Here’s a new one, a male, do you think Ouzo is a good name? He already answers to it! Hey Ouzo! Catch a peanut!”

For maybe three seconds a flicker of something penetrated the calm smug confidence on Singh’s face, then a hardness overtook it.

“Canada.”

His face, like his plan was unchangeable. Gerry was also expressionless, but his eyes were darting round in a way that suggested trouble.

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Cora Druetti

Lake Conjola 12<sup>th</sup> October 1968

Alison Caufield’s cottage was like something out of Disney or a European fairy tale. The clap board timber was a dark chocolate, the trim cherry red and the windows had timber covers with hearts in the middle surrounded by bright painted flowers. The interior was as alluring, there were sunny and shaded sections, a high timbered cathedral ceiling and a lounge room with a lower white one with thick mahogany beams across and a 1920s art deco lounge set. The Dutch doors and French windows were blond oak with lead light panes. The wide, solid, almost stolid fireplace was a cheery light brown brick and arising smoke drifting off into those firs which so aptly surrounded the place making it perfect for a



'life is good' poster, especially with the bottle green water lapping up to within twenty feet of the flower bordered veranda. I found myself gazing into its pellucid depths for a long time, watching speckled and silver fish wafting among the reeds. Behind the house the densely wooded, stony ridge angled down into the lake like a knife into flat bread, and behind it were more lake and land spurs before the massive lake went all the way to the beach. Sitting on the veranda, face angled slightly to the sun was so serene:: spring sunlight was perfect for this. Summer sun was too strong, winter too weak, autumn waning. Just as the total quiet seemed a little unnerving until birds twittered in the distance. It was a perfect day, then the trouble with paradise, which is always the same, emerged. Everyone wants to be in paradise, for what they think is paradise. Speedboats came: four of them, giving a steady drone that was almost imperceptible at first but they revved the motor up to an aggravating gravelly sound and clouds of smoke came from the engines, so abundant that we could smell the fuel from here. They all wore wraparound sunglasses so we couldn't see their eyes, but could be annoyed by their brazen smiles. They wore the skimpiest possible costumes so we could see their rippling torsos and tans - whether we wanted to or not. The deliberately angled wide curve splashed brackish water that could kill the beautiful garden and just reached me on the veranda, wrecking a beautifully embossed and coloured Edwardian edition of Wordsworth's poems. They had Cheshire cat smiles as they circled and then took off.

Grandfather and Alison came out in their dressing gowns. He was saying a great many predictable things: the non-obscene ones concerned hoons with more money than sense. Alison's vexation going into overworked neck muscles rather than colourful vocabulary.

"Can you do something Ross? Please?" She asked

"Of course: a plan is formulating but where's a phone?"

“You can use the car to get to Milton.”

The beautiful sunny yellow trim and oak blond panelled kitchen dining room was no longer serene after the last revs of his car died off and the three of us, still in dressing gowns, gathered around the kitchen table (the room lit up by the morning sun with half a wall being a window and warmed by the wood fire) and over a brew we discussed the arrangement.

“He’s not really promiscuous,” Alison started, looking at me. Suddenly my status was changing; by talking about sexual things in front of me they no longer considered me a child, nobody does that unless childhood has gone. My relationship with Byron put me among the experienced women. I looked towards her bedroom, wryly. Alison followed my glance and got into my thoughts.

“It is just that he never abandons the women he gets involved with. Even Rebecca, he never abandoned her and he tried rescuing her from the Nazis.”

“Rebecca! Another one!” I exclaimed, amused.

“Helen, Rosalind, me, Brionny, Alessandra, Rebecca and Zinada, Zoe, Elizabeth.” Alison counted them off on her fingers in satire. “My magazine article, claims the average adult has nine sexual partners in their lives, Ross has the average.”

“Alison!” Zinada laughed, “Don’t tell Ross that, he might add another!”

“What about those beautiful young women he likes to have around him, the ones Elizabeth procures?”

“He has looked most dreamily, by hasn’t touched a one.” Zinada chimed in. “Either old age has made him moral or his taste now goes just to looking.”

“He seems to have a taste for older women.”

That was as daring as I could go, perhaps more in my new status. They looked at each other and laughed. Alison spoke.

“Zinada have you had any other response to your presence but snoring?”

“Not a one, not once.”

We looked at each other and laughed, there was a slight, distant, mechanical humming outside.

“Oh hear come those accursed speedboats back.” Zinada nearly snarled.

“Upon first coming here at the end of the Great Depression I prayed for prosperity. Now they have money for making noise, Be very careful what you wish for....” Her concentration focused on the faint noise.

“That’s Ross’s seaplane, the new one.... odd to visit now.”

As the seaplane circled several times, buzzing the fist waving swearing skiers away the smile returned to her face but was replaced by a pensive look, when Rosalind sad-faced and tense, alighted onto the jetty. She knocked on the front door and was let in by an expressionless Alison.

“Could Eustace have coffee and use the petrol to refuel? He will be a time checking the plane”

Alison sighed and nodded and Zinada went to the kitchen bench.

“I have not brought good news. When six weeks past Young Ross did not arrive in Sienna with his new parents a month past, his father tried tracing him. He found that he has been convicted to three years imprisonment for smuggling heroin.”

“Young Ross would never!” Zinada was rightly adamant.

“He confessed, both in writing and in court. Even his adoptive parents testified that the police search was proper and that they saw the heroin.”

“Because they planted it, or blamed him because something went wrong.”

I told them about what I had heard and seen when visiting them in Sydney. This held their interest.

“Where are they now?” Zinada asked; she at least liked Young Ross and was sensing I was onto something. Grandmother started following that lead.

“Actually, to use detective parlance, their trail goes cold after arriving in Heathrow. Surely this is grounds for an appeal.”

“An appeal after a confession?”

“Trickery or torture, Francisco says.”

Alison started to say something about Indian jails but Zinada kicked me by mistake under the table and then got the conversation onto the role of Craig and Eustace and their general behaviour. Lunch was unnecessary, but we prepared it anyway and I started eating nervously, not even noticing until I realised they were staring. Grandfather returned in the late afternoon and did not even notice his wife.

“Plane's quick, where's the team?”

“Team?” Alison asked.

“The rock movers, dumping some at the lake will get rid of noisy bastards.”

“The flight was about another matter Ross.” Grandmother started and with the others, he got the story.

“His father is still in India?”

“Yes.”

“With my boyfriend and my brother in jails, I don't feel like relaxing. Perhaps to stay here another time would be great, but perhaps I should be in India with my father.”

They accepted that and Grandfather, after pondering, spoke.

“Then we will help with funds for an appeal and if that fails, jail bribes to keep him alive. Family deserves that much, but innocent or guilty he has proved himself a twerp who won’t inherit from me. Same applies to Eustace and Craig. One deserted his post in my absence; the other never occupied it. One thinks call girls are more important than his nephew, my business or his wife. The other is a drunk who thinks sleeping in till midday is more important than his nephew. Both nephews and the grandson are no heirs of mine.”

“So who will inherit?” Grandmother asked, hopes for her son suddenly illuminating her face.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No it is not.”

“Elena is honest, thrifty, hardworking, popular and the mother of three sons. She knows that music business and perhaps she can learn another, we will give her a chance. Besides who else is there?”

*Me sitting here beside you.*

\*

Rosalind Jervis Clarke

Lake Conjola 19<sup>th</sup> October 1968

After Eustace flew in labourers with crowbars convenient rocks rose out of the lake with the dawn. Soon we had an intruder banging on the door as if he was trying to smash it. He was wearing nothing but thongs, brief costumes, sunglasses, a terry towel hat and a tan with lotion on the Everest of his nose. He bent backwards at the hips making himself a bow to reveal his barely covered penis.

“One way or another yer bloody old silly bugger it’s gunna be yer last bloody flight! My uncle, he’s on the council and he has influence, great bloody influence and he knows the law and so do I an’ if the bloody law don’t work a screwdriver in yer bloody fuel tanks will!”

Alison began banging her head on the table.

“What’s this? A bloody looney bin for bloody old age pensioners? Now I am flamin’ tellin’ yar for yar own flamin’ good that yar can’t stop progress and that the lake should be for everybody, nar yar can’t stop progress an’ that’s a fact an’ ...”

Grandfather appeared in his dressing gown with a shot gun. “Who is this one?” He asked Alison that to stop her banging and it worked, she replied

“A reincarnation of Tom, my brother Allen or Henderson Crutchfield. Well perhaps an illegitimate son to one.”

“Dunno them, but I’ll bloody take yar tar bloody court for flamin’ slander if I don’t like what yar call me, waddaya callen me?”

“Men! Bloody Men! Loud and bossy and selfish and insensitive and why, why, why, why can’t you leave me alone?”

I had been on the verge of giggles at the silly man, but old Alison was banging her head into the table again and weeping, pathetic and unwise at eighty-six.

“What are ya? Pack of lesso loonies by the sound of it.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you just left, now.” Zinada was calm, quiet and immobile.

“I got me rights, yar know. Hey granpa! If yar wanna poke bloody old hags that should be tossed onto a dump that’s yar bloody business, but yar keep away from the lake with that bloody buzzing noisy aeroplane, yar hear me, yar hear?”

He walking off, towards the boat he had tied to our wharf, swearing obscenities about us, our noisy buzzing plane and informing us of his rights and that we could not stop progress; he said that thrice more, shaking his head in agreement with himself. Just to make sure he dominated his radio was blaring out ads and the man who hated our noise reved up his motor as loud as possible as he took off. Alison suddenly

looked her eighty-six years and weary. She sounded even wearier as she spoke.

“All I wanted was serenity, but it does not matter where you go. They always come, but why, why, when they have less sense of beauty than that bull ant there, why must they be drawn to the quiet, beautiful places?” She burst into tears at a man who made me giggle.

Late next afternoon at tea the palpitations started and she dismissed them with a false casualness, but she insisted on no phone calls. Around midnight we were awoken by her stifled cries and found her with her back arched, her torso raised by her elbows as she gasped for breath. We called a doctor who eventually got here and gave shots and held her hands, but there was nothing anybody could do when faced with the power of death. I knew that from the nursing years and Zinada knew it from her wars, but Cora learned that horrible black night.

Next day we flew out of Conjola with Ross and Cora in the seaplane and returned with the coffin. Zinada stayed and made the excuse that there was not enough room but we were all worried for her almost as much as Alison, what we should have been worried about was something that seemed of little consequence, that rising hot western breeze that was just persistent enough to notice.

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Ross Clarke

Ahmegodheho 29<sup>th</sup> October 1968

Being so near the sea and protected by ridges, Conjola was totally quiet, but that wind was ominous, not to the plane, but in some way that was not tangible yet, but would be soon. Just the way it rippled across grazing grass, orchids and corn below us on the way home was enough. We had fuel enough and I could see it rippling through not yet harvested wheat fields and the stubble of the harvested and paspalam that should have been green midway through spring was already dried out to flax.

That being its late summer colour and the gums and pines had that same dried out look, four months too early. Already the eastern half of Tasmania had burned to the edge of Hobart, so bushfire season was becoming unpredictable. This wind would not die down and came off the plains. Preparations were to start as soon as we landed. Yesterday when Rosalind got the pilot to drive into Milton it must have really been to phone Horace, for there he was, last seen as a traitor in the 1944 trial.

Eustace had enough brains to be waiting for the plane. I liked that, but not the look on his face or the way he opened the plane door for me, as if I couldn't or he should be a servant. This was a former Battle of Britain pilot.

“Elizabeth is not in a good way.”

“Meaning what?”

“Heart palpitations. She slipped at the stair top and they are not game to move her from the front bedroom. We hired three professional nurses so they can be with her for shifts, all twenty-four hours.”

“I need to see her, but with this rising wind-”

“I've got the civil defence to cancel all leave and also the Halloween bonfire and all rubbish burning and outdoor barbecues. There are plenty of not yet working pickers, early school leavers, layabouts. I've organised a training program-”

“Get them organised into a unit starting tomorrow at seven. Take Horace with them and see what you can make of him.”

“I put them into units three days past. They are checking sprinkler systems at Clarkestead and Armhegodheho, and getting rid of deadwood, bark and anything else that burns. Trucks are taking what will sell for firewood to Canberra.”

“If you are so wise and organised why on earth get into that mess in Sydney?”



He just shrugged his shoulders in an embarrassed way. Cora piped up; I had nearly forgotten her.

“If a fire hits you will need to ensure that the radio station stays operative over twenty -four hours, can I do that - man it?”

“Good idea, let’s drop you off as we go over to Ahmegodheho.”

“We will need groceries, particularly coffee, soap and towels.”

Another Clarke with a brain that worked at its best in a crisis. The pair of them were less wise about who they got romantically involved with. As it turned out another in the same boat provided a Clarke family trio.

At the radio station Fred seemed very overwrought. We could see him through the door in the studio waving his arms about, with a pointed finger, his eyes popping. Some strange lanky man was bewildered in a fake way and Elena was looking on concerned. Fred did the talking – too much of it. This Vietnam was turning out to be another of those interventionist idiocies like the one I went to in Russia, bad as Communists were and are, it does no good to waste lives like Craig's fighting for crooks, not that Fred was doing any fighting with anything but his mouth.

“I say any man with hair below the collar is either a dope following a trendy fad or his limp in the wrist or he’s a closet Communist spreading degeneracy so as to ensure that they just have a walkover when they invade!”

“Fred isn’t this a bit extreme?”

Fred sighed vexedly and pushed a button beside him. We could hear the tape click off and see the script in his other hand.

“Elena!” He shook his head in this bad actor way and sighed, loudly. “You may be a fine announcer and a good mother but you are no actress. The key word was viewpoint and it was the one you missed. ‘Isn’t this viewpoint a bit extreme?’ That was what you were supposed to say and

didn't. Now unlike Hollywood we cannot do a dozen takes. By four we must have tomorrow's talk show ready, now...."

I walked in. "Don't worry about all this, just have music and fire warnings on tomorrow. Right now I want Cora to work out station improvements. Cora if you list the needed things, I'll do the costing and contact the tradesmen."

Better to keep my thoughts to myself, but I was learning that these anti-communists were just as loud, phoney, sly and tyrannical as the Communists they said they hated. Sometimes I suspected that Fred was just bunging it on to impress me to get my money. Jan, Karl, Alice, Alison, Helen and Rosalind had all separately given me accounts of Tom's bullyboy recruiting methods and loud patriotism on the home front in the Great War and again in that New Guard rubbish, but at least Tom had fought and suffered, not this strange loud mouth. When I left they were all obviously thinking that I was unworried about Elizabeth, but I was, but was not surprised. The first heart murmurs had started over a year past and she was on regular medication, off coffee, cigarettes and worries. A few months past Karl warned of an approaching big one and the Conjola trip was the first time we had been separated in a year.

She was sleeping, looking contented at last, it was the nurse beside her who looked worried and that worried me more than Elizabeth ever could.

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Cora Druetti

Eloura Radio Station 4th November 1968

As soon as the pressure to do station work was off the frenetic energy that had kept me going vanished and exhaustion hit. Enough energy remained to pull down one of the bunks and take off boots and socks and that was it. The noise of Fred's prefabricated right wing moral outrage came into my sleep – 'Now I'll show you why Nixon is our best hope for victory in

Vietnam.’ My first instinct was that my subconscious was creating it, but my opening eyes could see them through the little glass panel that revealed the recording studio. Mischievously I pressed both their studio button and ‘live to air’ and let them unknowingly rehearse in public. Fred was hectoring his wife and even saying ‘that subtlety was beyond the local yokels so therefore everything must be made simple and obvious for their tastes’. Uhm: ‘so’ combined with ‘therefore?’ Since when were redundancies a sign of subtle ideas? Fred rehearsed his belief that instead of negotiating to stop the bombing of the North Vietnamese 'dropping just a little atom bomb' would soon get a negotiated peace with them. Ever loyal Elena was playing the role of the gullible liberal pinko who believes we should negotiate a peace, but dazzled by Fred’s brilliance, realises that atomic bombs are the way to go. As she thought she was off air she was not playing it convincingly, or trying to. She was vexed or on menstrual tension. Even she had the sense to ask ‘Fred why should thousands of babies, school kids, grannies and everybody else in Hanoi who isn’t in a uniform be burned alive to make a point?’

The answer was because this is how Fred thinks that he will impress Grandfather into being his heir. There he was and being less engrossed, now he could see the red light signifying ‘on air’ being on. As Reverend Jervis was wheeled in and his wisp of a snarl started up on how ‘a sinful generation would not take the phrase kill a commie for Christ seriously and he was going to tell us why we should.’ I switched him off in my studio as my Grandparents, Doctor Karl and Keith came in. Up till now I thought my Grandfather was hated out of a combination of envy for his money, success with beautiful women and misunderstandings about the airport fire twenty years past, but in there realisations began emerging. First he gave me the briefest of nods and smiled as he looked around the room. The smile was for himself, happy at the improvements, not for me.

“Look at this pine panelling, so neat and clean and look at how the moulded plastic mattress fits so well into the pine frame, with sheets and blankets you can store in the niche beside it!” He demonstrated with my bed wear as if I was not there. “And hey ho!” He pushed the mattress up and it fitted into the wall. “Look! You would not know the thing was there, it fits in so well a perfect part of the panelling.”

*You do not know that I am here either.*

“Cora has done a splendid job!” Grandmother interjected. “The second broadcasting tower put up, and in here a little refrigerator, heater, dry goods supplies and drinks of all kinds, first aid kit and fire extinguisher-”

“We might need that right soon,” Old Keith interjected. “Word came through on the telex, two days past, the fires have indeed started out on the plains and are spreading fast on vertices from the Murrumbidgee and eastwards, when it hits the Blue Mountains with all those trees and gullies....”

“Still gives us several days to prepare.”

“Could I get a shower somewhere, getting all this done means three days deprivation.” Everybody else understood that me standing there was a pointer to a thank you, but it didn’t come. Doctor Karl broke the awkward silence with a suggestion that as we should see Elizabeth MacKinnon, Cora could have a shower at Ahmegodheho. Propped up in bed, she looked extremely weak, with a voice that was weaker.

“Hello Cora,” She waved with an elbow still on the bed, as if giving a benediction and as if that was a mighty effort - and now it was. “You should help your grandfather and the fire-fighters.”

“The fire won’t be here for days, if ever.”

Her cynical smile came back and she motioned to the curtains. The wide western facing windows revealed a still, totally grey sky above the grain and grazing plains.

“That is the fire.” She announced. Grandmother answered.

“How can that be? It must be summer haze as it covers all the sky but does not move and it is all one colour. I cannot see any flames.”

“Walk around the veranda and look westwards.”

Grandmother and I did so, but we saw nothing except returning teams heading for the servant's bathroom. They said they saw nothing either. Being the end of afternoon shift and the bathroom being taken by males, and being hot enough for a swim, I went to the creek that flowed westwards. About two miles off it had a pretty pool and it was clean, the walk was made pleasant by the galahs, kookaburras, cattle bells on the grazing Herefords and horses, so I changed into costumes and took soap, towel and book with me and walked the long trail down. It was a totally still day, totally, almost eerily so, until a fully-grown speeding kangaroo nearly bounded into me halfway down the trail. That should have warned me, for why would that habitually plain-bound species bound up a heavily wooded and rocky ridge with an angle around eighty degrees? That is wallaby territory; kangaroos usually stay along flats or slight slopes. That puzzle was on the edge of my thoughts and should have been at the front where I would have worked it out. Instead, I had my leisurely swim. I considered taking my too tight costumes off, but fire-fighting meant ubiquitous males. The silence was so serene I flicked water with my toes for a sound and after the last busy week nearly dozed off in the water. Perhaps I could get more sleep in. It was so quiet now, no birds and the horses and cattle had moved off somewhere, odd.

A single leaf rotated round in the air, slowly whimsically spiralling down into the water, it had black ashy edges.

Walking back up the steep bit rocky track meant my gaze was always on grass and dirt, until the top, when I did what I always did, enjoy the serene view of flat flaxen grasslands and wheat fields stretching off into a distant mountain range, usually a verdant spring or early summer green, but this year dun.

I turned around to see that view and screamed, then stood transfixed. The flames stretched in a line as far as the rocky ridge on my left and then across the plains as far as I could see. They were taller than the tallest tree before me, maybe twice as high and those big old gums which were five times my height. Even as I watched, one lit up like a screwed-up newspaper getting a match at its base and soon the fire line looking stationary from this distance, was leaving a black line with little flickers. The haze was really smoke with no wind to disperse it. It was so thick that the sun was not visible, not even its glower showed. More animals and little figures were now running forward, but the fire would get them all soon, despite their frantic running. One man was slower than the rest, he was running in a panic and tripped on something. It took him perhaps a minute to get to his feet again and he could only frantically hobble. Even at that distance his frenzied fear was obvious and horrible and he became a human torch.

Very soon that would happen to me. Ahmegodheho with its shelter and safety, was almost a mile away. I started running. Horace senior was off in the distance on a big motor bike, with saddlebags, apparently looking for me or somebody, but the sound of the bushfire was loud now, the grass was high and he was distant and went past my line of vision – so I ran. Ahmegodheho was in sight, but still so far away - and the fire was not.

The sound rushing after me was surely the clatter of the fire reaching for me; then it neighed fearfully and I never heard a more welcome

sound: there was grandfather on a skittish, blindfolded bay.

“Up on back and fast about it. This colt’s fearful from just the smell and if I let him see those flames...” I was on. “Now maybe I should let him see the flames, that way we’ll make the beach in five minutes.”

Although beaches were over twenty miles off Grandfather’s exaggeration was not by much, the fleet footed colt zoomed fast and while hugging Grandfather, I sensed that there was no fear in him, just an intense focus on getting that horse on it’s right course and he did that, almost dismounting himself (and less adeptly me) before the horse had stopped properly. The place was a tangle of hoses, fireproof coverings. and urgently preparing fire-fighters, including Eustace. After asking Eustace where to help Grandfather butted in.

“Elizabeth’s nurse has to be at the hospital, they have the first smoke inhalation victims and they have to evacuate the elderly. She has left written instructions.”

“Shouldn’t you be the one to do that while a young, energetic person like me fights fires?”

His jaw dropped in amazement then clamped it shut like a crocodile entrapping, he then he stared me down. I now had no trouble believing that he killed thirty Turks with a knife in one Gallipoli incident.

“I am in command here. Nobody else here saw this place built so I know best where to check for fire safety. I had the sprinkler system installed as well. Now let me do what is essential for our survival.”

I did. When I told Elizabeth that after over forty years he should be here, suddenly her clouded mind became sharp and her frailty was replaced by strength.

“No, he should not be here. I am a general’s daughter and know where he should be: commanding his forces is where he should be. This place is a fortress and no such thing as an invulnerable fortress really

exists, but he will make it as close to one as possible because he knows that we will die horrible deaths if he does not do his duty. He cares, I know he cares.”

“He does not seem to.”

“He does care, but no officer can show that. For forty-four years he has been there caring and he has found my hardness and arrogance attractive – not in a perverted way of course, but to be known for what I was – many said I was beautiful, but they always recoiled.”

Her mind lost its sharpness in recollections, but even so she heard the fire before me.

“Open the curtains Cora, Let me see the enemy. I am a MacKinnon. Our branch stood with Wallace at Sterling Bridge, with Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn, James at Flodden Field, and Charles at Culloden. For twenty years we fought Napoleon. My father had over fifty years of service. My brothers faced the enemy at Ypres or fought them in the skies: fires does not scare me.”

I stared into her face and she did not mind me seeing that this was what she was, it was a statement not an act and she wanted me inspired, not pitying.

“Now go and fight them.”

A look through the window showed that the fire was close enough to be loud. It made two sounds crackling and whooshing that merged in and out of each other, like different instruments doing a duet in an orchestra from hell. Outside I realised once again that Grandfather was no fool.

Sprinklers were on where the grass started. The wide pink slate on the patio that had looked so wide as to be ostentatious at eighty yards, worked as an eighty-yard fire break and also concealed a water channel two yards wide once uncemented slate was quickly prised up. After that any fire would have nothing but slate to feed on. All windows had



unpainted steel shutters. The fireplaces were blocked, exterior doors sandbagged, all creosote had been scraped and covered with layers of sodden jute, the guttering had some metallic cover that kept out flammable debris and made cleaning easier and everywhere was covered in wet bags. Rows of motionless men and his cook and house cleaner watched westwards holding wet jute bags. They made a horrible wet smell, but I picked up some. Although the fire made its sound, and sprinklers were drenching the ground, it was so quiet that everybody could hear the water dripping off the bags on the roof. Grandfather glared at me with his passiona drink in hand while others were so thirsty they stood under the guttering necks craned to catch water. He missed that subtle hint.

“She said to be here, she said she’s a MacKinnon so the fires no worry.”

That got a few wry laughs, but Grandfather just sighed in acceptance.

“Those that want to go, get in a truck and head for town or the coast. The fire may give you as much as twenty minutes head start. Those that stay head for inside only when you feel your wind being sucked out of you or all your clothes getting hot. Last man in, don’t leave the door open - nah! Last man will be me.”

Five or six did slink off. Just ahead of the rapidly approaching fire line, at the base of our ridge, was Uncle Horace still on his growling bike, but with a pillion. It was too steep for a bike so he did not get far before the bike tottered over, but it was just far enough. He had to drag his passenger, and Eustace and others rushed down to help so they made it. Horace stood in front of Grandfather catching his breath. His passenger pulled off borrowed goggles and helmet and it was Moon. Grandfather swore and Moon swore back and then attacked Uncle Horace..

“You saved Moon!”

“And the fire fighters. Their truck’s fuel leak meant that the fuel I took down got their truck going.”

“So what do you want? A medal?”

“A thank you would be nice.”

“For saving a truckload full of moongoons? And the chief of the pack? Why don’t you take off with Moon and the other cowards?”

We could hear the trucks in the distance taking off. That settled that and the fire racing up the hill was focusing our attention. First came the embers, and some flicked their jute bags at them like they would at a bee and some made stagy jokes about getting wet from that and others joked about being wet enough, soon enough. I noticed that everybody but me was wet neck to knee. Eustace noticed the same thing and put me on hoses.

The flames hit the crest and came at the slate patio line like an attacking enemy. When the fire hit the drenched soil it halted, then tilted with the flames and curling in on itself like some great reptile, and then flared in a line soon enough at a thirty-degree angle and halted. Even so, the pressure from behind kept it strong, so strong that here and there shirts that had been sodden twenty minutes before broke into flame, so hot that paint blistered on the veranda iron lace and they began to smoke and finally to glow. Ash and smoke added to the heat coming down on us.

“It has been here eight minutes boys.” Grandfather called out, “Now they usually last around twenty before passing, so give holding it a go, hold for now gentlemen.”

The other four women in the line exchanged sardonic facial expressions that vanished quickly when Grandfather turned around. I remembered what Jan the baker said about grandfather when, three years past, I interviewed him for the school project on Gallipoli. “After he got

his battlefield commission captaincy he was lucky not to get a bullet in the back.” I had naively thought he meant Turkish infiltrators out for revenge for the capture of their banner and the killing of their officer; now I could see what he meant. Even as he walked the line trying to give encouragement, it was clear he was the direct opposite of those that have the common touch: he was obviously patronising, held the fire fighters in contempt and only spread dislike for himself and dismay for the worsening situation.

The sprinklers held ample water, and it takes a long time for the heat to warp wet sprinklers in use, but it happened - and then the water stopped. Fortunately the ground was sodden by then. Unfortunately the steep slope meant most of the water was run off and draining away rapidly and if the fire was also draining away some of its force, it was at a slower rate and it was still inching closer.

“Beat a retreat, those left of me first, right to me last.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Ahmegodheho 4th November 1968

Inside there was nervous laughter and obvious comments. Rosalind and Cora had made up tureens of iced tea in the Ottoman Room (the only one that could hold so many) and all being literally scorched, were making that way. She was up there making sure my orders were followed that their muddy boots and the Turkish carpets were not mixing and nothing went missing. I asked for local fire news from the radio where Fred and Elena should have been on standby, but all I got was pre-taped Perry Como and ads, cowardly mongrels, the pair of them.

With Elizabeth developments were so dramatic that it strained credibility. Great high purple curtains were pulled apart to reveal the panorama of flame not far from the other side of the glass. Swirling flame filled that whole high window while Elizabeth lay straight and still arms

straight by her side, her hair, (still with much blonde in it) was brushed out. Somebody had laid her out, it seemed, and then I saw her eyes move and she whispered.

“Rosalind laid me out, I wanted to be found dignified, but it seems Satan comes for me.” She smiled wanly and could just raise her hand to point to the flames and she said it as a joke. “Or is this God trying to scare me? If so tell him it does not work and ask him if it was his best shot.” She smiled and then laughed and the effort of laughter suddenly made her grasp for breath she raised her head slightly and then flung it back and her breaths became pants and her eyes were unseeing. Her temple and neck veins throbbed and then slowed. Her pulse was very faint, but regular and her body still. For several minutes I tried to revive her, but nothing happened.

I looked up and the sky was blue, not a cloud, just a few ashes floating down as if they were the gentlest thing in the world. Eustace knocked and entered.

“They need everybody they can get on the fire line if we are to save the town.”

“Start the trucks, have the best you have at the left of the line and rush them to Clarkestead as soon as needed, the preparations there are complete. Tell Rosalind she should be here.”

Excepting the emptied school, town was chaos incarnate. Through the big high modern style windows we could see the seniors doing their final exams, trying to ignore smoke, noise and fire. Now and then one would get a tap and go off, they would only be allowed out to fire fight if their home was actually “under imminent threat” –which meant burning or nearly so. When some poor conscripted horse died and by doing so blocked both lanes, late leavers were in a frenzy. They gave us beeping horns, yells, coughing from the smoke and panicky, weepy children being

ignored by parents who should have been setting an example instead of making attempts with their cars to boot each other forward. It was a disgraceful sign of mass cowardice and I would have said so, if old Reverend Hilton Jervis wasn't blathering on about Sodom and Gomorrah and us 'being in the end times and the fires of hell burning for an evil and lustful generation that had renounced the sacred struggle against world Communism for a world of pleasure.'

He was suddenly so infuriated with being ignored that he clutched his veranda post and used it to get out of his wheelchair and stand upright, waving one fist in the air. Nobody could hear him above the cacophony and being upright he was inhaling the smoke that was descending. Soon he was spluttering and coughing, he seemed to suddenly not know where he was, and bewildered fell backwards, still moving by flaying his arms about but ignored. Good riddance if he died.

Stuck cars were running out of fuel. That made the jam unresolvable. I ordered our vehicles to reverse and we were on the road to Clarkestead.

“Could you let me out please?” Cora asked, and I could guess why.

“The radio station?”

“It will need manning.”

“Here's fifty pounds, keep yourself in food for the next few days.”

She had guts and loyalty, maybe too much, I got her into trouble from school on. She was not wise in matters of the heart either, but then no Clarke ever was. Even Robert was lucky but did not know it or appreciate Alice as much as she deserved.

\*

Grahame Clarke

Eloura Creek 4<sup>th</sup> November 1968

Flames were coming for me again. They hurt so much. I jumped into the creek for creeks are made of water and fire can't burn water and the creek

is a friend because it carries me away from Clarkstead, from the flames and the bad people into the big water, the ocean.

\*

Fred Hyers

Eloura Creek Road 4<sup>th</sup> November 1968

Take your pick for the biggest idiot in yokel land. Great-Uncle Grahame, merrily singing nursery rhymes while floating down the creek was seemingly, the most egregious, even worse than old Hilton Jervis, having the time of his life raving about the end of the world - his world at least and good riddance to it and to him. He hit ninety plus but from the bewildered brain and almost rasping breath he wouldn't see a hundred. Not so obvious was Ol' Pappy, the patriarch of us all, thinking he could save the ancestral hall. Silliest of those was his son Horace, thinking that his Communism and his treachery at his 1944 trial would be overlooked for hurling a sodden jute bag about. Cora was nearly as bad; I heard the radio start up.

“Hello Eloura District, This is radio presenter Cora Druetti bringing you non-stop emergency news on our bushfire situation... Messages are relayed as they come in. Police ask that all non-essential journeys to the town centre be delayed as we have a massive traffic jam in the town centre.”

I did a u turn and parked in Clarkestead and there was El Supremo himself on the veranda just setting up for directing more firefighting. He nodded. I turned her off, so he would not hear her, then what she was really doing hit me and who knows? It just might work.

‘I’ll drive the kids to a coast motel and then be back for firefighting.’

“Elena can’t drive?” His fixed, contemptuous smurk stayed on.

“Just enough to manage.” She butted in, thankfully. Then she revved the motor, reversed in an amateurish way (either deliberately acting or real) and sped off. He threw me a sodden jute bag and if I had not caught it, sodden jute would have splattered all over my face.

\*

Doctor Karl Fisher

The Surgery Eloura 4th November 1968

There were so many that we had to lay them in the hall that had not been used for patients since the Great War and then the 1918 Influenza pandemic. Only a few mattresses had bed frames, but Ross had ordered in enough and burns ointment and oxygen tents. That was fortunate, as most casualties were smoke inhalation victims; if only he had ordered a dozen. We had them literally lined up before them, and medical workers were going along the lines giving oxygen to the needy. We lost one to cardiac arrest and despite CPR could not bring him back. He was only fifty-five, too young to die that way and too old to be a fire fighter. I was also too old for this, the stony pain in my chest was coming back stronger than when it started, last year. Others we did save, but the place was pandemonium with screeching relatives, coughing victims, the crackling sound, ash and smoke from the fire, honking cars and yelled instructions from the street and the sounds from four different radios, no two on the same station. Two were just that infernal, loud ubiquitous rock music that pulsates like a dying drug addict's pulse; as if the situation was not providing enough of a cacophony.

We saw that old villain Jervis die. His death was the most grotesque anyone here ever witnessed, foolish over-playing and self-deluded to the last, he could even make death seem silly. He lay there coughing and spluttering like the rest, except he was semi-conscious but came to at the worst moment, when our surgery garden trees had caught alight, making for a red sky and flaming leaves and windblown embers emphasising the

point and the cacophony outside aiding the visual effect. As he was still coughing his fading, bewildered eyes took it all in and then focused on me.

“I am surprised to see myself here, but not you. I always knew you for one that attended church but never really believed, you were a miscreant and a racial miscegenator. But why am I here? I who always loved and obeyed and tried...”

“You are in a makeshift hospital ward.”

“No death came on my veranda,” he started to cough again with all the energy he had left and that made him realise where he was. “I always expected to die there, but not in the quiet way my congregation so reasonably expected.”

That was as much as he could say and then the coughing came again and then his eyes widened in terror and as he called out “God why abandon me? I served you all my days.” It turned into a death rattle and he fell back, eyes that had never really seen were now unseeing and perhaps he was on his way to the real hell.

\*

Cora Druetti

Eloura Radio Station 6th November 1968

There was always a new message to impart, always news to gather and assess. Much time went on calling senior students out of the test I should have been sitting for to attend to their burning homes. Some things I did not broadcast, many wild rumours and the three known deaths - the moongoon we had seen burn in the distance, a middle-aged fire fighter suffering a heart attack and old Reverend Jervis, at ninety-four, killed by smoke inhalation, just bad enough to make a healthy person cough, had finished his fragile body off. Physically Keith was only a little better; yet he insisted on giving me sleep and rest breaks.



*Treat him like he cannot do it and that might turn him into a dodderer.*

His mind remained as perspicacious as ever, but he walked with two canes, panting as he did so. He squinted while tilting his head, usually with what is described as a wicked grin, but not today.

“Your Great Uncle Grahame is quite a story. He floated all the way to the sea. Take your suntan lotion and costumes and interview him first. Shouldn’t be more than a few minutes.”

“You are being facetious.”

“Not totally. Three days solid in here cannot be healthy.”

I nodded and arranged for a three hour break. Jan had been arranged backup so he took over.

When found he was playing with sea shells near the estuary and was oblivious to the others but smiled in recognition at me.

“He gave me a lift and then it was easy.” Uncle Grahame pointed to a tree branch : this was a he. He stood smiling vacantly, his thinning long white hair blown about as seagulls whirled around us squawking over rotting fish. Thank God the ageing child/man for whom time stopped the year the *Titanic* sunk did not get to eat the raw fish. My proffered chocolate bar prevented such a possibility and lured him back to Clarkestead with promises of others. Grandfather sat on the veranda in one of his foul moods, clenching papers.

“Oh God, Eustace gave the insurance documents to bloody Craig to fill out and file! Even Alexander the Great says we have no case and now they won’t pay a penny! Might as well have given it all to poor bloody Grahame here!” He pointed to Grahame who was eagerly running to his lead soldiers in a box on the veranda, these being brought back from Queen Victoria’s London jubilee over seventy years past.

“This family! This family! The only one worth anything is in Vietnam and always will be!”

As if to illustrate his point we could see the convicts walking from the bus at the junction and one was familiar. From radio news we knew that they would be used for the massive clean-up, snake and rodent catching (fleeing from the blaze, reptiles found buildings the best refuge) and dousing spot fires. Fortuitously Grandfather was not looking the right way when I excused myself and moved fast.

“Byron perhaps we could meet over the next few days.”

“That would be great, but stay cagey.”

“Cagey?”

“An Americanism. Stay cautious, watchful, quiet. Could you bring me some fresh oranges? Or juice? My body craves it. Don’t feel good Cora honey, my body loves this light. Don’t get much in solitary.”

He looked like some emaciated zombie with a mind on another planet, as if they had electrocuted him and thrown him in a dark cell for a month. His eyes wandered around almost unfocused; his taut skin from was pitted with small slashes.

“They won’t destroy me,” He whispered with almost mad intensity, the eyes that once were attractively, intensely, cheery bright blue now seemed merely intensely, paranoid, yet even so, washed out. “They won’t destroy me! They won’t!”

*But they already have.*

He shouted it again this time and the guard woke up and came over. I was expecting a leering bully making threats, but he was just a sad-faced, quietly spoken, weary man who looked even wearier as he saw Byron.

“Miss, you had best leave him with us.” He sighed as he spoke quite calmly to Byron. “Byron please board the bus without trouble.”

“You are trying to kill me with spider bites. There is no other way it could have got in the bread.”

“The huntsman species is not poisonous Byron. We eradicated the nest.”

“Dunbar, Dunbar.” Byron was shaking his head vigorously. “You made him disappear, you will make me disappear me to.”

“Dunbar is a fictional character Byron.”

“So am I, so are you. Everyone is a figment of somebody else’s imagination.”

The guard just stood there staring; so did I. This was not the humorous Byron who was once in competition with himself to say outrageous and outlandish things; he apparently really believed this.

“Come along son, you might get out soon if you behave.”

He barked several times before obeying instructions without a backward glance as the guard advised me.

“Miss you had best leave him with us.”

*Miss you had best leave him with us.*

Those words reverberated in my skull with more meanings than the guard may have intended. Looking at Grahame on the veranda giggling as he played with his soldiers underlined this sensible advice. He once had a wife, Katie Dean, who paid a high price for living as a nursing wife to someone with much of their brain gone, someone who never grew up. Eventually she gave up and left. Old Marsha Chapman was pretty much the same, married to a man preserved in 1916 by oil the way Palaeolithic flies are preserved in amber. Old Mrs Douglas Fisher had been another time warper, lost in love. Three women in the district like that was enough, what good would it do to make it a quartet? Besides more good could be done elsewhere.

“Grandfather, how soon could I get to India to help Young Ross?”

“Start as soon as this emergency ends if you like.”

\*

Lynda Taun Fisher                      McPherson's Surgery 9<sup>th</sup> November 1968  
 He should not have worked so hard in the bushfire emergency. The funeral went exactly as expected. A massive turnout that crowded out Saint Paul's, the similar elegies that person after person felt compelled to repeat and the formal condolences that they felt compelled to give me with faces that conveyed no real sympathy. Sixty years in Australia and I was still the outsider. At home the aroma of his pipe smoke was still detectable; his journals still by the armchair and the house was too still and now always would be. Alex would probably pay formally correct visits after returning from the latest Clarke mess, this one in India.

\*

Alexander McPherson    Eloura Park War Memorial 11<sup>th</sup> November 1968

Today was the fiftieth anniversary and it made everybody gathered around the memorial at eleven wonder. No war to end war and see a world of peace and democracy really, as we had been told fifty years past. The three back from Vietnam, the two who were going and the two engraved on the memorial below the Korean and Malayan service names made that clear.

The films and books and newspaper stories and even more realistically, the refugees from Communism all made it clear we were a world on the verge of world war, and had been since Churchill's iron curtain speech a generation past and so many of those media fictions and real reports made it clear that the next war, not the 1914-1918 mess would be “the war to end all wars” – but in a very different way to what president Woodrow Wilson and our generation expected. Despite their outlandishness, atrocious taste and tendency to ignore Red brutality, the peace marchers had a point, as Karl affirmed in our last conversation.

Ross was there as always, so were the always dwindling band. The three of us who had been at Gallipoli Landing Day stood together. Of those returned Max, Bach, and Caufield, were all dead and Cyril Abaya, had long vanished into Melbourne's suburbs. Jan was here for the much needed respectability it conferred. With Keddy it was the same, For Craig Clarke and Moon it was and always would be an unsuccessful attempt for the same. Even in a wheelchair now Marsha Chapman was here because it was at the core of her religion, church events were a pallid and peripheral aspect of her Christianity. For Jack Caufield it meant votes. My brother Karl was not here now hard to adjust to lives lived so closely together, but Lynda was here as part of their professional responsibilities connected with the veteran's hospital. Rosalind, Murie and Eustace were here out of loyalty to Ross and I – well I was there and could still stand tall. Keith could not do that anymore, so Cora took photos and notes, she would make a fine journalist. Ross had something up his sleeve and sure enough he came over.

“Alex, this one involves travel, there's a hum dinger of a task ahead for you.”

*I just bet.*

“It is about my brother” Cora was all urgency and started to tell me of his situation. It was fortunate he had been named Ross.

“We have to prove that he was set up and that the confession was falsely obtained, both will be at best extremely difficult to prove.”

“Which is why we will use you.”

“First we must get him out of jail on appeal before we make allegations against the police and drug dealers; if we don't they will be competing to put a knife in his back within days. Second we must have the names of the officers involved and have them under arrest or

investigation before we make claims, that evidence will give us credibility....”

Ross slapped me on the shoulder and then clenched, smiling.

“No need for third and fourth. Alexander the Great will conquer the Indians, just as he did in history.”

*But he did not. His reputation fell apart there*

Horace was the only one in the Ahmegodheho office to be smiling and that quickly turned to puzzlement as he looked at our faces. Ross had instructed me what to say to his son verbatim while he stared at him with revulsion. Cora was learning to be wary.

“Horace you are not here to receive any type of award but merely to answer questions. As you can see Inspector MacKinnon is here to take your statement and it is possible that if you lie you may be jailed for perjury. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but what is this about?”

“Two questions, first where are Rima and Gerry?”

“Haven’t a clue. I have avoided them like the plague since the divorce.”

*True.*

“Second, do you know anything about their involvement in drugs?”

“When people leave the party, they no longer exist for party members. We do not talk of them, listen to words about them, anything, they are non-persons.”

He was telling the truth and knew nothing. We asked Horace junior in and this would be a different situation. After being in courts since Edward VII reigned I knew a slime with a secret when I saw one. When asked the same two questions and got similar answers, but he was lying and with the smirk, folded arms and glittery eyes he wanted us to know it.

“You won’t find any drugs on me or in my house, car or workplace. I am not that stupid.”

“Does it worry you that an innocent boy is in hell?”

“Not at all, assuming that what you say is true. And a court put him there, not me – and they put him there on his confession and on evidence. I suppose big money will get him out.”

He gave us all a meaningful glare. I motioned to the door and waited.

“Obviously he knows and we need detectives on him to find his involvement and to find them. I want to work the Australian and English angles before going to India. We need a legal expert to check the transcript for any possible grounds of appeal in Indian law that are not evident to me. His father assures me that his bribes are keeping the boy alive and he will stay in India until we take over.”

\*

Horace Clarke

Balmain 19<sup>th</sup> November 1968

They are on to you and me but have nothing concrete yet. Old Bugger Ross uses big money for detectives and lawyers here, in India and in England. Get citizenship to make extradition hard, leave Montreal as they have picked up a rumour.

\*

Rima Clarke

Eagle Creek Saskatchewan Canada 30<sup>th</sup> March 1969

This might be the fourth week in spring but nobody would ever pick it. The snow does not have this pure white look, coal dust from Gerry’s trips blows off, making it this horrid grey for hundreds of yards. The few trees planted to break up the horrible unending flatness that stretches to infinity are bare and only emphasise the horrible emptiness. Painting the house in bright colours would only do the same for the white, grey and black world we live in. Gerry is finding more and more excuses to stay on

the road rather than stay here with me. The load that got us into this, plus what was left of the Sydney sale after Singh's gouging gave us enough to get here, and to set up an instant corporation that appears as the owner of this house and his truck (with a paid street dero signed up as president and owner, we being shareholders) and it leaves us little else. Excepting some citizenship roll our names appears nowhere.

*Every Day study ten demographic or geographic facts and know what the general public would know.*

*1, fries for eating chips*

*2 wood chips for chips of wood*

*3 fall for autumn*

*4 last of for final*

*5 Ottawa is the capital*

*6 Newfoundland was a separate part of the Commonwealth until twenty years ago.*

*7 Labrador is a geographic name for that part of Newfoundland that is on the mainland*

*8 Prince Edward Island has the warmest beach water before Florida*

*9 Montreal is the world's second- largest French speaking city*

*10 Nobody would ever pick it for concealed or not obvious*

After housework this is what must be done and what we do together when he comes home sober, becoming Canadian so nobody will suspect. Yet in the one hundred days we have been here not one person has ventured onto the dirt road that leads here from another dirt road that eventually joins a very uncrowded highway that stretches across the endless vastness of Canada's plains. The only consolation is that Singh, my father-in-law, and his human bloodhound Alexander and for that matter my son, will never find us.



Cora Druetti

Bombay Airport 8th April 1969

It was easy to see that he did not like Bombay and given the view from the plane window, it was hard to blame him. A high barbed wire fence was perhaps an Olympic pool's length from the 707's tail and beyond that were the cramped, dirty, wickerwork shanties going on for some massive distance until they faded into the polluted haze and the modern high rises on the horizon.

Alexander the Great. Alexander McPherson QC. Although he had never been to England for more than a holiday, he seemed to epitomise the English gentleman as he sat there in his navy-blue pinstriped Saville Row suit with the pearl grey waistcoat, Rolex, deep red cravat and impeccable haircut. Time had not made his skin flabby or given him weight, if anything his skin and waistline were tauter; making him seem more like a rapier in his courtroom exchanges, when he would move around like a dancer or a duellist. He would be as effective in Ross's courtroom as anybody could be. What was his personal life like, if it existed? Somebody who could sit from Sydney to Singapore reading legal documents and then turn to *Bleak House* for relaxation until we reached Bombay just might not have a personal life.

When I was twelve and visiting Ahmegodheho, my parents were talking on how he was like this and always had been. My grandmother and Alison were exchanging knowing glances and smirks.

“Oh everybody has a private life and the more private it is the less the public would like it.”

That was all they would say and it left me wondering – homosexuality? A hidden mistress? Bigamy? A valuable secret stamp collection gained from gypping little boys and elderly maiden aunts? More likely he was an updated version of the character in Oscar Wilde's story 'The Sphinx Without a Secret.'

Whatever, the world did not worry him: if only it did not worry my father. Although Alexander had about thirty years on my father, it was my father who looked older. I did not recognise him at first. Initially my scanning glance passed over him among those waiting in the airport lounge, then because something familiar registered it returned to him. My father always had black hair cut neatly; this man had long white straggly hair. My father never had extra body fat; this man was extremely paunchy. Always a sartorial dresser, this man seemed unaware of the dirty shirt tails hanging out, his apparently unshaven face or his bewildered weary look. Recognition came to his face and pity. He shook hands.

“It would be better for you both to leave. He is not my son any more. Think of Young Ross as dead, for soon he will be. They will just fleece you. It would be best to return to the farm in Sienna, I still might inherit, my other job has gone while I tried to save him here.”

\*

Alexander McPherson Chae Court Maharashtra Province 30<sup>th</sup> May 1969

“All rise!”

From their faces it was obvious how it would go.

“After careful consideration the court has rejected the defendant’s appeal and upholds the original verdict and sentence for the following reasons.

First, although the mysterious disappearance of Ross Clarke’s travelling companions and the arrest in Sydney of their son on drug travelling charges indeed provides good cause for suspicion of involvement in this case, for investigators this is not yet proof of anything in a court of law.

Second, no credible evidence exists that the defendant’s confession was coerced, that evidence was planted or that his sentence was draconian

or unjustified. He is clearly a very different type of person to one who would supposedly be so naïve as to believe that jail was some type of holiday camp where drug dealers loll about and read swami's philosophies and play with monkeys, as his lawyer insists."

*Indeed.*

"Third The court unanimously agrees that the defendant has ignored our warnings and committed three acts of contempt of court and sentences the defendant to a further thirty days imprisonment for each offence, these not being concurrent."

He was that bane of the legal profession, the client who was his own worst enemy. He would sit there staring at the judges with a fixed sneer, and folded arms and whatever he said was defiant, cynical and smug and asking for trouble. It was also obvious to everyone what jail had made him and what he might have become anyway, but that would not impress judges. Seeing what he was becoming, Cora wept on one occasion, and after that just stared fixedly at the floor. Old Conrad, (a former partner in the ill fated Eloura Airlines) knowing that his pension from Ross depended on his keeping this grandson alive, was even more glum and embarrassed and shook his head as he spoke.

"In forty-eight years residence here not even the worst of England's sahibs and memsahibs I ever saw was this arrogant, this hostile, this...lacking in manners. We will be lucky to get away with only that increase in sentence."

We were all relieved when it was over. On the plane back when the air hostess asked Cora what she would like she said 'home.' We could agree on that.

\*

Elizabeth MacKinnon Rosewood Retirement Home Eloura 1<sup>st</sup> July 1969

Ross pays for this but I asked him not to come and see me this way.

Best not to see what he has become either. My friends and family are all dead, the world has gone mad, all these young nurses try to boss me around, my eyesight goes and my heart splutters on like my old ford motor that wouldn't quite die... better that it would. There is no point in continuing in this antiseptic white world that hums to the dull roar of the traffic. Better to have died in style on the day Armhegodheho burned.

\*

Cora Druetti

Eloura News Offices 15th July 1969

Keith said he was training to me to be a journalist, but he was really training me to be an editor and we both knew why. He had turned eighty in the weeks we had been in India and his failing eyesight, shakes and memory had all deteriorated even in that short period. A year ago he was as sprightly and as shrewd and sharp as ever, but now, he had some good days, like now.

“Cora your moon landing coverage reads well as far as it goes, but does it go far enough?”

My only story so far was just a picture of all of Eloura's school kids in the assembly hall, rehearsing for their watching on four screens soon.

“Everybody gets the basic facts repeatedly; I don't know what to tell people.”

“Then ask them for what they think, always do that when in doubt. They love being asked their opinion. If they are in doubt give a leading question - such as?”

“Should it be the world's first priority right now? Is the cost justified?”

He nodded smiling and he was right. I put together a double pager with their faces, identifying captions and summarised comments. Circulation reached its zenith since publication began in 1853. I tried the same format after all the publicity about the Woodstock musical festival

and it was successful, but third time unlucky: revisiting the great bush fires was a mistake.

“No matter what, they hate my grandfather.”

“Yes.” He sighed. “And they always will.”

“But he brought in paid fire-fighters and then paid volunteers. They say he watched Moon’s men burn to death and did nothing and then abandoned Eloura to save Clarkestead, but those saying it were in the traffic jam that blocked us trying-”

“Your pictures of the fire and the list of the fourteen who died would have been enough. It is best not to mention your grandfather, ever.”

“And Elizabeth?”

“The same, all those women the same, just give standard obituary coverage that I gave to Alison. The new doctor says that Elizabeth has not long, the body shows atrophying, the heartbeat stays weak and irregular....”

Poor Keith was also weakening, but also clinging on to life. When I went to Melbourne for three days to attend the massive moratorium rally he could not keep the paper functioning, and was hospitalised. Uncle Craig who was supposed to help, went on a drunk; no surprise. I visited Keith, with Lynda Taun Fisher, present, no smiles there, no surprise either.

“Get good photos?” Keith smiled in keenness.

“Had to battle to keep the camera though.”

“Police agro hey?”

“Demonstrators actually, they thought I was a spy. This was incredibly important, not even in the worst of the Depression have so many rallied against government policy, it is more than the war in Vietnam, we are chall-”

“Maybe they just wanted to nick a camera.” He paused, rolling his

tongue around his teeth as if tact was stuck there. “Can you carry on alone?”

“Radio and paper both? Yes, they won’t leave me much spare time though.”

“Journalists seldom have it. House fires at three in the morning, run arounds that chew up the time and suddenly the deadline looms hey... A safe bet that you think of getting Byron onto it – best you don’t.”

He sighed again while the Chinese dragon queen moved in. I deliberately disappointed her by moving out before she could give me orders. She sneered, but as she sneered she started what looked like a sneeze that would not come and grasped a bedstead. Her lungs were heaving and her mouth was biting then it passed. After a few breaths she was outwardly calm.

“Please leave.” She managed those two words.

*Death has laid its hand on you, nasty old lady. Soon it will have you in its grasp and that is why you are making our lives a misery.*

A week later she paid me back, both for what I had seen and clearly thought: when I turned up and his bed was empty. She was waiting motionless and waiting for me to ask and knowing I had no immediate choice. She could be as bitchy as she liked and say anything, she was retiring in a month.

“Don’t know, don’t care. I’ve been busy inspecting and installing the new scanners and coma equipment. See patient records”

I thought then that he was dead and that this nasty woman was making it into a game. “Can’t see sense in trying to live forever myself, often coma patients are not a pretty sight, probably suffering and after a few days, it is extremely rare for them to recover and it must have cost him a fortune, or rather another one.”

I just walked out and contacted Grandmother.

“No, Keith has not died, but he has left the hospital. Ross may be on the coast, visiting Keith and helping him move in. As a retirement present Ross bought Keith a little beach house down near Ocean Ridge.”

Keith did not have the phone on. I found the place eventually, fine views from a veranda facing the sea on a headland, but an awkward walk down to the cove, and a long one to town and it was something less than a villa, being in length and width about four times a man's height in any direction, except up. Outside the walls of thick ugly unpainted planks merged into a rust-dotted corrugated iron roof, water tank and garage and a sand weathered red-brick chimney. The windblown sand today was enough to make me worry about my new Volkswagen. Inside it was cosy with the fire going and 1930s furniture. The television was the newest thing, being from the past decade. Everything except the bath and outside toilet were in that one room.

“There's no need to disapprove girl, and look sad for me, the smaller it is, the easier it is to heat and move around in. He offered me a big, fancy beach house, but I'll not have that bother, this is what I want.”

“The sadness has another cause.”

\*

I came to love the visits to that ugly little cottage and amazingly, now he was not working, Keith's deterioration seemed to halt, or at least noticeable symptoms halted. Now he did not have to gallivant his mind and body over *Eloura News* his thought processes were quicker, less vague. I drove him into the new doctors for a monthly check up, and went with him to the films after lunch at Jan and Keddy's pie shop. Groceries and the new books out on cassette and record were delivered before conferring over my editing. Usually I would read, short stories and poems at first, then whole books.

After a year it hit me how our minds worked the same way, how

close we were, years of work making us closer than many a married couple and he said it.

“Ah girl, girl. You are what I dreamed of – for sixty years – and there’s the problem. All things might come to him who wait, but should we spend life waiting? And sixty years, that is an age difference that leaves only minds in unison.”

“You had a wife.”

“A more generous, brave, lively girl never came out of Ireland. She could make cats laugh and she was innocent of guilt or responsibility or caution. That innocence led to a barrier, it was always there. We never had that total unity that ease in another’s ways that marriages should have when two become one. It is more than a physical unity, it should also be a minds and personalities merging.”

I knew that he was cautioning me about Byron, who would be released soon.

\*

Byron Haast

Goulburn Jail 4<sup>th</sup> November 1971

My happy day was here and they gave me the warning talk with the same stuck-up enthusiasm that they gave the clothes and possessions. Nobody was at the gate. There were enough bucks to get me to Eloura and there my honey was, absorbed in preparing the type for the newspaper. I knocked on the glass smiling and she looked up without surprise or a smile. No frown either, nothing.

“Forgot my big day?”

“No.”

“Not particularly fond of Goulburn Jail?”

“Not particularly.” She just stared, no smile. “There’s a salad roll, lemonade and fruit left for you over there. I’ve eaten.” She pointed to her desk. “Now I have a schedule to meet. If you wish to be useful empty the



garbage and set up the paper for the printer. If you don't, see me Sunday when I have time."

Then she ignored me totally until after finishing near to one in the morning.

"Byron I am very tired and with a five o' clock start, I will sleep alone on the settee here. Please turn out the lights when you go."

"But where the hell will I sleep at one in the morning?"

She just sighed, got up and tossed a rolled up blow up mattress my way. Instead, I stayed at the new all night road house on the highway a mile from town. I thought of hitching a lift out with a truck-driver, but they were looking at me as if I was Dracula prowling in the darkness and the store help likewise, hell. Maybe with the parole officer here, overseeing my new employment and that being under Grandfather God, leaving might not be so wise. They keep us on leashes, but even that is one better than being on the inside and I am not going back, no matter what comes. I've got a razor wrapped in foil in me sole. Razor in my soul, get it?

That drunken old bastard Craig found me in the road house quarter after six and even then smelt of alcohol.

"Got work for you, Choices. If you ride you can herd cattle, tend to them, learn to rope and brand, and tend fences, with your American ways picked up so quick, you can pick all this. There's orchids to pick, bales to load, the picture show, emporium and Clarkestead and the newspaper offices to sweep, oh there's lots of ways to earn a living here."

He leered, and those icy blue eyes with everything faded out of them but gutless malevolence just held my stare. I wondered if he was like his father. He was the main problem so far. It was great to be out in the open air and for big bucks; whatever else he was Grandfather God was no scrooge, paying better than award wages and as much overtime as

wanted. Money is power and I was piling it up. Cora stayed pretty much the same as the weeks passed. Not hostile, not friendly. Something was up when the mail and visits faded out a couple of years back. There did not seem to be anybody else; she spent more time with that old Irish geezer in the loser's shack on the coast than with anybody else. One late print night weeks after I was back she went to her settee to sleep and I told her she would be more comfortable, sharing mine.

“As you wish.” Her voice was toneless, even so, amazingly she complied, undressed and turned her back, saying nothing until it was over.

“Got used to doing it that way in jail did you?”

“Never did it in jail. The one who tried got a broken arm. After that they left me alone.”

“Byron after treating me like a mattress with skin you go into flattery.”

“You are the one who turned your back to me. You wanted it this way.”

“Preferable to your lecherous leering face and what is enjoyable about ninety seconds of being an object, not a person?”

She began to weep and while holding her, kissing her shoulder, I began more slowly and lasted longer, then held her, feeling better. After a few hours we coupled again and this time it was maybe hours before I ejaculated and she was right sort of, like the ads say about a certain Aussie beer brand, the longer it lasts, the better it gets. After that night I always held her that same way and that was sweet. She never initiated any more, but when I wanted she gave, but there was no passion any more, not in bed, not out. I wanted some passion and got it off a surfer chick on the long weekend in January when the parole office was shut and the beach was hot. Same chick same thing in the Easter break. Cora

knew judging by her face but never said anything. Sometimes I got to feeling like an old pair of shoes she kept because they were comfortable. I said that to her trying to work things out. She sighed first.

“How can anybody enthuse over an egocentric who keeps changing?”

“What?”

“Within six years you have gone from posh English rebel to hippy idealist to American loner, to drugged out layabout to paranoiac jailbird to transplanted American cowboy being a jackeroo. How can anyone know you?”

“I always wanted to be an American, to go there and live there...”

“Yes I know – and why you really came back. Byron Haast is not the rarest name in the world. Your loose boasting of living near Oxford got back to the FBI. I saw your name on a document on your parole officer’s desk.”

“You snitched to her?”

“I went in on a request and to say how well you were doing. The request for information was on her desk. Murder Byron? Heroin running?”

“Maybe we had better run.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Maybe I should.”

\*

Helen Chapman

Hawk’s Nest 24<sup>th</sup> September 1972

For decades we had hungered for Evelyn to be rich, popular and appreciated, but after the decades long drought all three had combined to overwhelm in a tidal wave that was begun by that 1967 retrospective. In itself it might have been barely noticed, but that global hippie thing that was supposed to open up bold new worlds also fuelled nostalgia for past

bohemians, and Evelyn was a living fossil from the longed for Edwardian garden party world and the roaring twenties, after that it was fossil time or rather variations on sleeping beauty, woken up by the kiss of public adoration at the age of eighty-three. We all thought it would soon fade, but no, he answered a public need, both as celebrity and producer. Sometimes it was so very painful to see what was happening to him.

Soon I found myself hungering for our moments of quiet together, and his wry, misanthropic humour, the cynicism about money, religion, politics, the media, war and everything else. Instead what was once latent in him became predominant, the selfishness and the egotism of the rebel willing to defy the world, now became the pomposity and monstrous conceit of the world's aged darling, an oracle issuing edicts on matters he knew little if anything about; the Vietnam War, performance art, zero population growth, astrology, the upcoming elections, free love... whatever some eager young student questioned him on he would act the sage with his cheerfully enunciated homilies. He was even banal about his own work, unable to sufficiently translate into words his motives, feelings and techniques.

It started innocently enough, he being obliging to the reporters, and they fed his vanity, coaxing him in his role as the last Pre-Raphaelite artist and sage to a foolish world. Soon the thesis writers, the autograph hunters, the tourists with their endless clicking cameras came and were so incessant that he opened the house for tours, "only two days a week" but that only seemed to increase the swarms. By early last year he was so far gone in his vanity that he compared what he did with paint to what Shakespeare did with ink and saying it before film cameras.

He was so smug and with making many similar statements like that the numbers who started out with adoring smiles turning to sneers became more common and many began to see why I would be always

sitting in the corner when a woman arrived for the interview. Cora warned me that he was on the cusp of his popularity and already those same journalists who had built him up were scouting around to see if the public were a wake up or just bored and if they saw enough signs, they would tear him down with exposés. Even so, there were the retrospectives – in Paris, London, New York and Los Angeles. My hatred of airports equalled my feelings for journalists and I would give away all he had earned for a week at Hawk's Nest before the war, or failing that an end to my incessant body aches, liver, kidneys and bones. He recently announced that 'as much as she loved Europe he absolutely must let Sydney Australia be the site of the first retrospective for his ninetieth birthday celebrations, no other choice was even possible for such a great event.' That was two years off, a long time with his health the way it was.

When Cora, Alex, Jan, Keddy and Murie (his true friends) and I tried to talk to him about this all we got was the same silly grin Max used to give after he returned from the Great War, at the end they were little different.

The end came quite suddenly one night. We were at a party and he murmured that we should take the beautiful spring air on the terrace and there he sat, panting a little, but smiling gamely, watching the dancers move to 'Daydream Believer.'

"There are four teenage girls there..." He pointed weakly "The ones with their faces painted in psychedelics singing the song in that lilting way, so young, so innocent. Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?"

Then they light went out of his eyes.

\*

Alexander McPherson

Eloura Offices 29<sup>th</sup> September 1972

He was like a brother. Some of my earliest memories were of him

and so it was obvious what the will would be like. Poor Helen.

“So the house, contents and all art are bequeathed to the people of Australia in a museum and an art gallery. You get the remainder of his cash.”

“Over half a million dollars.” It did not remove her well-justified bitterness.

“He never even asked, it was our home for sixty-two years.”

“Perhaps this way you will have peace and quiet, away from-”

“Yes, affluent obscurity. Would you know of any beach houses for sale, nothing that needs work? You do also do real estate conveyancing don't you? My knees are not up to much housework but my ears and eyes are still fairly good for listening and reading and my hands, most important, for I want to do landscapes, in watercolour.”

\*

Cora Druetti

Eloura News Offices 25th January 1973

They died four months after Evelyn and within a month of each other, worn down by a long winter with no spring in sight and flu around. I gave Keddy a week after the funeral before interviewing for the tribute article. Keddy seemed to prefer talking to staring at nothing over the veranda.

“Lynda was born and raised in remote western China?”

“Yes, her race were a subject people; she never considered herself Chinese. When she was twelve she was sold, common for girls in large families and she was extremely lucky to be bought by Christian traders, who returned to Brisbane and trained her as a nurse. They met during their internee-ships.”

“And her career of sixty years-”

She answered the phone, speaking in a low voice and approaching us with a sadder face than when I arrived and stunned. I knew.

“It is Keith?”

She nodded.

Grandfather did not even wait for the funeral. His deathbed was at least cold, it held the shape his body made. We had the conversation cum dismissal in his hut, within sight of his deathbed. Clumsily Grandfather God knocked over Keith’s telescope as he pulled a chair to and didn’t even care. With his shakes, I often had to adjust it for Keith; how he loved scanning the sea.

“Got no time for recollections girl, got to get down to the real world.”

*Girl? At twenty-two years old? “Real world?” That always means dirty deal.*

“That means business.”

“Exactly. The paper runs at a loss. It only stayed with me this long to keep Keith happy. Big media conglomerates have been buying up small country papers, they save on syndicated columns and syndicated chain store ads. We can’t compete...”

“All true, but there is more to it...”

“Indeed there is. You might want Eloura to know about the outside world, but does Eloura want to know? They don’t want your opinions. This is a blue-ribbon conservative electorate and you run stories like “It’s time! Labor is coming!”

“And they did!”

“That’s obvious, but we don’t need my paper to look like their banner in the front line of the charge and that is another thing, you ignore the good question that they write in so often – who on earth is going to pay for all their big spending promises at a time when unemployment zooms up and exports stall?”

“You don’t look puzzled by that question.”

“I don’t like sassy smartness in women.”

*Nor anything else in us except our sex organs and our cooking.*

“You are going to tell me that the rich will pay. This one won’t. The less I own the better under governments like this one. Lucky there was a boom to cover what we lost in that fire four years past. No, sell the paper, pay off all debts, and it goes into more blue-chip Swiss bonds and shares. If the Communists and the welfare state types ever take over the globe – and after this Vietnam mess the globe might go red, well if it does Switzerland will be the last to go. Alessandra got that right. Craig is going on the dole, like half the bloody country. He can take the lease on this place, costs more than he is worth. Your brother will stay in India when he’s out and work for old Conrad, he’ll be happy to be a remittance man. I’ll retire the Mcphee's, they want Townsville’s beaches and sun, so you can have their job, teaching you how to run the film projector, accounts, sweeping...”

“You are keeping the picture show, but closing the paper?”

“Deathbed promise to Max, he loved the place.”

“Colour television is being tested and-”

“It will be the deathbed of the picture shows. Yes I’ve heard that one before with the coming of television. Well the new allowances for Sunday shows will help and just this week we have weekday rentals for bingo, classical music and the amateur players both want to rent for practice.”

“That is obviously such a good idea that I wonder why failing cinemas all over Australia have not done the same thing. Monopoly control? Is it legal?”

That was the worst possible question. He went red, clenched his fists and swore obscenities at the modern world, which I apparently embodied. Then he lost it totally.



“Brionny! When will we see the work done and the money come in? Then we can relax in happiness! An-”

Then he paused and a sad but calming look came over him as he stared seawards, but not at anything out there.

“Get Alexander to check the legalities. Keep the picture show going somehow. Have Elena run the front office and enquiries. People like her. I’ll try to keep the radio station going, but everybody advises me to sell it. Might have to. I’ll get you severance pay for the paper and the takeover people want to employ you for three months while they fit in.”

“Training my replacement?”

“Not good, but you will get thousands. If you wish to leave that is understood, people should not hate us, but they do, but at least I fit in here. Byron doesn't and it is worth saying goodbye to the missing two thousand from the petty cash to see the last of him. Craig says you were in on it, I pray not.”

\*

Alexander McPherson

McPherson’s Offices 18<sup>TH</sup> July 1973

“Are you sure of this?”

Sad-faced Cora nodded and stared at the floor.

“Nobody believes you really stole the money. Travel expenses are a legitimate claim and you filled out the paperwork correctly.”

“Legal and ethical are not the same.”

“No, even so Ross will probably be glad to see the last of Byron at the cost of two thousand in travel expenses, the trouble being Melbourne cannot be far away enough.”

“That is where I am going.”

*Thank God I was a wake up and never became a slave to love. No that is a lie I was and still am.*

She looked around the room for something to say. I spoke.

“Accountants say all legal requirements for the takeover are assured.”

“Any news of Young Ross? Grandfather refuses to discuss him and referred me to you.”

“He has been paroled. While Conrad lives he passes on the cheques to Young Ross on condition that he stay in India under Conrad’s surveillance. If Conrad dies or becomes unable to carry out his duties I do. He retrained as a journalist of sorts.”

It was obvious that neither of us wanted to discuss Young Ross any further.

“So you are flying off to visit your father?”

“A few months around Europe while I have this money; then there are matters to discuss with Byron’s parents, the problems may be solvable. He has to dry out in a clinic: if he cannot do that he cannot be part of my life. He has until Easter.”

“May I advise you?”

“Considering your reputation, any free advice you give will be very carefully considered.”

“Focus on your career. In Melbourne there will be a larger audience for your tastes. Personally, much of your music and writings appealed, to me if not to others.”

“If community radio does take off in Melbourne ,perhaps I can be a major part.”

“But how will you make a living from that?”

She seemed puzzled by the question and just shrugged her shoulders. She had no idea how much trouble she was heading for.

\*

Cora Druetti

Kingsford Smith Airport 18<sup>th</sup> March 1974

Nobody was here for me and that was fine. All that was needed was

a clean, quiet hotel room for a day or two before more travel, a bus trip to Melbourne, revisiting Eloura would be unwise as Ross was away Alexander said. Maybe with a stay at Conjola the quiet would restore me. Zinada would not have the phone on surely, but directory assistance connected and I was welcome but something was wrong. The bus stopped at the turn off and it was pleasant to walk on a sunny day on a clear track through gum trees, wattle and wrath and hear the birds, not people.

They were sitting on the veranda, Zinada knitting in a rocker, Helen Chapman on a visit, was now using canes and smiled to see me. After pleasantries Helen asked the question that I knew would come and did not want.

“How was Europe?”

“Not what I wanted at all. The energy crisis meant being stuck in a expensive part of Holland and every year in Italy men prove how big and tough they are by blasting at sparrows with shotguns. They shoot each other at around eight hundred annual casualties and they put so much lead in the trees that the forests are dying. So much for pleasant forest walks.”

“And your father?”

“He died before my arrival, he had been in hospital for months. They did not tell me but kept his funeral bills for my arrival. That cost and the energy crisis made big holes in my budget.”

“Old Ross, is in America, had a sudden yearning for Brionny and seeks her.”

\*

Ross Clarke

Oscasa Farm West Virginia 14<sup>th</sup> April 1974

She had chosen one of the most beautiful places on earth, a river dominated valley in the tree filled Blue Ridge Mountains “that just radiated spring” as the woman running the petrol station who gave me directions said. Brionny must have built soon after arriving, for her

weatherboard (what the Americans called clap board) farm had the look of a place built in the 1930s style. A hostile man was swinging on the veranda, what they call a porch, sucking on his pipe and watching me.

“Don’t want to sell the place, don’t buy from strangers, if it’s litigation see my lawyer, if its directions I won’t rob Mrs Calley out of a map sale. That about covers it.”

“You are Brionny’s husband?”

“Son.”

“Could I speak with her?”

His face softened, but in a way that set my heart beating.

“Afraid not.” He paused to let something sink in. “She died ten weeks past, right on this porch. Wouldn’t go to hospital, said it wouldn’t make much difference. Went the way she wanted to, watching this view at sunrise, listening to a favourite Mozart tune of hers.”

I could only nod and stay steady on my feet. He was assessing.

“She never said much about the past before she came here. Some uni fella attached to my sister an’ all mixed heavily into politics turned up for Sundy dinner. Tried to talk about Ireland back when their troubles were on – not for long. Threw a tureen of hot potatoes an’ carrots at him an’ said not to waste one more minute of her time on that rubbish. Liked horses, Pa, a good meal, Mozart, this farm and us, not much else.”

“She mentioned me?”

“Never got your name.”

“Ross Clarke.”

He scanned through his memories, and something came to him.

“Breakfast table talk went round to people not getting’ credit for achievement. Said she didn’t get it for bein’ first woman to fly from London to Bombay, three years before Mrs Simon Hoare made the record books, but she said lots of long stops in between meant it wasn’t really a

record setter. When I asked why all the stops she screamed “Bloody Ross! Bloody Yassir and those Clarkes and their airline!” Then her face twisted up and I knew it was best to pack my school bags. That's it.”

I looked across the river and lands we should have owned and given to the daughter that no money and forty years could find, the view I should have seen and the son we should have had who would keep this horrible modern world at bay.

“There is nothing for you here fella.”

\*

Cora Druetti

Lake Conjola 28<sup>th</sup> May 1974

Leaving Day was here, and my rucksack was ready. For a time it had been good, Zinada enjoyed my company and I, being young and eager to do chopping, weeding and anything else that got endless European galleries, noise and worries and the Druettis out of my head was useful to her. Zinada was somewhere in her seventies and slowing. Even so I did not fit in and she knew it and to my amazement, I longed for Byron, for the vitality of youth and after a month's respite, the noise and bustle of the city. Nice as she was, Zinada was so very very *old*.

There were other reasons: she was failing, even in the short time I was there the differences were becoming noticeable and her mind was slipping. I did not want to see the process worsen – again. Byron had a valid point about Eloura's old people. It had been essentially the same with Aunt Helen, now at Ocean Ridge.

“Cora you do know don't you, that I cannot leave you anything.”

“Of course.”

“We enjoy your company, but...” Her mind trailed off as it often did now, but then it came back. “Finally peace at last these last few years, to forget about violence and wars and politics and when I was young. Even Ross, well, better not to see him much because he reminds...”

A suffering look came over her face and she struggled to shake off something.

So here I was, at the bus stop, heading for a life with Byron, for better or for worse, and why chose for worse? Why suspect the worse on a beautiful spring day when the air was so invigorating? He looked well and happy in the photos he sent and the photocopy of his final report was strongly positive, clearing him and everybody deserves a second chance, especially when they work for it and the great hippie dream of a freer happy world had not totally succeeded, but we had progressed and a new world was emerging and we would be in it – as a married couple..

\*

Book Ten

Heirs

January  
1984

Cora Druetti

Melbourne 2nd January 1984

Where did it all go so wrong? Or was there only one point where it did?

On this first Monday of Orwell's year I walked through the usual street rubbish thinking of the song about hating Mondays. The office as usual opened at five thirty, with the first cleaner. That habit got me out at two thirty, so there was a little more time to myself, escaping the degradation of working with my brother-in-law Fred. He was on the glass floor above me and every other staff person. The studio rehearsal rooms and archives were a floor down and only the printing presses, collating rooms and dispatch areas in the basement escaped his gaze through the walls of glass.

Through the glass Fred spent much of his time smugly watching us and would bark out his orders to not daydream or to work harder or not to forget the deadline and he would do that as if the place would fall apart without him. Reality was the opposite: two years back when he was off making American contacts everything went much more smoothly. He was initially amazed that we could function, then shaken and went into tirades about trivialities to show he was essential and if you wanted to keep your job you agreed that yes, we should have glass ash trays in the foyer for the guest's cigarettes rather than plastic and he solemnly told us that it was his eye for detail that was a major factor in becoming the boss. On this year's jaunt he phoned back every day.

Fred had 'everything under control' to quote his favourite phrase. He then went into his rodomontade routine about the famous pop stars he had met in America and how he was changing the pop/rock world. Amongst those songs we were not allowed to play was one about meeting the new boss who is the same as the old boss. While essentially true a few things had changed. He loved to call applicants who turned up in white shirts



and short haircuts squares and sit there laughing; because we were a rock/pop magazine, long hair on males, jeans and t-shirts were de rigueur.

He did have the ability to know when to ease his manipulating pressure and plaster a smile across his face and call out in self-parodying tones 'Hubba Hubba!' or 'Now hear this! It's nineteen eighty-four next week and this is Big Brother speaking!' Indeed it was, but while the authoritarianism was Orwellian, the pleasure rewards were from Huxley's *Brave New World*. After incalculating his control through fear, he eased resentments (or thought he did) by making the process seem a parody. If he ever went too far so that he was losing or threatened he would start with "only joking" before going into psychoanalysis as emasculation.

This technique went a little further when he would say he was ordering pizza for everybody for lunch, it was free beer at the pub or everybody from the cleaner to my sister Elena got some type of lottery ticket. This was also surveillance for control of a most bizarre kind. The disaffected nicknamed his flunkies as 'the hearty pizza eaters gang.' Fred would watch the tables with that smug face and foxy eyes seeking out the absent, the sullen, those going along expressionless and those who would survive, the servile smilers. His status went up when the last cleaner won a lottery gift and went down when she said what she thought of him and this hell hole and he threatened to sue; not that he needed the money.

To give the devil his due he and Elena started six years ago as special advisors to our collective Melbourne community radio station which put out a single programme sheet. On his last jaunt he got outlets and distribution for our magazine in Singapore, Los Angeles, London and New York. Other major cities would follow after the next Easter jaunt.

I sighed and looked at the in-box. *How to Use Your Own Personal Computer* could wait, they were not starting here until July. The overdue, half- done Joni Mitchell feature could now also wait. The cub doing the

1983's obituary overview had vanished for face crime against our lord and master. The latest celebrity deaths were incomplete. Fortunately, I could pick up fast with knowledge on Miro, for a few seconds the bright colours in the art book made me forget this colourless, dreary, glassy place. The next among the really dead did the same thing through earphones, *Good Vibrations* from The Beach boys led me to a reverie of swimming with Byron at the beach, him cheerfully making a scythe of splashed foam when I was not wet yet while that music was coming from our radio and now their drummer was dead in circumstances that suggested the betrayal of the hippie dream was not all black and white. Dennis Wilson stayed true to that and stayed still, youthful until his death at nearly forty.

I glanced again at my recent review copy of Joni Mitchell's *Dog Eat Dog*, back now from the archives. The title said much about the album's mood: this was the same woman who wrote about love and peace and getting back to the Garden of Eden in the Woodstock era. Her change in attitude could not be blamed on her, she was only describing 1980s reality, the commercialisation of the hippie dream, the lunacy of drugs and the way the world of money absorbed our causes was all evident a decade back and the change was now pervasive and egregious.

\*

Grahame Clarke

Clarkestead 8<sup>th</sup> January 1984

Why was the door locked when it was so rainy the other day? Now wheezy noises came when I breathed and they said not to worry because I would be with mother soon, but that made me worry. She beat us for nothing and her hands were gnarly like the cane was a big long finger and she had mean glinty eyes and did not love us, only Jesus and hating Aborigines and Irish people. I wanted to be with the horses or the dogs or Brionny but the dogs and horses changed every few years and Brionny,

she was gone. Elena was not nice to me any more after I found lots and lots of money when I looked in the secret place for the Christmas presents. There were no presents, just lots and lots of money. She hit me for it and her face was not nice any more when she did it.

\*

Ross Clarke

Armhegodheho 13<sup>th</sup> January 1984

They all turned up like a pack of wolves, staring at me like they could work out when I would be next from my face. Poor Grahame, nearly made it to his ninetieth birthday without growing up. The preacher said he was too innocent for this world but he lasted eighty-nine years in it and without those blows to the head who knows what he might have achieved? Maybe more than this bunch. Fat old balding Byron on his Saville Row suit, and his wife in style and brats, flying out to bury a great uncle he never liked, trying to chat to me about money and investments: scum coated with icing. Nobody could blame Cora for bring stunned by the sight of them, but when she woke up she woke up alright. Divorced after five years of marriage and financially he cleaned her out and was here for more, but more from her or more likely from me? Despite her suddenly stoney face at the sight of him Byron came over to her and all she said was:

“You do continually amaze. Sixteen years ago you gave the impression that drugs would lead you to poor Great Uncle Grahame’s state and now look at you... deputy manager of a bank and a member of the Conservative Party.”

Then she turned her back, wise, but a pity about that last sentence, she had done well with some things. The others weren’t much better than Byron. Alex, Keddy, Ruth and Murie, the last ones I could really trust were too old. Elena was shaping up well to inherit without that slimy bastard Fred. She had done very well in the entertainment world, but that

was frivolous stuff, grown up at last. With Eustace gone a new will is in order, Alex is always wise in such matters. He told me of how Byron tried to get him onside with bribes so that he would set Byron up as my heir with faked documents, which he Alex would witness.

\*

Cora Druetti

Melbourne 27<sup>th</sup> January 1984

Two weeks after Great Uncle Grahame's funeral and a few days before Grandfather's ninety-fourth the question returns.

Where did it all go so wrong? Or was there one point where it did? For me it started to rot at the core and when it seemed so right on the surface, when I got off the bus at Melbourne in 1974 on that bright, cheery, sunny autumn day and there was Byron, the new Byron.

*The latest Byron*

That warning thought came and I should have listened and not have been overwhelmed by those bright blue eyes in that overwhelmingly enthused face that was at last focused on me, accepted, but giving up on love was never easy, and for four years there was no reason to, and he gave me a second marriage proposal when I announced the pregnancy, I accepted.

We married in the grounds of Ahmegodheho and the reception was on the ground floor in what had originally been intended to be the ballroom, but it was rarely used. Using it and the coming arrival of a heir pleased Grandfather and Grandmother greatly. There was the tragedy of the miscarriage, but life went on. Something always happened: station events mainly, it took over a year before our first broadcast. We were not only into music, but interviews and reviewing books and films and political assessment, all innovative and daring concepts then. We were like one big family, Sandy turned up and lived with us. As in most families, some left home for wider fields and were seen occasionally and

there were replacements, but by late 1977 there were fewer of them and I only noticed it in retrospect, but around then the faces of the remaining founders were no longer fresh or enthused, being increasingly either expressionless, dull, weary or even vexed.

“Elvira, next time you pass Song Sounds could you buy that new Lynda Ronstadt album?” Assuming agreement was a very big mistake.

“No.” She kept on scrubbing the pans as if I had not spoken.

“But I bought two albums last week, Byron bought two and Sandy-”

“Byron, Sandy and Cora can buy all the albums they want.”

The pans were made to clatter in warning and her gaze was down on suds.

“But how can we compete with the commercial stations if-”

“If we don’t suck people dry for their every penny, for every minute of their lives?” She turned on me with blazing eyes. “Did you know that last month my daughter walked four kilometres to hand deliver a card to save forty cents postage for the station? I woke up a day before that, when I stood outside a clothes shop, feeling guilty because I wanted to buy a new dress, instead of owning two cast offs. Now I want a mortgage, gourmet cakes at morning tea and a minute of my life to myself!”

Elvira threw the plates to the floor, stormed off to her room and soon stormed out with a stuffed suitcase. Others were not so dramatic, but their numbers increased when new laws, new music, taxes and bureaucratic inspections took up more time and money. At the last meeting of the year one complainer followed another in a rehearsed process that was clearly leading to some preselected destination that Sandy, Byron and I had not been let in on.

“So clearly,” the manager started off, “The station cannot survive on donations and regular sponsors alone. To pay these big new bills, to cover insurance, legal retainers and taxes, we need another eighty thousand a

year and we need it in the bank by the last day of the year or we do not survive.” He paused and looked around. “Now does anyone have that money for us?”

People were looking at the floor or at him, expressionless.

“We either compromise on our initial idea or we kill it. Those are the hard alternatives. Now it won’t be so bad, we won’t play ads after every song and they won’t be ads for exploitative companies....”

*At first. Get people used to it a bit at a time.*

“Is this what we have struggled for, sacrificed everything for?”

Sandy was brimming with tears and her voice had anger in it.

“Is failure our best option? That's what closing down means. Now people are here who are ready to help us, people experienced with these problems and so sympathetic that they will both work without pay for the first year of a three-year contract and work two graveyard shifts and lease us their massive record collection – over a thousand albums. They will do the work of getting sponsors, do the legal work and vet the ads. With an offer like that we should at least listen to what they say.”

The manager motioned and in walked Fred and Elena...

“Daydreaming again!” It was Fred, loud and triumphantly angry. “You are not being paid to day dream, you are being paid to work!”

He gave a foxy look all around and seeing nobody here, moved closer and almost whispered.

“Maybe it is not daydreaming, maybe it is the drugs, again... Maybe the police should see the tapes.”

He sighed, the type of sigh someone may give before or after a satisfying sexual experience. Things like this had happened before - and as before, he backed off. He knew there was a line and Elena would not let him cross it: if he did his whole empire would collapse. I knew it was not about real sexual desire, just sadism. He walked off.

That initial meeting I was recalling was in October 1977. Within weeks I could see the first little signs of Byron reverting, sleeping in till ten, going from immaculately clean in his appearance to shaving and washing every third day, dwindling enthusiasm at station meetings, tolerating dope deals in the kitchen. Soon he was calling me a bitch in disagreements; he was introverting sexually as well, Wife or not I was an object again. Within a year Fred had taken over; we had as many ads as commercial stations, in fact we were one. By then Byron had joined all the other originals in resigning. Soon he was rarely awake in daylight hours. He was back on the drugs and didn't care what they were or who he got involved with. I walked into our room one night and there were two of them with him. One had year tene textbooks in her shoulder bag beside the bed. The other looked embarrassed and sullen, as if she really did not want to be there. Peer group pressure?

“Hey girls, this is Cora! My wife! If yer want a fine intro into bisexuality she's the girl! Cora which der yer want first? This is...”

He actually looked stunned trying to remember their names and puzzled as to why I walked out. The paranoia that returned with the drugs was even worse than the promiscuity and giving me a reputation for obsessive love gone masochistic. Eventually I realised my critics were right and divorce was not failing in life.

We were at an alternative fair at the Easter weekend in 1979 when it all came to a weary breaking point. It rapidly proved itself to be a place where anything could happen. At the entrance a naked man, feet a metre apart, back arched, face smiling to the clouds, was reciting Walt Whitman's poem “Song of Myself” and pointing to those parts of the male body as they were mentioned. Inside grown adults in green elfin costumes pranced around in circles holding hands with their toddlers, chanting 'learn from the child.' The solar energy stall people looked on

expressionlessly, but it was easy enough to see their alienation. Byron was carrying around a rucksack full of packets of birdseed. He started issuing them to people, the first few just took them politely if warily, staring at him as if he was a dangerous lunatic to be humoured. They were not far wrong, as the less wary proved by asking the question most of us had brains enough to think of, but not to ask.

“Why are you offering me this?”

“So you won’t get poisoned; they can put additives into everything else and poison us with white death additives and preservatives, but they can’t poison the birds because their stomachs are so delicate, its our last refuge, Birdseed! Birdseed! I eat birdseed so they cannot poison me! Ha!”

He began a long, frenzied cackle with his druggie washed out blazing blue eyes clearly showing his madness. They and others gathering round at a safe distance gave me looks of pity or contempt. I had enough: love was over. Call me selfish, say I was deluded and had not found true love because I would not be there for him, call me anything. Emotionally I was exhausted and did not care anymore, walking away back to the cars. Byron hardly went into mourning. On the way to the car there was some street theatre and a bare breasted blond with eyes as blue and mad as his (and a face equally intense) was tediously if melodramatically beating the drum for a performance about victorious revolution in Chile next year. I wondered if I had missed some important Latin American development, more likely they were on drugs.

I saw her and Byron, eyes meeting, lips curling in knowing smiles and suddenly they were chattering and soon I no longer existed and was driving off to Conjola, the mail had stopped being answered about three years before then.

Instinctively it was clear that they weren’t there any more. Two cars were in the garage and Indian children frolicked under a sprinkler.



“Our name’s Shastri, we live here.”

“Do you know of the old ladies who lived here?”

The smiles faded; I knew what that meant.

“We’ll get Mum.”

The mother’s face and sympathetic nod confirmed it.

“The Australian one got so she needed even more help than her friend could give her, spent the last couple of years under some sort of home care. Then the Russian one, Zinada? Well she had her heart set on staying here, so that Ross Clarke who owned it was trying to find a full time nurse willing to come here, but she had to be hospitalised, then...”

I nodded, and turned around, there was nothing else for it but to spend Easter in the slowly crawling coastal road traffic. On the way, by travelling only a little faster than pedestrians, I ended up sleeping in the car and the thought of doing that again vexed, besides, this was Easter Monday, nearly lunch, I might not make it in time for work even if I could drive all night. The traffic on the inland roads to Eloura, (being off the coast) was heavy but above static, so I made Ahmegodheho by ten.

Grandfather himself opened the door. I was expecting him to snarl something along the lines of 'Told you to give up with that rat bag' but he just ushered me into the kitchen and heated up leftovers and made me us tea. Something seemed wrong.

“Grandmother’s gone to bed, so keep your voice down.”

Something was wrong. He stared at me.

“What do you need?”

“A flight to Melbourne, very early tomorrow morning. I have a live show at midday and can’t reschedule-”

“Eustace flies there, leaving at eight, coincidence?”

I had enough sense not to ask the obvious question, he would tell me and did.

“So you had the brains to ditch him?”

“Yes, he phoned?”

“Visited. Day before yesterday. Wanted money for secrets kept and two first class round the world tickets, him and that new woman, Pamela Groz, gross indeed and mad and red. Eustace flew them to Sydney so they fly out tomorrow. Said he would start on the divorce before you did.” He just stared, as awkward as myself. “That twelve thousand he had in cash when he arrived, wasn’t yours was it?”

“No.” Now I was worried.

“Wasn’t his either. That blonde who looks like his twin in looks and idiocy did not look rich...”

I wondered who he had blackmailed or burgled or done a drug deal with before getting here.

“This is a mystery to me. It is as you said, he is nothing but trouble... He has been my only lover and...”

“You do not talk about such things with the elderly, or at least you did not in my day, especially your own kindred.”

“Anything happened in the last few years?”

“Alex, Murie, Ruth, Conrad in India, Jan and Keddy, still the same, all happy and doing well. Alison and Zinada, both gone. Bloody Moon died sometime back, old, rich and cranky, muttering to his nurses that he was going to get me, never did. Leo and Marsha Chapman’s both gone long past.” He screwed up his face in attempted recollection, he was losing it at eighty-nine, Moon, Leo and Marsha had died years before I left in 1974.

“You know how they made Evelyn’s place up in Sydney into a museum? Well, we did the same here, bought a lot of his things, big tourist attraction. Helen opened it and lived long enough to commemorate the tenth anniversary.”

“Yes I remember and came for that.”

“Yes you stayed with her, not here. How long since you were here, at Ahmegodheho? Two years, no three, not long after Whitlam got the boot.”

“That was for Uncle Craig’s funeral. I was here to see Helen a year after that.”

It seemed that mentioning him was more tactful than mentioning Whitlam, but no, this led to a tirade.

“If he had a scrap of decency Craig would have shot himself after the trial revelations. I even left him alone in the office with the desk cleared and nothing but a loaded pistol on it, but either that was too subtle or he didn’t have the guts: instead of causing his family a week’s grief he stayed alive until he drank himself to the same end and caused them grief for decades, and Eustace is not much better.”

Melodramas all the time. I sighed and recalled how those grotesque melodramatic Tennessee Williams plays seemed to be about ordinary people in my childhood. Suddenly being hours in an all-night traffic jam did not seem so bad. I asked for a shower and a room. The place was like a mausoleum for people not quiet dead yet.

In the morning he went off to arrange the flight and I was alone with Grandmother, along with Rosa in Scotland the last of his women alive, but not for much longer it seemed. She was so thin, her long grey dress looked like a wrapping and all the bones in her face and hands stood out like porcelain covered with dull pink paper. Amazingly she had this cheery vitality, waving her hands about like fluttering butterflies, her eyes gleaming and her voice warm and mellow.

It was a strange day to be so optimistic. Everywhere was grey or some horrible shade of brown. The poplars usually had golden autumn leaves, but today the few leaves there were dull tan and the trees

themselves were stark spindly spires pointing, onto a pale grey overhanging sky with everything under it sodden from last night's downpour, no colour anywhere and little movement and what there was came from the horizon, from dull, dark, ponderous cumulus clouds building up. It was a day for pondering life's existence and coming up with negatives, but not for grandmother.

"I turn eighty-five next birthday, everyone knows it will be my last. God has blessed me, there were horrible parts to my life, the siege in Peking or whatever they call it now, much of the childhood in Cornwall and the dreary days with that horrible Reverend, my father who wasn't: my real father was a general, I only met him once, but he was..."

She paused as if recollecting something wrong. "Well, he certainly made me rich and Ross made me richer. Andrew was nice, too nice, but at least he made Ross's hardness and ruthlessness look better. Oh yes, Ross, he has made me comfortable and I have never taken that for granted, never do. The horror loomed up, but rescuers came, Max and Zelda, Brionny and Jenny, Andrew, my father and Ross. I only pray that you have rescuers, for many fear that you are also heading for the pit. As some type of radical and one of this generation that have never known want or war you may despise money, but never be without it."

How prescient those words were. I could only nod, she gave me a feeling that this might be the last time we met.

"Had to cut you out of my will but you will go back in. That villain Byron would have wheedled you of all my money. It is his grandmother Rosa who needs it, she lives in Scotland and has medical bills, dialysis. Her daughter avoids her, even so when I'm in town Friday Alex will amend it." She stared out past meadows to trees edging the creek.

"Better than riches, I have known love, all those people who rescued me... Love is our ouroboros, seen through a cave's pellucid water." She

smiled to herself at that, then looked at me, knowing that would puzzle. Involuntary spasms came up from her chest to her jaw. “Could you make me another cuppa? The pot’s gone cold.”

While returning I saw from the back that something was wrong. She was too bolt upright, the fine china plate lay near her rocker, shattered on slate. The smile was still on her face, the brightly alert eyes unseeing.

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It was easy to see how the police saw it: Byron and I took the money from the station safe at the start of Easter to get four days ahead of being found. He had a record and I had a brother convicted and relatives who vanished mysteriously in a drug case still under investigation. There was not quite enough of a case to prosecute, but many considered me a yet to be convicted thief and avoided by all, including grandfather. It was hard to blame him, after they came to question a day after Grandmother’s funeral and while Eustace and I were at Eloura Airport, warming the engines up. Of course it looked like an escape. I also talked of the twelve thousand Grandfather had seen, no it was thirty-eight they said, odd that. The explanation came a week after the fuss died down. Fred clearly with something up his sleeve called me into his office after work finished.

“Everybody knows you were in on it, and everybody knows we can’t prove it yet.”

I had sense enough to stay quiet and wait for the coming blow. It had something to do with the way flatmates were seen going into his office over the last few days and also with the usual office television and taping equipment being not there.

“People say that you should be fired, but no, I too believe in innocent until proven guilty.” That was said the way a Nuremberg defendant might express concern for the Jews. “But you could be found guilty very quickly very easily.”

He pressed a tv button. There was our kitchen and there was Byron talking of a drug deal that would make him twenty-six thousand dollars and not to worry, he would soon have twelve thousand safe and secure in the same untraceable safe that would take the twenty-six, no bank would trace them. I was inattentively munching on my healthy muesli in the far background.

“I’ll tell the police that you stole the dealer’s money and Byron fled with your twelve. That is the amount you usually kept in the safe.”

“Prove it. Maybe the deal fell through. Maybe he kept the twenty-six elsewhere. You will not find the twenty-six thousand in any bank account of mine or in cash anywhere connected to me. All I have to do is show this to the police and Cora goes to jail for many a year as an accessory. Or you can do as I say.”

*Oh God, not sex with my brother-in-law, not this animal.*

He read my face and smirked.

“Not that, no definitely not. Why on earth the handsomest man alive wanted a regular relationship with a chunky little bluestocking wog is beyond me, probably just a way to get grandpa’s money.”

“No definitely not! Don’t even think about it!” Fred was, for a few seconds, flustered as Elena stood by the door.

“It is not about that, it is about business, please leave us.”

Kind-hearted Elena gave me a look like she used to give to lambs and cows before Grandfather led them to the slaughtering pen, then she vanished, as she did back then.

“So what does Hubby say? It isn’t babysitting the kids on Saturday nights, is it?”

“You work only two days a week, fourteen hours a day and you work that for one third of what you earn now – and this is at casual rates without any extra benefits.” He had that smug glitter in his eyes when he

had something further up his sleeve.

“There is more.”

“Indeed there is. Work restarts on September First. Until then you are on partial suspension, not sacked and you are to report in daily for one hour’s retraining of your replacement at the rate of ten dollars a day. You are not to visit Eloura, and this is to go on until the twelve thousand and the compounding interest which I was going to make from that money by my investment is made up and I will not accept inferior, scrappy or incomplete work, are we clear now?”

“How long will this take?”

“Three years. Break just one single condition and off to jail you go. Try to put me in for blackmail and the terms of this contract will show I was merely trying to keep my sister-in-law out of jail, while giving her a chance to make good her loses, the filmed evidence will be found after any blackmail allegations.”

One of the house sharers had actually served prolonged jail time for aggravated assault and described jail: it was not just the horror stories of being inside that scared me, it was what that woman had become: automatic obedience, fear and a wearying permanent despair would always be perennial with her. I signed his seemingly innocuous contract while he superciliously smirked. I turned up at what was my home at midday, when there should have been nobody home, but they were there, motionless, staring with the mumble of conversation ceasing when they heard me enter. I had broken the major rule for living in counter-culture houses: never bring in police or police business.

“Cora! We wish to talk to you! Sandy, leading power freak and house boss, who embodied morality when it suited, started off: the others, by being grouped around her showed me they agreed.

“I do not wish to talk to you. I have to pack.”

It hit me how little there was to take, a transistor, spare jeans, three tops and dresses, one winter coat, a vest, underwear and toiletries, a style manual and dictionary for work. Unlike most Communists, Anarchists, and radicals I was no properterian and I wished I did not own even that. They came in needling and baiting, about Byron, about drugs, about 'My friend Fred' (!!!!) About me being a rich kid slumming. I spoiled their fun by giving them a month's rent and storming out, leaving my few possessions. This was unwise. Credit cards would not last forever and hotels were expensive, but I was sick to death of shared houses. How sick I was of the radical politics of shared houses also became concrete at a peace march soon after.

There was former flatmate Isaiah, who about a year back had patiently listened to my peace talk with a fixed sneer and half hooded eyes and then butted in with 'You peace freaks shit me, come the Proletarian revolution you are going up against the same wall as your fascist grandfather.'

Now with clenched fist swung in unison with the other agro faced comrades he chanted for peace. Once again there were the hate America posters, well over a hundred of them, denouncing American warheads, fleets and germ warfare, but where were the posters denouncing the Warsaw Pact nations and their weapons and wars? Even though they would be the ones to drop bombs on us and the speakers graphically described the horrors of nuclear radiation on the human body and the extinction of all life on earth, nobody denounced those who would do this to us and nobody else there seemed to notice this legerdemain pass over. I only saw two signs that went some way towards balanced blame. A priest carried one saying *BOTH SIDES MUST DISARM NOW* and a group of anarchists had a big banner saying that no uranium should be sold to the following countries - and it then listed capitalist and Communists and



among the thousands there, that was it. Just to top my alienation off, Fred and Elena were there, keeping credibility with their clientèle and demonstrating (pun intended) that they had a social conscience.

My disillusionment with the radicals was no more than their disillusionment with me: I wore out too many welcomes by sleeping on too many couches and not giving them or not being able to give them what they wanted, plugs for bands, babysitting, belief in conspiracy theories, my body, damaging gossip about rivals, membership in some Marxist group, dating as a cover for homosexuality. Nothing was ever free, not even a lumpy old lounge and a sheet. The sexual revolution ended for me when I woke up in the dark to find a hand between my legs and was told I was a frigid bitch for screaming no. If it wasn't winter I would have slept in a park. Soon that would be my only choice. Nobody would hire me, or for long. I was just not adept at rushing around with trays, giving change quickly, putting up with the nasty little mind games people played to show me who was boss and even if I had been, gossip about Byron's flight and Fred's insistence on reporting daily wiped out many employment chances at anything. In the tight knit world of journalism I was *persona non grata*. Even when work resumed at spring the little pay earned only meant two nights a week in a hotel and few groceries. For months I actually started staying at all night coffee lounges and movie shows and would sleep in the day, then one night in a suburban cinema it was heavy rain at nearly midnight and it was necessary to wait for it to ease off.

The manager (his name was Stephanous) stood beside me, a middle-aged Greek with weary, kind eyes. "I must fix projector, something wrong, too slow wind up. No lock up, stay inside dry, you wish?"

I nodded, sat in the comfortable foyer lounge and soon could hear him tinkering. The next thing I knew it was sunny and I was alone with a

sign on the pre-locked door saying SHUT. I didn't leave because he walked in as I came out of the toilet.

“Matinee start in ninety minutes. No time to clean last night, you clean, twenty dollar. Yes?”

Oh yes: after the matinee I agreed to free admission tonight and another twenty for more cleaning. It snowballed and he offered free accommodation for night watch duty, I couldn't believe my luck until I saw the free accommodation. He brought it in on the back of a truck. It was actually, really and truly a former chook shed. Ahmegodheho and Clarkestead taught me that recognition by sight and smell. He had cut the wire back, scrapped out the chicken shit and painted the chipboard walls, even given it several coats. Even so, the smell was obvious metres off. I kept my face expressionless, after all if I was the night watch I could sleep on the foyer sofa. He offered me the job of painting the massive graffitied wall. My coop was placed directly below the big exterior movie poster frame, now advertising a rerun double for Vietnam obsessives right and left, *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. The first title was the target I felt like, the second was my situation. Clearly if the wall was wrecked my job was also wrecked. Before I washed and painted the wall I washed and painted the coop – six times – and then varnished it to contain the smell. I was given army surplus lanterns, a bunk and bedding, a mini fridge and within a month got used to it. With free rent and no bills, my wages began to be enough to live on, but not as I had lived before, no endless donations to endless radical causes, no music for the station, no restaurant meals, or travel, just a bank balance going up and a credit card debt meeting it on the way down. Stephanous okayed eating packaged chips and other movie food if it was not consumed by its use by date, in fact he approved my thrift, doing the same for his family.

The silver screen and journalism gave me conflict and excitement

enough; at least I was free of family problems, I thought. Then one afternoon a surprised flunky couple from the paper (yes flunky, not funky) turned up for films and soon Fred was making chicken noises when he saw me and I had to endure smirks. A year after I started this cinematic life started an adult human shadow joined to a child's moved onto the lino as I polished and stayed motionless. I turned around and it was Uncle Eustace. He was more gaunt and grey than remembered and his face had something in it that was hard to read, pity? Concern? He had the youngest son with him. Eustace junior aged ten, born just before their divorce. They stared at me expressionless.

“He sent me here to bring you back, at least for the event.”

“Event?”

“The Eloura film premier of Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli*. With three of the dwindling band of veterans still in the one town the film makers sent us researchers.”

“That would be Grandfather, Old Alex and Jan the baker.”

“Jan has long since retired with arthritis and is in failing health, he will be lucky to see ninety; Alex still does some law.”

“And grandfather?”

“You had best come today. He expects it. He likes obedience.”

“What is wrong?”

“Prostate cancer, not advanced.”

Jan on his last legs, the thought came before grandfather. Uncle Eustace then went into a complicated medical analysis that sounded as if he was recalling somebody else's words and then it hit me. *He has it too*. Stephanous stepped in, they exchanged glances and I started asking for time off, expecting it because he was very family orientated, but he just cut my explanation short with an agreeing nod, too fast. The crowds had been dwindling lately.

“While you away I teach Constantine and Alexis, you a year of work, no time off? Take much time off.”

On the driv-up Uncle Eustace made much clearer.

“Stephanous got out of you where you spent much of your youth. There are not many Clarkes in the Eloura phone book. I had to be a detective and reports back about giving up politics, Byron and extravagance eased the way; setting up the film premier was a good excuse.”

“For?”

“Reconciliation... He is a Jekyll and Hyde character, but he is the only Grandfather you have and you share common enemies and who else can you rely on?”

“And?”

“And without being grasping, you need to think about your future. Even what you have here cannot last much longer. The new migrant station-”

“SBS is starting on the foreign films and audiences are dwindling.”

“Do you know of the new tapes that will play films in the home? The videos?”

“No.”

“They have been working in the labs for years and should be on the market in a year or two.”

“And the baby boomer generation are saving money for mortgages. The younger generation don’t respond well to Bergman, Polanski, Fellini, Antonioni, Hitchcock and Kurosowa reruns. The radical days of cinema have been waning for the last few years.”

The whole world of driving round in Volkswagens, wearing duffel coats and going to discuss the just seen art movie and talk politics in all night coffee houses was suddenly passé.

“Some like Stephanous say that these tapes will do what television started, finish off the theatres: he looks for offers.”

“You are encouraging me to go back to Grandfather.”

“I will teach you how to run the businesses.”

“What of your own grown children?”

“They are established elsewhere. He has not made his mind up about everything. He even asks old Conrad about Young Ross and about Byron.”

“Byron?”

“He has settled down and so has Pamela, his wife.”

“Don’t mention her name. That is information definitely not needed.”

“Marriage and the baby saned her up and somehow she tamed him. They are married with one child and twins on the way. They moved in with his grandmother Rosa, who left them the house. Before she died recently Pamela was helping her hand out leaflets for the Conservatives.”

I knew he would not believe me about the revolution in Chile street theatre less than three years ago, but it was my turn to disbelieve.

“And Byron?”

*The latest Byron.*

“Barely recognisable in the last photo; middle age, no drugs and home cooking have given him another fourteen kilos.”

“And he has a nice job somewhere to impress Grandfather to be a long shot chance to get in his will.”

“I am the one they all have to impress. I inherit the land, the businesses, Armhegodheho, much of the cash and shares. How the cash and the Clarkestead house and land will be distributed is all that remains uncertain. Grahame (or rather his carers) Eunice and Rolf, Murie and Ruth, Elena and Fred, Young Ross, Old Conrad, Keddy and Jan are all in

the running, so are you, but he chops and changes and has become very cantankerous since Grandmother Clarke died. Be very careful.”

Little Eustace watched the scenery, carefully as if such conversations were nothing new. As we came to Clarkestead I could see Elena’s car and kids outside.

“Elena lives here now. Occasional trips to Melbourne, but...”

“They are separated, divorced...”

“No, she keeps an eye on Clarkestead and old Grahame.”

*And on Grandfather.*

He was expecting me to grab at that or at least start a chat that would entice me into being back, but how to say that doing that would lead me to becoming like him? This man was once a fighter pilot in the Battle of Britain, one of the heroes who stopped the Nazis, but years of obedience and conformity to Grandfather’s wishes had made him pathetic. His one break from conformity and hard work had wrecked his reputation and cost him his family. Little Eustace was probably here on a custody visitation.

We arrived at Ahmegodheho at twilight. The three Gallipoli veterans sat in the centre, surrounded by film guests, the family and friends. Jan was in a wheel chair, wearing copper bracelets and his jaw made involuntary movements. Alex was just a little more aged than I remembered him, still erect, stately and his mind was undimmed. At ninety-one Grandfather was beginning to go, lips twitching in annoyance at some thought, eyelids blinking too often in vexation at something he could apparently not quite remember. Fred noticed all this and overplayed his hand, putting a slouch hat on Grandfather’s head. He glared up at him as if he was a much-hated Turk about to get a bayonet.

“I am not some show dog to be decorated with a hat!” He threw it on the ground and stamped on it and sat with his fist clenched, while the

room went absolutely quiet.

“Cora is not some chicken or dog to be kept in a pen, even if she thinks she is! I will not have my family treated in such a way!”

Fred was always quick, until now. He looked like he had been unexpectedly punched, and didn't know how to react. Grandfather cooled down a little.

“Look at this idiotic excuse for a slouch hat. Looks like an upside down soup bowl on a plate. We wore them like this.” He punched the crown down and tried to curl the brim, but disgusted, tossed it away, oblivious to where it landed. On the silent, tense drive in the thought came that it could not get any worse. That was very, very, wrong and became obviously so when the car came nearly level with the Pharaoh or what was now entitled the Clarke. Alexander's gaze went with mine in a frozen stance staring with enlarged eyes. For once he was stunned and fearful. What had been a perfectly preserved art deco façade and foyer, replete with polished cedar and mahogany dado, Egyptian wall tiles, copper gilt and bronze sheets to the art deco decorated pressed-tin roof that once had a full blast chandelier had been changed.

Fred was famous for his crass taste and he usually knew it and employed the trendy in needful situations, the way most of us call upon plumbers, but not this time or perhaps tacky was in. The walls were now black and white *plastic* all the way with light coming from pink plastic circles embedded in a purple plastic roof with green zigzag lightning that did not match the black plastic floor. Instead of framed posters of past star that had once been there, Fred had ads for famous fizzy drink brands and chips, lit up by neon. The alabaster busts of Cleopatra and Ramses, their yellow and orange veined marble stands and the plush Arab runner had gone. The doors needed no lighting to brighten them, reflecting plastic canary yellow with shocking pink zigzags will do it every time.

Grandfather did not get it and just blinked.

“The only constant in life is change.” Fred intoned. “To make a sale life must be made anew, people don’t go for old, for the stale. They want now, they want what is trendy.”

“Thought we were going to the Pharaoh. Eloura does not need two picture shows... or is this one of those disco things?”

He blinked some more and looked around at the place and bafflement started to give way to suspicion. He wandered out looking around at familiar landmarks and came back, stunned. The familiar neighbouring shops and the mercifully unchanged façade made him realise and he stood there, mouth open, eyes bewildered, motionless, leaning on his cane for perhaps a minute. The cranky breath intake, ever increasing should have been a warning and perhaps a film about a charge at Gallipoli was not the best choice under the circumstances, for charge he did and Fred copped four blows before the cane broke.

“This was a deathbed promise to Max, not to sell it, not to change it. A deathbed promise to the only person who really liked me and you make me look like a fool and a failure to him!” He stood there panting and clutching the stump of his cane. “It was those young characters up from Melbourne in their flash cars and American baseball caps and with their Yankee slang and those wraparound sunglasses scouring the countryside for antiques, wasn’t it?” He roared the last two words again.

Fred, bleeding and dazed, could initially only nod, only a fool would have said anything and he did.

“I thought you would be impressed.”

“I had you half-wrong, knew you for a slimy sharper but thought you were smart. Those antique hunters must have salivated when they saw the foyer and laughed over what a fool they had found.”

I sighed, Grandfather had it right; but if Fred had proved himself a



fool against expectations Elena now proved herself wise, to use a polite word, beyond expectations.

“I can fix this Grandpa.”

“You can Elena? How?”

“What has been sold can be purchased again and they are not going to destroy what they paid ten thousand for. They may not even have unloaded the truck in Melbourne yet. There was still room in it and they said they would scour Eden on the way home. We can re-buy and rebuild so it is as good as new.”

“Good girl. Get onto those answering machine things if they have one, oh they will, that type are always onto whatever is new and makes money. Then get onto - no you can't do two things at once... Useless Eustace! Live down your name and off to Eden now! Check everywhere bloody likely and then unlikely. If they have gone track them to Melbourne. I'll see if police can catch them on something trumped up.”

Elena join Eustace there if we have to, Cora will look after the kids while you are away.”

*Oh will she?*

Suddenly I could see why he was where he was, the local big man.

“Well let's get to this film and it had best be good.”

Fortunately it was. “Very close to the mark” was all Grandfather said directly, although he gave it his ultimate compliment with his instruction to the projectionist: ‘Keep showing it until nobody turns up.’

Alex said it was like being there, which got Jan to say ‘which is why I wanted to leave.’ Within six weeks an appointment was made for me, I wanted to leave. This was just after the Pharaoh had been rebuilt to its former state by Elena, who by heading the sharpers off at Eden no longer needed a baby sitter - or much else as she had divine favour.

Once again, I was the naughty child outside his office. Eustace for

his successful role in the Pharaoh's restoration was permitted to stand behind the chair. Grandfather was behind the desk with photos of the chicken coup I lived in and another of me in a charity food line up and he was his usual tactful self.

“You do know you are living like an idiot and disgracing this family don't you?”

“I was manoeuvred into-”

“Then outmanoeuvre them!”

“How?”

He got flustered at that and rattled his way through his thoughts.

“What is the situation? Byron gets the drug money and then scoots off with the blonde and you get the empty bag that leads to a jail cell if you talk? Not far off the mark, am I?” He roared the last two words again then scowled as he handed me a cheque for ninety thousand dollars and nodded to Eustace to leave, he did.

“That will get you a deposit and a start on a mortgage in Melbourne, buy anything cheap and shoddy and be foreclosed on and you won't get anything more from me. Why you won't leave that magazine station combine is beyond me. Melbourne is not the world.”

“Do you want me back here?”

He made a dubious face and I was just beginning to think he had forgotten the question when he answered.

“Let's see how you do in Melbourne and let's see how Elena does back home and how Eustace's boys do.”

He rang a bell and Fred entered, not happy while I was ushered out.

Next morning at the aerodrome Eustace was going to fly me back when Fred pulled up and wound the window down with cranky gestures.

“I still have the evidence and he is not going to live forever. He insists you be reinstated but he did not say on full pay or hours and

incidentally, have you heard that the cost of a hit in Melbourne is down to four hundred dollars? Supply and demand dear girl, supply and demand!”

He meant it and that only my dying grandfather’s astuteness was stopping him and that my fear gave him a sense of triumph. He stared gleefully and without his apparent movement he wound the window up, the glass slowly obscuring his triumphant face.

On the flight to Melbourne Eustace let me know that Grandfather would make a surprise visit to see how wisely I had used his money and that much counted on it.

“Don’t buy on first inspection visit, or even on a fourth, get an architect’s evaluation. Don’t go for anything too ritzy or anything too-”

“Working class?”

“That and anything too hippie.”

“They faded out a decade past.”

“Even faded hippie colours are red rags to a bull. Do you want a buyer’s help in home buying?”

“Yes please.”

“Whatever goes wrong, don't ask him for a loan, this is a test, ask me.”

Before Christmas I ended up with an immaculately restored 1896 terrace house in a quiet back street and a mortgage debt of two hundred thousand. Before Grandfather arrived to be impressed I woke up to what was happening: the house was being arranged to suit him, not me. Remembering his opinion of Peter, Paul and Mary as Communist dupes, I put their album at the very conspicuous front of the LP pile. He saw, but ignored. Looking everywhere as if he owned it.

“Good good, Keep this one. Now I’ve got time off and sad news, you are needed for a funeral.”

“Alex?”

“Jan.”

Keddy, who was only in her early seventies, compared to his eighty-seven, needed to be held up at the graveside by Eustace on one side and me on the other while Ruth got a chair. Uncle Murie was so rotund he could barely move, even with crutches, while Uncle Alex seemed ageless. The reception was held at Clarkestead: Elena lived there, people liked her and Grandfather still found help hard to get. It did not escape my attention that her children were in local school uniforms, that she had documentation concerning all the Clarke businesses in the study and that Fred was absent. There was no trace of all the musical paraphernalia she had accumulated. After the reception she insisted on a chat.

“Fred’s gone, well nobody has been lucky in love have we? I’ve left romance, and music behind, adolescent stuff. Eustace has been teaching me business and it keeps me busy. So does Grahame. When Grandfather goes, he does.”

There was a long awkward pause, a trap I was supposed to fall into.

“It was your own fault, and not just over Byron, although that might have done for you anyway. All that silly bugger hippy stuff and half red politics and that way you show what you think on your face...”

I could only shrug my shoulders and sit on the porch, watching Great Uncle Grahame play with his tinsel hat, the little boy nearing ninety.

Far from worries being over, they had merely changed, and not all that much. In 1979 being homeless meant that when I ordered souvlaki I opted out of sauce to save money and drank water to stop hunger pangs and suppress appetite: by early 1983 I was doing the same and instead of anxiety about where to sleep tonight, my nightly anxiety was if interest rates would rise - and too often they did. Stephanous sold up so magazine wages were insufficient. Even so, I might have survived, but I tried tenants and ended up being sued in a set-up, a fall from the steps and over

the banister which collapsed because somebody had unscrewed the supports. I went into court blithely confident that no judge would believe these egregious liars who it turned out had police records. No judge would disbelieve the expert's photographic evidence about tampering. I came out of court, stunned, poor after a partial payout and forced to sell for the remainder and knew that there was one option open for me. I rang Eustace.

“Hello this is Ahmegodheho Industries, Elena Hyers speaking.”

“Could I speak to Eustace Clarke please?”

There was a few seconds of silence. She knew it was me.

“I'm terribly sorry, Eustace Clarke is now dead.” This was said in a parody of the receptionist's artificial cheer and continued that way. “Can I be of assistance?”

The warning signs had been there, it was now apparent. Her way of suddenly saying obvious things and then chattering on as if these were deep revelations had been replaced by assessing silence and her love of music had faded somewhere; nice children often leave their niceness in childhood. Far from being separated, Fred and Elena were now as one. The separation was now clearly a ploy because Grandfather was a wake up to Fred. They would reunite after grandfather died and left everything to Elena. In the meantime. Fred would leave me dangling with the old threat, even if I inherited he would move in for the kill, or more accurately my jailing.

Eustace left most of his money to the children who disowned him. The five thousand he left me made little difference after the litigation case made a house sale inevitable: another loan was impossible with a rushed house sale. Even the remaining cash was not that much and by December 1983 I was back to watching the dwindling bank balance and positions vacant columns while paying the lowest rents possible in Melbourne's

slums. This time no Stephanous turned up and Fred was making chicken noises when he walked past, his face taut with smugness, eyes a glitter.

“Don’t forget, I’ve got the photos and the tapes!” He crowed, and that was his big mistake. Others heard it and while fingers kept typing and faces stayed expressionless, eyes darted quickly his way and then down to their work. One of them must have talked, for two days later the police turned up and quite sympathetically asked me if I was being blackmailed and were polite when I asked for time to seek legal advice - a call to Alex.

“With the evidence to hand, you may be charged as an accessory after the fact of embezzlement, theft and drug dealing. But with blackmail involved and your role being limited to the knowledge of at most some of what your defacto was doing, you probably will not even be charged, especially if you cooperate.”

“And Fred?”

“Much will depend on what the witness has said, but prima facie almost certainly a strong case for blackmail charges exists. The theft of twenty-eight thousand will not stick without stronger evidence.” There was a long pause. “Perhaps we should talk when you are here for his ninety-fourth.”

“Fred sometimes lets me go to Eloura, sometimes not.”

“Fred is going to let you go to Eloura.”

Fred did.

\*

Alex McPherson

Eloura 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1984

Poor young woman, not so young any more either. I waited on the porch in the dawning light with tea and sandwiches at the ready. What was my sister's Meloni and Ruth’s bedroom so long ago was now the office, still used for the occasional case, more often now for brief

interviews with those who want the key to victory from the invincible, the legendary Alexander the Great. Very flattering, but one reason for such a reputation is that I never fight losing battles, and after turning ninety refusal comes easily. This one I won't refuse, but will she follow my advice?

Cora came walking, very pensive and subdued, staring at gravel, but nodding politely and accepting breakfast. While she sipped and ate, I read her face and could see that she would comply, reluctantly. That would be best: police despise revenger or cowardly informers. She had bought her pay-packet documentation as advised.

“When the police come do not hold back on any information. Answer all questions to the best of your recollection. I've arranged for you to make your statement here, all we have to do is phone.”

She stared down, recalling something and seventy years of law left me knowing: the recollection of some bond that they were leaving behind: she had loved that scoundrel. She nodded, I phoned and it went well. The officer concluded with what I was going to say, that she did not have to work for Fred any more and it would be wise not to and she had best avoid Elena and their children. She did not need it.

“I suppose that you will tell me I should work for Grandfather.”

“After this morning that will possibly lead to a conflict of interest. I must give all the work connected to Elena and Armhegodheho Industries to a junior in my firm and maintain a Chinese wall, which means I do not know what goes on there. My last secretary talked too much and has not yet been replaced. Getting a bit old for my workload and house and yard work.”

I gave a long pause with a look and she got my meaning and was surprised.

“You get free rent and board, award wages and if you pick up extra

work at the local radio and paper in your own time that is fine.”

So was she.

\*

Ross Clarke

Armhegodheho 18<sup>th</sup> May 1984

An Indian summer day, in early winter, good one, God. I might not see that many more summer days and wanted to see the creek where Grahame and I had played as boys and where Helen and I had been young and in love. Alex was getting too old to drive, so Cora would. They turned up as I was finishing brunch and food was there for them, but Cora dropped Alex off and said she would be back with things to get from town. Something was up and I asked Alex what it was.

“Elena has taken a few days off for a holiday, used the good weather to catch a few days at the beach at Merimbula, her secretary says.”

“She works hard, nothing wrong with that.”

“Called Melbourne to speak to Fred, he’s on holiday in Merimbula.”

“They are reconciling.”

“Probably never split, really.”

He gave me a few seconds to get the implication.

“Get on it, detectives if need be.” He nodded and we sipped tea. “It is a worry and might be enough to change my mind. Any news on the investigation?”

“Byron’s lawyers are trying to keep him out of jail and he’s naming dealers to do so. The twenty-eight thousand has not turned up in Fred’s accounts, so the prosecution is stalled.”

“How’s Cora doing?”

“Very well, she has organisational abilities and common sense.”

“So has her aunt, my daughter Eunice, bit old, but sharp, like your sister Ruth. Good lord, Murie might end up my heir. If Cora is in the race, might as well give those other hard cases Horace and Young Ross



consideration and get an opinion from Conrad.”

I sighed, summer’s weather would be spoiled with all this heir talk. Maybe I should give it all to charity. Seeing Cora on her return from some vitally important shopping she had to miss seeing me for made me consider that idea in depth. She took a seat on the veranda in an uneasy way for starters, as if she did not really like me.

“Now many people I respect have good opinions of you and say I should make you my heir, but you are not steady, not good with money and Elena has both of those qualities. Both of you are unwise with men, but we will let that pass.”

“Then why mention it?”

“I will let that pass as well.” She just stared. “Now in the bushfire you proved you had guts and loyalty and you had sense enough to ditch that Byron, now I want to see what you can do without Alex’s help or anybody else’s for that matter. Here, take twenty thousand.”

I gave her the cheque, had to put it into her hand really, she was so much like a stunned mullet, but I expected nothing good. Since school she had been putting her efforts into no hoper things, poor Young Ross, that Byron who had turned out all right too late, but was still never to be trusted, the non-profit radio station and then the Melbourne picture show likewise, the low paying journalist job where Fred made her grovel and she did, the house she could not pay off, Alex’s charity work... a fool never learns, I told her that and she just said thank you for the cheque and took off. I got my tax returns and started looking through the charities. I gave her and myself a year at best.

\*

Alexander McPherson

Eloura 4<sup>th</sup> January 1985

Perhaps Ross had a point; she tried so hard, and lost every penny. It was a pity, and not only because she tried so hard; she had more character than

the rest put together.

“One thing he ascertained correctly” She spoke determinedly on the veranda with all her possessions in a rucksack, “I have to achieve something on my own somewhere.” She thanked me, shook my hand and left.

He still did not know what he would do with his money, changing the will every few months. Young Ross was apparently hopeless. If Elena had been the decent, naïve person she once was before Fred arrived, I would have pressed for her, but that once sweet sunny face was now fixed into a supercilious sneer. Ruth and Murie did not want Armhegodheho industries and said so in the clearest possible terms.

“Lord that place is as cheery and lively as a mausoleum,” she started and he took up the theme, “Think of the cleaning bill”

“And the time” Ruth added, “We have been happy where our family have lived for well over a hundred years, where our children grew up and where God has been good to us. We can relax here. If you like I will speak to the daughters, but they are doing well enough and know that Clarke money is a curse and always has been.”

As a lawyer it has been my experience that such opinions are more common than one would expect. I began to suggest his son Horace, pointing out the many famous anti-communists who had once been Reds, and he did seem to consider. When Cora sent me amiable postcards I felt a twinge of guilt, but my first loyalty was to the estate and family I had served for so long.

\*

Ross Edward Clarke

Bombay India 6<sup>th</sup> January 1985

AIDS info had finally got into even Fatherington’s thick skull, so he had laid off his free trade factory boys for several months, and was now salivating for it, even so and even with my need for the cash that he was

piling up on the table it was better not to risk it, he wasn't hateful, just silly. I didn't mind him once I worked him out: working class, he had worked his way up to foreman and then took a chance on coming to India and managed one of those factories that export cheap products. Buying me was a class thrill, a subservient aristocrat with a lineage going back to the House of Lords and back even to medieval knights and lords, well. He would actually warm up on all that stuff: trashy novels with knights and cavaliers on the cover were in his literal bag and were his bag. Some of the Indians and closet Americans lured by distance and the exotic locale were the same. If I could get off the drugs I would prefer not to do this, no more money was coming in from trafficking, the dealers said I looked like an actor getting ready for a wanted poster. True enough, my major acting jobs in Bollywood were in those roles. Remittance money and the occasional Bombay talkie acting role and journalistic piece would be enough for the rest of my short life.

“You cannot reject me.”

“I have to and if you were careful, you would not ask. It's not just in Africa or Los Angeles, we have it here in Bombay.”

He sighed, collected the money and left. Seventy pages of Herman Hesse later, fat old Conrad heaved his way up the steps, it was obviously him from ten minutes away; no Indian was ever fat enough to make the aged timber stairs creak like that. He knocked on the rattan blind and I let him in, he was embarrassed and as direct as always and his sweaty face had his earnest look; it was always there when he wanted to encourage me to go to what he considered home.

“Your grandfather is ninety-four and has early cancer, he wants to see you. He helped you in trouble that was not of his making – and he still does.” He stared and assessed; that line had no effect.

“I am in my eighties and also will not live forever, what happens to

you when we are gone?”

He assumed too much. The purple curls had started appearing on my skin six weeks past; I was telling my acquaintances it was a flu that was hard to shake off. There were so few cases here that such signs were not common knowledge yet, better to go where everyone does before I was a walking skeleton from the new black death, voyage away to unknown lands one last time, this one to an infinite sleep.

\*

Alexander McPherson

Ahmedogheho 28th January 1985

The funeral would have to be five days before his ninety-fifth, two before Ruth's ninetieth. As it was the Australia Day weekend, there was no help for it, too many holiday makers were coming, jamming the coastal roads. Embalmed or not, it would be better over sooner. He would be buried beside his brother, that other casualty of the turbulent sixties: both should be forgotten: right and left, both were naïve, but woke up too late.

Everybody turned up, even Fred, wisely staying in the background, even Horace, lined with a shock of thinning white hair now, fingers that trembled, deep lines through his face, eyes that would not meet another's and the purplish veined nose of an alcoholic. He was looking older than me, this was the man who was once as handsome looking as his father. Unlike Ross, he had the face of a failure.

Ross took one bitter look at him and sighed. Horace sixty this year, finally dared to speak up.

“I liked Young Ross and have a right to be here as much as anyone else.”

Ross snorted with an assessing look and a slight glimmer of knowing humour in his eyes.

“Still believe in all that Communist rubbish?”

“There comes a time when a man has to put himself first.”

Ross waited with a steady gaze, assessed and then grunted, pleased

“Alex give him a cheque for forty thousand and let’s see what he does with it.”

“I do not want it.”

Ross was transfixed, except for the open mouth.

“What? Why not?”

“A man needs to stand on his own two feet.”

“You might become something after all, even if you waited to sixty before achieving it.”

Clearly he would not achieve much. Advanced sclerosis of the liver and two heart attacks meant a sanatorium paid for with other people’s taxes, with nurses dictating his every move, was hardly standing on his own feet. His rejection of the money was probably because he knew he did not have the willpower to not drink it away and he had little time left. He excused himself and went to talk with Cora.

\*

Cora Druetti

Ahmedgodheho 28th January 1985

I heard Uncle Horace reject what must have been his last chance to inherit or to be anything and tried to talk him out of rejecting, but he, who was usually so soft and pliable, was adamant on the one thing he should not be.

“At least stay for the combined birthday party, due to the funeral they are delaying grandfather’s so as to combine it with Aunt Roth’s ninetieth.”

“Just like the queen’s birthday.” Despite that comment and the accompanying sneer, he considered, then shook his head. “Ahmedgodheho and in fact Eloura, holds nothing but unhappy, memories for me.”

I gritted my teeth and just managed to stop myself. It was the wrong time

of the month for his whining, his self-pity and his now perennial negativity; the Communist Party seemed to have gained and then destroyed any optimism he ever had. While walking off to speak to Uncle Murie and Auntie Ruth, to my amazement Grandfather was talking amiably to Fred and Elena and looking at their brats. Carly, named for Carly Simon, was the eldest girl: she had Elena's features stamped with Fred's characteristics, the gleaming eyes and tight curled up lips. She flounced up to me with some clever little power play ready.

"Aunt Cora, can I ask you a personal question?"

"No, you may not."

"Uhm, Defensive! Clearly you are hiding something. Even though that is obvious, I will ask you anyway. What is a lesbian?"

"Carly, my brother's funeral reception is not the place for these nasty little mind games. If you will excuse me."

"No." This was accompanied by an assertive shaking of the head and concluded with a smirk. "You will listen. Grandfather hates you and says that you are a loser. He has promised that we will inherit Ahmegodheho and everything else he has and he cannot possibly live forever, although he is clearly giving it a good try."

Like most brats she had no idea of when to stop or of the many subtleties involved in playing an adult's mind game. She was so self-absorbed she did not realise how far her voice carried or that others were now quiet and watching.

"Once again this is not the right place for your observations."

"Well see you around. Maybe one day we will drop into your Brisbane restaurant and eat off the dishes you have to wash and then tell the owner how you are a drug addict on the run."

"Carly, enough!" That was from Elena, who like Fred, was clearly worried by grandfather's expressionless yet assessing face. "Come here!"

“See ya.” She waved smugly, splaying out her fingers and making them into a large circle that was centred on her merrily triumphant face, oblivious to the stony disapproval of every other person in the room.

“You watch too much American television.” And with that I walked out.

\*

Ross Clarke

Ahmegodheho 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1985

Great to wake up with the summer sunlight on my face; ninety-five, made it. The sun was high up, fine, at ninety-five I deserved a sleep in and would have my favourite breakfast, nice and slow. Alex, Cora, Elena, Ruth, Murie, their daughters, Keddy, Jan and Karl...no they were gone, those last two. My brain was going the way of my body, getting old and slow.

Next week there would be the joint birthday celebration with Ruth and there would be the talk about Gallipoli Landing and three V.C. nominations, two in one day and marriage to the Russian Princess and bloody Eloura Airlines and nothing about Helen and what it was like to be young when Edward was king and the world seemed so full of bright hope for a wonderful tomorrow. I knew where I wanted to be, but it wouldn't be today. Today I would remember when the sun was bright on our skins and we were young and golden and the world was a beautiful view and she loved me.

\*

Ruth Fisher

Eloura Creek 8<sup>th</sup> March 1985

He always infuriates, always. Selfish in the way of the godless who think that they are God. Four times he insisted on this pointless picnic at dawn and three times he cancelled it; once for no better reason than the sky was overcast, another time (when we had all assembled here!) because it was windy. Naughty God to disrupt the great Ross Clarke's

plans with less than perfect weather. Murie and Alex say we owe him much and he only holds on by willpower so we came, being, like the temperature in our Fahrenheit nineties (Celsius temperatures are impossible, nobody gets comfortable with them) and he was worried because it was a week past the last day of summer. Cora here as well, instead of his heir Elena, that does not make sense either (Ross and Alex told me separately a month past and also as an accountant Alex had me check the figures) and he would get cranky about a few dropped tin cans and ugly graffiti spoiling his paradise and wander off to sit under a far-off tree at the creek edge, dozing off again, just like he did at our joint birthday celebration. Ross was and is always a vexing man, over eighty years of him to remember and always the same. I made him a plate of salad and gave it to Murie.

“Murie! If he won’t answer our call, can you take him his salad?” Murie did so, but was gone a long time. Even without my glasses I could see Ross’s shoulder and right arm sticking out behind the tree, his white shirt wafting in the breeze, yet he was motionless. Murie walked back in a strange way, leaning more than usual on his stick and going very slowly and as if he was bewildered. As he came closer we could see his stricken face and tears and the conversation stopped. He plodded on to us and Cora looked upset.

“Poor Ross held on till now, then let go, he has gone.”

From childhood on, Murie was always saying the obvious. To my amazement, Cora and Keddy, after a few seconds of being stunned, also cried for the old villain.

\*

Cora Druetti

Saint Paul’s Eloura 24<sup>th</sup> March 1985

Grandfather warned Fred not to be at the funeral, but where was Elena and her children? Alex clearly knew, wouldn’t say and left the



impression it was better not to ask. We got an idea why after the funeral when we saw her being taken by police from the jail to the court in handcuffs. If only that had happened two weeks ago.

“Money will get her out of this one.” Ruth sneered and I nodded in bitter agreement.

The will reading was next day. With Great Uncle Grahame and Young Ross gone this last year Ruth, Murie, Horace and myself were his only surviving relatives in Australia. His daughter Eunice, her husband Rolf and Byron and his wife Pamela had all flown out, more likely for the will than the funeral. It took me minutes to recognise him. The colour had faded from his thinning hair. His hips had widened, actually his whole bone structure had and the fat had grown on it and formed bulges in the very proper navy blue extra-large three-piece suit. Even more striking than the physical changes was the staid look of a moderately successful provincial banker who would never do a surprising thing. She was the female version. Byron’s parents had suitable grieving looks, but would not now be satirised by the returned prodigal, who had made his peace with the phoniness of the world. Horace, Keddy, Murie and Ruth were also there and that was it, apparently. Alex began to unseal the document.

“What about Elena?” Ruth had her face screwed up in puzzlement; Elena was out on bail late yesterday.

“No need.” He unfolded the documents, squinting at them as he went through the usual necessary preamble. The date was a surprise, nineteen days ago, meaning three before his death.

“I bequeath ten thousand dollars each to the following people: Horace Clarke, Conrad, (sic) Keddy Van Groendhal, Murie Fisher, Ruth Fisher, Eunice Haast, and Rolf Haast. To my nephew Byron Haast I leave five thousand dollars for use as bail. No Clarke should be in jail. All these payments are subject to the proviso that my will remains undisputed.”

He gave us a dry cryptic glare and proceeded.

“The remainder of my estate, this being my bank balance, my picture show, the Pharaoh, all of my shares, debentures and bonds, the estates of Clarkestead and Ahmegodheho all furnishings, antiques, tools and land, in short everything contained therein, and anything not listed, including unfound treasure, I leave to Cora Druetti.”

All the others thanked him and left: we waited till they were out of earshot.

“Why not Elena?”

“Two things. Graham's nurse was away when he fell ill that last time. A few weeks past she heard things he said from those that did nurse him at the end and she got legal advice, elsewhere. Grahame's ramblings about money under the parlour floorboards proved correct. The police did interview Elena, Ross and her children and nurses, but charges of negligence and culpable homicide got nowhere, then two weeks past police returned with a search warrant. She had brains enough to hide the twenty-six thousand in a different place to where Grahame found it. The police had nearly given up when they found one note Grahame had used for a saddle cloth on his toy horse, serial number traceable. They turned up at Ahmegodheho asking for any other possible explanation for Elena having the money under her bedroom floor. It gave Grahame's ramblings credibility. He knew her arrest was coming, that left you.”

“Ross was uncertain about you, but said you were honest and loyal and would not alter the estates, particularly Max's picture show. As he put it ‘He hoped you would learn sense.’ He asked me to be your mentor. Although I would put it more tactfully, that is also my earnest hope. You are now a millionaire several times over.”

\*

Heirs

March 2005

Cora Druetti

Ahmegodheho 24<sup>th</sup> March 2005

Twenty years ago today I became a multi-millionaire and with that title came everything money could buy, well everything tangible. Gaining peace and quiet was, well, initially a battle. Lined up against me were:

A: legions of attention seekers trying to pass on their fardel of problems in ways designed to make them rich with my money and me miserable with their problems.

B: charity collectors who usually ended up richer and/or more powerful with my donations.

C: people with money-making schemes wanting me to invest.

D: politicians and assorted true believers wanting my endorsement and credibility.

E autograph hunters.

F thesis writers and school kid researchers, after information about Evelyn, the Last Pre-Raphaelite, Grandfather or Great Uncle Robert, the famed air ace.

G The occasional treasure hunter, they usually did not ask, but just wandered around on my property with their metal detectors, looking for what was known now as “the Irish Gold.” Alex and I got into the old archives and made photocopies of the police list and put the owner’s names next to the objects with a five- dollar reward if found and a legal warning if not reported found. That deterred many.

All of the above gave the impression they had read some self-advancement manual with a title along the lines of *How to Get Your Own Way in Every Situation and Make a Million Bucks Fast*. The million bucks was to come because they had self-confidence, a winning smile and relentless persistence, characteristics blitzkrieged onto me. My compliance with their wishes was assumed and deserved because they were either/and:

A moral people;

B brilliant;

C possessors of an original sure-fire scheme;

D possessors of arcane knowledge;

E members of an exploited group that deserved social justice which would be gained with millions going into their personal accounts.

The first few charity collectors all got something initially, which meant that word must have spread over beers, coffee and tea, or my name went on a list somewhere because it became so bad that I had to change my phone number, even leave, albeit luxuriously (on a European holiday) for six months. It took two years of nothing but firm cranky refusals and employing a secretary and a security guard, but eventually I could sleep in, loll about in the hammock, listening to a whole symphony, swim in the creek alone, sit by the fire or read one of those books I always yearned to read.

The trouble expected from the usual problem people never came, at least not big time. Byron and his wife Pamela, Fred and Elena, Horace senior and junior, his parents Jerry and Rima, Jack Caufield and his sister Esmeralda Crutchfield, and her daughter Mary were the expected troublemakers. I imagined Byron turning up or writing from some jail, asking for money, but in 1996, not quite fifty, he had a stroke, maybe from past drugs, maybe from overwork in the bank, his wife left him and he ended up in a seedy nursing home just getting fatter and fatter as he stared into vacancy, he still does. His parents sent a video of him in this state, rather odd and cruel I thought. It was such a strange fate that it did not register. When Ross died they sent me Aunt Rosa's highly personal letters and photographs, saying I might like to put them in a museum. Also cruel and odd for archivists. I asked them not to write or visit in

future and only found out that they died within months of each other when their lawyer sent me documents and keepsakes for the museum. That was five years past.

Horace the first born, who by ancient law of primogeniture should have been master of Ahmegodheho, only outlived his father by six years. Despite my paying for clinics and therapy Uncle Horace never really recovered from the collapse of his ideals and his marriage and barely survived the self-destruction of the Communist Party in 1989-1990. He did stop drinking, but when it was too late.

After Elena's arrest she wrangled her way out of jail for Uncle Murie's funeral. She glared at me but I felt numb, this hard-faced gaunt woman with grey streaks through crew cut hair and *Killer Bitch* tattooed on her arm had once been my happy sweet-faced sister? She who in her twenties hummed chirpy songs against a backdrop of boy singer pin-ups? She, who was such a devoted, fresh-faced cheery mother to her children? She soon got out, but only for weeks, back in for a stabbing some boy – yes, boy, that sweet young thing contemptuously rejected her. Because he survived, she got only five more years added and they were served in maximum security, after another warden proved that she tried bribing him with sexual favours and promised Clarke money and then assaulted him when he said no. On release for that she took up drug dealing and pimping boys to pay for teenage boys who were mirror images of the pop star type she once worshiped. Both habits got her six non-parole years, concurrent. My expensive lawyer claimed that it was the best possible deal. She was released in July 2002, supposedly as an act of mercy, but more likely as a budget cutting exercise because she had to be treated for the terminal cancer that claimed her before that year ended. Once again, I paid big bills to no avail. Despite informing her children, radio days people, even school friends, I was the only mourner at the expensive

funeral and mourned for someone dead long ago.

The last thing she ever said to me was on the early 2002 visit, the last.

“A sixtieth birthday visit! Where's the cake with the file in it?”

She smirked at her own lame joke; this was now the face of a person who would never really laugh. She seemed to think of something to say.

“You never need worry about Rima, Gerry or Horace junior turning up ever; that is if they still live, which I doubt. Or Fred, he is a suspect. In jail you hear things. Excepting Fred they are still on an Interpol watch list, transferred over from seventies paper reports, every major airport in the world has them on a computer database. Every parole hearing they still offer it to me for their whereabouts. They got into something very major, international, maybe the mafia or those Taliban or their rivals the warlords, who beat the Colombians for the title ‘biggest drug dealers on earth.’ They don’t get the publicity, but they should. If they ever try to leave their bolt hole they will be caught and their bolt hole is nowhere close, even close to Australia.” She paused and started to stare, assessing.

“See what nice things you get to hear when you visit, Gunna get me out?”

“After what you did, you think I would? Or should? Or could?”

“You know how close we came to sitting in reverse chairs in here? Byron was your worst enemy and towards the end he was dealing with Fred in both senses of the word and you were the fall guy, only saved because of Fred’s balls up over the picture show. I told silly bloody Fred to leave that bloody silly picture show alone. Even better, just to tactfully suggest Granpa give it a good polishing up to help preserve it.” She sighed.

“Now all that, the music and the kids and our days in Gringila, when the bloody memories return and they don’t often, they look like some

film I saw as a five-year old, even when I am in them it is like an actress is me...”

“What changed you?”

“A fifteen-year-old boy, just like those pin-up boys I used to love. He prepositioned me and I thought why not? It was terrible and suddenly I saw myself as others did... a naive good-hearted used dope.” After snarling in vexation she paused, absent-mindedly searching for a cigarette. It ended up in the corner of her mouth, along with the grizzled short, prison cut hair and weary expression making her the epitome of wasted failure

“The next one was everything I had ever dreamed of. Fourteen good months - and then the next deal went wrong, washed up execution style, bullet to the back of the neck, hand bound behind the back.”

She sighed and sank into some reverie, possibly from memories probably from the anti-cancer drugs, her totally grey crew cut hair was going. “The first boys were in it while we were still married. After a decade of bloody Fred and his ninety-second wonder and his other women I thought I would give it a try, never looked back. With plenty of time in jail I added them up.” She smiled. “Two hundred and twenty-three. Only fifty-eight paid for, more were demanded freebies from employees. About eighty were pickups, none over thirty, that’s when male sexual energy starts fading.” She stared into my face, playing the blinking game with the last word. “Jail makes us into honest people, but not the way do-gooders think.”

*“No, something even worse happened, you are not saying it and I do not wish to hear it.”*

“Time is nearly up.” The guard was trying to hide her disgust.

“Don’t I know that? Last wise words, before you get involved with another lover, ask yourself for an example; for anybody named Druetti or



Clarke who was lucky in love.”

I could only nod to that, not wanting to mention Wolfgang or my daughter in this place, or with this person. She continued after winning the look away game.

“You are lucky to be still living in the twenty-first century in that feudal Lordship style that started wobbling on its base two hundred years ago now. The only other people who can do it are rock stars, drug lords and the original computer nerds and I wonder how much longer your type can go on in a world where the vote, mass migration and a hunger for your riches and your land and castle spread. Did you know that the world’s population goes up by nearly a quarter of a million every day and they all want to live like Hollywood families and if they know of Australia they call it Treasure Island? Who talks like that? Welsh coal miners living where there ain’t no coal anymore; Sikhs like the ones who set up young Ross; Pilipino mail order brides; American singers in a country where every tenth person tries to sing for their supper. Israelis or Palestinians? Whoever eventually loses in the Middle East Treasure Island indeed. They will come and Aussies will have children until the endlessly spreading endlessly farm and forest devouring quarter acre blocks of Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne all meet! Maybe at Eloura! Then reach for the sky in towers. There’s too much money and politics involved to stop it. Glad I won’t see it! You will! That is all I know. Now goodbye forever. It gets even worse for me from here on.”

And it did. No tragedies ever hit Fred. He got the kids, the house and the money and moved into Perth’s best suburb. When I recently saw photos of him in a magazine article showing off his yacht and his sailing rock star celebrity friends I thought Dear God, let him sail off to a typhoon in Africa, the Nullabor might not be wide enough, but it is.

It was not only the negatives that did not go as I expected. The

elderly, I knew for a certainty, were sure to ease me into my role as local dominant individual with their wise advice, but it did not happen. Keddy, Conrad, Alex and Murie all died within three years of gaining my inheritance. Keddy died suddenly of a stroke aged seventy-three while I was in Europe and I visited Conrad on what was meant to be an overnight stopover in Bombay, but found him in such a weakened state that I stayed paying medical bills until his funeral. Another one I paid for. I went to see Alex early one morning as that was when we liked listening to the morning news, to scan the papers for our own analysis and discuss relevant law and business over tea and eggs with pleasingly varying culinary accompaniments. Then came that unseasonably beautiful weather on that sad day when I arrived to find him with morning sunlight shining over him, he was lying slumped on the veranda settee, still breathing, just. He never regained consciousness. He lived twenty-six days longer in intensive care and nearly reached his ninety-fifth birthday in that state,

Alex's funeral was massive. His longevity, his legendary role in law, and his equally legendary part at Gallipoli landing and being the last Eloura survivor to serve in the Light Horse had given him local fame, so the ceremonies and respect were accorded with what goes to an unblemished successful man. And yet perhaps he would have sacrificed everything and decades of his long life to have returned to a loving wife and family in 1919, yes, the habitual bachelor was really a widower. Being co-executrix with Ruth meant going through his things and to my amazement, he had once been married, and with two children. There was the evidence in his family tree, in his bible and even more amazingly, photographs of her, a startlingly beautiful, alluringly sensual blonde, familiar from some past memory. In one she was jubilantly hugging a new-born, in the other she was in bridal white with him beside her in

officer's uniform with Uncle Evelyn and Aunt Helen on either side, obviously best man or maid of honour. Then the realisation came: she had been one of Evelyn's models and was in some paintings. What happened to her and the children was unclear. Assuming that he never mentioned them from grief I showed them to Ruth, who squinted, puzzled for half a minute and then became very curt.

"We will build a fire that will contain all such evidence. That bible where he dared to write such things would also be burned where it not that destroying God's word is a great sin. We had best secure it somewhere..."

"Why?"

"Why? Girl you are blind to sin! She was one of that monster's models, for want of a better word, even Ross never put his conquests on obscene display and Alex, despite his virtues and a life after her unblemished, was still a male and you know what they are like! You do not disgrace the dead by flouting their foolishness and their sinfulness!"

She snatched the photographs and tossed them towards the fire, but being fast meant that they now grace the Evelyn Chapman Gallery with captions explaining who they are next to the paintings, which cost, one coming from a Sotheby's auction. In one she is a medieval queen, in another in Edwardian clothes, and one is full frontal nude. Whoever she was remains a mystery: anyone who would have known is surely decades dead.

Ruth threatened to never speak to me again and when that did not work sicked Tom Caufield's son Jack, the retired MLA onto me, but lawyers said they had no case and I ignored the letters in the paper saying that I was a typical licentious, exhibitionist Clarke. When they first went on display Jack and Esmeralda Henderson turned up, Alison's son and daughter, faces hostile: hostility for me and the painting. She had the

physique and the cheery face of a boulder. Until now she was only seen in the distance, puffing as she toiled away in her seventies, just keeping the dilapidated old Caufield place going. Just here and there the collapsing old tin roof showed a dull silver patch among the almost disintegrating rust. Up close she had her nasty father's face and cold calculation was in her eyes, Jack Caufield MLA, DSO was an immaculately dressed little old man with the face of a rat waiting for the chance to attack. He took it.

“You are behind this... this pornography? Putting this up where children could see it?”

“Over the last week, our first since being installed, a few boys tittered and the same cranky old lady who complained about all the other nudes complained of this.”

“There are certainly enough of them aren't there?”

“Well he couldn't paint every gum tree and sheep in Australia. Though he made a good try.”

That got laughter from the audience in the background. She spoke.

“Should have known better that to talk sense to a Clarke, whatever your last name is.” Then she stormed out, coughing, He snarled, sighed and followed. Clearly Clarke-hating trouble and I made a generous offer to get her away, as she and her daughter Mary were both ageing and farm work is relentless: they took my offer.

That was it, the end of the great Caufield – Clarke vendetta that had been going on since at least Victoria's reign. With the purchase finally agreed on and very much her way, I saw Mary and her uncle for the last time at Murie's funeral, Jack and Mary both went into flats somewhere on Queensland's coast, while Esmeralda went into a cancer clinic. Murie had a long and happy life. Like his brother-in-law, he lived well into his nineties in good health until almost the end. The last time we met was at

the Australia Day bicentenary celebrations, when ruddy faced with cheer, he waved to me with a flagon in his hand. Perhaps wisely, he used his farm for nearly everything but farming. Ruth ran the bed and breakfast as they had so many unused rooms now that their daughters were gone.

When the musical fad of recording in farmhouses to get away from the city rat race started, he renovated and then rented out a disused storage shed and bought the recording equipment when the first band left it behind after a split involving infighting. He kept it and ran it well and then set up a restaurant which had jazz and folk nights. He loved that; jolly, burly and ruddy, he would sing along, knocking out the turns with a thick beer class. Sunday was for God and those non-musical nights went to running the picture show: all of these things he loved doing and all of them made him money. His Christianity had become more vague, genial and tolerant, while Ruth's had ossified into something more puritanical, loud and archaic. Perhaps he was aware that his wife was easier to love when contact was minimal. Even in Eloura, even in their nineties, change comes.

One thing that had changed since his death was that Eloura and for that matter Australia had changed, it had become self-conscious and with that, expensive. A massively increasing population and tourism fuelled expansion and pushed up prices. Working class clap board cottages now cost fortunes, even here, let alone in the price madness along the coast. Places like New Albion, The Pie shop, The Pharaoh, the 1922 bank, the churches and the virtually unchanged since 1853 local newspaper offices (which I rebought) had little plagues for the tourist heritage walk. Despite my best efforts to preserve the town we had a tacky tourist shop full of dinky-di koalas, psuedo-Aboriginal boomerangs painted by European tourists, gaudy yellow plastic beer mugs, and other atrocities, all imported from Asia, where the investment money came from and where profits

returned.

Change came to me that same year 1987, and I was glad I never had to tell Alex I was two months pregnant, although he possibly knew, the last breakfast together was wrecked by morning sickness: old bacon was a perhaps adequate cover. Ruth and the gossips had a field day with innuendoes and outright and loud public denunciations, even loud enough to get the hackers briefly looking up from their computers in the main street's internet café, (the other big change) and on another occasion getting the checkout girls stares, followed by their shrugs of the shoulders and waving their fingers round their ears and that was it. They went back to waiting customers. The old morality echoed, but did not resonate.

The world of sexuality had seemed dead to me or so I thought, but sexuality goes deep into the subconscious when suppressed. It was this beautiful summer day, which had an invigorating spring feeling to it, which was almost miraculous. I went for a morning swim, at the creek pool near Clarkestead and was annoyed, for there was a backpack and a towel and a he, fortunately only the one, his blond head turned away; odd to see a backpacker over thirty. I knew the rucksack brand, highest quality and of German manufacture, with a Danish flag sown on. I sighed and waited; eventually he was startled.

“Oh the pool is large enough.” He told me.

“So it is.”

“Does the landowner own the river as well? Will he object? Perhaps so, yes? Nobody swims here on this hot day, odd.”

“The owner will not object.”

He smiled, and dived, resurfacing gasping with turquoise from the bottom.

“I wondered how water could be so impossibly blue. They go to great depth. Odd to believe, and yet they must have been artificially

placed here, yes?”

“They were, eighty years past.”

“A rich country, for such a thing, so much space... Only mad King Ludwig, a hundred years past, do such a thing and he emptied Bavaria’s treasury.”

So we talked of mad King Ludwig and extravagant Max with his imported blue stones, my mad sad Siennese relatives and the places in Europe we had both visited and his Danish home and back to the pool.

“Yet it is beautiful, it makes the water clear to such a great depth, to see something so pellucid.”

“Pellucid? This means what?”

“Just like that.” I pointed to the pool, and told him how at the depth of two metres every little stone could be distinguished. He seemed disappointed with my definition. “That’s just the technical definition. Pellucid means a pure, clear crystal world of wonder, where water has vibrant life under its surface.”

He offered a bottled lemonade and took one himself, we sipped agreeably. I followed his gaze across the lush meadow, to the poplars, unusually green, to the distant purple mountains under a few fleecy clouds and a sun burnished blue sky. A few minutes passed with awkward glances.

“The day, and the land are beautiful.” He smiled as he spoke.

“So are you.” I did not believe I had said that, or what happened next. Faltering a little as I stood and pulled off my costume, I determined not to show any nerves and didn’t as I jumped in. He had the message, but was too nonplussed to do anything with it, initially. Soon we were circling in the water, playing a game, then he closed in for kissing, to start with. He was my second lover.

Amanda was born nine days late, on the first day of spring, 1987.

She made for a massive baby and a long painful birth, which had to be brought on by injections. After her and the horrible miscarriage with Byron's child, the doctor did not have to advise me not to have another. I had miscalculated, both with timing and need. I had told Wolfgang I had never done anything like that before and did not want to spoil one fine passionate day by entwining the dead hand of the world and its woes on us. He took me at my word and left – and returned suddenly three summers later, to Clarkestead, with the same rucksack and a stunned look.

“You talked like you were another tourist; not the owner of the district.”

“I own about a quarter of Eloura's land; town gossips exaggerate.”

“Only a quarter? Do they exaggerate a baby?”

“Common belief underestimates the life expectancy of sperm by a day, or even two. I was not using you to get pregnant, but I don't regret it, she's a lovely child. You can see her soon.”

He nodded, assessing what was just said, and me.

“When I said you were only my second lover and after celibacy for six years that was the truth.” I cut my vegie burger down the middle, and offered half to him. He ate with a pensive face.

“Three years ago I thought never to see you again, but the memory returns. My home... life's happy there, but... ”

“But?”

At that point what we had in common came in to show me a blooming crocus for the table display.

“Amanda this is your father.”

She looked up stunned and then as children will, immediately accepted him.

“Why are you late?”



“Oh there was much to do in Denmark.”

“Are you staying here now?”

He looked at me, the question was on his face and the fear of disappointment was coming into his eyes, he was not aware of that. That night after Amanda was asleep, negotiations began, he started

“My first romance and then my marriage failed because of opposite reasons. Helga believed in what she called free love, if a man looked attractive to her, she propositioned him – and I was supposed to take that calmly, I did not and never will.”

“And the opposite?”

“Astrid had, and has to have, total control of every thought, every movement and even with the most tolerant people, my sometimes desire for solitude, makes life difficult. When it leads to jealousy...”

“Byron was a totally lecherous, manipulating, lazy, drugged out, immature selfish user who expected me to pay attention to him twenty-four hours a day and never have a minute to myself. Maybe we should introduce him to Astrid and have a double wedding.”

After living together for a year, we married, but I kept my name; he insisted on signing a prenuptial agreement disbarring himself from my wealth (which he never touched or would accept, even at gift-giving times) and he stayed in Denmark in their summer, I only asked him why he always returned there, once.

“In Copenhagen I am my own man. Here I am the Queen’s consort, just like Prince Albert to Queen Victoria and I want a home, not that pseudo-Gothic museum. Only neurotic nouveau rich English speakers who saw too many horror movies as children build like that.” We ended up spending more time at Clarkestead, smaller but sunnier, and if the views were not as panoramic, they were pleasing, willows and gums by the creek, meadows for and aft, mountains in the distance. While in his

shop in Denmark he was assiduously and sedulously involved with his work as a wooden musical instruments maker and restorer. His status in his profession was so great that one commission was for a Stradivarius and abundant requests for his services came across the world. Several times we went back with him, but with the custody visits from his first bitter marriage it was awkward, her children blamed us, but oddly not Amanda, who they saw as exotic, as if Eloura was the American Wild West or the frontier world of *Out of Africa*.

One return visit early year before last he was not on the train at Eloura Station. Back home I got his Danish answering machine telling me he was in Australia. Finally an e-mail came from the former wife, Wolfgang had been found dead in his office, a massive heart attack. I responded with the abbreviated candour that comes in cyberspace.

“This is a vicious joke, another of your designs to split us up. Wolfgang has never had any heart trouble, nobody in his family has. We are planning his fiftieth for next month. He exercises regularly, never smoked, and doesn’t do junk food or alcohol... Never stresses...”

The response was cyberspace brief and callous.

“The funeral will be Monday morning nine sharp. Confirm or deny your arrival. Astrid Blixen.”

Getting over this for both of us was so hard, I still have not. Everything Byron was not and I wanted him to be, Wolfgang was. Thirteen years of happiness. It was harder for Amanda, who went very quiet.

“Mum why do we live in this creepy place?”

“Space and views.”

“Which we share with ghosts. It is like Grandfather Ross has just gone for a drive and will be back in time for tea and to polish the glass case that holds the flag he captured on Gallipoli Landing Day when he

killed fifty Turks before breakfast to get his trophy. Ah, here look at the big wide window where Grandfather God's mistress thought the Great Bushfire of sixty-eight was Satan's flames coming for her and defiant to the last, she conjured up her Scottish spectres, clan warriors all, to show him what she was made of, while the demon's arch servant, one Albert Moon, was being saved by his enemies in the bitter blood feud over nobody knows what. Ah! We approach the spot on the veranda where his wife Grandma Clarke died and we know that for sure because her rocker still rocks there and there is Red Horace's room left just as he left it when he ran away in 1940 for some reason."

"So you have renounced your plans to be an archivist cum curator for some reason."

"Working in a museum is one thing, living in one is another."

"Uhm, all those things you mentioned were told to you because you did ask."

"This grim granite place... is a perfect museum so let it be one. The gallery isn't. The paintings are clashing with the post-modernist architecture. Great Uncle Evelyn's paintings would be perfect for the parlour and the downstairs bedrooms and we could leave the Ottoman Room and Uncle Horace's room as it is. 1940 was so long ago now. The terrace could be for al fresco tea coffee cakes sandwiches made in the kitchen and all we need will be one room for an office and a bedroom each if we need to stay over. We could have garden tours and save on rates by shutting the Chapman gallery or maybe even turning it into town houses... Laura Holmes mother is an architect and she says she can do it for under sixty thousand and people always want to live in the centre of town..."

Any other time I would have told her to stop being precocious and that "only sixty thousand dollars" was a clear warning to curtail signs of a

rich bitch princess emerging. As teens Elena, Craig, Young Ross and I talked of 'only fifty cents.'

Yet this was the last days of 2004 and we had just passed our second sad Christmas without him and this was the first sign of enthusiasm or cheer seen from my relentlessly listless daughter since that terrible day, so it had to be encouraged and for once life went according to plan. Rent from what was the gallery and was now town houses paid the operating costs of the Pharaoh, our Egyptian art deco picture show and beloved pet white elephant, a death bed promise passed on, but a promise kept and we were both happy to do so.

Yet what Amanda said was truer than she knew, for if the Pharaoh made people happy and brightened their world, Ahmegodheho only brightened the world of me and my deprived siblings in childhood, for everybody else it brought gloom. All that endless money and at the end, Grandfather desperately wanted to die with the happiness that came from being on a creek bank on a sunny day, a thing anyone, any pauper could have.

Even so, I often slept up there now; on Sundays and before 8:30 and after 4:00 it was as if the tourists were never there. Perhaps a town house might be enough; Amanda had taken a lover, at thirty something Eustace Clarke (the same who saw me sweeping floors in Melbourne in 1981) was the head of the English Department at Eloura High, the youngest child of Uncle Eustace and living proof of the handsomeness of Clarkes. More than one tourist thought pictures of Ross and Robert had been faked using Eustace. Seventeen was too young for marriage to a man about twice her age, but it was also too young for morning sickness and feeling used and abandoned. Daughters should follow their mother's advice about contraception, but seldom do. The wedding would be in the April school holidays and fortunately he had old Eustace's reliability, but with

added imagination and flair. As he was the handsomest man I had ever seen it was hard to blame her.

The ultrasound showed no problems for the male on the way, but as they had already decided to name him Ross I was not so sure about the no problems part later in life. We decided that as the wedding would be in the Clarkestead parlour, all the things there would be should all go on display at Ahmegodheho. The old 1897 Jubilee display, the swords and great-grandfather's jubilee uniform, the swords, flags, genealogies and photographs, fans and preserved flowers under glass would all go to Ahmegodheho. The massively long cedar table and benches in the kitchen would stay, being perfect for the reception, after a cleaning. It was striking, being twelve metres long and half-moon shaped, but it was grimy with the carbon of ten thousand fires and nobody could recall a varnishing since we Druetti siblings gave it one around 1960.

“Ms. Druetti could you have a look at this. It opens up, I think”

Eustace was always polite. With prising from chisels and oil on what turned out to be groaning latches and hinges, Amanda, Eustace and hired help got the lid up and there was a hollowed out central section, full of exercise books and texts, toys, teacher's equipment and two armies of lead soldiers, one Indian or Arab, the other British redcoats.

There was the class photo dated in the corner. ‘*Last day of the Chestnut's School December 13<sup>th</sup> 1895*’ In the back row are the parents, my maternal great-grand parents. The man Frank died the year after my father was born, but the great-grandmother Rachel died less than two years before my birth. Elena could clearly remember her, saying she was like an Egyptian mummy, but could talk. She had a way of calling her 'child' as she interrogated her about wasting matchsticks. In the photo her resemblance to Grandfather was startling. To their side (another great back) stood proper looking Victorians, children of Waterloo veterans.

There were documents in that parlour that took my maternal grandfather's family back to 1223. Beside them were the Max and Zelda he always talked about, once the big man in the district, seemingly holding the reins of control as I do now, although my mother, who knew them well, said she was the brains and the power behind her husband. How the world changes: the hidden power of women is now obvious.

There were Alison's parents and her in pigtails, smiling up to some mischief, one hand affectionately on Grandfather's shoulder, he sitting in front of her, with his friends. I did not recognise the faces, but the caption had their names and many matched those from the war memorial; Alison's brothers Douglas and Allen Fisher. That last one was also familiar from a memorial in the Anglican Church, 'Allen Fisher, killed at the landing April 25<sup>th</sup>, 'A hero of Gallipoli'.

That made it poignant, those poor boys, smiling, not knowing what the little they would see of the century would bring them in horrors, others I knew of. Allison's husband that horrible Tom Caufield, whom I met only that once in Gringila 1965, Alex and his brother Doctor Karl, Uncle Evelyn, smiling so self-confidently and dashing standing beside that pleasant looking Leo Chapman Byron mocked at his funeral, the man who survived in an oil bath for nearly fifty years, preserved like some creature in an ether-filled bottle... At the end were Ruth's smiling assured parents, their hands on their other son, Grandmother's first husband Andrew, something familiar that would not quite link... Ruth was a baby swaddled in her mother's arms. Underneath them was the optimistic caption 'Ruth and Andrew, students for the twentieth century.' This was apt, for he was enshrined as a guiltless youth, (also apparently preserved forever) as the innocence lost at Gallipoli, while she had only died in her sleep early in January, while her relatives were planning her 110<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations in the lounge room.

In one long lifetime the world had changed so much. The real-life models for those little tin red coated soldiers had ruled one quarter of the world's surface and population, and few questioned their right to do it or the theories of racial and religious superiority which served not just as justification for it, but as it being a duty. 1895 was the year of the Empire's war against Moslems up in what is now colloquially known as the Stans and it went unnoticed, now I hear of battles in Afghanistan and Pakistan daily, hourly if I wish to go on the net. Oscar Wilde went on trial for homosexuality in 1895 and suffered imprisonment, scandal, ostracism and ultimately exile and poverty while royalty commented that it was amazing that he was still alive, as men like that usually shot themselves. Now even attempts to outrage moral opinion with extravagant displays of homosexual behaviour are passé; it can and is viewed when everybody watches Sydney's gay Mardi Eras on television.

The first commercial films were released in 1895 and seemed a wonder, now the average American watches television fifty-four hours a week and that excludes going out to films and computer games. One expert claims the average American now spends eleven years of their life in front of a screen of some kind. Australia would not be far behind. Phones, books and refrigerators were luxuries then, now the average student has a phone on their body, and if they wish it can carry internet connections, e-books and cds that contains much more books and information than the whole world contained in 1895. In that year feminism, psychology, Marxism and socialism were in their infancy; now they dominate human thought. Flight, penicillin, television, radios, computers and nuclear weapons were unknown: Amanda's last assignment was to choose one of the above six and discuss its global importance in changing life.

The era of rigid hierarchy and hereditary aristocracy was also gone,

Men like my great-grandfather, and Max Chapman and Grandfather as ideals were nearly as remote as the medieval lords they emulated. I was supposedly heir to the line, but even if I wanted to, a junkie's lover who had a child out of wedlock and tolerates an unwed pregnant daughter could hardly pose as a defender of public morals. A 1960s radical and atheist upholding law and order? And against what and for who? The community did not want that any more, and rightly. There was more to duty than donations and sitting through sermons. Duty led to being strung out on the Somme's barbed wire, to gassing Jews and gassing Jews, to fascism and obeying Stalin and napalming children and Jervis's repressive boring world. Alice Clarke, Katie Dean Clarke and Alison Caufield lived lives of dutiful misery until they escaped duty as much as they escaped their husbands. Setting up my brother for jail to prosper an Indian jailer's family was duty. And for what? Where was the paradise all these things supposedly led to? Why not enjoy life, what was here now? Duty was the suppression not just of desire, but of people.

And yet in the triumph of the common man an oddity emerged: nobody loved tales of royalty and aristocrats more than the people in council flats and housing estates. The BBC knew that television series set in the English country houses or castles would be a success. *Gone with the Wind*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *The Sound of Music*, *Out of Africa* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy were among the biggest grossing films of all time. *Highlander*, *Tarzan* and every western was all about the longing for that past world. King Arthur and his knights are perennially popular. American and Australian soaps on the worlds of the rich and powerful do well. Such stories always have and perhaps always will. Tolstoy, The Brontes, Austen, Galsworthy, the Waugh brothers, Compton Mackenzie, Howatch, John O'Hara, McCullough and Delderfield all still sell well.

As if to illustrate the thought, a mud-splattered car with Victorian



licence plates was in the driveway, loaded with camping gear and kids. Hubby had a map out, scrunched and rightly, I knew that local tourist map, it lacked detail. This had happened before. He nodded vexed.

“We came through the town and they said Ahmegodheho was only a few kilometres out on the only road out on this side”

“They probably meant Fisher’s Road, the sealed road running north south. This unsealed road goes to the coast and does not show up on maps.”

*Because I paid hefty bribes to the council dependent on donations to make sure it would not so people like you would not vex me.*

“You need to reverse and after five kilometres turn left, at the sealed road intersection, you can actually see Ahmegodheho from there.”

“It will probably be shutting by the time we get there, and we are due back in Melbourne tomorrow night.”

“It won’t be shut.”

“We rang them on our mobile; they said they cannot keep it open.”

I rang them on mine, then told the tourists they had until six. They probably lived in a suburban unit and hungered for remembered childhood days of a paid off house on a quarter acre block within walking distance of the beach; an Australian memory going the way of convicts, bushrangers, uncrowded beaches and singing 'God Save the Queen.'

“You work at Ahmegodheho?”

“I own it.”

Eyes enlarged, some jaws dropped. One boy of around ten clutching an action hero was excited.

“Is it true that he killed fifty Turks and got three Victoria Cross awards before lunch in one day and then he married a Russian princess with millions?”

“Visit and find out.” I said it smiling, with a sweetness in my voice,

a little thing my grandfather never did or considered what its effects might be.

They took off, grateful and awed. Amanda and Eustace came out in overly varnish-splattered overalls and gloves. Like all Clarkes they were not adept at manual work.

“Tourists?”

“More who would like to be heirs to Ahmegodheho.”

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