

**‘FOOTPRINTS’
(A NOVELLA FOR ADULTS)
AND
‘SKETCHY BUSINESS’
(A NOVEL FOR YOUNG READERS)
and
‘ALIENATION AND BOUNDARIES IN SELECTED WORKS
OF TIM WINTON WRITTEN FOR ADULTS
AND FOR YOUNG READERS’**

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ABSTRACT

Western Australian author Tim Winton said that if we accept boundaries other people set for us then we're just suckers. His comment reflects the hypocrisy and fickleness of many boundaries, and the flimsy foundation of alienation that may arise from being on the 'wrong' side of a boundary. The issue of alienation and associated boundaries is explored in each of the three components that comprise this creative writing thesis. The novella for adults, *Footprints*, set in Japan and in Broome, Western Australia, focuses the theme of alienation and boundaries on the WWII internment of the Japanese pearl diver Hiroshi, attempting to paint a picture of the human side of the Japanese population that was demonised en masse during the war. The novel for young readers, *Sketchy Business*, elicits the theme through the over-eager newshound Pollo, whose biased assumptions lead to damaging false judgements about a newcomer to her town, and through Pollo's offsider, Will, who is having family troubles. The dissertation explores the concepts of alienation and boundaries as rendered by Winton in his novels *Dirt Music* and *Lockie Leonard, Legend*. It looks, in particular, at Winton's manipulation of narrative elements such that *Legend*, though departing from several commonly accepted conventions of young readers' fiction, maintains strong appeal to its young audience.

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FOOTPRINTS
(a novella for adults)

Suna-hama ni

Ashi-ato nagaki

Haru hi kana

— MASAOKA SHIKI

A spring day —

A long line of footprints

On the sandy beach.

CHAPTER ONE

He moves through grey-green shafts of light, his lead-cast soles raising puffs of sand, toward a patch in the seagrass darker than the rest. He stoops to lever the mollusc from its anchor, holds it to the portal of his helmet — at arm's length to see its entirety. Smiles. Another beauty, its gnarly face nearly a foot across — far bigger than they pulled in shallower beds the previous day. The gamble to work the deep channel is paying off. He slots the shell in his bag with the rest.

He sees the dark blur of Takashi on the other side of the lugger, bending to the sea floor. Nudged by the current, feeling the press of the greater depth, Hiroshi adjusts the valve on his helmet to allow more air. Six fat fingermarks slide by and angle away as one. His breath within his brass bubble sucks and exhales, sucks and exhales. The tomp-tomp-tomp of the air compressor forty fathoms above trembles down the air-hose into the space around his head like an infant heartbeat.

It is eleven days since he saw her. Shinju. Eleven years, more, since he held her. She was womanly in a different way, not like before — her body fuller but her face hollow, the candle-glow of her hair, held off her neck now by metal pins, extinguished. The war and the eight years since had changed people. Times had been hard, perhaps harder on Shinju than him. He had lost a wife, yes, but sympathy was spread thin in his country since the war and he needed no share of it. While he had respected Koiko in their little time together and adored their daughter, Etsuko, he had never lost himself to Koiko as he had to Shinju.

He hadn't expected Shinju to be in Broome when he came back, but a tiny grain of him had hoped. He saw that now. After all the years, he hoped he might tender the kiss, the dream of which had pillowed him through their wasted years apart while he idled in camps enclosed by barbed wire. If Shinju was still in Broome with this kiss they might, at last, make their broken world whole. He had gone from citizen to prisoner and back again. Signatures on papers, government edicts. He had no more time for society's categories and boundaries and what was thought proper — the war and time had ripped all that apart. Yes, he admits, he had hoped.

Hiroshi scuffs a mollusc with his boot, bends slowly to prise it up and slots it in his bag alongside the others. He doesn't see Takashi — a butterfly thought.

He was edging through the crowd outside the Sun when she appeared. There in front of him, no more than six feet away. He saw the tiny globes of perspiration glowing on her lip from the theatre bulbs above, then that fellow drawing up beside her, reaching down and touching his handkerchief to her lip that way.

If only Shinju's eyes had lifted to this man's, Hiroshi would have slipped away. With time the jagged hole of his love for her might have filled with the sediment of life. But something had made her look his way instead. And he'd seen the flood of sorrow and the storm of bitter regret for the war and the ring on her finger. Hiroshi tried to turn but couldn't. They had stood in the dust of Carnarvon Street, townsfolk milling between them, until their futures evaporated like summer rain, until the man with the handkerchief took Shinju by the elbow and pulled her away, not so gently.

Hiroshi becomes aware of tugging on his air pipe. How many has it been? Four, his tender, Shoji, beckoning him to the surface? He peers through his helmet portals. Visibility is poorer than ... how long ago? The shafts of green have merged into brown, blurring shapes. There is no sign of Takashi. The current is eddying, stirring the sediment. Water pressure has changed, the fish are skittish. He adjusts his air valve and draws a long breath. Again, he feels tugging on his air pipe. He counts this time. Four. Far above, the crew will be eyeing the western sky where the clouds will be blackening, their hair strands lifting in the electric air. He has put others at risk. They'll be wanting to get out of there, ahead of the storm that is on its way.

He tugs four times on his breast rope, telling Shoji he's ascending. Should he go straight to the surface this time? Plenty would. Like Koichi had. Koichi's dead red eyes float before Hiroshi's. No — he's been down too long. He'll stage as much as he can, as much as he dares. They're far out to sea, far away from the decompression chamber in town. And he's deep ... so deep.

Clinging to his breast rope, Hiroshi allows himself to be reeled slowly upwards by the crew on the surface, the tomp-tomp of the air compressor, the clinking of shells in his basket, the creaking of taut ropes a comforting confluence of sounds. He rises ten fathoms. He tugs on his line to stage.

But there's no pause in his ascent. He's rising faster now than the bubbles of his exhaled air. The surface of the water has disappeared. It must be like dusk up

there, he thinks. Then he feels it, a distinct forward movement ... the slippage of the anchor, their lugger being pushed ... quickening ... by strong wind.

He hears the muted thick throb of the lugger engine kicking up. Hiroshi can barely see his gloves in front of him as he lurches through the stony grey. He's rising too fast. He tugs to Shoji to slow but his tender ignores him again. His blood pushes from within, pressing against his skin, at the membranes of his eyes. He's at twenty fathoms, he estimates — too far still from the surface. His vision is beginning to waver, sparkles of light fountaining behind his closed lids. *Popping eyes, twisted limbs, Koichi's helmet wrenched from his purple, swollen head.* Hiroshi exhales, emptying his lungs and drags three deep breaths, ensnaring as much oxygen as he can. He grabs his breast rope to create slack. He draws out his knife.

In Taiji. They were fishing from Turtle Rock when his father caught a wooden box. Hauled it out of the deep black-blue onto the rocks, his bamboo bending like it would snap at any breath. But as his father scraped eagerly through crusting barnacles with his fishing knife, Hiroshi scrambled to his mother and buried his face in the folds of her blue kimono.

She pushed back his fringe and kissed his forehead. 'Shsh ... the box won't hurt Father. The Dragon Palace is only a fairy story.' She looked at her husband and smiled. 'But, to be on the safe side, Father promises not to open the box just now, don't you?'

His father was squatting by the box, his knife already in its metal catch. He laid the blade on the glinting black rock reluctantly. 'If I must' he said, 'but it would be nice to know why.'

The Kumano Sea lapping, fish flapping in their basket, his mother's kimono warm-scented in the sun, Hiroshi's mother told his father the tale. It was the tale of the gentle young fisherman who, in the Upper World of land and sky, rescued a stranded turtle. As thanks, the turtle carried the fisherman on his back down to a kingdom in a hidden valley at the bottom of the sea — Rin Jin, the Dragon Palace, a most magnificent place. A kind, beautiful sea princess and happy fish servants looked after the young fisherman well and time slipped by.

‘But one day, he wanted to return to his family,’ said his mother, in her soft, low voice, ‘— as I’m sure you would too,’ she’d added, with a smile toward his father.

As the ocean lowered on the tide, not yet enough for the family to wade to the base of the bluff and climb their way home, Hiroshi’s mother continued. The princess, she said, wished the fisherman well and gave him an exquisite lacquered box. It would keep him safe and strong, she promised, as long as he never opened it. The young man returned to the Upper World on the turtle’s back with the precious box. But when he reached his old village, he found that hundreds of years had passed. People wore strange clothes and talked differently. Not a single soul recognised him. Feeling sorry for himself, the fisherman turned to the beautiful box and, there on the sand at the water’s edge, opened it. A cloud of purple smoke billowed from within it. When it cleared, the fisherman looked at his reflection in the shiny surface of the sea and found, to his terror, a withered old man. He snapped shut the box and rushed into the water, calling for the turtle. But the turtle didn’t return. Eventually the ancient fisherman let the tide float him away.

Hiroshi’s mother tickled his cheek. ‘But it is just a fairy tale, Hiro-chan.’

Hiroshi, though, jumped up and grabbed the wooden box by his father’s feet. ‘No!’ he cried. And before his father could stop him, he hurled it into the dark sea where they watched it sink and sway from sight in a trail of bubbles.

With numb fingers, Hiroshi saws through the last fibres of his breast rope, blindly ties its end to his basket of shell. He slashes his air hose and feels the water around him soften as the hose recoils above him. His leaden boots draw him down as the basket rises. Hiroshi feels his mother’s hand on his forehead and hears his father’s laugh and sees the light catch the effervescent trail of the wooden box’s descent. And the bubbles of his own breath swirl and collide as they glide to the Upper World.

He comes to rest, forty fathoms below, his body waving like the seagrass around him — gold and jade and temple-red. Nine-finned fish dart between the fronds. There are mossy bamboo glades, smooth green ponds, cherry trees in gaudy blossom. Beside a shell path, sea-creatures raise welcoming lanterns, their warming glow drifting across his bare, albescent skin. He treads upon sand, silky like flour beneath the soles of his feet. The graceful curves of the Rin Jin emerge from a

waterfall. And through the shimmer, he sees her, her hair like sunlight. Shinju. She steps toward him, her toes lifting puffs of mist, and they hold close while somewhere a temple bell sounds — softly, and more softly, its peal quivering on the air till a tranquil silence surrounds him.

CHAPTER TWO

Tsugi wa Yotsuya-aaa-aaa. Yotsuya desu. The station announcement crackled above the swaying passengers. Yotsuya station coming up. Eleven stops after that to the end of the Marunouchi line at Ogikubo where he'd transfer to the Chūō rail line. From there he'd be at his apartment in fifty-seven minutes.

At Ogikubo, Kazuo left the subway, picking up a newspaper at the kiosk, and walked quickly, just short of running, along the platform to the waiting above-ground train. He climbed onboard and fell towards an empty row of seats. He took the aisle, dumped his briefcase on the seat between himself and the window, spread the newspaper over his face and feigned deep sleep. He wouldn't have to stay like that for long. In a few stops there'd be plenty of space for everyone.

He should have stopped for a drink. A whisky or two at the bar across from the station would have done him good. What was there to rush home for? To help his six-year-old nephew with his homework and hear him recite the long-winded plot of some TV episode? To take food off the flame while his sister lingered on Facebook? To climb into the top bunk in a room papered in Disney heroes and try to sleep with a Shrek night-light casting a green glow?

The interview at the Katsui Company hadn't gone at all well. Four executives sitting with their backs to the fortieth-storey glass wall and the hazy sun. He could barely make out who was speaking to him. When they asked him why he wanted to work there, he shouldn't have thought so long before answering. Silly of him not to have prepared a lie. Any reason other than, 'Because I am imposing on my sister and her husband in their small apartment. Because my family is embarrassed for me, given my prospects were once so bright.' Not that he'd said it.

They'd put an electric razor in his hand. How would he improve on it, they wanted to know, assuming, hypothetically, no scientific or engineering impediments. All he could think of was his mother buzzing a miniature version, as small as her thumb, perhaps stencilled with a cherry blossom, over the dark down below her ears on her jaw line. He'd told them that and laughed, just a little. The faceless men hadn't.

It was almost three years since he'd been awarded his PhD and still he was drifting. The position on Professor Yamaguchi's research team everyone had assumed would be his forever had been cut. The GFC. Other positions around the country were

taken by then by the myriad of other eager graduates. His father reacted as though Kazuo had died, perhaps in a laboratory explosion.

Throughout his PhD Kazuo had felt blessed to be around when the synergy of the computer, biotech and quantum revolutions meant that any tiny brain-spark of his might actually help alleviate cancer or poverty or global warming. More knowledge had been amassed in the previous fifty years than in all human history, and he was part of this avalanche of learning.

But he was falling out of touch. At the nanotech symposium in Nagoya three months ago his colleagues had indulged him with an excess of patience and encouragement. He'd felt like a child allowed to join the adults in a card game. And now here he was today, begging to join a company that specialised in personal grooming appliances.

Kazuo opened his eyes, blinking in the white light of the train. Around him, people slouched in their seats, chins on chests, bags and briefcases clamped onto laps. Two rows ahead, the tooled leather shoes of a snoring salaryman jutted into the aisle. Above him, a man gripped the strap of the handrail and lolled, half-asleep, with the rhythm of the train, his face rocking in and out Kazuo's space, filling it with whisky breath.

Kazuo took his iPad from his briefcase and tapped on the folder containing his schedule for Sei Chizu — the 'hire-a-friend' agency that was keeping his bank balance alive. His sister had shown him the 'Person Wanted' ad as a joke. Sei Chizu — Say Cheese — the fake-smile command that his fellow Japanese had taken to heart. He hated the name for its falseness, its feigned happiness ... and the truth with which it described his dealings.

He brought up the email containing his speech for the wedding tomorrow. It had been written by the groom. Kazuo was Best Man — a pressure role, but worth the five thousand yen. He was to meet the groom in the hotel lobby at one p.m. The groom had Kazuo's photo.

The day after that, he had an appointment with Tanaka Satsuki. For the last three months they'd been meeting at two o'clock every second Sunday at Nakanoshima Park, strolling by the water for an hour then going their separate ways. She was nine years older than he, lived alone and ran a small property settlement

agency from her apartment, ‘making other people’s dreams come true,’ as she put it. Satsuki talked and Kazuo listened. He’d learned not to ask personal questions — she shied away from them like a snail from salt — but their meetings probably helped as much as the therapy the Californians had cherished when he’d been there on exchange, with fresh air and exercise thrown in. He knew *he* always felt better afterwards. He was fairly certain it was mutual.

Despite her general distrust of people and life, her persistent gloom, her defiant bad grooming and the fact that, officially at least, he was nobody to her, Kazuo liked Satsuki. He wanted to suggest she come with him sometime to visit his parents in Taiji; that she look out from the bluff over the cliffs and coves and rocky islets of the Kumano Sea and be restored, like he was, with the peace of knowing it was all greater than one, that there was only so much a person could do. In his mind, he went to the bluff in Taiji after every bad job interview.

But he could lose his job with Sei Chizu if Mr Hajimoto, the manager, sniffed something more intimate than the scheduled agent–client meetings. ‘Freedom from even the threat of entanglement is the cornerstone of the Sei Chizu service,’ Hajimoto warned Kazuo before signing him on. Kazuo needed the job if he was ever to afford his own place, and Hajimoto was giving him more and more assignments lately. Kazuo was clever enough to handle questions at a bar or a train stop about someone he’d professed to love like family, although he loathed the lying; and he snapped up the bookings that many other agents hesitated over — the ones that, although paying more, required something extra like a speech or a song or a tear. In the past five months Kazuo had discovered quite a talent for virtual grief. It counterbalanced nicely his virtual contentment with his stranded life.

They took the Midosuji Line to Shin-Osaka to pick up the nine-twenty-two fast train to Wakayama. Satsuki refused to hurry as Kazuo would have, and he sensed that to urge her would lead to time-consuming discussion. She visited the ladies’ and bought a can of warm coffee from the vending machine, fishing for the exact one-twenty yen as though the machine wouldn’t give change. Kazuo held her things and bit his lip.

The train schedules between Osaka and Taiji were programmed into him. If they missed the Shinkansen leaving in six minutes he’d be in uncharted waters. Like a tourist, he’d have to study the electronic display hanging from the ceiling. He

wouldn't know when to expect to reach Taiji after switching to the slow train in Wakayama. If he found out and called his parents, they'd just as likely not hear the phone. His father, waiting at Taiji station in the Yaris with the engine running, would worry. He'd go home and call Kazuo's sister to check Kazuo was coming. Then his sister would find out he was taking a friend — a female friend — and he'd never hear the end of it. It was far better they made the nine-twenty-two.

They did, which gave Kazuo time to wonder how his life had become so regimented that he had to worry about such things. At least he'd thrown caution aside and done what felt right by asking Satsuki along today — his first spontaneous act in a long while. Satsuki took the window seat, unfolded the tray-table for her coffee and the wrapped box of wagashi sweets she'd bought for Kazuo's mother, and gazed like a child at the square towers of the city strobing past. Soon they were flying above suburbs and garden plots and school playgrounds and, eventually, the mercury sweep of the Yamato River that signalled he was on his way home.

Kazuo's father Kiyoshi, in his best blue suit, drove, Satsuki sitting beside him up front. Kazuo had warned his parents he and Satsuki were just friends, but knew it was pointless. When Kazuo told his mother he was bringing Satsuki, she would have hurried to the shrine, tossed her coins and prayed for the union's success as soon as she'd hung up the phone.

They skirted the bay dotted with fish farms and crossed the bridge with its cement dolphin statues beneath the new whale-and-calf sculpture on its red poles. Glossy Kujirahama Park, the whale aquarium, came into view, nestled at the foot of the thickly wooded tsunami evacuation park. A show was in progress, an amplified commentary bouncing across the forecourt and through the car windows. Satsuki swung her head as they passed.

'We can go there later, perhaps,' said Kazuo.

He saw the tiny shudder. 'Or perhaps not.' She turned and added, 'Thank you, though.'

They dodged the base of the cliff and climbed the bend. As the black mouth of a cliff tunnel appeared, Kiyoshi suddenly grinned and swung into a car park just short

of it. He jumped out and jogged around to open Satsuki's door. 'Forgive me,' he said. 'It is Kazuo's homecoming ritual.'

They crossed the road to the viewing platform, Kazuo lagging behind. Ahead, steep cliffs covered in twisting pines framed a glittering sea. Below nestled a cove, a beach of small grey stones sloping into clear peacock-blue water.

Satsuki gazed and inhaled deeply. 'Exquisite,' she said.

'It's Kazuo's favourite place in the whole of Taiji,' Kiyoshi beamed.

'Mine and half the town's,' said Kazuo. 'I spent half my summers here. Of course, that stuff wasn't out there back then.' He pointed across the water to a line of small white buoys that, like a double-stranded pearl choker, bisected the bay before doubling back on itself, a sign bobbing from side to side on a larger float towards the middle.

Satsuki shaded her eyes. 'Is it a safety net?' she asked.

Kazuo looked at his father and back to Satsuki. 'You wouldn't know I suppose. Not many in Japan do. The bay is empty at the moment but –'

'It's for the foreigners,' Kiyoshi interrupted. 'Silly Americans who think they know best.'

'Ah, the show-offs who swim out too far,' said Satsuki. 'Thoughtful it's in English then.' She smiled. 'Maybe they should do away with it.'

Kazuo laughed nervously, teetering between letting Satsuki think what she would and telling her the truth. He didn't need binoculars to know what the sign said. It was a warning, though not an altruistic one. Each visit at this time of the year he hoped it would have disappeared, but from September through to March these days it was always the same: 'All dolphins and whales inside this net are property of the Fisheries Association. Any presence in the netted area without Association permission is trespassing and will be grounds for prosecution.'

Kazuo stood at the rail of the viewing platform between Satsuki and his father, his conscience twisting. Taiji worshipped whales and dolphins but had no qualms about rounding up dolphin periodically over the winter months, sending the sleek handsome ones to aquariums around the world and slaughtering the rest to sell for their meat. Around the corner where the culling took place, he remembered vividly the

water blood red, sloshing in the bottom of the men's dinghies, mingling with the stones on the shore. He'd never taken part as some of his friends had, leaning over the gunwales and jabbing spears into the herded beasts, but, growing up with it, he'd accepted it. Then some Americans made a film. A documentary. It won an Oscar. The world looked in on Taiji and hissed. Westerners the same age as him, with dreadlocks and cameras and snorkels and surfboards, began to congregate and sabotage.

Kazuo didn't like the dolphin killing, but nor were his fishermen friends, or the women in the whale-meat shops who chatted as they weighed and wrapped, blunt-brained murderers either. He was left feeling anxious and vaguely guilty. With Satsuki beside him he felt the need to explain, to rationalise, but he found himself lacking. It all went too deep. And why taint the day when it had barely begun?

'Shall we go?' he said, conspicuously checking his watch. 'Mother will be waiting.' He cupped Satsuki's elbow and whispered, 'Let's get this over with.'

The Yaris revved up the steep hill on the other side of town, Taiji harbour with its fishing boats and yellow-tarpaulined fishermen's huts below, the Kumano Sea beyond. Satsuki seemed to be looking ahead to the jagged islands. It was just as well, thought Kazuo. Below, inside the cement breakwater on the other side of the harbour, was the familiar grid of floating pens. The water flashed frothy white in patches, from time to time parting for glossy grey bodies to carve their seamless curves of breathing and diving. The lucky ones, depending on your view — aquarium-bound bottlenoses picked for their built-in smile and resemblance to Flipper.

They arrived at the family home squeezed onto a wedge between vegetable plots and an ancient lane that sloped sharply, back down the hill, through giant arching trees, towards town. His mother, Etsuko, was snipping shrivelled stems from a pot beside the front door. She bustled up to envelop Kazuo in a quick hug then bowed to Satsuki, who bowed in return and offered her the box of wagashi.

Satsuki was talkative over lunch, putting aside her cynicism and warming herself to Kazuo's parents with compliments and questions. Etsuko, having assessed Satsuki's advanced years and general plainness, seemed to accept that her son and she were mere friends. The gathering was relaxed, not suffocating as Kazuo had feared. Kazuo tensed when a whale-meat dish was placed on the table, wondering if Satsuki would recognise the dark flesh, once again feeling the need to apologise for something

he'd grown up with. But while Satsuki hadn't complimented that particular dish she hadn't queried its origins.

After lunch, when Etsuko brought out the family albums, Kazuo winced and groaned. Satsuki ignored him and pulled her chair closer. 'My family doesn't keep photos,' she said.

'Really?' said Etsuko.

Satsuki shook her head. 'Not that I've ever seen. My parents aren't much for sentiment. They don't see the past as part of us. They're all for the here and now ... well, make that the "what's next"?''

'That sounds just like Kazuo!' laughed Kiyoshi. 'Always looking around the next corner and worrying, never stopping to feel the earth beneath his feet.'

Kazuo rolled his eyes.

Satsuki looked at him closely. 'Very different from my parents but ... yes ... I've seen that in him.'

Kazuo crossed and re-crossed his legs.

Etsuko got up, breaking the awkward silence, and crossed the room to the tokonoma alcove. She brought back a photograph Kazuo knew well and placed it reverently in Satsuki's hands. It was in sepia colours of a young man at sea.

'This is my father,' said Etsuko. 'Ishikawa Hiroshi. He was a pearl diver in Australia for years. He spent the war locked up there, along with all the other Japanese. He came home afterwards and married my mother, but she died giving birth to me and he went back. This was taken before the war, where he died, in a place called Broome. He is just about to slip into the water, so it looks, but for his diving helmet.'

'Yes, that would rather spoil the photo,' laughed Satsuki. She studied it. 'It's amazing.' She looked up at Kazuo. 'You look exactly like him.'

'I've always thought so. It's nice, I think,' said Etsuko. 'I have very little else in my father's memory — just the photo and a letter home to my grandparents at the outbreak of the war. He might have sent others but they didn't make it.'

'It surprises me that your father would go back again,' said Satsuki after a moment. 'You'd think he'd want to stay away.'

Etsuko shrugged. ‘Grandmother said he never settled here after the war. And in those times, for men like him, it was either go back to pearl diving or join the deep-sea fishing fleets and be away months at a time anyway. He left in 1953, the minute the Australians let the Japanese divers back. Grandfather and Grandmother looked after me here in Taiji. Father didn’t last long, sadly.’

When Etsuko was only two, the photograph of the strong young diver, wind ruffling his salt-spiky hair, had moved from the mantelshelf to the tokonoma alcove at which the girl and her grandparents knelt and prayed daily.

Satsuki traced the frame with her fingertips. ‘So far away,’ she murmured.

‘Though that’s also the beauty of the sea,’ said Etsuko. ‘It connects us all. I go to the bluff and send my prayers across the water to where he lies.’

‘Have you ever seen his grave?’ asked Satsuki. ‘Another photo perhaps?’

Etsuko shook her head. ‘On the bluff there is a smooth boulder that I think of as his grave. It has to be enough.’

‘It’s peaceful here,’ said Satsuki. She was gazing northwards towards a small lighthouse on a rocky islet. They had walked in the soft winter sunshine to the high bluff that jutted into the sea a mile or so from Kazuo’s house, said a prayer for his grandfather and climbed the stones that formed the lookout.

Kazuo pointed to a mound of smooth black rock a few metres wide protruding from the blue swell. Two figures, legs planted wide, were balanced on top of it, fishing rods in graceful arcs. ‘See that there,’ he said. ‘We call it Turtle Rock. People wade out at low tide and fish out there for hours, until the tide ebbs enough for them to come back in. I used to go there with my father.’

‘It looks dangerous,’ said Satsuki.

‘It probably is,’ said Kazuo. ‘There’s a story about Grandfather Hiroshi and Turtle Rock. When he was a toddler, the family was out fishing from it one evening and Great-grandfather caught a wooden box. It was all encrusted and mysterious. But before anyone could open it, Grandfather — who was only little, of course — screamed and hurled it back into the water. They never found it again. Great-grandfather and Great-grandmother wondered what was in that box until they died.’

Satsuki laughed. ‘Oh, poor things! What made your grandfather so scared?’

‘Something to do with a fairy story, I think it was,’ said Kazuo. ‘Some bad magic box in a tale he knew.’

‘Funny to think of our grandparents as small children,’ said Satsuki. ‘She looked at the sky. ‘Your parents, this place,’ she said, ‘they’re lovely. I never go back these days. It only reminds me what a disappointment my family and I have become to one another. My family home is a shrine to greed. I turn cold when I go there, like a bronze statue — I can’t help it. They hate me for it.’ She sighed. ‘Families ... in my experience, for all that we honour our ancestors, it’s a rarity that the live ones get along. You are lucky. Do you know that?’

Kazuo laughed and wondered if he should have. He’d been Satsuki’s companion — no, her friend — long enough to know how unhappy she was.

Satsuki suddenly turned to him. ‘You should go to Australia, you know.’

‘What?’

‘Go and find your grandfather’s grave. It would complete things for your mother.’

‘It would finish things for my mother.’

‘You might be surprised,’ said Satsuki. ‘She knows you’re not happy. You’re not, are you? Cooped up with your sister, always so anxious. I know what sadness is, remember? You don’t always hide it so well. Sometimes I look at you and see a bird with clipped wings.’

Kazuo had never thought of Satsuki observing him. Nor had he realised he looked unhappy. As they’d looked at the photos of his grandfather after lunch, he’d found himself wondering, putting himself in his grandfather’s shoes. But it was a silly thought. Things were different then. It was a simple matter to pack up and leave in those days. ‘You could go to Australia, too,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing holding you here.’

Satsuki looked at her hands. ‘It’s too big for me,’ she sighed. ‘I’m like those dolphins in the pens in the harbour. Yes, I saw them. Only I’ve been penned so long I’ve forgotten how to swim. I’m not going anywhere, Kazuo. All I can do is come up for air every now and again — enough to keep from dying.’

Kazuo didn't know what to say. They looked out, saying nothing, the wind rattling the pine trees.

Suddenly Satsuki laughed. 'I'm sorry for being so glum. And I'm not even paying you to listen!'

Kazuo looked away. Satsuki took his hand. It was the first time he had ever felt the touch of her skin. She gently pressed his fingertips one by one. 'And I'm even sorrier for saying that. It was thoughtful of you to bring me here. Thank you.' She put his hand between her own. 'Tell me a story, eh? Cheer me up!'

Kazuo smiled. 'What kind of story? Momotaro?'

'Very funny,' said Satsuki. 'One I haven't heard a thousand times would be nice. Do you know any from Taiji?'

Kazuo scratched his head. 'There's one from Ise they used to tell us at school, but I never really got it.'

'Ise? I'd love to hear it. We went to Ise once when I was little. It's a little up the coast from here, right?' She sat on the ledge of the lookout, waiting.

Kazuo sat down beside her. 'There was a badger and a mud-snail, see ...' He told her how they agreed to race to the Great Shrine of Ise; that the mud-snail secretly attached herself to the badger's tail and hitched a ride; that when the badger reached the Great Gate of the shrine with the snail nowhere in sight he whisked his tail with joy, breaking the snail's shell against the stone and rolling her onto the ground. 'So,' said Kazuo, 'when the badger sees the mud-snail on the ground, the snail hides her agony and says, "Hello! I've been here for ages! I just slipped off some of my shell to cool down while I waited for you!" But as soon as the badger turns his back the snail dies.'

Satsuki frowned. 'That's it?'

'I told you I didn't get it. I never could decide if the badger had helped the snail or not by taking her to Ise. And the snail could have asked her friend for help, but instead she dies alone. It always leaves me feeling a bit hollow.'

'The badger would have helped if the snail had asked him ... and he didn't know what he was doing when he hurt the snail, right?' said Satsuki. 'And the snail reached Ise and got to claim victory and die with honour, wouldn't you agree?'

Kazuo shrugged. 'I suppose so.'

'It's no fairytale, I'll give you that,' said Satsuki. 'It's like real life. Complicated. Intriguing ... Tragic.'

'I shouldn't have told you.'

Satsuko pulled close the neck of her jacket as Kazuo rose from the bench.

Two weeks later Kazuo was to meet Satsuki at Nakanoshima Park again — a Sei Chizu appointment. He hurried his sister from the bathroom. After showering, he put on a white shirt then changed into his blue. Walking to the metro he found himself smiling, hoping again that Taiji's simple beauty, the time with his family, had shown Satsuki another side to life, a path from her emptiness, as it had shown him a warmer side of her. He descended the stairs with a bounce in his step, not noticing the hordes coming the other way.

When he reached the gates he found the Yotsubashi Line closed. Snatches of mobile phone conversations indicated a suicide up the line, at Higobashi station where he'd have got off to meet Satsuki. It wouldn't be reported in the media. That was forbidden — it only encouraged people. He took another route to the park. He was seven minutes late and Satsuki wasn't waiting. Hours later, he returned to his apartment, drunk and deflated. He kicked off his shoes at the doorway, stumbled past his sister and brother-in-law watching TV and sprawled on his nephew's floor rug fully clothed.

Three days later, his sister came to the door, a large yellow envelope in her hands. She frisbeed it up to the top bunk where he stretched, hesitated at the doorway, then left. It was from Sei Chizu. Odd. Kazuo thumbed it open. There were two letters inside. He went for the more official-looking one first. A bonus perhaps? It was from Hajimoto, the manager, himself. 'Please accept Sei Chizu's apologies for opening your personal correspondence in error. However, it brought to light a breach of employee–client protocol which has had most unfortunate consequences. In light of this, your services at Sei Chizu are no longer required. A cheque is enclosed in final payment.'

His hands trembling, Kazuo fished out the second letter, opened with a sharp blade and resealed. It was addressed to him at the Sei Chizu office in Satsuki's tiny

writing. Kazuo pulled out the note inside. ‘I’ve hitched a long way on your tail, Badger, but my shell is too broken to go on pretending. Our journey together opened my eyes. You showed me what is possible and, sadly, what is not. Your sorry mud-snail, S.’

Kazuo stepped off the Greyhound coach outside the Tourist Centre, scratched his stubble and looked about him. The sun had barely risen to the East. It was warm, sticky, the air thick to breathe and laced with diesel from the coach’s last cough. At the edge of the oval opposite, half a dozen dark-skinned bodies lay scattered under the scrubby trees, McDonald’s wrappers and empty beer cans beside them. Some had lifted their heads when the coach pulled in, some hadn’t.

He pulled out a map, hoicked his backpack to his shoulders, found his lodgings and stowed his gear. A short while later he was climbing a broken footpath up a long rise. Below, on one side, was the prison. On the other were pink-sanded Aboriginal lands that sloped to fringing mangroves and a copper blue sea beyond, at road level ending abruptly at an upmarket hotel. Down there in that water somewhere his grandfather Hiroshi had made and lost a life.

Was he here in Broome for his grandfather, his mother or for Satsuki? He couldn’t tell. In his capacity as a mere Sei Chizu employee — a virtual friend — her funeral had passed without his knowledge. He knew only that since her letter he’d cried his first real tears in years. He stood at the crest of the hill squinting, a passenger jet climbing slowly ahead of him, until the brutal heat turned him back toward town.

Kazuo sat on the sand at a quiet place a little out of town that his map called Simpsons Beach, the evening gentle after the astounding heat and swelter of the late Wet season day. It was a humble but beautiful spot — no swimming beach or cafes or landmarks; only pink sand, dark flat rocks, the sea and a surly, swirling sky. He could see himself coming here again before his two weeks was up.

He dug his white toes deeper into the coarse sand, feeling, as his father would say, the earth beneath his feet. Overhead a pelican spiralled higher and higher on a thermal draft. He was glad he’d left behind the scooter he’d hired and walked. It had left him free to hear the insects and the trickling tide and the breeze, free to feel the

sweat seeping from his temples and running down his back, to feel physically connected to the elements as he seldom did in Tokyo.

Maybe thirty metres in front of him, an old woman sat on a canvas fold-out stool, a pink plastic bucket at her side, holding a fishing rod. Kazuo watched her, intrigued. From the stoop of her back she looked old, ancient, perhaps as old as his grandfather had he still been alive. While other fishers further up the beach regularly reeled in their lines and checked their bait, she let her line drift. In the hour he'd been there she hadn't pulled it in once. She gazed out to sea in her fisherman's hat, in another world. He admired her serenity.

He checked his watch. Six-seventeen. Forty minutes before he needed to freshen up for the eight o'clock session at the outdoor picture theatre his guidebook said was a must. He was tired but the book promised that the slung canvas seating would keep him awake.

As the sky began to darken and the air to smell like rain, the old woman got to her feet. She turned and looked around, for the first time noticing Kazuo. Kazuo smiled and gave the bow ingrained over a lifetime. She took a few steps up the sand toward him, then stopped, her face twisted as though in pain.

She stared at him till tears began to glisten in her eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Rik swept the paddle of her kayak through the sea below Gantheaume Point and scanned the glinting surface for a turtle's beak. She felt a mix of delight and disappointment that these creatures that flew so languidly through water with the occasional flip of their fins should forever be constrained by the need to surface.

To the east the cliffs rose sharply, their orange faces shadowed at this time of day. To the west ... well, to the west was bugger all for a thousand miles — one of the things people liked about WA.

Thirty metres off, Johnno, in his floppy hat and wraparound sunnies, was doing three-sixties for the hell of it. She'd liked him from the moment she met him on her first day of work at the Tourist Centre. He was a tour guide who blew in and out collecting crisp-cottoned clients in bright white runners and delivering them back hours later pink, limp and knackered, and, in the case of the odd Japanese adventurer like the poor guy yesterday, looking vaguely bewildered. Johnno was a loveable maniac, like a lot of the people who washed up in Broome.

Had she washed up here or had she steered? She wasn't sure. Maybe it was dumb of her to leave Darwin and come rushing here the moment she knew she was pregnant.

It was working out well with Nan. Nan was a different kettle of fish from the rest of Rik's family in Perth. She didn't give a darn about what others thought — but in a good, honest way. There was nothing cold or nasty about her, none of the talking people down to build herself up that Rik's father specialised in. It was hard to fathom that Nan and he were of the same bloodline. Rik knew who she wanted to take after.

Nan was a honey and clearly not long for this world. She was a bit of a dark horse though. At first, Rik had joined her after work at Simpsons Beach, thinking it would be a relaxed way to get to know her better after the years of brief letters. But Nan, in her quiet way, had made it clear she preferred to be alone. Nan wasn't like Skip, her old mate back in Darwin, an old boot, as he described himself, wedged in the rocks. Nan was an organism of Broome itself, living and breathing it. So far, they'd been leading parallel lives — Nan pottering at the beach all day, Rik working at the Tourist Centre. She wondered if she was intruding.

Rik caught a dark shape moving off to the left and paddled softly toward it. Just ahead, the leathery, beaked head surfaced — a second or two only — and slipped away. Rik smiled. Out here on the water she was definitely an intruder, and happy for it.

She thought of Skip, pushing sixty, who thought himself rootless, floating, as free as that turtle. Skip, who'd somehow stayed put in Darwin for thirty years. Those endless muggy evenings on the verandah of his backpackers, young guests from all over the place clanking around in the kitchen behind. The scent of citronella and damp dog — always Boris at their feet. Steam rising from the broad wet leaves of the garden, glistening in the ragged fairy lights of Christmases past. Rik and Skip sipping brews from sweating glass bottles and their revolving talk about the meaning of life. Skip's sweet concern when she'd asked if she could borrow his sperm.

'You ever think about what you'll be leaving behind, Skip?' she'd asked him.

Skip laughed at the question, which started him coughing. 'A bloody great bank loan,' he said eventually. 'Funny you should ask. You been going through my things?'

'No, of course not.' Rik tipped her head. 'Why? What are you up to?'

Skip inspected the toothpick he chewed as a surrogate cigarette. 'Nah. Nothing, mate. Just been working on my Plan B, that's all.'

'Plan B? Didn't think you had a Plan A, you old fox.' Skip kept to himself. Rik liked that about him.

'Everyone's got a Plan A, haven't they?' said Skip. 'Something along the lines of getting up every day and having a good crap before midday.'

Rik groaned.

'Nah, seriously.' Skip hunched forward in his chair. 'I reckon the Micks have got it sewn up. The Seven Deadly Sins. It's a fair bloody checklist. Thou shalt commit one per day and though shalt go down laughing.'

'Great!' said Rik. 'I'll put them up on my fridge. Get some structure into my life.'

'Atta girl.' Skip raised his bottle to her across the drumming of the rain.

‘So,’ said Rik, ‘what’s this Plan B of yours — when you’re tired of all this sinning, that is?’

Skip took his big feet off the railing and, elbows on knees, slowly spun his beer between his palms. He gazed out onto the garden. The rain was easing. ‘Just a bunch of silly ideas.’ He massaged Boris between his shoulder blades with the heel of his foot. ‘Like mortgaging the hostel to the hilt and bugging off. Going bush. Only, in my case, it’d be some place more like Thailand ... or Micronesia. A pretty little island where you sit in the shallows, and they bring you beers and tropical fish nibble your feet.’

‘Why not just go on a holiday?’ said Rik.

‘Then I’d be coming back, wouldn’t I?’

Rik sipped her drink. ‘Why so glum? I thought you were here for good, Skip,’ she said. ‘Like one of those old boots that gets washed in and wedges in the rocks. You try to pull them out to toss them in the bin, but nature has slowly shifted everything around them so that when you try they won’t budge. They’re stuck there among the old plastic bottles and crap until they rot or get eaten by crabs.’

‘Far out!’ Skip smiled at Rik. ‘An old boot you reckon? With such a bright future ahead of me! Can’t I be the water itself?’ he said. ‘You know ... it flows in and gives the rocks a tickle then flows away again to become part of the greater whole?’

‘If you want to go all philosophical on me.’

Skip got on a roll. ‘And if it gets trapped in one place it starts to get a bit on the nose?’

‘And scummy.’

‘Okay ... and scummy.’ Skip smiled.

‘But seriously, you’ve been here thirty years or more, haven’t you?’

‘Very scummy. Anyway, you’re still young and gorgeous,’ said Skip. ‘Why the heck are you worrying about what you’ll be leaving behind?’

Rik took a slow sip. ‘Well, I guess I’ve had my own Plan B sitting on the back burner for a while now. But I’ve made a decision.’

‘Go on.’

‘It’s this thing about leaving something behind when you go. Being part of a cycle. I want to do it.’

‘What? Start a foundation or something?’

‘Nah, nothing that grand ... or magnanimous. It’s more wanting the feeling I’ve done as much as I can, and that what I’ve done will have a tiny pin-prick of an impact in the world when I’m gone.’ She stuffed a fold of sarong between her knees and laughed. ‘It’s a very individual thing, I realise. Some would say I’m talking utter crap.’

‘Yep, you’ve got me flummoxed. I have to say at this stage I’m leaning towards the utter crap camp myself.’

‘The thing is ...’

‘The thing is ...’ Skip, holding the bottle by its rim, took a sip, his eyes not shifting from his friend.

Rik took a deep breath. Hell, where to begin? ‘The thing is, I want to have a baby.’

Skip splurged beer through his mouth and nose. ‘Fuck!’ He swallowed the remainder with a gulp, wiping his jaw with the back of his hand.

‘Not much more to say really,’ said Rik.

‘That’s grown-up stuff. That’s big.’

‘Funny, that’s not what you guys seem to think when you’re tumbling into the sack with some girl you barely know. Having a baby seems kind of insignificant then.’

‘Aah, but then it’s all about the sex. Sex and babies — two entirely different things.’

Rik laughed. ‘That explains why there are so many kids who look uncannily like you trotting around the place.’

‘Don’t talk about it!’

‘Why? Are there any mini-Skips out there? C’mon! You can tell your good buddy!’

Skip drummed his fingers against his bottle. 'It's possible. You don't run a backpackers for thirty-odd years without having fair few, let's say, opportunities come your way, especially before AIDS.' He ran his fingers through his hair. 'Shit, in the seventies often as not it was a box foreign girls had to tick. *Sex with an Australian ... Check*. They just used me, man!'

Skip scratched his jaw. 'To tell you the truth, I've started to think maybe it wouldn't be so bad having had a kid. Somewhere along the line. In theory. Call it a mid-life crisis.'

'Aah, the old mid-life crisis. A respectable term for a man pissing off from his family for someone two years older than his daughter.'

'Huh! Don't go plastering your old man's sins on me. Anyway, I've never been married.'

'Nah, true.'

Skip clapped his hand on his wrist and flicked a dead mosquito off his palm. 'So this baby thing ... I didn't know you were seeing someone.'

'I'm not,' said Rik.

'Aah, so you're talking off in the future then.'

'No, not really.' Rik grinned and rolled back in her deck chair.

'So ... what ... you're thinking about doing it on your own, then?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Fuck!'

'You already said that.'

Skip fished another toothpick from the pocket of his shorts. 'Why now?' he said, the stick bobbing in his mouth. 'What's the rush?'

'It's hardly a rush,' said Rik. 'Not according to my body anyway.'

'What? You're only bloody mid-twenties. Plenty of women have kids in their forties these days.'

'For the record, old man, I'm thirty next month. A few years have slipped by while we've been hanging out here drinking beers. But anyway, all this having babies

in your forties is just a modern thing. Our bodies still want us to start younger. Our bodies are in the dark ages.'

'Yeah, but medicine's not. What about freezing eggs? Stuff like that?'

'It's possible but, the thing is, I don't want to wait that long. I don't want to be stiff and cranky while my kid's growing up.' Rik took a sip. 'I want to take it camping.'

Skip laughed. 'Plenty of oldies go camping.'

'Yeah, but they never have teenagers in tow, and they don't have to back up day after day after day when they get home again. It's not the first couple of years I'm worried about. It's all the worry and running around after them into my sixties that scares me.'

'Can't say I've ever really thought about it. Damn you, I'll have to go celibate from now on.'

Boris sat up and, his front legs sliding on the wooden boards, attacked a flea at the base of his tail. From the kitchen the sound of forks on plates and giggles drifted out to them.

'You realise we wouldn't be having this conversation if I were with a bloke,' said Rik.

Skip placed his hand on his crotch. 'Last time I checked ...'

'Very funny. I mean, if I were seeing someone.'

'Depends how long you'd been with him, I suppose.'

'Would six months be okay? What would you say is a reasonable length of time?'

'Hmmm ...' Skip scratched his chin. 'I guess about a year.'

'And then I'd have your blessing?'

'Okay, I take your point,' he nodded. 'You don't just want to wait a bit though? See what turns up?'

Rik sighed. 'I've been here five years and barely met anyone I'd have a drink with, let alone a baby. The best prospects are the blokes on my tours. They're interested in the world beyond their living rooms and the pub.'

‘But you haven’t really been looking for the long term, have you? I reckon if you went about it in a different frame of mind ...’

Rik locked her hands above her head in a long, slow stretch. ‘I know what you’re saying,’ she said. ‘I have to admit I’ve got a couple of friends in Perth who partnered up pretty much because they were ready to take the plunge and happened to meet someone else who was too.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I mean,’ said Skip. ‘It’s not just females who decide the time’s ripe.’

‘But that’s the thing, you’ve got to find someone at the same turning point as you or it’s a frigging disaster.’ She combed hair from her forehead through her fingers. ‘Not to mention the depressing odds against meeting someone you like in the first place.’

‘So there’s your answer. Easy. Don’t put pressure on yourself. Just sit tight a few more years.’ Skip rolled back in his deckchair and took a satisfied swig.

Rik looked at him. ‘You reckon spending the next five years looking for a breeding partner isn’t putting pressure on myself?’

‘Things turn up.’

‘When I can go to bed with a turkey baster tomorrow and achieve the same result?’

‘You can’t go camping with a turkey baster. Well, you can, but there’s not much singing round the campfire.’ Skip slapped another mosquito on his knee and studied the splat on the palm of his hand. ‘Is there something you haven’t told me?’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘Well, you know ... you’re not one of them are you?’

‘Ha!’ Rik rocked forward and thumped her bottle onto the verandah boards. ‘I knew that was coming! Not wanting to get hooked up with the wrong guy and spend the rest of my days trying to get rid of him doesn’t make me a lesbian.’

‘So you’re not then? I mean, I like them the same as anyone else, of course, but you had me wondering.’

Rik breathed deeply and counted to ten. ‘I just want to have a child while I’m young and fit. I don’t want to kick off until the kid’s old enough to look up “Funeral Director” in the yellow pages. Pretty simple really.’

Skip whistled a disjointed tune while the geckoes chirruped, the drainpipes dripped and the dog chewed at its tail. ‘So,’ he said, clearing his throat, ‘back to my question. What are the details of this child-spawning thing? Have you talked it through with Turk?’

‘Turk?’

‘Your turkey baster. The strong silent one.’

‘Aah, Turk!’ Rik laughed. ‘My one true love! Actually –’ she looked at Skip, ‘– he made a good suggestion.’

‘He did?’ Skip raised an eyebrow.

‘Can I trust you?’

‘You’ve always been able to do that. Your best buddy, Skip, remember? Steady as a rock.’

‘Yeah, that’s what Turk reminded me.’

‘Really? I like this fella more and more. What else did he say?’

‘That, genetically speaking, you’d make a good father.’

‘Turk’s not as smart as I thought he was.’

‘You said earlier you wouldn’t mind having a kid,’ said Rik.

‘Having had a kid,’ said Skip. ‘Big difference.’ He stood up and leaned on the verandah rail, his back to Rik. ‘Besides, that was all hypothetical. Pie in the sky. Not something to lose a friend over.’

‘Damned if you do –’

‘– and damned if I don’t.’ Skip stared into the darkness of the garden and drew on his rollie.

‘If it makes any difference,’ said Rik, ‘I was thinking I’d leave here once the pregnancy was under way, before all the tongues got wagging. Head over to Broome and stay with Nan. I was talking to a tour guide. She reckoned I’d pick up a job at the

Tourist Centre with my background. There'd be no chance then of reeling you into fatherhood.'

'I'd still know, wouldn't I?' Skip turned to face her, the light of the flares gleaming on his cheekbones. 'I'd know I had a kid. That I was a father.' He looked out to the garden, pressing the sockets of his eyes with his fingertips. 'What if it had problems? Complications? If something happened to me you'd be on your own. I can't imagine either of your parents leaping in to help, from what you've told me.'

'Geez, Skip, half the reason for wanting to do it now while I'm young is to avoid "complications"!' She snatched at a mosquito near her face. 'Anyway, that's a worst-case scenario. No-one would ever have a kid if they thought of all the things that could go wrong.'

Rik rose to stand beside him. 'Just consider it another of your mindless seventies hayrolls — only with Turk as a go-between.'

Skip shook his head and turned to look at her. 'But it's not mindless, is it? You're my ray of sunshine round here. I couldn't do it to you.'

She nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. 'Not *to* me, you dag. *For* me.'

Skip had crafted another rollie and smoked it to its twisted butt while she'd waited. Eventually, he'd turned to her.

'Okay.'

Up ahead, Johnno was waving his paddle, beckoning Rik to catch up. 'There won't be much left of it if we take too long,' he yelled.

He led the way toward the base of the cliff, not far past the flimsy metal lighthouse of Gantheaume Point. They wove through clumps of boulders and black rock, as they neared resting their paddles and letting tide ease them in, until the two kayaks nosed with a soft crunch onto the sand. Rik swung out and, water lapping at her feet, gazed at the sandstone cave reaching over them, the buttery coloured smooth arch, the white sandy floor that stretched into its cool recesses, the stream of sunlight pouring through a shaft in the rock like some heavenly exultation.

'Pretty, innit?' Rik realised Johnno had been silent for longer than she'd ever known.

‘Exquisite.’

‘Look over here.’ Johnno walked to the rock wall and pointed.

Rik looked up and there on the creamy curve was the outline of a fern, or perhaps a fish, the length of her hand, perfectly symmetrical, its structure delicately etched in the stone, fossilized over the ages.

‘Makes you feel kinda temporary, eh?’ said Johnno.

Rik smiled and nodded. But as she gazed, she felt the mound of her abdomen and sensed that some stubborn atavistic part of her refused to agree.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kazuo pulled onto the shoulder where the road from Cable Beach met the wide north-south thoroughfare leading to the port. He hunched on the handlebar of his hire-scooter, letting its engine idle, looking across the asphalt lanes at the stone and iron entrance of the Japanese cemetery, his view interspersed by semi-trailers and four wheel drives. In the parking area in front of it, in the shade of the trees, two women ran a drinks stall from a trailer hitched to a utility. As Kazuo watched a tour bus came and went, the rows of sandstone markers beyond the gate surrounded, captured digitally and deserted.

He was due to leave in two days and still he hadn't visited his grandfather Hiroshi's grave. He hadn't even begun looking for it, not glanced once at his grandfather's letter from 1942 that his mother had pressed into his hands before he left, thinking it might help. What was wrong with him? He'd been acting like an ordinary sightseer. The staff at the Tourist Centre knew him by name. He'd bought trinkets in Chinatown. He'd ridden a camel, a hovercraft, an old pearling lugger and spent a day in the Outback in a four-wheel drive minibus. He'd taken his scooter out to Gantheaume Point to look for the famous dinosaur footprints. They were submerged until the next cycle of low tides — by which time he'd be gone — so he'd consoled himself with three beers at sunset at the Cable Beach café. At the pearl farm, where they grew what so many had died chasing, he'd bought a pearl for his mother and found himself teary, wishing he could buy one for Satsuki too.

The shuttle bus that ran between the beach resorts and town rattled alongside, enveloping Kazuo in dust and warm fumes. The driver leaned toward the open door. 'Everything okay, mate?' Kazuo gave a thumbs-up and the bus lumbered off, refreshing the dust cloud.

He'd come to Broome for Satsuki, because he could and she was unable. She had more or less dared him. And he'd come for his mother to, as Satsuki had put it, complete things for her. But he couldn't face doing what he was here to do. It was as though once he'd found his grandfather's gravestone and traced his presence here some door would shut behind him.

And there it was, thought Kazuo. Plain as a full moon. He didn't want to lose his excuse for being here. The place had opened something in him. He'd come for Satsuki and his mother, but he wanted to stay for himself.

Kazuo returned at sunset, when the buses had gone and the trucks had stopped and all but the cloud-crowded sky was still. He walked up the central brick path, the slapping of his sandals muted in the thick air, amid the eerie expanse of white shell-grit chequered with carved sandstone grave markers, below which lay the bones of his countrymen long gone. He found it midway, to the right, its stone eroded so that the sedimentary layers looked like paperbark. Its characters, in black, were mostly intact. At the base, a line in English completed the inscription: ‘Ishikawa Hiroshi. Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan. 1918 – 1953’.

Kazuo wondered at that last line. It was unusual. Perhaps practices had changed briefly after the war. He took photographs on his camera for his mother. He knelt on the shell grit and prayed as best he could.

He was in the lounge of his backpackers, flicking through photos on his phone, when the voice of Japan’s Prime Minister beneath its English translation made him look up. An earthquake. Massive. Five minutes long. Skyscrapers swaying. A nuclear reactor hit. Fires. Tokyo shut down, the shinkansen halted. A tsunami — a black wall of debris, bulldozing towns, fields and highways. Ships lying on rooftops, homes splintered like chopsticks, people dazed, crying behind white dust masks, hugging in quilts in the snow-blown streets. Bodies in blue tarpaulins lined on the side of the road. Rolling text giving updates of the death toll in its thousands.

A fellow in a lounge chair beside Kazuo looked sideways at him. ‘You from there, mate?’

‘Yes,’ whispered Kazuo.

‘Geez,’ said the man. ‘I wouldn’t be going back there in a hurry.’

CHAPTER FIVE

Nan was wrapping fish bait in newspaper on the laminex kitchen table when Rik came in dressed for her shift at the Tourist Centre. Rik caught the headline and photograph on the outside page as Nan swept it up in her leathery, scarred hands.

‘Hang on a sec,’ she said. ‘Can I’ve a look?’

Nan relinquished the sheet and slid it to her granddaughter. Sharing the newspaper was a habit she hadn’t got the hang of yet. She moved to the sink and began going at a whetstone with a knife.

Rik looked at the front page. ‘Japan In Ruins’. Below the headline was an image of what looked like the aftermath of a bomb. There’d been a magnitude-nine earthquake off the coast of Japan — so powerful it had knocked the earth off its axis and shifted the whole country three metres out to sea. It had triggered a tsunami that had swept away entire towns and their people. Rik had caught some of it on the radio at work yesterday before returning to the technological black hole that was Nan’s place.

‘They reckon the death toll’s going to be twenty thousand,’ said Rik. ‘God, it looks awful.’

Nan stopped the circular scraping of her knife and looked out the window to the turquoise satin stretch of Roebuck Bay. ‘Sixty years ago people would have been celebrating,’ she muttered.

‘Celebrating? In the war, you mean?’

‘That’s just what I mean.’

‘Were people really that bad?’ said Rik. ‘That heartless?’

Nan washed her hands and huffed onto a chair. She laughed, a strange soft wheeze like a baby bird. ‘People were scared, pet. That’s the difference. It was never very good between us and the Japanese back then — though here in Broome it wasn’t too bad. But when those aeroplanes attacked the bay out yonder there was no going back. Fear took hold then. The Japs stopped being individuals and became the enemy. All of ’em. Each and every one.’ She tapped a shaking hand on the newspaper in front of Rik. ‘Back then, we blasted ’em to smithereens — every man, woman and child — and everybody cheered. That’s war for you, pet ... it brings out the ugly in people.’

Rik chewed on her lip, staring at the photo in the newspaper. At the Tourist Centre, the strafing of Broome was a gimmick, in a way. At low tide there were tours out to the stumps of the wrecked flying boats where people had drowned in burning oil. It was something that distinguished Broome from the rest of the bland, prosperous state to the south.

Nan began loading up her pink bucket for the day, her old self returning. Rik realised she'd never thought much about the woman Nan used to be, the young woman inside. When she arrived she'd gone straight into management mode — seeing her old grandmother ate okay, cutting back the jungle of a garden, getting the grubby, ramshackle place into some kind of order.

‘You’ve seen so much, Nan,’ she said.

Nan went on putting things in the bucket.

‘Do you think you could tell me your story,’ said Rik, ‘before ...’ She trailed off, hoping Nan hadn’t caught that stupid last word.

‘Cheeky beggar!’ Nan chuckled, shaking her head.

‘There’s heaps of stuff I want to know,’ pressed Rik. ‘Like what things were like for you growing up here, and what happened with you and Grandpa Jack and Dad?’

Nan sighed. ‘Who would want to hear my old ramblings? I’ve hardly ever left Broome. I’ve got nothing important to say. Besides, the less you know me the better. As your father will tell you, I’m not a nice person.’

‘I don’t believe that, not for a second!’ said Rik, without knowing why. She only knew she meant it. ‘I could record you, like on a tape recorder. It wouldn’t take much — just a few chats on the verandah after dinner.’

Nan rummaged in her bucket for a box of hooks. Using her knife, she began attaching one to the loose end of a line. She kept her eyes down.

‘You wouldn’t have to talk about personal stuff necessarily,’ said Rik. She tried a different tack. ‘But knowing what happened back then helps us put now into context. Without historical perspective, how do we know what we should be aiming for? Some evil dictator could tell us everything is rosy and we’d believe him!’

‘You youngsters,’ said Nan, fumbling with the hook. ‘You turn everything so serious.’

Rik smiled. ‘Well, it would put *you* in perspective, Nan — hearing your side of things. Besides, I want to know if I take after you.’

Nan looked up. ‘I hope for your sake, pet, you don’t.’

Rik looked at her watch. ‘Hell, I’d better get going.’ She kissed her grandmother on the cheek. ‘We’ll start tonight then, eh?’

With the moon glinting orange on the rippled tidal flats, Rik pulled her chair closer to Nan’s. She’d picked up an audio recorder in town that she now rested on the arm of her chair. Nan took a sip of tea and gestured to it. ‘That thing work? It looks too small to have enough tape.’

‘It’s cool, Nan,’ said Rik. ‘It’s digital.’

‘It’s what?’

‘Digital. Doesn’t use tape. You can talk forever.’

‘Now there’s a frightening thought.’

Rik laughed. ‘Whenever you’re ready, Nan. Just start at the beginning.’

‘The beginning,’ said Nan. ‘Now where would that be?’

‘My name is Pearl — Elisabeth Pearl — and I was brought into this world by our servant Koepi during the Christmas riots in Broome, two days before Police Inspector Thomas breathed his last. Koepi kept house for us for twenty years, grateful for her keep, or, looking back, so we presumed. When World War II came along she was evacuated to the Beagle Bay mission and I never found her after that.

‘Papa wasn’t waiting outside the door for my arrival. Nor was he doing what most Europeans in Broome were doing — huddling in the sitting room clear of the windows, though they’d all not long beforehand been at the annual Christmas picnic. When I took my first breath, Papa was patrolling the streets, a rifle in his hands. It was 20th December, 1920, though, of course, I didn’t know that then.

‘By the time I could talk, the ink on the city papers had faded brown and all but the folk up here had forgotten about the rioting and the Japanese and Koepangers and who was right and wrong. It might have gone over my head too if Papa, on account of having served in the Great War, hadn’t been sworn in as a Special Constable when the fighting got bad that night.

‘Mama only told me this when I was about to be married. When Papa came back from the fighting in France, he bought a lugger and a licence, married Mama and shipped up here, thinking to leave the killing behind him — in another life that belonged to another man. But that first night of the riots, in an alley off Carnarvon Street, he’d come across a Jap about to knock a Koepanger’s head off. Papa had had to point his rifle and near as damned pull the trigger to save the fellow’s life.

“‘Like a mirror tapped with a hammer,” Mama said, Papa’s soul, unguarded after all he’d survived in the Great War, cracked. Two days later, when poor Inspector Thomas went down in the melee — from heat apoplexy the doctor said, but everyone knew what had brought it on — it broke apart. Mama said that from the time I was born — and I wasn’t to take it personally — Papa never felt that a truly peaceful life was within a man’s reach. And something Mama didn’t need to tell me, he set his heart against every Japanese for the riots that most agreed they’d started and for the tranquillity they had robbed from him.

‘But I didn’t get to grow up in this pretty blue bungalow on account of what Papa felt in his heart. When it came to business matters, Papa was pure pounds, shillings and pence, and he was very successful. His lugger never set sail without at least one, preferably two, of the six crewmen and divers being Japanese. The Japanese cost more but they were the best by far, everyone knew, when it came to finding the great banks of *Pinctada maxima*, the ugly mollusc bigger than a soup plate with the beautiful insides that rich people fancied so much. Koepangers, Malays, Manilamen and natives? They were left to clean the catch and cook.

‘The Japanese knew their worth, though, and the lugger captains grumbled that on board they lorded it over the other races and caused trouble. To keep the peace, Papa, along with most lugger owners, fixed it so the Japanese were in a minority. A crew out at sea for months on end breathed shallow at the best of times without the Japanese ganging up.

‘From time to time during the lay-up, while luggers were repaired and the huge piles of shell sorted in camps on the edge of town, the Japanese recruiting agent would come to the house. I remember him getting out of Mr Chi’s big Buick taxi with its numberplate of “Broome 1” and crunching up the shell-grit path, same as it is now. Sometimes I was playing under the verandah here — it’s cool underneath — so I’d listen in, pretending I was Matahari. Papa and the agent would sit in their cane chairs arguing and drinking Koepi’s tea until the indenture contracts — little two-year snatches of men’s lives — for the coming season were signed. As the agent disappeared in Mr Chi’s taxi, Papa, sure as the dawn, would curse, “Upstart Asiatics!” Then he’d kick one of the white-painted rocks bordering the path, hobble about and curse some more while I covered my mouth to stop the giggles squirting out.

““Upstart Asiatics.” That was the kind of talk I grew up with. That was how my father felt about the Japanese. And that was long before they dropped any bombs on us.’

Nan leaned forward, her hands clasped between her knees, and shook her head slowly. Rik waited, the washboard call of the myriad of crickets and the moans of water birds out on the bay ticking by the minutes until Nan threw Rik a smile and eased back into her chair.

‘The waterfront was never much, you know — just a jumble of shacks and alleys they called Chinatown sliding onto Roebuck Bay from Napier Street. It was no place for a lady, Mama told me about as often as she brushed away flies. But I wasn’t a lady — not the sort Mama had in mind — and had no plans of becoming one, there being little use for them in Broome as far as I could see.

‘Papa gave up ranting at my wandering and started ranting about Japanese politics instead. He didn’t like the sound of this New Japan and its imperialist talk. I hear it now as clear as then, one evening Papa saying the government should pull its head out of its bottom and look at what the Japs were doing in China. Mama went pink and flapped her sewing at him as if that might chase off his colourful words.

‘Anyway, as time went by, I found myself meandering often along the waterfront, drawn by the breeze and the big sail of a sky. It was no Venice with graceful bridges like in the books, or even Fremantle, its air washed clean every afternoon by a westerly. This was Broome. The mangroves had all been cut away back then. At low tide you could feast your eyes on a vast plain of corrugated mud.

The beach itself stank of old fish heads and the slurry of bilges and was littered with discarded tins, washed-up tackle and old campfires. There were no tourists then. Broome existed for one reason only — that big ugly mollusc.

‘But the sea was out there somewhere, I knew. I didn’t need to see it in order to feel it inside. In time it became part of who I was. It was never that way for your Grandfather Jack, more’s the pity.’

Nan rubbed the back of one hand with the palm of the other in a soft swishing movement.

‘I first saw him fishing from the rocks at Simpsons Beach, around the bend beyond Town Jetty. I was spending most evenings there, sometimes with a book, sometimes not. It was 1939. I was eighteen and lonely. The war in Europe seemed a million miles away. The only friend I’d ever known had left for secretarial school in Perth and Mama and Papa wouldn’t hear of me going too. They said I was so vague I’d catch the bus to town and end up in Alice.

‘If I’d known what was to come down the track perhaps I wouldn’t have gone where I went when I saw him that evening on the rocks. But what young girl stops to consider, and I still believe that’s as it should be. This generation thinks too much. They worry about every darned possible consequence. When I saw him I was flaring for life. The future was nothing to me. It was unconnected, a puff of cloud that would go where it wanted and pay no heed to what I did and didn’t do.’

‘You’d think when a fellow came ashore after weeks out there that he’d want to turn his back on the sea for a spell. But this fellow wasn’t like most. Perhaps living in a tub with half a dozen men for that long meant you liked a bit of elbow-room. I don’t know. But I can tell you this — in the time he was in town before his lugger set out for the rest of the season, he came to those rocks at Simpson’s Beach every twilight bar the last.

‘There was a stillness about him, like the silence after a gull’s shriek, the silky quiet of the tide at its lowest ... a kind of emptiness, not from any lack of life but from a soul so free of the vexation by which everyone around me mapped their lives that it seemed to swell and cling to the brim of him.

‘The first evening, he looked at me and my book, then out to sea again. He didn’t smile. I’d taken off my hat to feel the gentler late sun on my neck. My fair hair

was hanging in loose plaits and my face was uncovered. He could have seen I wasn't a worker or one of the girls from the boarding houses. He wasn't wearing a hat to doff but he ought to have nodded my way. It flustered me. I thought him a bit proud, funny to remember it now.'

'Every twilight it was the same. Sitting on the pink sand, I'd wait for him to stroll down and settle on the rocks, taking in his broad straight back, the way muscles carved his arms into hills and valleys, his calloused hands with their long fingers and salt-white fingernails. He was taller than most and had the chest of a diver — I could tell that much. He didn't look old enough to have a family anywhere and, besides, Papa said most of the divers were bachelors. In Papa's mind this was all the more reason for me to steer clear of them, though in mine it ran the other way. All these thoughts charged around in my head like bush turkeys while he sat on the rocks a few yards away.

'That tranquil way of his never left him for a moment. It gathered strength like an undertow, dragging me in. And every afternoon, from behind the peninsula, the red sun would set aglow those high cheekbones of his, those lovely curved lips, the coppered strands of his thick black hair. I tell you, by the end of the week I was lost to all good sense — and I didn't even know his name.

'The whole thing might have ended there if the Imperial League hadn't had a dinner-dance that Saturday night. Life would have been easier then, but maybe that's a life still to come.

'Mama and Papa went along to the dance, Mama looking like Greta Garbo in a dress that showed her back, I remember. It was just Koepi and me at home and I knew I'd be lying on the settee all night, trying to read my book and thinking about him and reading the same line over and over. I decided to go to the Sun picture garden. The Marx Brothers movie 'A Day at the Races' had finally reached Broome and if I came straight home Mama and Papa would be none the wiser. I knew Koepi wouldn't say anything unless they happened to ask her point blank, which was easier said than done with Koepi.

'Papa would never have approved of me going. He'd taken a set against the Sun before I was born when they started letting Japanese sit in with the whites instead of at the back with the rest. But I pinned up my hair and went anyway. I took a seat at the very back of the whites' section to keep clear of any friend of Papa's who might

be in the audience and leaned back, closing my eyes in the soft cool of the evening, listening to the hum of the crowd, waiting for the newsreel to begin. I heard the creak of the canvas seat next to me and felt an arm just barely brush mine.

‘I opened my eyes. He looked at me and smiled, his dark hair, his beautiful face only inches away. He said ...’

Rik waited for her grandmother to continue. In the dark she couldn’t see her face, but Rik sensed she was struggling. ‘What did he say, Nan?’ Rik asked gently.

Nan wiped under her eyes with the edge of a finger. ‘He said, “My name is Hiroshi”.’

CHAPTER SIX

Rik sat on a verandah step catching the damp dusk breeze, feeling her baby kick. She'd been going over the conversation of the night before through her earphones, hearing the way Nan had softened and unfurled as she'd drifted into times gone by, how the old lady with a plastic fishing bucket had become a spirited young woman. What shocked Rik, though, was what a bigot she'd discovered herself to be. While she could feel anguish for the Japanese nation after their earthquake, the thought of her grandmother falling for a Japanese man was somehow unsettling, and not for its risks. Up close, she had failed the test and was disgusted with herself for it.

A Japanese man, though. Back then. It explained some of the silences she had sensed over the years. Awkward gaps in conversations with Grandfather Jack and her father.

It had been easier listening to Nan's story the second time just now. Perhaps there was hope, after all, that Nan's outlook would rub off on her. But it had to happen fast. In five months she'd be giving birth to another human being, and she didn't want to stuff it up.

As the filigree of sunlight through the cloud merged into mauve, Nan came into view, her bucket bumping hollowly against her legs. The old lady creaked open the gate and pattered up the shell-grit path.

'Catch anything?' called Rik.

'Some beauties pet, but I let 'em all go.'

Everything as normal, thought Rik, relieved. She stood to let her grandmother pass, followed her through the flywire door into the kitchen and switched on the light. 'I've made us a salad with some tuna I caught at Coles,' she said.

'That's what I like to hear.'

They ate, talking no less than usual — Rik speculating on how long she could put off wearing maternity clothes, Nan mentioning a young tourist who'd taken to going to her spot at Simpson's Beach. Nan was vague. Rik couldn't tell if she was peeved or pleased. As Rik rose to clear the plates, Nan laid her hand on Rik's audio recorder and shuffled outside. Rik heard her creaking into her cane chair and left the dishes.

In the dim light from the kitchen, Rik could see Nan sitting motionless looking out into the night, her hands resting quietly in her lap. She appeared ... serene. That was it. She seemed to have come to a decision.

Wordlessly, Rik placed the recorder between them and pressed the red button.

‘Hiroshi called me Shinju, which in his language meant “pearl”. I thought it was lovely,’ said Nan. ‘I can’t say how it was, exactly, that we became so close. If his lugger was in town on a Wednesday, while Mama and Papa went to the Continental for cocktails and dinner, we’d meet. Always at sunset. We’d find one another on Simpsons Beach, far along, where no one in their right mind bothered to go, each time a little further from town and its dark cloud of propriety.

‘Perhaps you’ve led enough of a life to have loved someone with all your heart and being, to have felt a soaring lightness when you saw their face, to have clasped their hand felt a warmth and serenity spreading through your soul. All I know is that when I was beside Hiroshi on the sand, I knew a life in me I didn’t know I’d had till then.

‘We’d sit close and look out to sea, the sun lowering behind us on the other side of the peninsula, the blue sky above dissolving into pinks and mauves. He would tell me in his broken way about the place he came from — Taiji, a whaling village in the Wakayama region south of Osaka. He told me about his family — his mother, his father, his younger sister — and the old folk who in winter gathered at the hot spring, hoicking up their kimonos and warming their feet in the steaming water. He drew pictures in the sand of the mountains behind the village and the coves, and described the sea that was a darker, deeper blue than here. And he’d ask about me, and the place I loved — about the rocks and the trees and the birds that wheeled overhead.

‘For three seasons it was like that — thirty-nine, forty and forty-one. He went back to Taiji once in that time. The other two layups he went south to the fishing in Cossack and Port Hedland, like a lot of them did. But come the start of the season, we’d find one another again like the ocean to the shore.

‘In forty-one, towards the end of the season there was a feeling that things were getting risky for the Japanese in Broome. You only had to look at a newspaper or listen to the wireless. In June the government had made a list of all the Japs over

sixteen, born in Australia or otherwise, and they were ready to lock them up if things went bad which, with Japan getting more and more bold in the Pacific, it looked like it might. A lot of divers were cutting out of their indenture contracts and going home when their luggers returned to port to offload shell and take on supplies. Most of the pearling masters were understanding about it. I think they were relieved, in some ways, to have the Japs under their care off their hands. I remember the master Mr Roberts told his Japanese diver to leave, saying, "If war breaks out, you might get shot from behind, son, or in front." Papa would never have done that.

'I tried to tell Hiroshi to go too, nearly every time we met. But he'd take my hands and bring them to his lips and I didn't have the strength to pull away. But I sensed he was worried, that every time might be our last.'

'The loveliest moment in my life was maybe the worst, thinking how it lingered on with me, making the moments of happiness that followed never quite measure up.'

Nan suddenly looked at Rik, then back down at her hands. 'Perhaps I shouldn't say any more ... I'm your father's mother.'

'It's your story, Nan' said Rik. 'Not my father's.'

Nan tilted her head toward the moon and closed her eyes. '1941, it was. A Sunday in October. The season was all but over. Most fleets had come ashore to be cleaned and made tight against the storms to come. Papa was away in Cossack and Mama was at the Beagle Bay mission with the supply truck that went every year before the Wet set in and cut it off. I'd had a bad night, worrying that war with Japan was near, and Hiroshi's lugger was going to be setting out soon for one last run. So before dawn I got up and cycled out to Gantheaume Point, meaning to be back for Sunday Service. I loved the Point, the way it pushed as far as it could into that big shouting freedom of sea and sky. And I knew that with the spring tide I'd be able to see the footprints at the bottom of the cliff. Some of us fancied those strange shapes had been left by dinosaurs long before the scientists told us it was true. Whenever I walked in them I felt small and fleeting, yet oddly part of something great and permanent. They were soothing to me somehow.

'I climbed down the cliff and walked across the wet rocks, wondering at the tiny creatures ducking in and out that lived in two worlds. I felt a bit like them, I

suppose. I was springing from one footprint to the next when I heard soft laughter behind me. Hiroshi. There he was, the dawn behind him lighting him like a holy creature. He took a pearl on a leather thong from around his neck and slipped it over my head.

‘We went to a cave I knew, and I showed him a lovely fossil, an ancient fish, on the sandstone wall. We lay together ... as lovers ... a long time on that cool white-sand carpet, until the tide came in and hurried us along. It was beautiful, that cave. Magical. Far more magnificent than the place I was meant to be that Sunday morning. I felt we’d been blessed by the gods, his and mine both, to come together that way.’

Rik drained her tea. She sat, feeling the heavy warm air curling from the bay around them, thinking of the cave she’d seen with Johnno, knowing it was the one.

She thought of her grandmother’s lined, leathery face, of her hands, joints distended, fingertips calloused, of her hair, white and lifeless. She thought of the soft snorts when her grandmother struggled from her bed and of the vacant look she so often wore. Rik realised that deep down she’d expected stories from a younger version of that. Stories of coy early Broome shenanigans. Rik was the one who had been naïve.

‘Am I embarrassing you, pet?’

‘No!’ Rik lied.

‘Another cuppa would be nice.’

Rik took her grandmother’s near-full cup into the kitchen, painfully grateful, feeling like a babe in the woods.

‘Hiroshi’s master sent their lugger out to sea the next day. A late run.’ Nan sipped her tea while Rik waited. Eventually she took a deep breath.

‘A little after breakfast on the 8th December, I was reading out here on the verandah when I heard crying and fussing out on the road. Mama, Koepi and I ran to look and saw the Hollis’s Japanese cook and her two little ones being put into a police van. A few Japanese were already hunched in the back, carpetbags and cloth bundles tied with string at their feet. I knew the worst had happened and when we switched on

the wireless the newsreader's nasal voice confirmed it. Japan had attacked Hawaii and Malaya, and the Commonwealth of Australia had declared war.

'I ran into town with Mama calling me to come right back, away from the trouble. Sure enough, Japanese were being rounded up by the army and the police, one by one, family by family and taken to the jail that was never meant to fit that many. I waited under the trees outside the courthouse across the way, my chest hurting. Japanese who'd heard the news were walking up Hamersley St of their own accord, sitting on their suitcases outside the courthouse or standing quietly, waiting their turn to be taken over the road.

'I knew Hiroshi's lugger, along with a few others, was out at sea. I clasped my hands and closed my eyes and prayed he'd get wind of what was happening and somehow sail away. But the luggers were located and ordered back to port, and about a week later Hiroshi too was behind the barbed wire. I learned it when, along with several other folk in town, I took some small comforts to the jail for the folk locked up in there. I never saw him in all the times I went. It was perhaps as well. I'm not sure I could have trusted myself.

'The government called them internees, not prisoners. It was for national security, they said. But they were prisoners, weren't they, though most had never broken any law, except the unwritten one that says a man should know his place. The recruiting agent, the market gardener from out back of the aerodrome, the couple from the noodle shop in John Chi Lane and their littlies, one on the way; the pearlers themselves, of course — the divers, crew and skippers; even some lugger owners — men who owned motorcars, who'd bought licences under the names of white friends and become rich ... they were all there. All the Japanese jumbled together in the gaol like netted fish.'

The old lady screwed shut her eyes then quickly wiped beneath them with her knuckles.

'When we first declared war and locked up all the Japanese — old and young, women and children — I hoped for a while that the government would change its mind and let the ones from here go. But as the war became set in people's minds — the flying boats carrying refugees from the north coming faster and fuller, and more and more whites leaving town — the chances began to look sketchy. On the 21st December, the day after my twenty-first birthday, the authorities announced the

Japanese would be transferred to Perth, from there to who-knew-where in the Eastern States. It was a gut-wrenching welcome to adulthood, I can tell you.

‘Four weeks later, I made my way to the little sandy cliff at Mangrove Point — where the caravan park is now — and stood a long time watching the *S.S. Koolinda*, the steamer that had brought so much excitement and happiness to Broome all my life, berthed like the Grim Reaper itself there alongside Town Jetty.

‘It was late in the afternoon and the mudflats stretched silvery as far as the eye could see under the thunderclouds. I knew like everyone else in town. All the Japanese had been trucked there from the gaol earlier in the day and loaded aboard. The *Koolinda* was to leave on the full tide around noon the next day, you see.

‘I hadn’t laid eyes on Hiroshi since that last precious day before his lugger had left for its final run. When I’d taken food parcels to the gaol with the others, I’d not been able to spot him. I suspect he hadn’t wanted me to, thinking it might scar the lovely thing we had if I saw him penned up like that. But I needed to say goodbye. So I walked on down, right past the soldiers with their rifles on their shoulders and those smug looks on their faces, and found a place on the rocks where Hiroshi might see me if he cared to. A little along, a native woman sat with three almond-eyed kids. We came closer and held hands for a time, listening to the seawater trickling away. I reckon we were both thinking the same thing. Perhaps the tide wouldn’t come back. Perhaps the chaps we loved could stay aboard, under that big, boiling Broome sky until the fighting ended.

‘There was a lot of weeping on board and jostling for space but eventually I spotted him standing at the rail, facing out to sea, so strong and dignified. I took off my hat and shook free my hair to catch his eye, not wanting to call or wave. He didn’t seem to know I was there for a long while. I was beginning to wonder if coming had been silly, when a magnificent brahmīny kite appeared from the mangroves and wheeled overhead. Hiroshi followed the bird’s arc and his eyes came to rest on me. We looked at one another a long, sad while until the rain came and that was that.

‘I heard from Papa that there was a crowd to see the Japanese off at noon the next day on the high tide. I bet some of that mob just couldn’t wait to get their hands on all that Japanese property — Papa being one of them, I suspect. It had been eating at them for years.’

CHAPTER SEVEN

The damp air blew deceitfully cool against his cheeks as Kazuo pedalled south along the back streets, hugging the shade of the street trees, before winding his way to the bay.

His country wasn't on its knees like the papers and television said. His family, the gods be thanked, was safe. He had spoken to them this morning. The tsunami hadn't reached Taiji, not in force enough to hurt them.

But the havoc at home had made him think, had changed things. The trains in Tokyo had stopped for hours, their minute-by-minute schedules abandoned. It would have been unthinkable to him once. Millions now would start new lives from the muddied or shattered wreckage of their homes and the sudden, terrified deaths of their loved ones. He now understood the meaning behind Satsuki's dare. It was possible, if one had to, to stop and to start again. It was possible to be reborn.

He'd returned his rental and bought his own bicycle. He'd cancelled his flight home. With Narita airport closed, there hadn't been a fuss.

Kazuo bumped down the approach to Town Beach. The tide was out, the caramel-pink sand merging with rippled silt on which silver water puddled. Beyond, a light wind whipped the milky shallows into white caps. Far beyond that was the thin turquoise strip of deep water dotted with white vessels. To the right, café staff were stacking chairs and hosing the terrace; to the left, on the grassed hillock under the trees, an Aboriginal family picnicked, children darting and giggling among the graves of white pioneers. From the opening of the swimming cove formed by the stump of the old jetty and a spit of mangroves and black rock, four men lugged a dinghy and motor to shore, stopping often to rotate and wipe their faces. Kazuo couldn't help smiling, wondering how far out the tide had stranded them. He took a surreptitious photo with his phone.

Behind the mangrove spit was Simpsons Beach where the old lady would be fishing from the rocks, perhaps expecting him. She'd appeared upset the first time she saw him. He'd assumed it was because of his Japaneseness — some hangover from the war years. The war hadn't been forgotten here, he'd noticed, and she was old enough to have lost someone. But the next time he'd ventured there, she'd turned and

looked at him serenely — right inside him more than at him, it had seemed — and her face had crinkled into a smile.

She was a strange one, thought Kazuo. He'd not seen her talk to anyone else. Ever. But most evenings she left her bucket to come and sit beside him. He was used to sharing the intimacies of strangers from his time at Sei Chizu. It didn't faze him. And here, alone in Broome, he found himself enjoying her gentle company. Her tranquillity was showing him a different way to be.

Kazuo wheeled his bicycle past the single boab tree and onto the hard rock and gravel mound of the jetty — all that was left of what had once been the heartbeat of Broome, where — so his guidebook told him — steamers came and went on the tide with supplies and passengers, where his grandfather Hiroshi had arrived and from where he'd been taken away.

Kazuo found a place on a rock, looking out to the sea that stretched all the way to Taiji. He slid the plastic sheath that contained his grandfather's letter from his backpack, wiped his palms on his shorts, and carefully withdrew the brittle pages. Crabs scuttling below and sandpipers flitting ahead, he unfolded his grandfather's pages and, feeling only now the timid right, began to read them.

*

The 11th day of the 11th month of the 16th year of Showa

Father, Mother, Sho. Tomorrow with the return of the clear waters of the neap tide our lugger leaves town for the last run of the season. I have a heavy heart this time because my good friend, Ieyasu, who has been with me since Cossack — the fellow who sings all the time — will not be leaving with us. With all this talk about conflict between Japan and Australia, he is collecting his wages and returning home. Mr Carvell, our pearling master, was understanding and demanded no penalty for Ieyasu cutting short his contract. Perhaps you too are thinking it would be better for me to risk conscription at home than be stranded in a far-flung hostile country. But since coming here I have done as you advised, Father. I have travelled with my heart as well as my eyes; I have left a trace of my soul with each footprint. And now this place has ensnared me in a strange, deep way.

Besides — something else you have taught me — men by instinct fear the worst. Australia is as busy fighting in Europe as Japan is in

Manchuria so this conflict may never eventuate. I have decided to stay in Broome until I am forced to leave. I hope you and Mother understand.

*

The 18th day of the 12th month of the 16th year of Showa

I do not trust this letter will find you, Father, for since the news of the commencement ten days ago of the Greater East Asian War, the seas may as well have turned to desert, such is the different world in which I find myself. But you must not be alarmed, for I am safe, in no danger of physical harm and, I believe — you must be sure to tell Mother — still the son I was when I left Taiji.

I write from Broome, but whereas my previous letters have been penned aboard my lugger of an evening, this one is penned from the jail. The fact is, we are now at war. Pearlring men, market gardeners, shopkeepers and their families — we are now the Australians' enemy. All our compatriots — even wives of non-Japanese lineage and small children — began being brought here the moment our Imperial Air Force dropped its bombs so far away on the American warships in Hawaii. I ask you to forgive the smudging of my paper. We Japanese number one hundred and sixty or so in a jail built for fifty. The buildings huddle below Kennedy Hill and any breezes from Roebuck Bay to the east. Tents have been erected side-by-side so closely that there is little space to wave a fan. The oily wet season has descended so, you might imagine, goodwill is limp. The snoring of Nishimura the ice-man has infuriated many normally peaceable people desperate for rest, and has lost him several friends. Above us the sky is an endless black canopy crowded only with stars and one tries to forget that beyond the jail walls the land is the same. At least we are not being shackled and put to work, from which several of the older natives here still bear scars.

I will entrust this letter to an Australian friend on the other side of the barbed wire, though Australian friends are fewer now. With our military's successes on the Malayan peninsula, the town has been emptying like a lagoon on the ebb. All the talk here is that Japan will invade Australia next. People, families in particular, are closing up their houses and shipping

south to the safety of Perth, abandoning their properties to the oncoming Wet. There is news that yesterday our army took Penang, its British population hastening away by ship, denying people of local birth passage out and leaving our army a radio station among other spoils, by which this news arrived. But an invasion here? With all General Yamashita's prowess, I find it difficult to imagine — so much red earth and so little in it.

There are numerous locals who have decided to stay on. People who don't fall into line with common thinking are common enough here. Deliveries from our Australian friends of fish and vegetables and sauces are frequent. It seems that many of the townsfolk are trying to make life bearable for us Japanese. To them, thank the gods, we are not the 'yellow monkeys' that Mr Churchill called us. These Broome friends don't see us here as having much to do with bombs dropped oceans away. Visitors come and go, and I doubt the guards with their rifles across their chests intend us much harm. One guard even had the barber, Yokata, shave him the other day and said it was the smartest he'd felt since this business began. By the time you read this I expect that common sense will have found a foothold and we'll all be back in our lodgings, going about our daily business — the storm of panic lifted and our simple humanity once again recognised. I hope so, for the Australian army cooks cannot make rice to save their lives.

I find myself pondering how the world can change yet stay the same. Our lugger was taking its time returning to Broome, given it was the last run of the season, so all the excitement had been going on for nearly a week before we learned of it from a patrol boat and were ordered to get back to town. Still the news didn't really sink in until we approached Streeters Jetty and were welcomed by three constables with rifles pointed at us. They took me, my tender and the other Japanese diver straight off the boat, leaving the rest of the crew to unload the big haul of shell, and put us on the back of a truck. The town was queerly quiet, and people on the street didn't meet our eye. Fortunately we were allowed to stop by our boarding house and bundle up a few things, although the bath we craved we are yet to enjoy. We were allowed more preparation than those brought in on the day of the Hawaiian attack. Nakata, I hear, arrived with one half of his head clipped by the barber and the other half with the brush of six weeks on the lugger.

Oku's young daughter brought her geography book to study for a test they were having at school the next day, such was the general suddenness and disbelief.

The jail is not far from the Japanese Club. I have passed it many times, Father, but seldom had I seen a Japanese face behind the wires. It was an eerie sight, as our truck rolled into the courtyard, looking down onto a sea of my countrymen — women and men, ancients and infants — the Japanese thread pulled from the cloth of Broome life, suddenly all of us criminals. What an ugly contrast with only the night before out at sea where I'd lain in a hammock under the stars, the lugger creaking at anchor, nudged by the tide, happily oblivious to the world beyond.

That was four days ago. It has made me think that, with respect, Father, you are wrong when you say that to do right by others is to be a good citizen. There is more. One must be on the proper side of whatever boundaries are drawn by those in power. I am a Japanese in Australia on the wrong side of such a boundary. On the eighth day of December I became deserving of incarceration. I trust that the gods who judge us when we pass from this earthly plane do not study maps, tracing national boundaries with their fingers, in deciding who has lived the good life and who the bad.

I must try to reconcile myself to the uncertainty ahead, for there is talk we are to be transferred south. I hope with all my heart that this is a passing overreaction, that things will be restored.

*

The 18th day of the 1st month of the 17th year of Showa

Father, Mother and Sho. I sit on deck as the tropical night closes in. I have claimed some space up here to write, beside a mother and two small children, one of whom has fallen asleep, her head cradled between my shoes. Below, the air is clogged and reeks from the heat of those who hope to pass the night lying down.

This afternoon, when we dropped from the trucks onto the jetty, we saw Roebuck Bay for the first time in weeks. Where once there was bustle and industry, now there is waste and fear. The bay is nearly empty, save

the Netherlands East Indies flying boats bringing in refugees fleeing our Imperial Forces on the Malayan Peninsula. Those luggers that were capable of reaching southern harbours have been sent on. Those in doubt have been set to the torch. Their black ribcages protrude from the mudflats. Nothing that might aid our invading countrymen is to remain.

I'm aboard the S.S. Koolinda, the steamer that has served Broome for many happier years past. They trucked us here from the jail today — two hundred and twelve of us — and we depart for Fremantle on the tide at noon tomorrow. We were joined yesterday by twenty-five or so Australian-born wives and their children as Australia's paranoia swells. Baskets of washing were left on the ground, midday meals half eaten, bicycles and billy-carts abandoned to the weather. They are to collect more of us from ports on the journey to Perth.

Another downpour threatens, so I will close. I will write when I can, Father, in faith that you, Mother and Sho will receive my thoughts in one form or another. I picture us fishing on Turtle Rock beneath the bluff, the indigo Kumano surrounding us. The ocean and the skies — these connect us.

Please send word of Tatsuzo when you can.

Your respectful son.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rik sat on the verandah, watching the dark evening clouds grumbling out over the bay, waiting for Nan to return. She stirred the air with a fan. After being in air-conditioning all day, she liked to feel the air and smell the tidal flats and see the birds and bats flapping overhead. She thought about the single bottle of beer in the fridge — how coolly it would slide down her throat. God, it'd be nice. She still thought of the baby inside her with a mix of wonder, fear and, at times like these, resentment.

Parenthood. It was a strange beast. Would this child ever see her as anything but a mother? She looked at her own grandmother in a different way now, after giving her the time and space to tell her story. She saw now the young vibrant being inside the failing body and the frail mind. And in Nan she'd begun to see traits of herself that made a lifetime of feeling like a cuckoo in the family's nest make some sense.

On the footpath a couple in their fifties from the resort up the road power-walked, looking neither right nor left, pumping their clenched fists, intent on the business of fitness. The Japanese guy who'd popped in and out of the Tourist Centre a little while back slowly cycled by. He recognised Rik and gave her a wave. She returned it, pleased he seemed to have eased into Broome-time. A few minutes later, her grandmother toddled into view. Rik left the verandah to greet her, enfolding her in a hug that the old woman flapped away good-naturedly.

'You daft kid,' she said, squeezing Rik's hand.

They chewed their lamb chops at the kitchen table. Eventually, Rik asked the question burning in her. 'Have you got any photos, Nan? You know, from when you were a young woman?'

Nan's eyes twinkled. 'You need evidence?'

Rik laughed. 'Yep. Yep, I do.'

Nan put down her knife and fork and chuckling quietly to herself rummaged in a dresser in the lounge room a few minutes. She returned and gave to Rik a single photograph in an ornate silver frame that was tarnished nearly black with time and neglect.

A young woman, trying not to smile. Cream satin dress, cream gloves, fair hair pinned from her face before falling in soft curls below her shoulders.

‘You were a looker, Nan!’ said Rik. ‘Is this your wedding day?’

‘Golly, no,’ said Nan. ‘Your grandfather burnt all those. This was taken on my coming out. The debutante’s ball. Seventeen, I was. If you look close you can see me perspiring. It was hot as Hades that day. Those curls took hours with the tongs, I remember — Mama and Koepi fussing over me. I was never much for dressing up. Still, I did spruce up alright that night.’

‘You sure did, Nan.’ Rik decided not to ask about the lost wedding photos.

‘There’s a secret to this photograph, you know,’ said Nan. ‘I can tell you, I suppose ... now.’

Rik studied it more closely. ‘What kind of secret?’

‘It sat on Mama and Papa’s dresser all those years right in front of them, and they never knew. Open it up,’ said Nan. ‘You need strong fingers.’

Rik worked the clasps and removed the masonite backing. She lifted the moth-nibbled blotting paper to reveal a second photograph, yellowed and curled at the edges. Carefully she lifted it and turned it over.

It was him! Hiroshi! The shot was unusually informal for the times. He was at the side of a lugger, presumably on a ladder, pictured from the waist up and suited up in diving clobber but for his helmet. Ropes and rigging surrounded him. Behind him, the sea had a slight chop. He looked at ease despite the heavy outfit enclosing him up to his neck. Not smiling brashly, but with a kind of calm respect and knowingness for what he was about to do.

‘You can see why I fell for him,’ said Nan.

Rik nodded. She could.

‘I tucked it in there when they took him away.’

They studied the photograph of the young man, shoulder to shoulder, until Rik broke the silence. ‘Time to go outside, Nan?’

Nan leaned the photograph of Hiroshi against the salt and pepper shakers. ‘I’d like that, pet.’

‘Mama, Papa and I stayed in Broome a couple of weeks after the *Koolinda* took the Japanese away, helping out with the flying boats that were stopping in Broome to refuel. They were mostly women and children who’d suffered a frightening time and they were grateful for what hospitality we could offer while they waited for the tide to turn so their flying boats could move on. In a way, I was happy that we didn’t speak the same language. I didn’t want to hear their version of some of the awful stories that were coming out about the Japanese invaders. I handed out wet towels and cups of tea. I played with the children and said goodbye, every day to a new lot of faces.

‘Then in February the War Cabinet decided everyone in the whole of the north of Australia had to be evacuated south. When I say everyone, they only meant us Europeans — not the Aborigines or the rest of the Asians — the Koepangers and Malays and the like. It meant saying goodbye to Koepi.

‘Most of the Aborigines, I know, were sent to be watched over by the nuns at Beagle Bay mission, no matter how smart they were and what position they might have held in Broome. That’s where Koepi went. It was terrible seeing her pack her things. She was a second mother to me. The rest of the Aborigines melted into the bush — places like Fishermens Bend and Bones Well. Native Affairs dropped them rations every now and again. They were dead scared of any of them wanting to come south of the leprosy line down near Port Hedland.

‘You’ve got to remember, things were looking grim. The Japanese were having a picnic in Malaya and Singapore was on the brink. The Germans had sunk the HMAS Sydney off W.A. in the previous November, so if they could do that, the Japanese could do similar. People were deathly scared and when the Japs bombed Darwin midway through February, they were proven right. At the end of July, they’d draw a line across the whole of Australia above Brisbane and say they’d leave it to the Japs if push came to shove — the Brisbane Line, they called it. At first the whole of Western Australia was going to be abandoned if the Japs invaded, but the P.M.’s electorate in Fremantle had something to say about that, and the War Cabinet changed its mind to include our southern parts.

‘The women and children, a few hundred of us all up, left by all means. Mama and I scored a trip with the RAAF — the only time I’ve flown in an aeroplane in my life. I remember looking down on all the creeks and inlets, exposed by the tide in

silvered multi-coloured sweeps and curls. It was the most breathtaking thing I'd ever seen in my life and yet I was leaving it for who knew how long.

'Papa stayed another few weeks then the military moved him on too. He left on 2nd March, the day before the Japanese Zeros raided Roebuck Bay and all those poor refugees were killed.

'We stayed in rooms at a sprawling old house on Stirling Highway for the first few months until Mama and Papa found a place of our own to rent. It was run by a Mrs Hetherington, a widow from the first war. She seemed to be friends with half the Australian armed forces. There was forever a mob of young chaps, en route to the fighting, around her kitchen table having a beer or a bite to eat, perhaps because the Army camp at the Showgrounds wasn't far away. The government encouraged everyone to be hospitable to soldiers, and Mrs Hetherington took her civic duty to heart. It was a wonderful place for a lonely young woman from Broome.

'A lot of the talk naturally swung around to the Japanese, and it wasn't nice. But I couldn't hold it against chaps who had lost mates, or who were about to go off and risk their lives against them. Mrs Hetherington fortunately had a way of steering the conversation away from general hatred and back to positive things. Perhaps, unlike Papa, she remembered the first war when the Japs had been our allies. I'm sure it was one of the reasons people liked being in her kitchen.

'Hatred was stirred up by the government, mind you. A woman across the street who spoke her mind in defence of some Japanese friends was picked up for questioning as a collaborator. People worried that the Japs would land in Perth itself, it's hard to imagine now. Not long after we arrived, the Daily News began its half-page posters saying things like that the Japs were using maps made by the Japanese pearlers to attack us. One I remember said, "We've always despised them — now we must smash them!" Those last two words were in capitals. Another one had a photo of a Chinese and one of Premier Tojo. There were lines to different parts of the two faces, enlightening us as to the differences. The Chinese race, it said, were tall and slender while the Japs were short and squat with bob noses and beards. It was all rubbish of course, of no use to anyone. I remember that one in particular because Papa cut it out and pinned it to my wardrobe for me. I used to look at it and not know whether to laugh or cry. They were so intent on getting us to hate the Japs that they were sending everyone up the garden path.

‘They told us that all the Japanese were fanatics who were trained to hate from childhood; they were semi-civilised savages and yellow monkey men. Well, I was a mere young woman, but I thought of Hiroshi and the other Japanese I’d known in Broome and knew it was a lot of pigs’ ears and bunny rabbits. It was fair enough to fear the Japanese and their army, but not to hate the lot of them. Fear and hate — they’re two different things all too often bundled up together, no less so today. But Papa kept all the hateful clippings like they were gospel.

‘I’m ashamed to say it, but any thought I’d had of finding out where they’d taken Hiroshi and writing to him seeped away when I got to Perth. There were just too many risks, and the thought of censors seeing a word of anything either of us wrote — even if they did decide it was innocent — gave me goosebumps of horror.

‘People sorted out protection from invasion for themselves. A lot of people dug air-raid shelters in their own backyards before they were built in public places. I didn’t like the look of those shelters. They were too much like graves, and in the loose sandy soil of Perth, there was every chance they would be if people didn’t know what they were doing. Others sought a different kind of protection — the churches back then were packed to the rafters.

‘In those early days when the war against Japan was going badly, everyone had to put up blackout curtains. We had to cover the ventilators and door cracks to make sure every chink of light was blocked. Even smoking a cigarette outside at night was frowned upon. If you had a shelter room in the house, the glass windows were to be removed, and if you didn’t know how to do it there were newspaper ads telling you. To hold up invading paratroopers, some local authorities heaped rubbish in open spaces. Some hammered wooden spikes across sporting ovals. Beaches were draped with barbed wire.

‘It was a jittery time, all right. We had to mind what we said in case we gave away a secret to a spy. I remember Mrs Hetherington’s hackles rising at one poster. It read, ‘Talking Causes Loss of Life. Do as Dad Does. Keep Mum.’ She got all worked up, calling it an insult to all those ladies who were keeping the country going while the men were away, and who weren’t being kept by any man, let alone spreading secrets. Mama and I just tut-tutted along with her at the time, not knowing what she was on about. I remember it though because we hadn’t seen that side of her till then,

and Papa commented we should be careful because there was a bit of the Red about Mrs Hetherington.

‘I lost the last traces of my girlhood during those early years in Perth. Towards the end of ’42, Papa caved in to the call for women to get to work — to do their patriotic duty, as it was put — and asked an old friend to get me a job at Foy & Gibson’s before I got manpowered to the Land Army. It was one of the proudest moments of my life, bringing home my first pay packet and handing over some of it to Mama for board. After a while, catching the train into the city every day, seeing the women going to and from the munitions factories, working side by side with bright girls, and serving mothers who were keeping a business and family going while their husbands were away, I began to understand better what Mrs Hetherington had been on about. I’d never have clever opinions about politics, and I’d die before I contradicted Papa or any other man, but it was a start.

‘In Broome, I’d never had much female company. At work, we’d do little things for each other. At lunchtimes, if we weren’t helping out at the soldiers’ canteen, we’d look out for new supplies of things that were scarce and spread the word. In place of stockings, we’d draw seams with eyebrow pencil down the backs of each other’s legs. We’d swap rations and advice on how to handle charming American sailors. We’d pore over the daily casualty lists in the newspaper and give a hug when another’s friend went in the fighting or was taken POW. We’d listen like they were our own to letters from sweethearts, and we’d cover for someone who’d got the news everybody dreaded.

‘One of my work pals had been a beach girl on the cover of Pix magazine. They didn’t use professionals in those days, just any pretty girl who sent in her photo and who’d remind the boys of home. An army company serving in New Guinea had written very nicely and asked her if she’d be their mascot and, of course, she’d said yes. She used to read us their letters — polite and a bit cheeky at the same time. We loved them. A year or so later, their letters stopped and she learned they’d been wiped out somewhere in the jungle. It was a terrible shock, especially with the war turning our way. It shook her up badly and would have for a long time, I expect, seeing herself as a bad luck charm like that. After that, I knew I could never admit to anyone, maybe not even to myself, that I’d loved a Japanese man.

‘I met your Grandfather Jack at Foys — properly met him, I mean. We’d been introduced at Mrs Hetherington’s not long before he went off to RAAF training, but hadn’t exchanged two words, me being quiet and the kitchen a bit rowdy. He was a good-looking fellow, with smooth black hair like Errol Flynn. He came into my section one day, all the girls nudging one another as he made his way. I almost died when he recognised me. He finished up buying some socks and asking me to a dance at the Embassy Ballroom, I think to make conversation as much as anything.

‘I was Jack’s sweetheart by the time he left, and wrote him letters. We weren’t serious. All the girls wrote to chaps, usually two or three. We saw it as doing our bit to keep up the boys’ morale. In the back of my mind, I confess, sometimes I’d catch myself thinking of Hiroshi and how he was going, wherever he was. Truth be told, I sometimes imagined it was Hiroshi, not Jack, reading the letter at the other end. That’s a terrible thing I know. There had been no news at all about the thousands of ‘enemy’ within our own shores. I didn’t know where they’d taken Hiroshi, and I didn’t know where to start asking without someone getting suspicious. In 1944, Jack was stationed up here, in Broome. I knew where that was, alright. I kept writing to Jack then, partly, I think, because he was where I wanted to be.

CHAPTER NINE

Kazuo went early, ahead of the tour groups, pushing away the thought that what he was doing would later give them a touching photo opportunity.

At his grandfather's grave he knelt and got out two tiny plates covered in cling wrap from his backpack. He placed them on the base — in one a mound of cooked rice, in the other, a small bunch of grapes. Over the headstone he draped the amulet he'd woven the night before from grasses he'd picked behind Simpsons Beach after sitting with the old lady. He clapped his hands twice to let the gods know he was there, bowed his head and prayed for his grandfather's spirit.

He picked up his backpack and bike, stood on the pedal and scooted down the path, then headed back to town to wait for the Historical Museum to open.

Kazuo waited at the reception desk of the old stone building that had been a customs house in times gone by. Its walls were crammed with pictures, street signs, posters and knick-knacks from a jumble of eras and threads of lives. A sixties shop mannequin dressed in a diver's suit and bell helmet posed stiffly behind him. High on a wall, an air-conditioner blew doggedly.

'Japanese divers? Gosh, where to begin?' The volunteer behind the desk — Maggie, according to her badge — talked on an angle as she fondled the ears of the golden retriever at her knee. She wore purple half-spectacles and had a pile of hair dyed to match but for the strip of grey that straddled her part.

'After the war,' added Kazuo, 'when they were in the prison camps? Or when they came back here in the fifties?'

'They were internment camps, love. Not prisons.'

A fellow on the other side of the reception corral, his back to Maggie and Kazuo, muttered something into his computer screen.

'Well, yes,' said Maggie. 'That's true.' She smiled at Kazuo. 'They did spend the first couple of months in the gaol here.' She shifted uncomfortably. 'The truth is, we've got more records here than you can poke a stick at, but not so as anyone can make any sense of them. Are you after anything specific? Something to use as a starting point? A name, perhaps?'

‘My grandfather’s name was Ishikawa Hiroshi, Ishikawa the family name,’ said Kazuo. ‘My family has this letter from him. He wrote it here in Broome when he was interned.’ Kazuo drew the letter from his backpack and laid it on the counter. The other man swivelled in his chair and joined Maggie. The two pored over the letter, inspecting the postmark on the envelope — Fremantle, some time in February 1942 — and the yellowed sheets.

‘Was your grandfather a diver?’ asked the man.

Kazuo nodded.

‘Could you translate this for us?’

‘I would be happy to,’ said Kazuo.

A murmured conversation passed between the two workers until eventually Maggie smiled up at Kazuo. ‘We think we might have something for you, sir.’

Maggie led Kazuo into a room out the back that smelled of camphor and years gone by. She hefted a military-style strongbox onto the work table in front of him. ‘The reference library down in Perth asked for it a while back but it belongs here, for better or worse. Some of the guards who’d got friendly with the internees at Hay internment camp sent it back here to Broome when they repatriated all the Japanese at the end of the war. Most of our divers here ended up in Hay eventually, after a bit of time at Loveday.’

Maggie began unlocking the box. ‘Your grandfather didn’t have family here, did he? Because the families and the women went to Tatura.’

‘No,’ said Kazuo. ‘He had no one here.’

Maggie nodded and began lifting the clasps, one by one. ‘A lot of the prisoners — the internees, rather — didn’t want to go. I mean, some of them were ancient and hadn’t been home in decades; others had different kinds of roots here — older kids who could stay in Australia if they wanted, businesses and friendships built up over the years, common-law Aboriginal wives and families even. You probably know all that. Anyway, they left these things behind. Personal things.’

Maggie creaked back the lid of the strongbox, revealing letters, journals, photographs, old identity cards, tiny netsuke — wooden figurines carved by hand. ‘See what I mean? The guards shipped it back to where their Japanese friends had

come from in Australia, knowing that's where they wanted it to stay. Trouble is, no one's ever got around to cataloguing it and tracing their families.' She looked up from the box. 'How long have you got here?'

Kazuo shrugged and smiled. 'It doesn't actually matter anymore.'

'Well,' said Maggie. 'It's a jumble, but you're welcome to look through it. Just wear these gloves if you wouldn't mind. And please, take your time. I'll see what else I can find out in the meantime.'

Over the days, Kazuo became friendly with the other volunteers at the museum, enjoying the cups of tea they brought him, their Australian banter, and their delight in the fact that he sorted the material in the strongbox as he went. On the third day he came across the four letters, tied with cord and wrapped in a handkerchief, addressed to his grandfather.

Kazuo laid the handkerchief aside and closed the door. He lifted up the top letter and opened it. It was from grandfather Hiroshi's father — his own great grandfather, whose grave on the hillside above Taiji he had visited with his parents and his great aunt Sho's family last Obon — dated January 1942.

The writing was spidery, the paper splotted with age, and the script more ornate than he was used to ... but Kazuo let rest his mind and gradually the meaning came.

*

The 5th day of the 1st month of the 17th year of Showa

My dear son. I had pictured you safe in that faraway part of our world. We all pray for your safety and wish you a speedy return to Japan. You have always been a good son.

I had thought our army to have enough on its hands with Manchuria, which has dragged on ten long years. (There has been no word for some time now from your cousin Tatsuzo, I am sorry to report.) Yet these days the radio and papers talk of nothing but our victories in the Greater East Asia War, as we are now to call both conflicts. Goods remain hard to come by and inflation continues to squeeze us all. I only hope I live long enough to see the benefits of the sacrifices we are asked to make.

We stopped taking out the boats mid-way through December to clean and repair for the new year. Your mother and Sho polished everything until it shone, I suspect, hoping you might walk up the path, by some miracle, having left Australia before we dropped our bombs on the Americans. We spent new year's eve making tsubuki that now hang from every nail in the house. Sho has a way of plaiting the rice-straw with so much criss-crossing that I have trouble finding my way inside, I don't know about the demons. She made one for you and hung it above your photograph. On New Year's Eve, I went to the shrine on the cliff at midnight, of course, and made offerings, thinking of you, my son. In the moonlight and clear winter air, the ocean, Turtle Rock and the rocky islets were very beautiful. It brought to mind happier times.

Whaling so far this season has been reasonable. I don't know how long we can go on though — even taking the boats out as little as we now do — with fuel as scarce and costly as it is. We trapped a good pod of dolphin two months ago — sixty or so. The co-op got a good price and Funadamasama an extra bottle of sake on the village's November visit to his shrine. I expect you miss the excitement of the chase in fishing for humble molluscs.

Tomorrow, of course, is the seventh anniversary of your Grandmother Eiko's death. Fortunately, it promises to be another clear day for the climb up the hill to her grave. Your mother was a loving daughter-in-law and the affection was returned — one of the great good fortunes of my life. When your turn comes to bring a wife into our home I know it will be the same.

Kiyosawa Ichiji from the Post Office was conscripted last month. Unfortunately, his wife has not been strong since the birth of their second child. The village will rally to look after them. I am thankful to be too old to be called to service.

Your affectionate father.

*

Kazuo refolded the letter carefully and put it aside. He picked up the next, addressed in the same spidery hand, written in August of the same year.

*

The 16th day of the 8th month of the 17th year of Showa

My son. I confess I am happy now that you are where you are. We long for further word from you, but this war disrupts everything that we once took for granted, so your mother, Sho and I keep faith that the gods will look over you wherever you are.

There is bad news here. I have learned that your friend Ieyasu was conscripted almost as soon as he returned, and is now fighting in the Philippines. The family has heard nothing from Tatsuzo for some time now, and the stories of horror that trickle through from Manchuria are disturbing, more so with another bitter winter there on the doorstep. Your Uncle Seigo and Aunt Shizuko try to be optimistic, knowing that Tatsuzo will be fighting bravely for the New Japan. Be glad you are in Australia, my son, and contribute to the Forces Comfort Fund if you can.

With our Imperial Forces in the southern Pacific claiming triumph after triumph since the fall of Singapore there is no urge to talk with America to end this conflict. Premier Tojo is full of bluster. He says that the only way Japan will lose the war is if we, the people, are not unified in support of it. Anyone who does not support the war is a traitor — this is the government's line. Sadly, people are becoming hesitant to speak their minds. But is it not possible for two people to seek a common good while disagreeing on how to achieve it? This is what your humble father thinks.

Despite our nation's victories, America is proving much more resilient than our leaders first thought. In Taiji we do not forget the tragedy sixty-four years ago of the whale whose surprising strength caused a tragedy. The hunters hung on to the beast they had harpooned, thinking it would give up, when they should have cut their ropes. The whale didn't give up and pulled them further and further out to sea and dozens drowned. I have begun to wonder, is America the New Japan's whale?

Obon is over for another year and the souls of the dead are now returning to the Pure Land, having paid their annual visit. The wind was

faint last night and the harbour was aglow with candles in their paper boats, carrying the spirits of our ancestors back to the East. The return to Taiji of kinfolk in their fine kimonos; the eating, praying, dancing and drumming day and night; the lanterns burning brightly at the water's edge and Taiji's grandmothers chanting over burning shishibi leaves, warding off demons and vengeful ghosts — the festival put everything right again, as it always does.

It is a mystery to me the tranquility that I, a practical man, feel in calling and honouring our ancestors as we do at Obon. But it is one that in these uncertain times I will not trouble myself to question.

This year, sadly, we had more hatsubon families than last year, for several in the village have gone with the fighting this past year. Do you remember when you carried the tall gate of bamboo poles and cloth to the temple for your Grandmother Keiko? It was bitter, this year, to see the old performing rituals for the young.

With the lack of fuel, I am worried how we will manage the whaling season which begins next month. We will go on fishing with hand lines and the Co-op says we can be optimistic. While we may have little income to look forward to, we will at least have plenty to eat. Your Uncle Seigo says that inflation and the black market are biting hard in Osaka.

We will go ahead with the Whale Festival as usual, though, come November. It is good to be practising our dancing and drumming rather than sitting about at the Co-op swapping stories of gloom. You loved the whale dance as a boy, sitting on the rowboat and waving your arms about like the men.

The bee-bee trees here are covered in their clouds of white and grey flowers. I can smell delicious honey already. I hope there are similar pleasures wherever you are.

Your affectionate father.

*

Kazuo extracted the third letter carefully from its envelope. It had been written over a year later.

*

The 3rd day of the 11th month of the 18th year of Showa

My beloved son, for that is what you are. We have heard rumour that the merchant seamen in Australia are now called prisoners of war and housed in the same camp as the wretched souls captured in the fighting. Wherever you may be, you must keep strong and ride this storm as, together, we have ridden many in the past. No foreign edict will change who you are to us, and Sho will make a happy marriage one day, despite the fears you must hold.

I drank tea with Masaomi last week. His son-in-law, who received his draft notice only a month after the marriage to Toyo in July, has now gone to Burma. That is perhaps better than Manchuria, where our Tatsuzo is somewhere, where it is already thirty degrees below zero and the men have no rice. Toyo begs to come home — her mother-in-law is a bitter woman — and Masaomi said it tortured them to remind her of her duties to her new family when, with their son Tomo also in Burma, they would cherish her at home with them. Toyo has learned she is expecting, so this at least means she will be home for the month following the infant's birth in May.

Kasahara of the barbershop has been drafted. That leaves only old Ando to serve the village. Your mother says I am not to worry — she has the basin and shears. I am worrying, my son. I remember how you used to come away looking.

They have raised the age-limit as to who can be drafted for active military service to forty-five. We can't help wondering who will be left to keep things going in the village soon. Old Ando and your father may be going off to war together if this keeps up.

We are told we should congratulate a family whose son is killed in battle. We are also told we should write prayers of congratulations to boys going to the front. Young Shinya, who volunteered for the Setagaya Regiment, came home for two days before leaving for the fighting. Shimanaka was upset for his son was in a very bad way. His training had

been a nightmare. He'd had daily beatings, sometimes with studded clogs. His nose had been broken and his face was covered with eruptions. Recruits were forced to stand on tiptoe hours at a time. One of Shinya's classmates had taken his life in a privy.

Shinya has always been a gentle lad, as you would recall. He was a classmate, was he not? We paid respects to the Shimanaka family on your behalf. At the train station young women seeing him off wrapped themselves in Japanese flags and were in high spirits for him. I was unable to share their enthusiasm.

The government is obsessed with the drive for production. Your Uncle Seigo says everyone in Osaka has a cold because the heating equipment in homes and buildings has been taken by the government for metal. Anything metal — doorknobs and keys, altar bowls, ancient bronze statues in temples, the iron chains of graveyards, the railing alongside bridges and the steps to public offices, door strips and window sealers that shut out the rain — it's all gone. As cement replacements become available, metal roof tiles must be handed over. Next thing they will be taking our boat engines and telling us to catch more fish.

People are desperate and honour is under strain. Seigo's young neighbour took her lunch to school and while it warmed on the stove somebody took it. Even here away from the cities, food cooking in its pan is stolen from kitchens, and bamboo mats and ropes from garden huts. Last week, Yahagi from the Co-op was in the bathhouse in Shingu. Because soap, too, now is rationed he placed it close to his basin of water. A fellow splashed Yahagi's face with hot water and when he could see again his soap had gone.

Today your mother and Sho dug up the sweet potatoes and taro. It was a good crop that should last us a while. They planted the last few inches of garden with beans, while I went fishing from Turtle Rock, imagining you beside me.

It is a blessing not to have to rely on the black market for everything, for inflation is a beast. Sugar is now up to forty yen per kamme, sometimes fifty, can you believe? In the cities, a whole household has to make do with

one or two radishes a day or a handful of bean sprouts. Here in the country, we share our small harvests among our neighbours and keep quiet. It feels this luxury may be taken from us any minute, if the government were to look our way.

Be assured, my son, that wherever you are, the prayers of your mother, your sister and your sentimental father are with you. May the gods watch over you.

Your affectionate father.

*

Kazuo put down his great grandfather's letter and found his hands were shaking. He took a glug of water and, leaving the cool breath of the aircon, stepped outside into the museum courtyard in which spindly trees gave scant reprieve from the midday swelter. Crackling bark. Bushflies. The karking of a crow. He needed to see his shadow, to inhale the here and now, to reassure himself he existed, even as a mote of dust on the wind. He gazed toward the bay and gave thanks to his ancestors for delivering him here.

Back inside, he slid the desiccated sheets from his grandfather's last letter. August 5th 1945.

*

The 5th day of the 8th month of the 20th year of Showa

My son. Terrible news that I cannot linger over in the telling. Shinya is dead. The Shimanakas have not been told any details but that he went bravely and in battle. His remains are in New Guinea and will stay there. The Shimanakas have no body to tend and bury. We visited their home with what we could — no rice, no sake, but a sorry squid from the previous night's trap, and our humble prayers.

America is not yet weary and not yet ruined as was predicted by the military three years ago. His Imperial Majesty has said he is prepared to go to the front line and sacrifice his life. The authorities twist the samurai cry — 'A great man should die as a shattered jewel rather than live as an intact tile'. His Majesty urges, 'One hundred million shattered jewels!' One

hundred million deaths? A dead emperor? Where is the valour and the use in this?

Okinawa is gone. It is a bitter thought that, after the Iron Rain of eighty or more days, we have relinquished the islands to the Americans from where they might invade our country with ease. So many lives lost — on both sides. Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka continue to be bombarded relentlessly. Even the Imperial Palace was attacked, with part of the grounds left burning. Seigo tells terrible stories of the cities. No one goes to shelters any more for people need to sleep. There are no transport wagons to take away the bodies and no help for the wounded. Coffins are re-used. People burned beyond recognition are buried in the middle of the town in holes shovelled by drafted labourers, often children of fourteen or fifteen who, had the government not closed down all the schools above elementary, should be sitting in a classroom learning their lessons. In what spare time they have left, they train with bamboo spears. Propaganda leaflets flutter amid the char and dust and incendiary casings. No one dares pick them up for fear that one of the Kempetai secret police is watching.

If Tatsuzo ever makes it out of Manchuria I wonder if he will have any home or loved ones to return to. 'Rows and rows of silvery wings,' your Uncle Seigo described one raid near their neighbourhood. The planes came at low altitude, at a leisurely pace. Anti-aircraft guns were useless. The sky to the north became pure red and strong winds fanned the fires. Incendiary bombs fell slowly with a swishing sound like rain, setting alight the roofs of houses and bamboo fences. The stench from the burning oil of firebombs invaded everywhere. People beat their fences with overcoats and straw mats and threw water with wooden buckets. There were thuds and tremors, illumination bombs that turned night to daylight. People with reddened eyes — smoke, heat, tears — staggered about, smeared with mud. They hobbled along the railway tracks, wrapped in bedding, mothers clutching three or four children, not knowing where to go. A freight yard — the central dispatch for everything — was destroyed with cruel precision. People leapt into ponds to escape burning and drowned. In air-raid shelters they were overcome with smoke. Many who returned to help were killed or maimed by

delayed-action bombs. Bodies were strewn everywhere. I fear for your uncle and aunt desperately.

In Tokyo, the evacuation of homes on either side of streetcar routes is compulsory. People are rushing to the countryside. They board trains through windows, the water closets filled with people and their belongings, legs poking in the air. The trains sit for hours every time there is an air raid warning. Children empty themselves on the floor and adults must suffer, unable to relieve themselves.

Yet people are not indignant or outraged. They say, 'It is because of the war. It can't be helped.' This I cannot agree with. It is time our government talked with the Americans. The Yomiuri newspaper reported that in twelve attacks recently there was more damage than England suffered in five years and eight months. This is from a paper that painted the thousands of deaths on Attu two years ago as 'glorious victory'. With Okinawa and the Kerama Islands gone, our homeland is now cut off from the southern Pacific. Everywhere, even in Taiji, people train with bamboo spears. Premier Koiso says, 'Our people's confidence in inevitable victory is not disturbed even in the least.' He is either a fool or a liar.

In the evening there is not a single light to be seen. Even the darkness is dark.

Forgive my gloominess, my son. I hope you understand that I, too, am made to feel imprisoned, powerless, and under grave threat by our government's reckless stubbornness. We are blessed that you, at least, are safe, so we must believe, in Australia.

Yesterday we planted seed potatoes and eggplants and ladled night soil over the plot. How I long for a rice dumpling oozing with bean jam as a reward. But with no rice and sugar now 800 yen a kamme I will content myself with dreaming.

Last night I fished from Turtle Rock and caught a bream and three herring.

This morning, your mother, Sho and I planted geraniums by the path. Life is about beauty too.

Your affectionate father.

CHAPTER TEN

‘Jack was home on leave,’ said Nan, ‘when we dropped the bombs on Hiroshima then Nagasaki in August ’45 and the Japanese surrendered. People were hysterical in the street, laughing and drinking and hugging into the night, and I was cheering along with the rest of ’em that the war was over. Jack proposed right there in Hay Street with the trolley bus rattling by and, like every other girl that night, I said yes. We organised a simple wedding. Quick. Like life was a temporary thing. It was only when I got to the church that I realised how little we knew one another. Papa was beside me, and Mama was in a new frock and hat, the first in so long, and looking so proud. It took me all my nerve to go ahead with the service.

‘Shortly afterwards, Jack got a job with the Commonwealth Railways that took him away for four months. Can’t say I was sorry. It gave me time to get used to being someone’s wife.’

Nan opened her mouth as though to continue, but instead levered herself from her cane chair and walked slowly down the shell-grit path to the gate. She leaned against it, looking out to sea, clenching and unclenching her fists. She was still there an hour later, her snowy hair catching the glow of the moon as it rose above the bay, when Rik went to bed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hiroshi stares at the wooden gangplank bouncing and creaking as his burgundy-clad countrymen tramp aboard, duffle bags hugged to their chests. In Broome, four long years ago, he had gripped another ship's rail — the *Koolinda's* — and looked out to a vast twilight sky, a bruise of clouds massing on the horizon. A brahminy kite had glided overhead, its arc leading him to Shinju. Shinju, with her hat flipping on its ribbons, her loose hair glowing like the slipping sun itself. She was waiting, and in that incandescent light before the storm they had said a silent goodbye. Hiroshi tilts his head to the Sydney sun and closes his eyes, till he is once more with her in the cave at the water's edge, feeling the brush of her eyelashes, her soft exhalations on his neck.

A ship's horn bellows above him. Behind him, Japanese crewmen bark orders. Since the day he left Broome he has had not a single letter. He understands.

He pulls his cap lower against the sun. In Broome, as the *Koolinda's* horn sounded and the tug began its sideways pull, Hiroshi felt no finality. Even at Loveday and Hay, where weeks dragged into years, he was sure the torn pieces of his life would one day reconfigure. That serenity, he sees now, was naïve. Simple ignorance. This is his life now — this derelict vessel, the *Daikai Maru*, headed not to the turquoise waters of Broome, but five thousand miles beyond, to the port of Uraga on the southern jaw of Tokyo Bay.

Wisps of diesel eddy among the tobacco drifts from men lining the salt-pocked rail — like Hiroshi, men not so much eager to start a new day as to be done with the cramped, airless night. Below, the Pacific glitters steely as a dishpan.

The ship grumbles and belches northward. There are close to three thousand aboard — ex-soldier POWs mostly and a few hundred merchant seamen like him. The vessel was built for a few hundred. Guns have been removed, the bolt-holes beginning to rust, and replaced with sleeping mats and stowage. Men play mahjong where a few months before Imperial sailors trained guns. Women and families left from Melbourne nine days ago, some leaving older children behind.

Hiroshi picks rust flakes from his palms and swallows his thirst and the tearing in his stomach that has returned with waking. He tries to forget the rumour, gathering

like a plague, that the crew is holding back supplies to sell on the black market when they get to Japan. They all saw the crates of food loaded at Sydney yet they've had mostly bread and water for nine days now. Some of the ex-soldiers are talking of doing something. They are men trained to despise capture more than death. Many are ghosts in their family's eyes as well as the government's and their own. They have nothing to lose.

Beneath the chug of the engines Hiroshi senses a queer silence. The chafing and chiding is absent, and not from sudden contentment. He peers about, trying to pick up a clue. One of the POWs averts his eyes. Hiroshi hears the stomp on the metal stairs of trays of loaves, barrels of water being brought to deck. The clink of plates, knives. Men flock to the trays like chickens to grain. Silently, three POWs turn their backs and disappear, hands in their pockets.

Hiroshi later lies looking through the canopy of stars, tries to blot out the engines and the swish of steel being honed.

The murmur spreads an hour before dawn. Three crewmen dead. Knife thrusts — short, rapid. The men get an egg and an orange with their bread.

In driving snow, the *Daikai Maru* drops anchor off Uraga, its tall ancient gate prominent from the ship. Hiroshi huddles below, bone-cold and uncertain. After two days of quarantine the vessel is okayed. He disembarks with the others in single file. Clerks run fingers over identity papers again. In a shed he runs with the naked, blue melee of men through jets of DDT. Two days in old naval barracks, then a train ticket. Hiroshi is four hundred miles north of Taiji.

Carriages are jammed and what seats remain are gutted of stuffing. Hiroshi works his way to a pole near the door and wedges against it, his duffel bag between his feet. He looks across the tops of heads, swaying to the rhythm of the joints in the rails. The scratched windows screen the view and what he glimpses is a punch to the stomach, things worsening as they near Tokyo ... Mile after mile of scattered, blackened homes, shattered buildings, treeless parks, gutted temples, lonely building facades and single walls, twisted steel, old folk in military cast-offs, listless children, stations without platforms or shelter. As more and more citizens board, in his camp-issue burgundy clothes, the fabric sturdy and intact, Hiroshi feels the hungry eyes.

At Ueno Station, empty and aching, he alights. Shiny-faced GIs, pressed wool and polished buttons, weave jeeps through pedestrians and piles of rubble. Once-bright shopfronts are like toothless old women. Random newness — a fish shop here, a barbershop there — wedges itself between ruins. Everywhere, movie posters are in English — names he knows from the Sun — Clark Gable, Lana Turner — and shop signs in the script for foreigners and foreign things — Koka Kora, masaji. Hiroshi stares along the broken pavement, where girls with trousers and bobbed hair stride by a row of returned soldiers hunched on the pavement shining shoes. A couple holding hands snakes past. He crosses the road to where lipsticked women in grubby kimono linger in doorways, eyeing him with covered smiles. Marketeers leave their stalls to stroke his uniform and offer a price.

He buys udon from a stall and slurps it down. Heading back, one of the shoe shiners glances up. Hiroshi catches the confusion in his eyes before the soldier looks away. I've seen him, thinks Hiroshi, trudging on. Suddenly it hits. Shinya. From Taiji. Shinya who is dead, a hero, in New Guinea. He swings around to see Shinya scooping up his things, disappearing into the crowd. Hiroshi watches him weave away.

At Taiji station, Hiroshi steps to the platform alone. He crosses the bridge, ignores the tunnel through the mountain and skirts the cliff instead. He passes the turquoise cove where he used to play and the harbour where boats rot on frayed ropes. He climbs the long, steep hill to the house near the bluff, the place that his papers call home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rik left for work without speaking to Nan, but not without poking her nose into her grandmother's bedroom and seeing the slow rise and fall of her chest. That evening, things were quiet over the meal. Nan was no longer agitated as she'd been the night before. Instead she seemed half-elsewhere. The two photographs — Hiroshi's, and Nan's encased in wrought silver — remained on the kitchen table.

'I bought a frame for him today, Nan,' said Rik, nodding toward the photo of Hiroshi. She fished in the shoulder bag hanging from a chair at the end of the table. 'Just a simple one. But I get it if you'd rather just —'

'That would be lovely, pet. Thank you.'

Nan watched as Rik worked the photo inside the frame. When Rik stood it proudly on the table beside the image of the younger Nan, tears glimmered in the old lady's eyes. 'I never thought to see that,' she whispered.

After a moment, she got to her feet. 'I think, pet, we finish tonight.' She made her way out to the verandah.

'We left Mama and Papa in Perth — they had a place in Nedlands by then — and came back to Broome in '47. Jack tired of the railways and got the idea of buying a lugger fixed in his head. He'd liked Broome alright in the war and he knew Papa would rent us the house for next to nothing. I was keen to give it a try. I missed the place badly. And most of my married pals in Perth were squeezed onto a sleepout in the home of someone they barely knew, their belongings piled to the roof, cooking on a single burner and doing their private things behind a curtain.

'It was hard at first. Jack didn't know bee from a bull's foot about pearling, but neither did a lot of the chaps in those strange post-war years when so many of us were starting from scratch, especially up here. Broome had been turned inside out with the war — all the Japanese being taken away and the rest of us told to leave. But we settled in all right, and Jack worked hard. He was a proud man though. He wanted everything to be perfect from the get go — the business, the house, us. I tried to make him see sense but he had a funny way of closing off. Anyway, before too long, Robby, your father, came along. We were a family then. Jack ran his business, which was slowly finding its feet, and the rest was left to me.

‘Jack was softer back then. He liked to take a moment to himself at the end of the day, here on the verandah, with a whisky. Then he’d come inside under the fan and lift Robby onto his lap and read to him — a Rider Haggard adventure or some such, of which your father understood nothing but his papa’s arms around him. They were close, those two, even back then. I was often slow to get our supper, spending half the time in the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room watching them together like that. The chooks were the winners with the things I burnt that way.

‘I took to walking to the Japanese cemetery. It was tranquil there, I suppose. The earth was raked into swirls and arcs, though I never saw who did it. It was clean and free enough of snakes and double-gees for little Robby. Perhaps it wasn’t right, but to me the butter-coloured stones with their graceful black strokes and sweeps were beautiful. I’d lift Robby out of his push-chair and he’d trot about and hide among the grave markers which were about as tall as he was short. He loved to hide and tease me. Of course, in a cemetery it was a fair guess as to where he’d be. Over and over and over I’d pretend to be amazed at the places he found to tuck himself away, and he’d chortle like crazy at the act I’d put on.

‘It was in 1953, when Robby was four, that it all went to pot. It was the year the government let the Japanese come back.’

Nan unfolded and refolded her hands and held a sigh until Rik became worried. She exhaled in a long, sad whisper.

‘We’d arranged a sitter for Robby and were waiting in the mob outside the Sun. “Singing in the Rain” had finally made it up here and we were excited as kids. It had been a wretched day, I remember. Hot as buggery, the rain that should have fallen preferring instead to cling to your skin like a slick of oil. I took a hanky from my purse and wiped my face and neck, wishing I’d pinned my hair up better. Jack’s hand in the small of my back pressed me forward towards the ticket booth. Then he looked down at me and laughed, telling me I’d smudged my lipstick. He leaned over and dabbed my top lip with his own handkerchief.

‘I turned around to check who was watching. I was embarrassed, as you would be. And that’s when I saw him. Hiroshi, standing stiff like a pylon, the movie crowd swirling like water around him, looking at me ... *into* me more. I often wonder what my life would have been like if I hadn’t looked behind me that night. Hiroshi would

have done the right thing, I'm sure, and melted away and I'd have got on with my life. But that's not the way things happened.

'I went into a kind of trance, I suppose, there on the footpath, those years of yearning that I'd kept a lid on bubbling up — all the passion and certainty I hadn't known with your grandfather. I gazed back for what must have been too long, for suddenly Jack was tugging me by my elbow and telling me to pull myself together and asking what I wanted with that lousy Jap.'

Rik leaned across, her hand outstretched, but Nan batted it away and quickly pressed on, as though afraid a comforting touch would weaken her resolve.

'The wet at the end of that year was a shocker I'll never forget. It stood over us, soaking the air but not the ground. It's tempting to blame the weather for what happened — a few kind souls tried — but your Grandfather Jack was never much one for excuses.

'Everything was slick and rotten or on its way. The new shoes I had sent up from Perth smelled like old stew in a week. I'd been catching Jack giving me odd looks ever since the business outside the picture theatre, and that should have told me something, maybe. Perhaps he'd been told things. Who knows? We were still affectionate as man and wife, by and large. I'd put Hiroshi behind me as best I could. I'd stopped going to the Japanese cemetery, in case Jack took exception. I told myself that Hiroshi would have a wife by now, that my heart was with my husband and child. But perhaps Jack knew better than me.

'The lay-up was always a miserable time. Too much wet heat and too little business to attend to. Jack preferred to be tucked away in his office than down at the sheds, putting on a front of knowing more than his workers. That year, he was having trouble with one of his overseers, a Chinese-Malay who'd been pearling since before I was born and knew Jack couldn't do without him. I wasn't supposed to know, of course — Jack kept his troubles to himself. But then, just as now, tongues wagged and people liked to give a leg-up to their day by darkening someone else's.

'Jack was like a black cloud sitting over the house. One particular day, we were having breakfast when Robby spilt the jug of milk. Gosh, Jack gave him a swipe that knocked the little fellow off his chair. The worst was the way he looked at me before he hit out, like his hand was meant for me. And he wouldn't let me give Robbie

any comfort. I watched my husband chew through his bacon, unable to get down even my own spit, and when he finally left for town I put my head on the table and wept.

‘The dishes were crawling with flies, but I grabbed my hat, plonked Robby in the push-chair and headed off to the Japanese cemetery. I was in a lather by the time we got there but it didn’t matter. I just had to get out of the house and find some peace. Jack be buggered.

‘Robby ran off and I stood there breathing in the hot eucalypt smell and listening to the crackling of the pretty curling bark. I remember thinking that I’d suggest to Jack we went to the beach for a picnic tea to, you know, cool things off a bit, have some fun. That was when Robby began calling me from thirty yards away. I could see his little fair scone bobbing behind a grave marker.

‘I remember crunching up the path towards him. The bark on a pink gum was hanging in orange ribbons and a fly was pestering the corner of my eye, even in the shade of my hat. I bent sideways and slipped off my canvas shoe to shake out some grit, calling out to Robby — extra clear, pretending I couldn’t see him and his wriggling shoulders right in front of me.

‘He was hiding behind it — the stone. It was new — whiter than most, the soil around it not yet hard and double-geed. Three vertical rows of Japanese lettering. Then across the bottom, something else. In English. Letters that leapt at my neck and dropped me to the ground.

“‘Ishikawa Hiroshi. Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan. 1918 – 1953” ... in script only I would read.

‘I don’t know what happened. I began rocking and wailing, tears I didn’t know I had wetting the dirt blood-red, while little Robby peeked worried from around the stone. The next I knew, a woman was clutching my shoulder, shaking me with one hand, holding Robby in her other. His hat was gone and his face was muddy under his eyes and vivid from sunburn or fright. I couldn’t tell, I’m ashamed to say. A motorcar was stopped a little way off.

‘He was on the road, a woman from the motorcar tells me, and it was lucky she came along because she’d been in two minds, she adds for my benefit. I was Jack Hill’s wife, wasn’t I, she asks, with a twitch at the corner of her mouth I wasn’t too undone to miss.’

‘Jack got wind of it straight away, of course. He never once spoke of it directly, mind, but I knew. I don’t think he knew where to start. Perhaps he didn’t want to admit it was true by talking out loud about it. He’d been trained to hate the Japs during the war, remember.

‘For a few months we managed a life, as well as two folk with no one to talk to, not even each other, can. But I think Jack suffered, down at the jetty and in the pub, more than I knew. One day he just came in and announced he was done with Broome. He was selling up and taking Robby to Perth. His mother would look after him, and then there were boarding schools. He said my name described me well — that my heart was a grain of sand.’

‘One of the Japanese down at Streeters Jetty knew who I was. Hiroshi had cut himself loose, he told me down at Streeter’s Jetty. A storm had blown up out of nowhere and he’d cut himself loose. He’d never been one to risk a rush to the surface. Quiet and dignified it was — *isagi yoku*, a good death, he called it. As good as a death can be, anyway. The boat dropped a marker and when the storm passed they went back for his body.

‘Would I have gone to see his stone laid if I’d known at the time — have stood among the Japanese and listened to their strange words and chants? Mightn’t I have turned my back on him then, too, as most had done on his race since the war began? I’m ashamed to admit it, but my courage might have left me at the last.’

The two women sat watching a gecko on the verandah post edge toward a sluggish flying ant.

‘There’s not much to tell after that, pet. Your grandfather and his mother — we never got on — allowed little Robbie to think I was dead. By the time he learned the truth, he was nearly finished in boarding school and too afraid, maybe too busy just being a young lad, to open the can of worms that was his mother. I tried like the Devil to keep in touch, but I couldn’t get past them — your grandfather and her — not till he was twenty-one. Perhaps I should have tried harder, I don’t know. All I know is that, by the time we tried to pick things up, he had become as black-and-white as his

father. I think it was easier for him believing what he'd believed as a boy — that I was smiling down on him from Heaven. I couldn't really hold it against him.'

Rik and her grandmother sat still in their chairs, the audio recorder still running, watching the bats wheeling in and out of the mangroves, listening to the hoots and moans of night creatures and the soft, steady shoosh of the incoming tide, a big one.

'You don't want to take after me,' said Nan, 'like I said at the start.'

Rik laughed. She jumped up and, bracing her hands on the armrests of Nan's chair, bent down and kissed her forehead. 'If I take after anyone, I damn well hope it's you.'

They said no more, but slowly made their way inside and got ready for bed. Rik was nearly asleep when she felt a presence in the darkened room. The old voice whispered, 'Best you look after this.' She felt Nan's papery-skinned hand press something into hers then heard her pad to the door, closing it softly behind her. Rik felt about in the dark — its cool, smoothness, its leather cord. She held it to her lips and kissed it reverently — the pearl slipped over her grandmother's head by the Japanese diver she loved.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rik didn't complain when Nan came in and opened her shutters before the birds were up, even though she had the day off. She'd been muttering for a few days about going out to Gantheaume Point when the spring tide was at its low point so she could see the dinosaur footprints. So even though Rik's sleep had been scratchy, she smiled and slid from her bed, slipped on briefs and a cotton shift and followed her grandmother out to the jeep.

They left the bitumen and drove the gravel track till it stopped. Neither spoke and that was fine. Leaving the car park signs that warned and prohibited, they settled on a rug on the rocks, looking toward the sea, a thermos and tin mugs between them, sunlight skimming the crowns of their heads.

Rik peered across the lumpy rocks and gullies, the whiskery tufts of greenery, past the broken beer bottles and the towered layers of pink sandstone. Below, where the water came and went, were glossy square tessellations of slippery black rock. She'd love to show this place to Skip if she could ever drag him out of Darwin.

She took her grandmother's hand. 'You know, Nan, they've found other places round here with dinosaur footprints. I mean, where you can actually get up close without risking your neck. It's four-wheel drive stuff but I could take you.' Rik wondered if Pearl knew the real stegosaurus footprints here had been nicked years ago and replaced with cement-cast replicas.

Pearl looked at her, smiled and pointed a crooked finger out to sea. Rik squeezed Pearl's paper-skinned hand and kept it in her own. They sat together looking beyond the edge of the land to a sea that stretched forever, to a horizon so broad that it bent with the curve of the earth. The place was, in a way, sacred to her grandmother, thought Rik. She'd come here to escape, to breathe, to settle herself all her life. She'd met her lover out there once. Coming here was about more than seeing footprints.

Halfway up the lighthouse on its spidery iron legs, young osprey squawked rhythmically. Inside her, the baby moved. Rik watched the parent birds coming and going. It was what she'd soon be up for. The tide had turned, its fat silver kerb in the distance now pushing towards them. Rik lay back on the rug, closed her eyes and listened to the susurrus of wind and water until, in her dream, she was dropping wriggling fish in featherless ospreys' gaping beaks.

Pearl watched young Kazuo pick his way across the rocks toward the ocean floor below the cliff. When he drew level with her he stopped clambering and waved. Pearl waved back, pointed to her sleeping granddaughter and put a quieting finger to her mouth. Kazuo grinned, waved again and continued on his way, his dark head disappearing below a ledge of rock. Pearl was pleased he'd taken her advice on the best time to see the dinosaur footprints below. He'd been disappointed to miss them before.

Pearl sat a moment, listening to the osprey, feeling the day's heat, though it was barely past dawn, beginning to creep around her. She looked out at the point, where it strained into the exhilaration of sea and sky. She looked down at Rik, who was snoring softly, and quietly levered herself to her feet.

When Rik woke and her grandmother was nowhere to be seen, she didn't worry. The old darling had managed most of her life on her own. She sat up and sniffed the salty air, feeling better for the nap. The sun had a sting to it now. She checked the time on her phone. God, she'd been asleep nearly an hour. She tipped her hat lower to shade her eyes. In the distance, she could make out the specks of two people throwing a ball to a dog on Cable Beach. She poured herself another tea from the thermos and absent-mindedly checked her phone for messages.

The voice of a man calling didn't impinge on her at first. But when she saw his agonised face rise clear of the rocky ledge, she registered the urgency in his shouts and her chest clamped. When he saw Rik he stopped. He looked down to something he held in his arms beyond Rik's sight, then up to Rik again. It was the Japanese guy, Kazuo, Rik registered. She recognised him from the Tourist Centre. He was panting, his face contorted. 'I'm so sorry,' he puffed. 'Your grandmother ...'

Rik scrambled to her feet and ran towards him, holding her stomach. When she saw Nan, her hair matted and blood-streaked, her frail body blue, she fell to her knees. Kazuo laid Pearl's body gently on the path and held Rik's shoulders while she wept and shuddered.

'Where was she?' Rik asked, dragging back tears.

'In a cave,' said Kazuo, 'along a little, at the base of the cliff.' He looked earnestly into Rik's eyes. 'It was a beautiful place to die.'

Rik put her arm through Kazuo's and leaned on his shoulder, and they sat like that a long time.

When the ambulance had left — no lights, no sirens — Rik and Kazuo loaded his bike into the boot of the car and drove slowly back to the house by the bay. As Rik poured water from the fridge into glasses, Kazuo looked at the photo of his grandfather Hiroshi on the kitchen table, and knew that at last he had found him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

At Simpsons Beach it was approaching midnight on the final day of Obon when the spirits of ancestors were farewelled to the Pure Land. The near full moon and a billion stars glimmering off the inky water, Rik and Kazuo waded eastward with the ocean, alone but for the newborn swathed against Rik's chest, silent but for the swash of the outgoing tide against their legs and the snuffling of the child.

They stopped, the water lapping around them. Kazuo drew from a basket two small paper boats and held them out to Rik. She added rice and frangipani and lit the candles within. They bent their cupped hands to the sea and watched, side by side, as the tiny flickering flames bobbed away into the glinting blackness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elisabeth Pearl perches on the wooden seat of the water closet, swinging her legs, sucking a mango. The water closet smells better since Papa put the septic tank in. She'll stay here until she's finished, because Mama said not to have a mango unless she gave one to Charlie too, but Mama doesn't know Charlie held her under at Town Beach this morning. He said he was sorry and they haven't had mangoes for ages but he's not getting one.

There's a cockroach with wings like toffee sticking from the gap between the tin walls and the roof. And there's a fire ant on the floor so she'd better not drip juice. At lunch in the salad there was a scorpion with its head chopped off. Mama showed it to Charlie's mum, Koepi, who took it away on a spoon. It was a nice salad with tomatoes.

Tomorrow night, visitors are coming to hear a man give a talk. They'll sit on the verandah under the fans that wobble like fat ladies' bottoms. She's to stay clear. Koepi's got baking to do. Soon Koepi will spread a sheet under the rain-tree and her and Charlie will squat and swirl their fingers through flour, looking for weevils. It feels nice. Sometimes Charlie pats flour on his face to make it white like hers. He's funny. Charlie squashes his weevils. She puts hers on the grass and watches them wriggle away but she ate one once.

She can hear Mama, letting in Mr Nishimura, the ice-man. And she can hear Mama asking Charlie if he's seen her. She'd best be quick and finish. Mango pips float, she knows that from last time. So she won't put it in the water closet bowl, she'll tuck it in her bloomers for now.

They're going for a picnic at the cable beach later because it's not long before the stingers come back. She's got a new swimming costume that Mama knitted. Mama and Koepi will sit on the sand because they like to watch the sun go down. But Papa loves to swim. He says their pee-pee goes all the way to Africa, which is a long way. Papa and Charlie and she will jump through the waves. The waves will chase them and wash away their footprints and the shiny sand will look like they were never there at all.

The End

SKETCHY BUSINESS
(a novel for young readers)

CHAPTER ONE

Friday 18:45

Pollo di Nozi crouched behind a tombstone, watching the stranger swish through the grass. She reached out, twisted off a stalk of wild lupin and held it to the snout of the stout grey sheep clamped under her arm. She prayed it would keep him happy. Now wasn't the time for Shorn Connery to start bleating. Pollo — supersleuth and editor of the *Riddle Gully Gazette* — was onto something.

Around her, twilight was settling in, the shadows draped between the graves beginning to dissolve, the forest beyond the meadow already still. While Shorn Connery crunched, Pollo wound his rope lead round her waist to keep him close. She tied it with a tug, then fished out the small pad and pencil that hung from her neck. She scribbled a few notes.

Moving only her eyes, her pencil twitching expectantly, she tracked the man in the grey light. He walked in slow, wide circles, hands clasped against his chin, long fingers flexing and straightening like insect wings. Nearby, from a large silver case propped open against a headstone, a blue light blinked.

Pollo jiggled her shoulder. It was still tender where this same man had banged into her barely an hour before, bursting into the second-hand shop right on closing, just as she was leaving. So what was he up to now? Here in the Riddle Gully graveyard? When all the other adults in town were watering their rose-bushes or grilling their chops?

She had an excuse. Shorn Connery needed his daily walk and fresh lupins, and dusk was the only time they could come without Father Perry wringing his hands and tut-tutting. But what about him, this stranger?

He's no mourner, thought Pollo, eyes narrowing. He wasn't muttering deep-and-meaningfuls or dabbing his eyes or tenderly plucking out weeds. She tapped her pencil on her chin. No, he looked much more like ... like someone waiting for something.

But what? It was her job to find out. They didn't call her a supersleuth for nothing. The second he made a move she'd be right behind him. She owed it to the readers of the *Riddle Gully Gazette*.

The readers ... A thought snuck up and tapped her on the shoulder. The Youth Reporter cadetship — the part-time post at the Coast news network! The deadline for applications was four days away. She'd only just hit high school so, as things stood, her chances weren't great. But what if she could dig up the story on this shady character and get out a scintillating special edition of the *Gazette* in time? That could change everything. She'd be irresistible! She could be a bona fide investigative reporter before she knew it!

The light in the stranger's silver case started blinking wildly. Pollo peered as the tall man strode across to it and studied it intently. Suddenly, he scooped up the case and, cradling it to his chest, began loping from the graveyard, towards the forest.

The supersleuth sprang. But the rope still tied around her middle snapped taut. Her feet flipped out from under her and she hit the dirt face first, centimetres from Shorn Connery's snuffling nose. Spitting soil, she squinted through the lupins. The man had nearly reached the trees! Her story was getting away!

She scrambled to her feet, plucking at the rope, cursing her bitten fingernails. Shorn Connery, meanwhile, threw everything he had into reaching a fresh patch of lupins.

'Keep still, boy!' she pleaded.

In the distance, the man cleared the falling-down fence between the meadow and the forest in one bound. A moment later he'd melted into the dark undergrowth.

Pollo had to get after him! She gave the knot a last, useless yank and set off, dragging Shorn Connery behind her. She'd steer for Diamond Jack's Trail — the hiking track began close to where the stranger had vanished. It was haunted by the old bushranger but it wasn't night-time yet. And digging into her waist under the rope was her trusty pen-torch. She and Shorn Connery could sneak along the trail and cut the man off! He hadn't got rid of her that easily!

Pollo half-crouched at the head of the trail, her hands on her knees, gasping for air. The rope around her waist was now so tight that she could barely breathe, let alone chase anyone.

Shorn Connery glared up at her and curled back his top lip, flashing teeth the colour of old apple cores. *Baa-aa-aah!* He lunged towards the young autumn weeds on the edge of the limestone path and Pollo winced.

‘Can you stop thinking about food for one second?’ she wheezed, shuffling after him, picking furiously at the knot. ‘Aaarghhh!’ She tossed her head back in frustration.

As she did, she noticed, not far above her, small dark shapes darting back and forth between the trees.

Just what she needed! Bats! With summer on the way out, the bats were on their way back to Riddle Gully. It was all the more reason not to be out after sunset. Her scalp prickled just thinking about their squashed, grumpy faces, their tiny pointed teeth, their curly see-through ears. They belonged in her vampire books, not in the real world. And certainly not here with her now, alone on Diamond Jack’s Trail with night closing in and a selfish, greedy sheep weighing her down.

All at once, the knot came loose. Pollo unwound herself in a flurry and inhaled long and deep. Shorn Connery galloped full speed back to the lupins in the cemetery, the rope lead bouncing behind.

Pollo slowed her breathing as much as she could. Very faintly, off in the distance, she could hear something two-legged pushing through the undergrowth. It had to be him — the stranger, her key to the cadetship — slipping away.

She peered down the track at the avenue of ghostly tree silhouettes. Somehow it wasn’t twilight in there any longer. Not even a little bit.

She shuffled forward. She couldn’t see ten paces ahead. She stopped and unclipped her pen-torch from her belt. Fingers trembling, she twisted it on. The thin beam shone shyly for a moment, faded, flickered

... and died.

CHAPTER TWO

Friday 22:00

Pollo snapped shut her book, *Last Slayer IV: The Dark Count*, and shoved it under her blankets, breathing fast. This was the best book of the series yet! She couldn't read it quickly enough, though at the same time she could hardly bear it. Something about the villain in this one — Count von Alberecht, the Slayer's evil uncle — really got to her.

She put the book on the bedside table. It was shameful to admit, but she was still a bit twitchy from before. Luckily, once she was out in the open again, everything hadn't been totally black like it was on Diamond Jack's Trail. And it wasn't far home from the cemetery along the track that ran behind the back fences of the houses. She reached across to her pen jar, found her carrot and took a big bite. They said carrots helped you see at night. She might still be out there if she hadn't always eaten her three a day.

At the knock on her door, Pollo jumped. Her father poked his head into the room. 'Not too late, mate. Two cats and a piglet are relying on you tomorrow. They'll want Pollo di Nozi, not Pollo di Dozy!'

Pollo smiled. 'Just wrapping it up, Dad.' Curses! Of all the mornings to be needed at her dad's clinic — when the story that could change her life was out there on the loose.

'Atta girl.' Her father crossed the room and scratched the top of her head, as he would a friendly dog's. 'See you at brekkie then ... Nighty-night.'

As soon as he'd gone, Pollo pulled her laptop from under the bed. As if she could sleep! The front page of her new special edition was laid out on-screen. All it was missing was its story. She brought up her surveillance log and studied it. What clue had she overlooked?

17:35 Suspect barges into Sherri's shop.
 Long, heavy coat — SMUGGLER???

18:45 Suspect arrives at cemetery.
 Walks in circles — RITUAL???

 Metal case; silver; Approx. 45 x 60 cm; Blinking light.

WHAT IS IN CASE??? Weapons? Drugs? Extraterrestrial communication device?

19:25 Suspect runs off, carrying case.

19:26 Investigator hampered by selfish assistant!!! Lost visual when suspect entered forest.

19:32 Audio recognition of suspect at head of Diamond Jack's Trail.

Torch USELESS – Abandoned tail.

Note to self: GET NEW TORCH BATTERIES! ☹! ☹! ☹!

Foiled by dead batteries! She could hardly blame Shorn Connery for that. And to be fair, she'd never have seen the suspect at the cemetery tonight if it hadn't been for him.

She could kick herself! She didn't have nearly enough on the man for an amazing special early edition of the *Riddle Gully Gazette* before applications for the cadetship closed. And her best back-up story was Sergeant Butt's stepson — the boring new kid in her year at school. He barely spoke a word and doodled, head down, in a sketchpad all lunchtime. She hardly knew what he looked like. A raw egg was more newsworthy.

No, without doubt, practically her entire future as an investigative reporter hinged on the man who'd got away tonight.

It was funny that Sherri didn't seem to think there was anything wrong with him. Pollo had been on her way out of Sherri's second-hand shop after delivering a bundle of the latest gazettes when he had charged through the door and nearly knocked her into the china display. Sherri had already turned off the lights and was ready to close. But instead of booting him out on the spot, all Sherri had done was fluff up her hair and check that her earrings hung straight. True, the stranger had apologised, but it was Pollo, not him, who'd found herself alone on the footpath, Sherri's heavy glass door clunking shut behind her.

Whatever happened to telling people to come back in the morning?

Sherri was halfway between a friend and a mother, which was nice for someone without a mum and whose dad was halfway between a friend and a father. She was Auntie Giulia's best friend too. But Pollo wondered about her sometimes. In every photo on the wall of Sherri's shop from her twenty years as a cruise-ship singer there was a different tuxedoed arm around Sherri's waist. Could her judgement be trusted when it came to men?

Pollo took another bite of her carrot and came to a decision. Unfortunately, no. Sherri might have come back to Riddle Gully to settle down and become 'a boring grown-up' as she put it, but her instincts were clearly all at sea.

Besides, in Sherri's defence, she hadn't seen the stranger in the cemetery — walking around in circles and galloping off like something was after him. The man was definitely dodgy — maybe even dangerous. Sherri just didn't know it yet.

And although Pollo had let him get away tonight, that didn't mean she'd given up on him. She was a supersleuth, after all! She had her mum's blood in her!

When Pollo was little — before her mum got sick, when they still lived in the city — her mum had saved lives, everyone said, with a big investigation into baby toys that were dangerous. Her Journalists' Association award hung on the lounge room wall. She hadn't won it by letting a little thing like dead batteries get the better of her.

Pollo grinned. It would be worth winning the cadetship to see the look on Mayor Bullock's face when she flashed her Youth Reporter press card under his nose. At the beginning, he called her newspaper 'an insult to the town council's photocopy machine', and grumbled at her being allowed to print each week's edition on it. Then he grizzled over the council admitting her to its monthly meetings, saying the scratching of her pencil gave him a migraine. Not long after, at the Riddle Gully fete, he bullied the judges into awarding him first prize in the chutney division, hovering and glaring while they tasted. But there was no way she could prove it. She took photos of him grinning in his winner's ribbon, but what she printed on her next front page was a close-up of him stuffing a hot dog into his mouth, sauce squelching down his chin. It was war from then on.

Pollo closed the laptop and tucked it back under the bed. She'd grill Sherri tomorrow and find out what she had on the stranger. By then, people would be picking

up the *Riddle Gully Gazette* and reading her latest scoop on Mayor Bullock. That should make for some fun!

Right now she was ready for one last chapter of the Slayer and Count von Alberecht ... as long as she kept all the lights on.

CHAPTER THREE

Saturday 06:45

A bright green bug meandered down Will Hopkins' arm in the chilly autumn dawn. Will waited for it to crawl onto his finger, then eased it onto the scrub at his feet. He shifted his position on the old fallen tree trunk and sniffed the air. Around him, the forest was waking up, the tree trunks filling with colour. The small bats that had been flitting around when he first arrived were long gone.

The damp bark had wet through the bum of his shorts but it felt good to be there. Alone. Even if it had meant getting up as early as the rowing team back at boarding school and sneaking out like a burglar who'd got the wrong house. In fact, this was the best he'd felt in the whole week since moving to Riddle Gully.

Not that he hated his new stepfather or anything. But the guy asked so many questions. Dinnertimes were a nightmare — his stepfather sitting across the table, chewing everything thirty-two times, rubbing his big nose and wanting to know all the details about every little thing — details Will never knew existed! How far was it from his locker to his Home Room? Did the cricket captain bat left- or right-handed? Did the canteen use butter or margarine? Had he chatted with anyone at lunchtime yet? It would drive a statue insane.

Will shook his head slowly. Of all the people his mum could have picked — like his old footy coach, for instance — why did she have to go and fall for HB, a.k.a. Harry Butt? When things were grim, Will liked to think of him as Hairy — Hairy Butt. It lifted his spirits. But to someone at the counter of the Riddle Gully police station he was Sergeant Butt or sir. Sticking his nose into other people's business was what his stepfather did for a living.

He wished he hadn't stormed off from the table last night though. Will poked at the crumbly bark with a twig. As Hairy's questions piled up, everything had somehow boiled up inside. In the end, he'd only made things hard for his mum by slouching in his room all night. Plus, now if he saw Hairy — and, seeing as it was Hairy's house they were living in, chances were he would — he was going to feel like an idiot.

Aah, well, thought Will. It wouldn't be the first time.

The log was starting to get uncomfortable, and a tribe of red ants seemed to think he was on their property. He should get going. It wouldn't be the same if when he got back Hairy was awake to grill him about where he'd been. This place — Diamond Jack's Trail or Track or whatever it was called — was a good hideaway. He'd keep it to himself as long as he could.

Besides, he had some cooking to do — a Birthday Special breakfast, no less. He'd bought all the stuff for it after school yesterday. Sure, his mum had married a nosy cop with a stupid name and dragged him out of boarding school to a town in the middle of nowhere, but it was her big day today — and that called for one of his famous breakfasts, no matter what. A lot might have changed in their lives, but some things never would. He'd get one thing right.

Will nipped three blue daisies from the neighbour's bush near the end of the driveway and padded quietly up the steps and into the house. Snoring like a jet ski doing wheelies drifted down the passage. Excellent. His mum, at least, was still asleep.

Softly opening and closing doors, he fished out the supplies he'd hidden the afternoon before. He arranged the daisies in a milk jug, opened the pots of fancy jam and put everything onto a serving tray. He measured out flour and milk, cracked two eggs into a large bowl and began beating the pancake mix with a wooden spoon, passing on the electric mixer so as to keep quiet.

The frying pan was warming on the gas jet. Will scraped a dob of butter onto the rim, watched it melt and slide, then returned to beating the mixture, hugging the bowl to his bare chest. He smiled as he worked, thinking of Birthday Specials in the past. His mum had no idea one was coming this year. She was going to love it.

'Well, well, well! What's all this then?' Hairy's voice boomed over his shoulder.

Will jerked backwards, slopping pancake mixture down his chest and onto his shorts. He jumped and landed with a yelp on what felt like a small animal, sloshing the rest of the mixture onto the floor. He looked down to see Hairy's great big knobbly bare foot under his own and leapt again, landing on the slimy goop. His feet slid out from under him and Will thumped onto his backside on the kitchen floor. The whole show had taken about three seconds.

As the gooey yellow lake spread steadily around Will, a ball of fire inside him grew and grew until it threatened to shoot from his chest and torch straight through the lino and the wooden boards beneath.

Funny how three small seconds could make you hate someone forever ...

Clenching his jaw, Will ignored the large hand that his stepfather was stretching out to him. He reached up and grabbed for the edge of the kitchen bench. Instead, he got the serving tray. It clattered down, the milk jug and jam pots bouncing off his head and splashing and crashing onto the floor beside him. Daisy water curdled with the batter. Petals once jaunty and blue were now limp and sullied.

Will tried to flip over onto his knees. *Splat!* Now he was face-down and coated in batter both sides like a raw fish fillet.

Hairy slowly backed behind the kitchen table.

On the stovetop, burning butter smoke curled towards the ceiling. His mum's sleepy voice drifted down the hallway. 'That's not a Birthday Special I smell, is it, Will?'

Silence.

'It's torture! HB, tell my son you're meant to be nice to people on their birthday!'

Hairy had reached the safety of the doorway. 'Err ... Angela? You might want to get up, love. I'm thinking we might all duck down to the new cafe on the corner.'

'But Will's making a Birthday Special breakfast! Besides, what new cafe?'

'Err ... the one next to the petrol station.'

'You're not talking about the one *inside* the petrol station, are you?' Will could hear Angela's footsteps padding up the hallway. Her voice was no longer warm and fuzzy.

'That's the one!' said Hairy. 'The Pickled Walnut is closed for painting. The boys reckon the coffee at this new one's not bad!'

'What are you on about? The petrol station? On my birthday? When Will's making a lovely —'

As Angela reached the kitchen doorway an eerie silence fell, as though all the air had been sucked from the room. Will slithered in a last, lame attempt to get up. He

twitched on his stomach on the floor like a hooked herring in a bucket, his eyes slit against the batter trickling down his forehead and off the end of his nose.

Angela looked at him and spluttered. Then chortled. Soon she was heeing and hawing, gripping the doorframe for support. ‘It’s the Creature from the Snot Lagoon!’ she gasped. Will held still, waiting for her to finish. His stepfather stood there, rubbing his nose and tugging his earlobes, saying nothing.

‘I think the petrol station is a brilliant idea!’ said Angela eventually, wiping her eyes with her singlet. Will watched, helpless, as she picked her way through the mess, retrieved the empty mixing bowl and turned off the flame under the frying pan.

She looked down at him, at the batter gluing his hair into clumps, and held out a hand. ‘Oh, Will,’ she sighed, ‘it’s wonderful that you were trying to keep up the tradition, but we might have to give the Birthday Special a miss this year, don’t you think?’

Will watched his breakfast oozing around the daisies and clots of jam into the cracks beneath the cupboards. So Hairy Butt planned to take his mother to the *petrol station*? On her *birthday*? He clenched his fists, batter squirting out like lava, and vowed revenge.

CHAPTER FOUR

Saturday 09:30

Will slumped on his bed, staring at a half-finished drawing on his sketchpad. It was better than staring across the petrol station table at Hairy Butt's stupid big nose. Better than doing anything else in this dumb stupid town that he hadn't wanted to come to in the dumb stupid first place.

He ran his fingers through his wet hair, which now smelled of herbal shampoo. He'd made the Birthday Special for Angela ever since he could remember. When he was a little kid, he'd stood on a chair at the bench, his dad, Clive, beside him showing him what to do. As he got older, Clive read the paper and 'tested the goods'. It was what Will did on his mum's birthday. His thing.

Since his breakfast had turned into a total, humiliating disaster, he'd said he wanted to stay home and draw something for Angela instead. But every time his pencil touched the paper, he expected Hairy to boom in his ear, 'Well, well, well! What's all this then?' It was useless.

Will twirled his pencil between his fingers. At least at boarding school there were enough kids around that you could always find someone who felt like doing the same thing as you — kick a footy, go to the river. And he'd really liked the special art group after classes. In Riddle Gully there was nothing, just a school full of kids who seemed to have known each other since the beginning of time.

Coming here was a really bad idea, no offence to Angela. She'd decided they should all stick together after all. But when that meant moving in with a boof-head with an idiotic name and a big bent nose that didn't know when to butt out, it sucked.

Crack! The pencil between his fingers snapped in two. Draw a picture for his mum? He had better things to draw! He scrambled off the bed, grabbed his old blue school backpack and stomped down the hall towards Hairy Butt's toolshed.

The strip of trees and scrub at the edge of the high school oval hid him from the road. He laid his bike on the ground and looked around. No one. His mouth set in a tight grim line, he swung his backpack onto his shoulder and strode towards the school buildings.

Five minutes later, Will stood back, surveyed the cream brick wall and grinned broadly. He was good, if he said so himself. He'd got Hairy's crooked nose and big ears with just a few sweeps. It looked just like him! It was amazing what could be achieved with a can of red spray-paint. He felt ten times better already!

He looked behind. Still alone. He turned back to the wall. Now for the finishing touch. He shook the can, the *tink-tink-tink* of the ball-bearing inside ricocheting around the brick walls and bitumen, cheering him on.

Sucking his bottom lip under his teeth, he held up the can and pressed the nozzle. The bright spray hit the bricks, dense at first, then tapering as he stroked downwards ...

Sergeant Butt

He was smart enough not to call him Hairy or HB! He stood back to see where to start the next line. He wanted it nicely centred. He stepped up to the wall, sucked his lip under his teeth again, and pressed the nozzle ...

is a pig's

One more word and he was done ...

bu

He leaned into the downward stroke of the final letter. But on the upward stroke that followed, the can began to splutter. And at the top, he had to do the curve twice. As he reached the bottom of the second downward stroke all that the can produced was a nasty, jeering hiss. Will stumbled backwards and stared in horror.

Sergeant Butt

is a pig's bun

A pig's bun? It was stupid! It was lame! It was all wrong!

Perhaps he could get rid of the last few letters altogether. Hairy could just be a pig. He stripped off his T-shirt, bunched it up and scrubbed. The T-shirt turned pink but all there was to show for it on the wall was a slight fuzzing around the edges of the letters. He looked at his hand. Each finger now looked like a party frankfurter.

At that moment, from the other side of the building, Will heard the low thrum of an approaching car. It slowed to a halt. Will froze. The sound of doors clunking shut and boys — a lot of them, laughing and yelling to each other — followed.

Will remembered. Cricket! The interschool finals! Principal Piggott had been saying that everyone should come and watch but he'd zoned out. He suddenly felt sick. Sick and very stupid. As the voices drew closer he stuffed his T-shirt and the spray can into his pack and scuttled for oblivion like a cockroach down a drain.

CHAPTER FIVE

Saturday 11:00

It was late morning by the time Pollo could escape her father's veterinary clinic and get to Sherri's shop — the Riddle Gully Second-Hand Emporium, Specialising in Maps, Curios and Local History.

She leaned her bike on the wall and pushed through the door to the familiar *ding!* of the old brass ship's bell. Sherri was at the back of the shop, her feet on the desk, chuckling behind Pollo's latest edition of the *Riddle Gully Gazette*, only the top storey of her pile of crimson curls visible. As Pollo wove her way towards her, Sherri's budgie Bubl , behind bars on the desk, began dancing on his perch.

'Why, Bubl !' said Sherri, lowering the paper. 'It's the supersleuth herself. You've outdone yourself this week, kiddo! *Mayor Bullock Hides Secret Under Rug!* What a cracker! Listen to this, Bubl :

Citizens of Riddle Gully may be wondering why Mayor Bullock, who claims to be in his early forties, had such stubborn recollections of the 1950s in the final round of the recent Country Women's Association quiz night [Refer to page 3: 'Mayor Storms Out Over Quiz Night Defeat']. The answer, dear readers, is in front of our eyes or, more precisely, on top of Mayor Bullock's head.

The shady figure pictured above with the owner of the Maloola Pharmacy last Saturday is none other than our very own Mayor Bullock. This reporter overheard our leader complaining of a scaly rash on his scalp from the tape he has been using to affix his toup e. So the rumours are true. Mayor Bullock's youthful locks are, sadly, fake.

Investigations since have revealed that Mayor Bullock is, in fact, fifteen years older and much closer to retirement than he claimed in his election campaign two years ago. Could this be why he has pushed the Diamond Jack Experience Tourist Centre at the expense of the skate park and the youth work experience program? It seems that Mayor Bullock's scalp is not the only thing about him that is scaly.

Sherri looked at Pollo and beamed. ‘It’s wonderful, Pollo! How on earth did you do it?’

‘Dad and I went to Maloola for an early-morning swim,’ said Pollo. ‘I spotted Mayor Bullock wearing that terrible disguise and so I just had to follow him. I was tucked in behind the sunglasses stand when he started talking to the chemist about his little problem. I nearly knocked over the whole display when I heard him!’

‘Lucky you had your camera with you,’ laughed Sherri.

‘You bet! Anyway, Sherri, I need to ask you something. The man in the long black coat yesterday —’

‘And this piece on Principal Piggott and her dog! I know it’s only a little fellow, but she still needs to pick up after it. She should go on litter duty for a week.’

‘Totally! She’ll have it in for me now too, I suppose. Aah well, it’s the price I pay for reporting the truth. Now then, you know that stranger —’

‘Speaking of dogs,’ said Sherri, ‘how’s Joe? He’s a lovely man, your dad. A customer the other day was saying what a gem he was when her old mutt swallowed a chop bone. We both think you should do an article on him.’

Pollo smiled. ‘It’s not exactly cutting-edge reporting though, is it? An article on how great my dad is?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Sherri with a shrug. ‘That kind of thing has its place. So anyway, which stranger were you talking about?’

‘That creepy guy who barged in after closing time yesterday,’ said Pollo. ‘What did you find out about him?’

‘Creepy guy? Barged in? Find out?’ Sherri flushed. ‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘Sorry,’ said Pollo. ‘It came out wrong. I mean, what can you tell me about your customer last thing yesterday?’

‘That’s more like it,’ said Sherri, leaning back in her chair. ‘I admit I’m curious too. It’s funny, but I feel I know him from somewhere. He had the same feeling. I *can* tell you that he has delightful old-fashioned manners and that his name

is Viktor ...’ She rifled through some invoices on a metal spike, carefully tore off one and read it. ‘... Viktor-with-a-K von Albericht.’

‘Von what?’ gasped Pollo.

‘Albericht,’ repeated Sherri. ‘It’s a doozy of a name, isn’t it?’

Pollo grabbed the invoice from Sherri and stared. Albericht, with an ‘i’. Only one letter different from the Last Slayer’s evil uncle.

‘He’s staying out at the old ranger’s hut,’ said Sherri.

‘The old ranger’s hut!’ Pollo yelped. ‘On Diamond Jack’s Trail? What’s he up to out there in the middle of the forest?’

‘Settle down, Pollo! Don’t let this scoop on the mayor go to your head. Viktor seems like a very nice person.’ Sherri’s eyes twinkled. ‘Very nice indeed. He had a perfectly good reason for being at the ranger’s hut. What was it now?’ She twirled an earring then chuckled. ‘I have to admit, I had trouble concentrating. He has the most deliriously deep brown eyes!’

‘Urgh!’ said Pollo, rolling her own.

‘I remember,’ said Sherri. ‘He’s with the environmental something-or-other. He’s looking for bats.’

Pollo went cold all over. A shiver ran down the back of her neck and she sank onto Sherri’s desk. Everything about this von Albericht pointed to it. But there weren’t any in Australia, were there? In the twenty-first century? They were only in books, weren’t they? Books like the one she was reading now ...

Sherri was looking at her strangely. ‘You’ve gone all glassy, kiddo,’ she said. ‘Is anything wrong?’

CHAPTER SIX

Saturday 11:30

From a tiny kitchen tucked behind an oriental screen, the telephone rang and Sherri sprang to answer it. Pollo was straining to overhear when the ship's bell clanged wildly and the black shape of Mayor Bullock filled the doorway. He spotted Pollo. 'There you are, you gutter rat!' he boomed, striding towards her.

As Pollo reeled, Sherri bustled back into the shop, pointing the receiver like a laser sword. 'Sir, please watch your manners while you're in my shop or you'll be out on your ear!'

Mayor Bullock looked aghast. 'You misunderstand, madam,' he said. 'Butter fat! I was warning the young lady here not to eat too much butter fat!'

Sherri shook her head and steered the mayor by the elbow to a hard narrow chair. She placed a hand on top of his now-famous head and sat him down. 'I take it you'd like a word with my visitor.'

Mayor Bullock checked his hairline with manicured fingers. 'If I may,' he said. With the starched yellow handkerchief from his breast pocket, he dabbed at the corners of his mouth. He straightened the sleeves of his jacket with two tugs, and allotted a smile to Sherri. 'As you would both be aware, I regard the youth of Riddle Gully as its lifeblood. Not only do I embody youth and forward vision myself, but since taking office it has been my mission to support our youngsters in every wholesome endeavour.'

'Huh! Like closing down the skate park because it woke you up on weekends?' said Pollo.

'However,' Mayor Bullock pressed on, 'in light of your abuse of the privilege granted you by my ... err ... the town council and your lack of integrity, Miss di Nozi, I have no option but to put a stop to this nonsense of yours, once and for all.'

'Nonsense? Lack of integrity?' Pollo jumped off the desk. 'It's all true and you know it!'

The mayor raised his finger. 'Aah, but therein lies the lesson, young lady! Truth and the public interest — not always the best of friends.' He smiled sideways at

Sherri. 'It's something one learns with experience.' Fishing a black-and-white-striped humbug from his trouser pocket, he popped it triumphantly into his mouth.

'But it *is* in the public interest if you're going around pretending to be a lot younger than you really are, and telling everyone that you'll steer Riddle Gully into the future!'

Mayor Bullock levered himself from his chair and, his back to Sherri, leaned so close to Pollo that she could smell the peppermint humbug on his breath. 'That's enough,' he snarled. 'I'm allowing you one last issue, its purpose being a full apology for the scurrilous report on today's front page.'

Pollo gasped. Only one more issue? He couldn't do that to her! She had the backing of the town council. She opened her mouth to protest but Mayor Bullock, standing to his full height, got in first.

'And don't think you can go running off to the council to object. I'm not a man to let a little red tape get in the way of what's good for Riddle Gully!' He started for the door, but paused. 'I have friends in high places,' he added, 'the editor-in-chief of the Coast news network among them. I hear you're thinking about that Youth Reporter cadetship. I want a full apology, Miss di Nozi, or I'll see to it that the editor-in-chief runs a mile at the mention of your name.'

Pollo's throat was clamped like a clam.

Mayor Bullock wrapped a hand around the doorknob. 'While you're at it, you can do something useful and discover who is responsible for the graffiti at the school this morning. The Graffiti Kid, they're calling the perpetrator, as though the scoundrel is some kind of hero. The youth of this town! Humph! Ungrateful layabouts the lot of you. I've half a mind to have a word with the editor-in-chief whether you print that apology or not.'

He pasted on a smile and turned to Sherri. 'Thank you for your hospitality, madam. I'm sure you appreciate, it sometimes takes a strong hand to rein in a wild horse. Good day to you. It's always a pleasure catching up with my townsfolk.'

Mayor Bullock clanged through the door and out onto the footpath, bumping into old Mr McNutty, who was shuffling home with his shopping. As the elderly gentleman's fruit and vegetables rolled towards the gutter, the mayor dug a humbug from his pocket. Lifting his polished shoe to let an onion pass, he pressed the lolly

into Mr McNutty's hand, patted him on the back and strode towards his glossy black car.

Sherri dashed out to help Mr McNutty. When she returned Pollo was hunched on the desk, staring at the floor, Bubl , on his perch, doing the same. 'Come on you two,' said Sherri. 'It's not the end of the world.' She sat down next to Pollo.

Pollo looked up. 'I'm onto a really good story, Sherri. If I get to the bottom of it and put out a brilliant early edition it might be enough to win me that cadetship he was talking about. But now I have to waste my last ever *Riddle Gully Gazette* on a stupid apology he doesn't deserve and that'll make me look like I've done something wrong.'

Sherri put her arm around Pollo's shoulders. 'Do your big story anyway,' she said. 'People won't notice a boring old apology if the rest of the edition is a ripper. And, on the bright side, you've got another couple of leads to follow up now.'

'There's that graffiti,' said Pollo. 'What's the other one? You're not thinking of Sergeant Butt's stepson, I hope. I know I mentioned him the other day, but —'

Sherri laughed. 'No! Not him! Though it must be hard for the kid starting a new school halfway through term. No, I was thinking of what Mayor Bullock said.' She took Bubl  from his cage and raised him to eye-level. 'How did that nasty old mayor put it, boy? "I'm not a man to let a little red tape get in the way." Something like that, wasn't it?'

'Red tape,' said Pollo. 'That's all the boring stuff the authorities make people do, right?'

'All the checks and regulations, yes,' said Sherri. 'But it's easy to forget that they're mostly there for a good reason.'

'And Mayor Bullock thinks he's above it all?'

'Said so himself.'

Pollo pulled out her notepad and made a few half-hearted notes. 'But even if I did manage to bring out a good edition,' she sighed, 'he's just as likely to rubbish me to the editor-in-chief anyway. I'm never going to get that cadetship. There's no point in even trying.'

Sherri smoothed the feathers on Bubl 's back. 'What would your mum have said to that?'

Pollo nibbled her thumbnail. It wasn't just any old story that she was onto with this Viktor von Albericht. It could not only get her the job with a real newspaper — but it could make her famous! She looked up at Sherri and grinned. 'I guess I'll let the editor-in-chief make up his own mind about me.'

'That's the spirit, kiddo,' said Sherri, giving Pollo a squeeze. She returned Bublé to his cage. 'I don't know about you, but I'd kill for a cup of tea. Shall I make one for both of us and we can talk about something nice?' She went to put the kettle on.

Pollo sat thinking. Maybe she should ask Sherri over for dinner tonight? No, better to wait for a day when her dad had done something heroic with a sick animal. Besides, she had a certain stranger to tail.

From the kitchen, Pollo heard Sherri humming a slow, smoochy song — something from her cruise-ship repertoire, she guessed. Sherri suddenly popped her head around the screen. 'I know what we can talk about!' she said with a giggle. 'Viktor von Albericht! That was him on the telephone earlier. You can tell me why you're so interested in him. I know he's way too old for you, but he's a bit of a dish, don't you think?'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Saturday 11:30

‘What do you mean it’s a rather good likeness?’ The pitch of Angela’s voice climbed with each word. ‘Honestly, HB, how can you sit there and smile when some little brat has made you a laughing stock?’ She was striding around the kitchen picking up whatever items came into her reach — the salt shaker, the wet sponge, a pen, a banana — and banging them down on the bench.

Will sat at the table, his eyes flicking between his stepfather and his mother. The red fingers that ten minutes of scrubbing hadn’t cleaned were tucked between his clenched knees.

‘Calm down, love,’ said HB. ‘It may not have been a “little brat”, as you put it. From the *Riddle Gully Gazette* this morning, it looks like Principal Piggott has a dark side!’ He stirred two heaped spoonfuls of sugar into his tea. ‘Besides, the joke’s on whoever did it, isn’t it? I’ve been called a darn sight worse than “pig’s bun” before now.’

‘You know very well what they intended to say.’

‘Precisely,’ HB chuckled, ‘only they didn’t get to say it.’

‘It’s the parents of these kids who worry me!’ said Angela. ‘Whatever happened to good old-fashioned values? Don’t people teach their kids respect anymore?’

HB dropped in another two sugars. ‘Well, whoever did it has been taught punctuation. The apostrophe’s in the right place!’ He looked hopefully at his wife.

Angela snorted. She turned and stared out the kitchen window, her arms folded, her back rigid. ‘Whoever did it should be shot!’

Will flinched. Angela could get mad. Really mad. It was how she and HB had met. After his parents got divorced there’d been a blow-up over school fees. Angela had put on a disguise and dumped a load of chicken manure over Clive’s new Kawasaki motorbike. HB was stationed in the city at the time and he’d been the arresting officer.

While she was in the lockup waiting for HB to finish his paperwork, Nan and Pop had come around to watch Will and take turns to mutter about their daughter’s

‘petrol temper’. ‘One spark and she turns into a ruddy bonfire!’ Pop had kept saying, while Nan looked at Will over and over and shook her head with, ‘You’d better not have inherited it, young man!’ It was a fun night.

Thankfully, Clive decided that to press charges could have ‘undesirable outcomes’ for Will, so it had all fizzled out. His mum had seemed calmer the last couple of years but, looking at her now, could he be sure?

HB put his hand on Angela’s arm. ‘The boys at the station will have the graffiti off first thing Monday, love. All it needs is some turps and a scrubbing brush. Don’t go spoiling your birthday over it.’

‘My birthday’s already spoiled! Everyone in town’s laughing about it!’ Angela snatched an old Bart Simpson beaker from the dish drainer and went to the fridge. She emptied the remainder of a bottle of wine into it and plonked down on a chair at the table. She was staring glumly over the rim, holding the cup in both hands and slurping.

HB dropped another spoonful of sugar into his tea and stirred slowly, the clinking of his teaspoon sounding to Will uncomfortably like leg-irons.

Suddenly HB slapped the table, causing Will to leap in his chair. ‘Hey, Will! We nearly forgot!’ He reached over and shook Angela’s arm. ‘Didn’t we, love?’

‘Forgot what?’ Her lips remained clamped to the beaker, giving her words a swampy tone.

‘Will’s picture, of course!’ HB was all smiles. ‘The one he did for you while we were out at breakfast.’

‘Oh, heck!’ Angela put the beaker on the table and smiled crookedly at Will. She reached over and ruffled his hair. ‘Of course. I’m so sorry I didn’t think of it, love. Here you’ve been sketching away and I come home ranting and raving. Even more reason to hate that little delinquent out there.’ She pushed the beaker of wine away. ‘Will you go and get it for me? If there’s one thing that can cheer me up right now, it’s a picture from my beautiful boy.’

Will smiled like an orange quarter was stuck in his mouth. He *knew* there was something he was meant to be doing instead of waiting for HB’s workmates to kick the door down.

‘Sure,’ he mumbled. ‘Back in a sec.’ He ran to his room, grabbed a charcoal stick and dashed off a sketch of the view from his bedroom window. Then he rubbed the charcoal thickly over his paint-stained fingers.

By the time he returned to the kitchen, Angela was sipping a glass of water and HB was massaging her shoulders. She was smiling, just a little. She didn’t look capable of killing anyone. Should he confess everything then and there? Just get it over and done with? He hovered near the doorway.

But where to start? Thoughts tumbled in his head like socks in a dryer. Could he tell them how much HB got under his skin? That he’d rather be back at boarding school? He couldn’t even tell them why he’d got so mad and done what he’d done. He didn’t know. His anger had somehow hit him from behind. He hadn’t seen it coming.

Angela was looking at him eagerly, holding out her hand. Maybe he should talk to Clive first — see what he said. Sort out everything in his head. Just wait a bit. He stepped forward and gave his mother the sketch.

‘Happy birthday, Mum.’

‘Oh! It’s ... lovely.’ Angela wafted her hand across the picture. ‘You’ve really captured the ... grass and ... the fence and the ... the shed.’ She moved around the table and put her cheek against his. ‘You’re my rock, Will. I don’t know what I’d do without you, I really don’t. I’m so lucky to have you around at a wretched time like this.’

Yeah, thought Will, his heart around his ankles. He’d definitely wait a bit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Saturday 13:30

‘We’ll be off then, son.’ HB appeared in the doorway. Will, sitting on his bed, snapped the top half of his lever-arch file over his sketchpad, hoping no edges were sticking out. For a big bloke HB sure moved quietly. ‘We’ll probably stay on for a drink or two afterwards, seeing as it’s your mum’s birthday.’

Angela squeezed underneath HB’s armpit. ‘Sure you don’t want to come down for a hit? Quite a few young people go, you know. You might find some friends.’ They looked at him hopefully, tennis racquets dangling, white shoes gleaming.

‘Sorry,’ Will mumbled, ‘but I want to do this assignment.’ Find some friends? Him? A wanted criminal? He didn’t think so.

‘Well, try to finish so that you can come to the movies with us tonight, eh?’ said Angela.

‘I’ll try,’ said Will. Angela and HB turned to leave. ‘Hey, Mum,’ he called. ‘Clive hasn’t rung, has he?’

‘No, love. Should he have?’

‘Nah. Just wondering.’ There was a brief silence. ‘Well, anyway ... knock ’em dead today!’

‘Don’t encourage her,’ said HB. ‘If she lets off steam with that serve of hers, there’ll be bodies all over the court. My sources tell me Homicide’s on red alert!’

‘Oh, honestly!’ Angela elbowed HB in the chest. ‘Though I admit the thought of that delinquent out there on the loose might pepper things up a bit.’

‘Heh, heh, heh!’ Will tried to laugh, sounding more like someone who couldn’t quite call ‘help’.

The afternoon slouched along. The house was silent except in Will’s room, where the *scritch-scritch-scritch* of his pencil had produced page after page of glowering comic book villains.

Will suddenly tossed his pad and pencil onto the floor and went into the kitchen. He stared at the phone. He’d have thought his dad might have rung him by

now to see how he was getting along. Clive came out with some weird stuff at times but they usually had a good understanding. Will had moved away, sure, but he hadn't gone to Antarctica!

He needed to talk to him — now! He grabbed the receiver and keyed Clive's mobile number. But the call went straight to a recorded message, inviting him to try again later — the same as any old stranger. Will banged the phone into its cradle and stomped back to his room. He kicked his backpack, the ball-bearing in the empty spray can clanging as the bag skidded across the floor. Had his father forgotten he existed?

Will flopped onto his bed and stared at the ceiling. As if talking to Clive would fix anything anyway. Those stupid red letters were up there for all the world to see, at least until the police got rid of them on Monday morning. HB wasn't that bad. He didn't deserve this.

Will sat up. *Until the police got rid of them!* What had HB said they'd use? Turps and a scrubbing brush. That was it! He jumped off the bed and emptied his backpack, shoving the spray can and ruined T-shirt into a drawer. Angela had an old wig somewhere. He'd seen it sticking out of a box when he was stowing his empty suitcase. It was blonde and curly — the opposite of his own hair. He had to try. And it sure beat hanging around like a sack of spuds waiting for his dad to ring.

CHAPTER NINE

Saturday 17:30

Will squatted in the bushes in the spidery shadow of a eucalypt on the edge of the school oval. Brimming over his knees was a flowery dress from his mother's op-shop bag and, stretched over his head, the curly blonde wig.

As the last players and spectators left, he picked up his backpack with its load of turpentine, scrubbing brush and rags and trotted to the scene of his crime. He splashed turps over his artwork and got busy.

Ten minutes of hard scrubbing in, sweat was trickling down his temples and the wig felt like a hot water bottle strapped to his head. But he was starting to make an impact. He'd got rid of most of the words and felt better than he had in ages.

He upped his pace.

Maybe it was the glugging sound or maybe it was the zesty lime tang in the air but ... bit by bit ... something made Will turn around.

A little kid with a shaggy red mop of hair was standing a few metres behind him, sucking heartily on a Chupa Chup, staring at him unblinkingly. From the other side of the building came a man's deep voice. 'Is it there, Rooster?'

The crunch of shoes on the bitumen drew near.

Will froze. He tried to move but the bitumen, it seemed, had glued to his feet. Eyes popping, he attempted to smile at Rooster. He succeeded only in baring his teeth.

Rooster took a step back. He slid his Chupa Chup from his mouth, a string of green saliva keeping it connected with his bottom lip — a lip that was starting to tremble.

'Daddy?' Rooster whimpered.

The deep voice called out, 'It's okay, boy. We'll find it!' With that, the owner of the voice himself appeared from behind the brickwork. 'What the devil ...?'

Rooster's dad didn't look the type to bother with introductions. He snapped into a karate position, set to spring. At that moment, Rooster began to wail. He clutched his father's hand with both of his own. The man's eyes flickered in a split second of hesitation and Will saw his chance.

Finally, his feet did what feet were supposed to do — run! He pelted for the trees, for the second time that day leaving a job unfinished. But this time it was to the boom of ‘Oi, girlie! Come back here! Oi, girlie! Stop!’

Will slammed the front door of his house and ran to the laundry out the back, his heart hammering. He unzipped his backpack and reeled as sharp fumes of turpentine shot up his nostrils. He yanked out the dress and wig. They were both covered with red splashes and reeked of turps. And what about the T-shirt he’d wrecked, lurking in his bottom drawer? They were like neon signs, pointing to him.

If he put them in the bag for the op-shop they’d be traced back to him, or worse, to his mum. That was presuming HB and his big nose didn’t sniff them out first. And there was no way he could clean and dry everything before Angela and HB got back from tennis. Besides, the dress was ripped where he’d wrenched it off before jumping on his bike. He drummed his fists on the washing machine, trying to think.

Just then, he caught sight of a tiny red box on the laundry shelf. Simple! Genius!

Angela wouldn’t miss the things — not straight away at least. He didn’t know why she even had the wig. He’d never seen her wear it. If he went down to the very bottom of the backyard and did it, no one would ever know ...

A minute later, Will was at the back fence beside an empty stretch of straw mulch in which Angela had been going to plant a vegetable garden. He pushed aside the straw with his toes, scraped a hollow in the dirt below with his spade and piled in the dress, the wig and his T-shirt. He slid open the box of matches from the laundry shelf, struck one and tossed it in.

Whoosh! Fire seized the turpentine-splattered clothes and polyester curls.

Will leaned on his spade and watched in awe as flames licked the things into life, turning them into crackling, writhing creatures. They hadn’t been allowed to have so much as a candle at boarding school. This was awesome!

Gradually he became aware of heat on the back of his legs. He turned around to see a second fire growing fast, its tentacles hungrily snaking through the mounds of dry straw. A spark must have jumped! Will began scraping a firebreak with the spade,

springing from one edge of the charred black patch to the other in his bare feet, banging at sparks as he leapt about.

One by one, the tongues of fire reached the ring of bare dirt and fizzled out. It looked like he'd won the battle. He straightened and, closing his eyes, exhaled. Leaning on his spade, he stretched to the right and then to the left. He opened his eyes and saw it — a tiny ember, nestled on the edge of the firebreak, glowing softly.

He lunged and banged the spade down on top of it.

Once more for luck ... He hoisted the spade high in the air.

'Everything okay down there?' HB's voice boomed from the back doorstep.

As Will's eyes jerked towards his stepfather, the spade swung down and slammed into the end of his big toe. *Whumph! Bang!* Ferocious pain shot up his leg, through his stomach and into his head. His legs buckled beneath him and Will's world, for the moment at least, went black.

CHAPTER TEN

Saturday 18:15

As the sun began to dip below the treetops, Pollo opened her back gate and set off for the cemetery, Shorn Connery, straining on his rope, leading the way. Sherri's favourite customer, this Viktor-with-a-K von Albericht, had gone to the cemetery the night before and her gut told her he'd go there again. She'd tail him this time, even if it meant going down Diamond Jack's Trail at night.

She had on her best surveillance gear — black runners, black pants, black T-shirt, black beanie and the scarf her dad had knitted her from Shorn Connery's wool, spun and dyed black by Aunty Giulia. Most importantly, she'd bought new batteries for her torch. She wouldn't be turned back this time!

Unlike Sherri, Pollo wasn't fooled for a second by von Albericht's 'old-fashioned manners' and his 'deliriously deep brown eyes'. She knew what he was up to. He'd wangle his way into Sherri's confidence and when she was off-guard make his move — like Count von Alberecht had done to his latest victim in *Last Slayer IV*.

Sherri liked von Albericht way too much already. Had her mother ever been in this situation? Investigating a story that could lose her a friend? Protecting someone who didn't want to be protected? Chasing a suspect who was downright dangerous? Pollo walked briskly along the track. The life of an investigative reporter was tough sometimes.

When she saw the grey puffs drifting above the fence ahead she broke into a run. A fire! Maybe it was out of hand, or the owners didn't even know it was happening! You could never have too many stories!

Drawing level with the smoke, she roped Shorn Connery to the foot of a large gum overhanging the path. She swung herself up the tree and edged along a branch.

When she looked down into the yard below her heart sank. The fire was already being subdued by a tall thin boy about her own age. His method was entertaining — leaping from one side to the other and banging everything in sight with a spade — but there was no news in it.

Wasn't this Sergeant Butt's place? Then this must be his stepson — her backup news story. Perhaps he wasn't so boring after all. She got out her notepad and pencil just in case.

She was about to call down to him when the back door of the house opened and a man appeared. It was Sergeant Butt, hard to recognise at first in his baggy tennis clothes.

Funnily enough, he called out the very same question that Pollo had been going to ask. 'Everything okay down there?'

It seemed an innocent thing to ask.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Saturday 18:30

All the woes of Will's day blurred into oblivion as the spade juddered at the end of his big toe. Everything around him was dark as a cave. His stomach knotted deep inside, pulling him double. When his vision returned, he was on his knees, the backyard sloshing from side to side. HB, waving from the back step, looked like he was doing the Dance of the Seven Veils.

His big toe screamed at him, 'Give up! Cry like a baby! Confess!' But his brain commanded, 'Do NOT give him a reason to come closer. Do NOT let him know you were putting out a fire!'

Will sank forward in the dirt, pretending to fuss with the hole he'd dug, blinking back tears of agony.

HB called across the lawn. 'Just popped back for my wallet!' He moved down a step towards Will then seemed to think better of it. He scratched inside his left ear with an index finger. 'Can I give you a hand, son?'

The pain in Will's toe subsided enough for him to speak. 'No thanks. I'm just digging a hole to ...' To what? He could hardly yell out *to bury the evidence of a crime!* HB was waiting for him to finish. Will's thoughts galloped. Crime ... murder ... dead body. Dead body!

'... to bury a dead body!' he blurted. 'An animal! A dead animal!'

'I see,' said HB. He was scratching in the other ear now. 'What sort of dead animal?'

At that moment, from out of nowhere, Will heard the single short bleat of a sheep, so close by he must have imagined it. It was a sign! Awesome!

'A sheep!' he called back triumphantly.

'Gosh!' said HB. 'I thought you were going to say a bird or a rat or a possum maybe. But a sheep, eh? I wonder how the devil it got into the yard — before it ... err ... passed away.'

Will thought about grabbing his spade and making his hole bigger — much bigger — not stopping until he reached the other side of the earth.

‘There’s a hole in the fence,’ he wailed.

‘Gosh!’ said HB. He scanned the yard. ‘Where’s the sheep now?’

‘I ... I dragged it behind the shed because ... because it was creeping me out,’ called Will. ‘Then I was going to bring it back to bury it.’ Why the heck was he going to bury the sheep? ‘For fertiliser,’ he added. Sudden inspiration hit. ‘And then I was going to plant a veggie garden for Angela on top of it — for her birthday!’

‘Righto. I see,’ said HB. ‘That’s ... err ... thoughtful of you, son. Your mum will appreciate that ... I think.’ He had fingers in both ears now, scratching vigorously.

‘So, you see, I’m fine. Really,’ called Will.

‘Yes ... yes, you are.’ HB shuffled on the back step. ‘Well, I’d best be getting back to the club then. Buy that round of drinks for your mum’s birthday.’

Will nodded. ‘Don’t want to make her mad!’

‘No-sir-ee! We can’t do that!’ HB opened the fly-wire door. ‘Well, I’ll leave you to it.’

Will managed a casual smile and a wave. ‘Bye then!’

‘Yes, cheerio! Back in a little while.’ The door clicked shut behind HB and Will exhaled like he’d surfaced from a dive.

Suddenly the back door opened again and his stepfather’s head popped out. ‘Don’t worry about the hole in the fence, son. We can see to it tomorrow.’

The hole in the fence? What hole in the fence? Will groaned. Details! Why did HB always pick up the details? How come his stepfather thought of every little thing while his real dad couldn’t remember to ring?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Saturday 18:45

In her dress circle seat on the tree branch, Pollo had filled three pages of her notepad and was grinning from ear to ear. Shorn Connery was the best assistant ever! Calling out at just the right moment like that. She'd swear he'd been eavesdropping too! At first she'd cursed him and his big woolly mouth, thinking he'd given her away, but it had turned out better than she could have imagined. A dead sheep indeed. My-oh-my! Hadn't *that* opened a can of worms for the new boy!

Suddenly, up at the end of the path near the cemetery, she noticed a tall figure moving in long, slow strides, a silver case under his arm. Von Albericht! He must have snuck out from the forest. He couldn't have passed underneath her tree — Shorn Connery would have said something. In fact, where was Shorn Connery? His rope was no longer tied to the trunk. He must have gone on ahead while she was busy with the fun below.

Sergeant Butt hadn't come back. His stepson was sitting on the lawn, elbows on his knees, head in his hands, staring into space. The action was all done here. She backed along her branch and climbed down. Keeping to the edge of the track, she snuck to the cemetery and crouched behind a bush.

Shorn Connery hadn't reappeared, as she'd thought he might. It was later than she liked and getting hard to see any distance. She pulled a carrot from a pocket and took a bite.

Von Albericht was alone where the cemetery merged with the meadow, his case open on the ground nearby. He was circling slowly on the spot, his head tipped back. Once again, he appeared to be waiting, almost *willing* something to happen.

Slowly Pollo slipped from tree to tree until she was so close she could hear the man's boots crunching through the grass. She patted the cold metal of the pen-torch clipped to her belt.

In von Albericht's case, the blue light began to intensify. He darted over and, as the night before, set off for the forest — for her! — carrying the case in his arms. He ran past Pollo, only metres away, his eyes trained on the treetops.

Pollo clung to her tree. She could hear von Albericht pushing through the undergrowth, getting further and further away. Where was Shorn Connery when she

needed him? She felt for her torch again and breathed deeply. She shuffled ten paces into the gloomy tangle of trees, everything now only visible in dark smudges. She could do this. She didn't need a sheep to back her up.

She unclipped her torch and switched it on. A shy glow illuminated a circle of ground in front of her ... then slowly faded away. She shook the torch. Nothing.

Pollo thumped her head with her hand. If Mayor Bullock could see her now! How could she be so stupid? She yanked out the notepad and pencil on the cord around her neck.

Note to self, she wrote. Put new batteries INTO TORCH!!!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Saturday 19:25

Von Albericht was the most important story lead she had ever chased and she'd let him get away not once, but twice! Pollo stomped back along the track, muttering to herself in the fading light. Shorn Connery trotted up to join her, lupin leaves streaked across his nose. She picked up the trailing end of his rope, barely noticing he was there.

They rounded a bend and Pollo saw something that lifted her mood considerably. Up ahead was the boy from earlier — Sergeant Butt's stepson — only this time he was on the track, his back towards her. In his hands he held a length of heavy timber and, to Pollo's delight, he was swinging it lustily, aiming blow after blow at the pickets of his own fence.

Her backup story just got better and better! Dropping Shorn Connery's rope, she snuck up behind him. As he was about to swing, she tapped him on the shoulder.

'Hi there!'

Will wheeled around, dropping the plank and reeling backwards. As he stumbled, a big grey thing shot out of nowhere, catching him behind the knees. His arms windmilled but he kept tumbling. For a split-second he sat on something tickly that wriggled out from under him. He toppled down, cracking and snapping twigs as he crashed into the prickly scrub.

He opened his eyes and looked up into a set of dirty Y-shaped nostrils. Glassy yellow eyes with horizontal pupil slits stared down at him. Ears at right angles to a long nose took turns to twitch.

He shook his head. Was he delirious?

The animal curled back its lips, baring grass-covered teeth. *Baa-aa-aah!*

Maybe he'd wake up and find that this day had all been a giant nightmare. He pinched himself but nothing changed. In fact, things were worse. A girl dressed like a burglar was now bending over him, offering him her hand. He got the strong impression she was trying not to laugh.

Ignoring her hand, he tried to lever himself out of his prickly bush. But with every twitch thorns found a new bit of flesh to jab. Swallowing his pride, he reached up.

The girl hoisted him to his feet and watched him pluck thorns from his legs and arms. She cleared her throat. 'I guess it's one of those one-thing-leading-to-another types of situations,' she said.

Will grunted. 'What's that s'posed to mean?'

'Let me guess,' said the girl, pulling out a notepad and pencil. 'You're trying to make a hole in the fence?'

'Why would I be doing a dumb thing like that?' said Will, colour rising in his cheeks.

'Because you told your stepdad, who happens to be a police sergeant, that there *was* a hole in the fence, when it would appear to most observers —' here she took a step backwards and glanced up and down the fence '— that there isn't, in fact, any such thing.'

'How would you know what I told my stepfather? Unless you were —'

'Eavesdropping. You've got it, though I like to think of it as making the most of all of my senses.' The girl stepped forward and offered her hand. 'Sorry, I should introduce myself. I'm Pollo di Nozi — supersleuth and editor of the *Riddle Gully Gazette*.'

Will scowled at Pollo's hand. What was it his footy coach used to say? Attack was the best form of defence! 'Pollo?' he said with a smirk. 'That's a weird name. It means chicken in Italian, doesn't it? I had pollo-something at a restaurant. Are you a scaredy-cat, or something?'

Scaredy-cat? Was that the best he could do?

The girl gritted her teeth. 'Pollo's short for Apollonia, if you must know. After my dad's mum. What you eat at restaurants is your business.'

Will gave up. He wasn't up for a tussle in his current state. He scuffed the dirt. 'What's with the sheep?'

'This here's Shorn Connery — you know, like the original James Bond, Secret Agent 007. Only instead of S-E-A-N, it's S-H-O-R-N — because he's a sheep! Get it?'

My Aunty Giulia named him. She said it was a good name for any pet of mine because I was always spying on people. Still am.'

Will grunted. 'Does he follow you around all the time?'

'Pretty much,' said Pollo. 'He was born on my Aunty Giulia's farm but his sheep-mother went all weird when he was born and rejected him. I raised him from a lamb.'

Rejected by a parent ... Will thought of his father, who hadn't bothered to ring him since he'd moved to Riddle Gully. So Shorn Connery and he had something in common. He had a friend in Riddle Gully after all. Angela would be happy.

Pollo waited, her hands on her hips. 'And you are?'

'You seem to know everything about me already,' Will grumbled.

'A lot, sure, but not your name.'

'It's Will.'

'Will, eh? Sure that's your real name? Sure it's not Liar-Liar-Pants-On-Fire?'

Will sighed. 'Will Hopkins. Hopkins is my dad's surname and I'm sticking with it. I'm never going near my stepfather's surname, no matter what anyone says.'

'Well, yeah. I can understand that,' said Pollo. 'Hey! Your stepdad doesn't know anything about the graffiti at the school this morning, does he? Has he got any inside info?'

'Nuh-uh,' said Will, shaking his head vigorously. 'Nothing. And I don't know anything either. Not a single thing.'

'Well someone wrote "Sergeant Butt is a pig's bun" on the wall of the admin building. They did a really good picture of him too.' Pollo giggled.

'You liked it?' Will tried to fend off a pleased grin.

'Let's say I admired it. I guess whoever did it meant to write "pig's bum".'

'Of course they did!' said Will. He added hastily, 'I'm pretty sure they did, anyway. They must have run out of paint.'

'I thought you didn't know anything about it.'

‘Err ... I know a bit *about* it, I guess. I just don’t know about *who did it*.’ His head was starting to hurt.

‘Oh ... right,’ said Pollo. ‘How did your stepdad take it?’

‘He wasn’t too worried, as it turns out. My mum’s pretty mad though.’

‘Well, I sure would be if I were her,’ said Pollo. ‘It must be a bit hard for you too, with it happening in your very first week here. Don’t worry though. Everyone likes your stepdad way too much not to hunt down whoever did it.’

Will closed his eyes and tried pinching himself again ... Still here.

‘It’s a cheap shot, don’t you think?’ Pollo went on. ‘Your stepdad’s always so nice.’

‘Mmm, yeah, I s’pose,’ murmured Will. He looked at the ground. He’d have to sound more convincing or she’d be onto him. What had Angela said at lunchtime? He looked up at Pollo. ‘I hope whoever did it gets shot!’

‘Wow! That’s pretty severe,’ said Pollo. ‘I’ll tell you one thing though. I’m going to get to the bottom of it. Whoever did it is going to be Page Two news in the next *Riddle Gully Gazette*!’

Will gulped ... Hang on a sec ... Page Two? He couldn’t help himself. ‘What’s going to be on Page One?’

‘This other scoop I’m chasing.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I’m hoping it will win me the Youth Reporter cadetship with the Coast regional news network — Mayor Bullock can say what he likes to the editor-in-chief. It’s only a part-time job after school but it would set me off on my journalistic career.’

‘You want to be a reporter?’ said Will.

‘An *investigative* reporter,’ said Pollo. ‘I want to keep the people who run things honest and help the people who can’t help themselves. Like my mum did.’

‘Heck ... well ... good luck then,’ said Will. ‘So your mum’s a reporter too, eh?’ Another person he had to avoid.

Pollo smiled crookedly. ‘Not exactly. She died when I was six, before Aunty Giulia and Uncle Pete talked Dad into moving here. But she was a fierce journalist. She won an award. Dad’s kept all her articles for me.’

‘That’s good. No, I don’t mean ... not good, but ...’ Will stared at his toes, his head thumping. This girl didn’t have enough parents and he had too many. Where was the sense in that?

‘Don’t worry, she’s still around somehow,’ said Pollo. ‘So!’ She put her hands on her hips. ‘You know as much about me now as I do about you,’ she said. ‘We’re square.’

If only, thought Will. He licked his finger and dabbed at a prickle scratch. ‘You haven’t told me what your big Page One story is.’

Pollo peered up and down the track and into the dim forest behind them. ‘It’s this man. A stranger here in Riddle Gully. He’s staying out at the old ranger’s hut,’ she whispered. ‘He’s one of *them*, I’m pretty sure. I think he’s planning to take my friend Sherri and make her one of the Living Dead.’ Her voice resumed normal volume. ‘Do you know Sherri? She runs the second-hand shop but she used to be a singer on —’

‘Hang on,’ said Will. ‘Back up a bit. Make your friend Sherri one of the what?’

‘The Living Dead,’ said Pollo out of the corner of her mouth. ‘You know ...’ She leaned close to Will’s ear. ‘Vampires!’

‘What?’

‘Vampires!’ said Pollo, looking around. ‘I think this man is one of them. I’m almost certain anyway — and I know heaps about them. I’ve read just about every vampire book there is. You should see the way he dresses and talks, and he hangs around in graveyards and likes bats and doesn’t come out till dusk. And — get this — his name is Viktor von Albericht! Nearly exactly the same as the vampire in the book I’m reading right this minute!’

‘No way!’ said Will. ‘He sure sounds like one.’

Pollo began pacing up and down the path, then turned to face Will. ‘He has to be! That’s why we’ve got to track him down tonight and find out everything we can. Sherri’s life could depend on it.’

‘Did you say “we”?’

‘Maybe ... It just slipped out.’

‘But you’re the one chasing the story,’ said Will. ‘I don’t even know Sherri! I’m not going to —’

‘Listen, it’s none of my business, I know, but aren’t your mum and stepdad due home soon? Seems to me like we should quit chatting and get on with it.’

‘Get on with what?’ asked Will.

‘Making a hole in the fence, of course! You can go and get an axe for starters.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Saturday 19:30

‘Step back!’ said Pollo, hefting the axe onto her shoulder.

Will’s eyes widened in horror. ‘Stop! We can’t just cut a hole with an axe! My stepfather would suspect something straight away.’

‘It’s a lot better than trying to beat the fence unconscious like *you* were doing!’

‘I wasn’t trying to beat the ...’ Will huffed. ‘I tried to prise off some pickets by leaning the plank against them and jumping on it, only I wasn’t heavy enough.’ He looked sideways at Pollo. ‘But you’re here now.’

Pollo looked doubtful. Clutching the axe handle, she jiggled her shoulders around, very much like someone who wanted nothing more than to swing an axe. Eventually she lowered it. ‘Okay then,’ she said. ‘Convince me.’

‘See here?’ said Will, pointing towards the base of the fence, about half a metre above the ground. ‘On each panel the pickets are nailed to this bit of wood going across. So if we wedge the plank against the pickets about here —’ Will jammed one end of the plank into the track and the other against the pickets above the crossbar ‘— and put our weight on the plank here —’ he indicated with his foot ‘— it should make the nails pop out. Simple!’

He jumped onto the ramp made by the plank and started bobbing up and down.

‘Maybe if we hit it with the axe a couple of times to get it started ...’ said Pollo.

‘No, this will work. You’ll see.’ Will edged along the plank closer to the fence and held out his hand. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘I need your weight on here too.’

Pollo dropped the axe and cautiously stepped onto the plank alongside Will.

‘One, two, three!’ said Will. Will hung onto the fence and Pollo gripped his shoulder as they jumped up and down in unison.

Cracks began to appear between the pickets and the timber crossbar. Pollo and Will jumped higher and the cracks widened so that with every bounce they caught glimpses of Will’s backyard. But after another minute of bouncing the pickets were still firmly attached. The cracks looked as wide as they were going to get.

'Now can we bash it with the axe?' puffed Pollo.

'If we could just find a bit more weight ...' said Will, looking around.

At that moment they heard a loud rustling in the undergrowth beside the track. Shorn Connery appeared, weeds sticking out either side of his mouth, his rope strung from one bush to another. He paused in his chewing.

Baa-aa-aaah!

Will and Pollo looked at one another.

Thirty seconds later, Will had the back half and Pollo the front half of a loudly protesting sheep. Will was grabbing the fence for balance, Pollo was grabbing him and Shorn Connery squirmed and bleated between them. They jumped up and down on the plank together, their eyes glued to the base of the pickets. It was working. The cracks were widening with each jolt.

If they could just hang onto Shorn Connery a few seconds longer ...

Suddenly Will felt the fence beneath his hand shifting away. As his arm stretched out, he looked up to see the entire panel of pickets that he was holding onto toppling slowly towards his backyard. It creaked and squeaked like a falling tree, Will then Shorn Connery then Pollo, in slow motion, tumbling up against it. The panel and its passengers hit the earth with a juddering crash.

No one moved. The three lay sprawled across the fence panel inside Will's backyard in a tangle of limbs and woolly legs. A cool evening breeze drifted over them through a two-metre gap in the fence.

Shorn Connery was the first to rise from the pile. He scrambled onto his hooves and shook himself from head to tail. He glared down at Will — *Baaa-aaa-aaah!* — then galloped away into the murky dusk.

Pollo stood up, bending and straightening her arms and legs, testing that everything was in working order. She looked down at Will. 'I guess you've got yourself a hole now.'

Will remained on his back. This had been a really bad day. A really, really bad day. He lay there, staring at the bats flitting across the sky. If only somehow he could join them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Saturday 19:45

Will stood by silently as Pollo brought the axe down, punching out a hole in the panel of pickets big enough for a sheep to have got through.

She threw the axe aside. 'I'll be off then!' she announced, looking at the first stars glinting in the purple sky. Soon it would be completely dark.

Will checked his watch. HB and his mum would be back any second. 'Aren't you going to stay and help me put the fence back up?'

'Sorry, I'd love to,' said Pollo. 'But I'd better find Shorn Connery while there's still a smidge of light.'

Will squatted and tried lifting the fence panel off the ground. It buckled, threatening to snap. He looked at Pollo like a castaway watching a ship about to sail on by.

'Okay, okay,' said Pollo. 'One more minute. Then I'm gone.'

Will stood in the yard and Pollo on the track. Together they pushed and pulled until the fence panel was back in position. Will secured it with fencing wire from HB's shed while Pollo held it steady.

Alone on her side on the fence, Pollo peered up and down the track through the gloom. Where was Shorn Connery this time? She hoped he hadn't gone back to the cemetery.

Just then Will's voice called through the pickets. 'Err ... Pollo?' He sounded nervous. 'We've got a slight problem.'

As he spoke, something tickled Pollo's knees. She looked down. Shoving its way through the hole in the fence was a springy grey mop between two big twitching ears.

'He's been in my mum's flowerbed ... by the looks of it.' Will's voice was mournful.

Shorn Connery looked up at Pollo, his puzzled eyes blinking stiff white lashes.

Baaa-aaa-aaah!

Pollo grappled with Shorn Connery's rope lead. It was stretched taut, twisting around his neck and disappearing through the hole in the fence. 'He's caught up!' she shouted. 'You need to pull him back out to loosen the rope!'

Pollo pushed Shorn Connery's chest and Will pulled on his hind legs until eventually they had his head on the same side of the fence as his body. Will untangled the rope and passed it back to Pollo. They tried to reverse the process, Pollo pulling, Will pushing. But Shorn Connery, meanwhile, had spotted Angela's flowerbed again. He wasn't going anywhere.

Will, heaving with his right cheek buried in the greasy wool of the sheep's rump and his feet spinning in the dirt, stole another glance at his watch. It was a wonder Angela and HB weren't home already.

Abruptly, Shorn Connery stopped fighting and stiffened to attention. Will peeked through a narrow gap to see Pollo, in the half-dark, wagging the end of a carrot. Shorn Connery suddenly muscled forward like his life depended on it. Will gave him one last shove and he catapulted through the hole, out of Will's yard and onto the trail. Will leaned against the fence and slid down into the dirt, turning his back to the sheep, the hole and the entire sorry business.

Only then did he look up to the back step of the house.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Saturday 20:00

Angela and HB stood on the step, their racquets and jaws dangling. Will managed a limp wave.

‘Who would’ve expected it? The sheep came back to life!’ he called.

Through the hole in the fence he heard a snort and felt the sharp jab of a finger in his back. Pollo whispered through the fence, ‘Meet me back here at twenty-one hundred hours.’

Angela descended the steps and began crossing the lawn, HB following slowly.

Will lowered his face and shielded his mouth with his hand. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Nine p.m., dummy!’

‘No — I mean why am I meeting you back here?’

His mum was in front of her flowerbed — not so much a flowerbed anymore as a stalk bed, Shorn Connery having beheaded most of its inhabitants. She was shaking her head and making a series of whimpers as she formally identified the corpse of each flower. HB joined her, gently squeezing her shoulders with his big hands.

‘If you don’t meet me I’ll spill the beans about you and your fires and your fence holes and your sheep that come back from the dead!’ whispered Pollo, jabbing Will’s back with each point.

Will sank lower in the dirt. As soon as he got out of one mess he jumped straight into another. The graffiti that had started everything seemed a lifetime away.

‘Nine p.m. sharp — or you’re toast!’ said the voice through the fence.

Angela and HB walked over to where Will was slumped in the garden bed. They stood looking down at him.

‘I gather the sheep wasn’t dead in the first place, then,’ said HB, leaning back to scan up and down the fence, squinting in the near darkness.

‘Yes ... yes!’ said Will. ‘That’s what I meant to say. I *thought* the sheep was dead, but it turned out it wasn’t!’ Through the fence, a finger poked him in the back.

‘HB, do you know what he’s talking about?’ said Angela.

‘Err, yes, love. But I didn’t want to spoil the surprise. Best you tell her, son.’

Will recounted the story he’d spun earlier, Pollo’s finger stabbing him with each porky.

‘Good grief!’ said Angela when he’d finished. ‘You poor thing, trying to make a veggie garden for me and having to chase a sheep around half the afternoon instead!’ She looked at HB. ‘Amazing, eh?’

‘Yes-sir-ee,’ said HB. ‘Amazing.’ Scratching his head, he added, half to himself, ‘Though I’m still trying to work out why the devil I didn’t notice this ruddy great hole in the fence when I was talking to Will before.’ He began tugging on his earlobes. ‘*And* I forgot to take my wallet to tennis. I think I might be losing it.’

Will was beginning to feel like an insect skewered to a corkboard. The minor detail of the position of the hole had never crossed his mind. It was always the details with Hairy!

‘Honestly, HB,’ said Angela, helping Will to his feet. ‘Will’s had a stinker of an afternoon and my flower garden looks like a bed of nails — and you want us to worry about you?’

HB bowed his head. ‘No. You’re right, love. Sorry.’

Angela held out a hand to Will. ‘Come on inside now, love, and clean up. We brought home some pizza. *Love on the Wing* starts at eight-forty-five. We should just make it.’

Will fell in behind as they trudged up to the house. ‘Did you say *Love on the Wing*?’

‘I know, I know! It’s a chick-flick but I’ve got birthday rights, haven’t I? It was either that or that horrible sci-fi thing. HB’s really looking forward to it.’ She grinned at HB. ‘Aren’t you, love?’

‘You bet,’ said HB, his face glum.

Will had to meet Pollo. She had way too much dirt on him not to. ‘Would it be okay with you guys if I didn’t come?’ he blurted.

Was that enough? Did he have to invent a reason why he didn’t want to go with them? He hoped not. He was starting to lose track of all his stories.

His mum and HB looked at one another.

‘I mean, we’ll all be eating together beforehand!’ said Will brightly.

‘Well, I suppose you don’t have to come,’ said Angela. ‘You’ve had a rough afternoon. We can bring you back a chocolate bomb — as long as you’re okay with being home alone. What do you think, HB?’

‘He’ll have *The Force* to keep him company,’ said HB.

‘Yeah, right, *The Force*! Excellent!’ said Will. ‘I’ll record it for you!’

‘Well, if that’s what you’d prefer ...’ said Angela. She suddenly chuckled. ‘How about, if you don’t come with us, you have to watch *Golden Summers* with me on Monday night? It’s the season finale — the big wedding!’

HB bent down to Will. ‘It’s only a half-hour episode. Take the deal, son. I wish I were in your shoes.’

As his mum punched HB on the arm, Will sighed. In my shoes? That’s funny. I don’t want to be in them at all. Every step I take, I just fall flat on my face.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Saturday 21:15

‘I didn’t mean to bring him. He just followed me!’ protested Pollo over Will’s shoulder. ‘I must have accidentally left the gate open.’

They shuffled in the darkness along Diamond Jack’s Trail in the direction of the ranger’s hut, Will going first with Pollo directing in his ear. He could feel her short, sharp breaths on the back of his neck and her runners brushed his heels every second step. She wouldn’t let go of her pen-torch, so its beam waved around from behind, making things worse.

Shorn Connery trotted a little way back, stopping frequently to tug at plants. ‘Couldn’t you have just tied him up to be sure? Everyone for miles around will know we’re coming if he starts bleating.’

‘There isn’t anyone for miles around. Why do you think von Albericht’s staying out here?’

Their footsteps crunched softly on the crumbly limestone track. The only other noises were the faint fluttering of bats overhead, the moaning of owls and frogs and, at their feet, the scurrying of unseen creatures. If they looked straight up they could just make out the shaggy silhouettes of trees against the dark sky. If they looked ahead into the ribbon of light from Pollo’s torch, the rough, twisted limbs of those same trees slid in and out of focus like ghosts.

‘I’ll tie him up with my scarf when we get closer,’ said Pollo.

Will grunted. He had to admit, he was enjoying himself, if he ignored the fact that he’d been blackmailed into coming. It was kind of nice just walking along the bush track in almost total darkness, hearing all the bush sounds.

‘This whole area is haunted, you know,’ said Pollo. ‘Dead bushrangers! Diamond Jack was an escaped convict. After raids, his gang used to gallop back here and hide out in the limestone caves. Some people say Riddle Gully got its name because the hills around here are riddled with caves. Others reckon it’s because the troopers could never figure out how the bushrangers disappeared. But most of us think it’s because they riddled Diamond Jack with bullets when they finally cornered him.’

‘No way!’ said Will. ‘Did that happen near here?’

‘Just up ahead at the end of the track,’ said Pollo, ‘in a clearing near the old abandoned railway bridge. That’s why this trail is named after him. He’s buried in the cemetery though. If you believe Mayor Bullock, he’s one of Diamond Jack’s descendants. He had Diamond Jack’s grave all prettied up with a big plaque making it official.’

‘There’s an old railway bridge, is there?’ said Will. ‘I didn’t even know there was a railway!’

‘They used it early last century to bring the timber down from the hills,’ said Pollo. ‘Diamond Jack was long before that though — in the eighteen-fifties.’

She shuddered. ‘Heaps of bushrangers died in the caves. Bullet wounds, gangrene, blood poisoning and stuff like that. They’ve found skeletons. We’re probably walking over some right now.’ She lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘They say that if you keep really still you can hear the bushrangers groaning.’

‘Let’s keep really still then,’ said Will.

‘Hmm ... maybe later,’ said Pollo. They shuffled on a few more steps. ‘So you believe in ghosts then?’

Will thought a bit. ‘I like the idea of them. Yeah, I guess I believe in them.’

‘What about ... you know ... vampires?’

‘I’m not so sure about them. But this suspect of yours — it definitely sounds like he could be one. I hope he is!’

Pollo shivered. ‘Aren’t you even a little bit scared?’

‘Well, yeah. I s’pose I am. But that’s half the point, isn’t it? It’s kind of cool.’ It sure beat going to see *Love on the Wing*.

‘Not when you’re scared of the dark, it isn’t!’ blurted Pollo. ‘There — now you know! Go on, rubbish me for it.’

‘It’s not exactly a surprise,’ said Will. ‘It’s why I’m here, isn’t it?’

Pollo didn’t answer.

‘When I was little, Clive used to tell me that everything’s the same at night as in the day, only it’s like you’ve got your eyes shut. Try it. Close your eyes and pretend it’s daytime. You can put your hand on my shoulder if you have to.’

Pollo did as he said. ‘Who’s Clive?’ she said, treading on Will’s left heel.

‘Ouch! My dad. He reckons when kids call their parents Mum and Dad it confines their relationship — whatever that means.’

‘My-oh-my! Adults say the strangest things,’ said Pollo.

‘Well, my dad sure does,’ said Will.

‘Still, this closing-your-eyes trick works. I might try doing it half and half.’

They edged along the track, Pollo’s hand on Will’s shoulder, Will trying to look past the thin torch beam that lurched around every time Pollo closed her eyes.

‘Where’s Clive now?’

‘In the city. With my stepmother Tiff and their rug-rat — my half-brother, I guess.’

‘You don’t sound too thrilled about it all.’

‘I’m getting used to it.’ It felt good talking to someone other than Angela and HB or schoolteachers for a change. ‘Just like I’ll get used to the good sergeant one day.’

‘Your stepdad?’ said Pollo. ‘I wouldn’t have thought he’d take much getting used to.’

‘He can be really annoying, take it from me,’ said Will. ‘When I went to the school this morning I —’

He stopped, his heart clenched. What was he doing? Blabbing — to her of all people. The editor of the whatever-it-was-called! A blackmailer!

‘This morning?’ Pollo rapped the back of his head with her knuckles. ‘You went to the school this morning?’

‘I was ... going to ... check out the cricket,’ Will mumbled.

‘How come you didn’t mention it earlier? You didn’t see anything suspicious, did you?’

‘No way! Like I told you — I don’t know anything about anything!’

‘Hmmpf ... Pity.’

Behind him, Pollo had stopped. Will turned to see her holding the torch between her teeth. ‘You’re not getting out that notepad, are you?’ His voice came out higher and squeakier than he’d expected.

‘Nuh-uh,’ said Pollo. She took the torch out of her mouth. ‘Why would I be doing that?’

‘Whew! I mean, no reason.’ She gave the torch to Will to hold.

‘I’m taking off my scarf to tie up Shorn Connery. There can’t be far to go.’ She giggled. ‘It’s made from his own wool! That’ll confuse him!’ She unwound the long scarf from her neck. It was riddled with holes. It looked more like a spider web to Will than anything.

‘Have you got giant moths at your place or what?’ he said.

Pollo held up a ragged end and smiled. ‘Dad taught himself to knit on this — that’s why it’s so long. It took forever before he stopped dropping stitches. It’s much better at the other end.’

‘Glad to hear it!’ said Will. ‘I’ve been wondering,’ he said after a moment. ‘Does this Sherri lady know what you’re doing?’

Pollo shook her head. ‘Nuh-uh — that’s the tricky part. Sherri told me that von Albericht had deliriously deep brown eyes. Enough said, right?’ Pollo held Shorn Connery and began tying the scarf around his neck. ‘That’s what all the hurry is about. I need to get evidence that this Viktor von Albericht is what I think he is before anything happens to her. If I told Sherri what I suspected without anything backing it up, she’d probably throw herself at von Albericht just to prove me wrong.’ Pollo thought for a moment. ‘Maybe I should tell her that Dad’s a vampire.’

Just then a strange sound swelled around them, wafting through the trees like a cold wind. Pollo, Will and Shorn Connery stopped dead, ears straining.

‘Dead bushrangers?’ whispered Will.

Pollo’s arms tightened around Shorn Connery as the sound swelled again, louder than before — a discordant yet strangely harmonious fizzing that seized the air, squeezing and releasing it, full of grave intensity as its pitch rose and fell.

Pollo gulped. ‘The pipe organ!’ she whispered. ‘The favourite instrument of The Undead!’

‘A pipe organ — out here in the middle of nowhere? They’re only in big cathedrals, aren’t they?’ said Will.

‘It’s the twenty-first century, dummy!’ said Pollo. ‘Vampires have portable sound systems too!’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Saturday 21:45

Pollo and Will quickly scanned the scrub as best they could and found a small clear patch. They coaxed Shorn Connery into it and looped the end of his scarf around a bush alongside.

‘This grass is pretty stringy ... and the kangaroos have been at it,’ whispered Pollo, sweeping the torch around to find a better spot. ‘I hope he’ll be okay.’

‘He’ll be fine,’ said Will. ‘Come on, we need to get going!’

With Shorn Connery staring after them, they crept down the damp path in the direction of the music. With each step it grew louder and louder. They rounded a bend. Through the trees ahead they could make out the old ranger’s hut in its clearing. Dim shafts of yellow light slanted through a single small square window. The pipe organ music was definitely coming from inside.

‘Looks like he’s home,’ said Will. ‘You might have to ... you know ... switch off the torch.’

Pollo’s fingers crept onto Will’s shoulders and gripped tight. There was a soft click, and everything around them turned black except for the thin strips of light from the hut.

‘We’ll stop a bit to let our eyes get used to the dark,’ said Will. ‘You okay?’

‘Sure,’ said Pollo, her voice shaking.

Gradually the curtain of blackness drew back a little. Between the scraps of moon and starlight and the lights from the hut they could just make out the shapes and dim colours of the bushes and trees around them.

‘We should move,’ said Pollo.

‘I’m ready when you are,’ said Will. His skin was tingling. He felt charged, like when the Turbo Blaster at the Royal Show was about to take off.

Pollo took a deep breath. ‘Let’s do this!’

They reached the edge of the clearing and the moat of gravel that lay between them and the old timber hut. They had taken two crunching steps when the organ music abruptly stopped. There was a murmur of voices.

‘He’s got company,’ whispered Will.

They waited on the edge of the clearing but the music didn’t start up again. ‘They’ll hear us if we keep going,’ said Pollo.

Will checked his watch. ‘We can’t stand here all night!’ Chances were he didn’t have a whole lot of time before his mum and HB got home from *Love on the Wing*.

Pollo nudged him. ‘What are you like at climbing trees?’ she whispered.

‘I haven’t done it for a while ... Pretty good I guess.’

‘I reckon that one over there would give us a good view,’ said Pollo, pointing to the bush beyond the clearing, ‘and it’s in the dark if anyone comes outside.’

Will followed Pollo’s finger. The tree was on the spindly side, but Pollo was right — it looked to have a line of sight to the window of the hut. And he was pretty sure Pollo wouldn’t let him off the hook until she’d got what she came for.

‘It’s worth a go,’ he said. Why not add climbing trees in the middle of the forest in the dark to the list of strange things he’d done that day?

A few minutes later, their feet were wedged in the fork of a branch about three metres above the ground, the tree’s rough bark digging into their arms as they hugged the trunk. They edged up to a standing position and carefully leaned sideways to peer through the little window.

They froze.

‘Is that who I think it is?’ whispered Will.

Pollo nodded slowly. ‘Sherri!’ She gulped. Von Albericht had got to her already!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Saturday 22:00

Pollo and Will watched from their tree. Sherri was nestled in a tattered armchair in the corner of the room, her dangly earrings catching the light as she nodded and laughed with Viktor von Albericht. Von Albericht, in black trousers and polo-neck, was filling her glass with a dark, red liquid from a strange, pillow-like vessel. It looked like the body of a dead animal, with a spigot where a head should have been.

‘He’s got her drinking blood already!’ said Pollo.

‘Does that mean we’re too late?’

‘Not necessarily,’ whispered Pollo. ‘He might just be giving her a taste for it. Let’s hope it’s only animal blood. Vampires drink that too sometimes.’

Von Albericht disappeared. A moment later the eerie strains of pipe organ music again snaked from the hut. Pollo and Will wrapped their arms more tightly round their tree trunk.

Von Albericht moved back into view and crouched down next to a crate in the corner near Sherri. He reached in with both hands and brought out what appeared to be a small, furry animal. Sherri stopped smiling. She shrank back into her chair. Her eyes widened as von Albericht, cupping the animal in gloved hands, held it out to her. She flung up both hands to stop him bringing it closer.

‘Looks like a bat,’ said Will above the sombre strains of the organ music.

Pollo nodded with a shiver.

As the notes swelled to a crescendo, von Albericht raised the animal level with his own chin. Staring intently at the tiny beast, he opened his mouth.

‘He’s going to eat it!’ squeaked Pollo. ‘I’ve seen enough! We’ve got to get Sherri out of there!’ She was about to jump down from the tree when Will grabbed her arm.

‘Wait!’ he said. ‘We can’t just rush over there! He’ll hear us coming. He’ll be prepared!’

Suddenly the organ music plummeted into silence — and at that same moment, a barrel-bellied, stick-legged sheep trailing a black scarf burst into the clearing and clattered up the wooden steps to the front door of the hut.

Baaa-aaa-aaah! Shorn Connery bellowed as only an angry, left-behind sheep can.

Pollo was about to call to him when the door swung open and the tall, dark shape of Viktor von Albericht loomed against the yellow light, the bright crimson puff of Sherri's hair bobbing behind him.

Pollo crouched low, pressing into the fork of the tree. Will, on the other hand, having little experience in surveillance work, flung himself along the slim tree branch he'd been standing on. In seconds, he'd swung down to the underside and was dangling by his arms and legs like a pig on a pole being taken to market.

A very bendy pole.

With a whip-like crack, the branch gave way, dumping Will on the dirt with a loud *hoomph!* as the air from both lungs shot from his body.

Von Albericht's head snapped in their direction. He squinted into the dark, then took the steps in one bound and began striding towards them.

Pollo swung down from what was left of her tree fork. She dragged Will to his feet and draped his arm over her shoulders. 'The track's back this way! We can cut through the bush!' Will couldn't breathe to object.

They scrambled through the pitch-black forest, Pollo closing her eyes whenever she dared, Will trying desperately to rake air into his lungs. Finally they emerged onto Diamond Jack's Trail. They flopped against a tree, catching their breath as quietly as they could.

A few minutes passed. There was no sign of von Albericht. Slowly Pollo stood up and looked around. She tilted her head. 'Can you hear anything?'

Will listened. 'No. He probably went back to Sherri. Lucky for us, eh?'

His words hung in the air. Will and Pollo looked at one another, two heads thinking the same thought. With Sherri and Shorn Connery back at the hut, it might have been better if von Albericht had kept coming.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sunday 10:00

Pollo sat on the back step of her house, her head in her hands. The trail of carrots she'd laid on the track behind the houses and in through the propped-open gate was untouched. Shorn Connery hadn't come home.

He'd been separated from her lots of times before but he'd always made his way back, no problems. Half the time, he'd been bleating at the back gate waiting for her. He'd certainly never stayed out overnight. What was keeping him this time? Away from his food and water troughs? Away from her?

She'd ridden her bike around for nearly two hours in the morning looking for him. She'd even gone back up Diamond Jack's Trail a bit, where she'd started scattering the carrots. She'd found nothing — not so much as a strand of wriggly wool.

There was only one stone still unturned — Viktor von Albericht's hut.

There were two reasons to go back there (three if you counted getting out of helping Aunty Giulia and Uncle Pete bag sheep manure at their farm). The first was easy — the hut was the last place she'd seen Shorn Connery. The second reason was much harder to face. She and Will had interrupted von Albericht's little party last night. Hopefully he'd lost his chance to work on Sherri — for the time being at least. But the odds were, then, that he'd been left hungry ... and to The Undead, if human blood wasn't on hand, animal blood was the next best thing.

Pollo gnawed on a fingernail. She'd read often enough that vampires couldn't harm anyone in daylight hours. But having seen von Albericht at work last night, it wasn't a theory she was itching to test on her own. She needed Will's help — just one more time.

'You want the galvanised ones, son.' Sergeant Butt's voice drifted over his back fence as Pollo tiptoed nearer along the track. 'Other nails rust soon as you look at 'em. Pass us a couple, there's a good lad.'

Pollo squatted and peeked through a crack as Will passed his stepdad the nails.

Sergeant Butt ran one through his hair. ‘Little trick I learned from a carpenter friend,’ he said, winking at Will. ‘It greases them up. Makes them go in easier.’

All of a sudden, a mighty bang shot through the fence past her ear, sending Pollo tumbling backwards into the dirt. ‘You don’t muck around with little taps!’ said Sergeant Butt. ‘You’ve got to give it a good wallop! Here — you do the next one.’

Pollo heard Sergeant Butt step away and she scrambled back to the fence. As Will squatted down with the hammer, she tapped the wood next to his head. ‘Meet me here at eleven hundred hours!’ she whispered. ‘Please!’

They approached von Albericht’s hut by the back way this time, creeping in a wide semicircle through the bush and along an old kangaroo trail, damp and glistening green. A light shower had fallen a little earlier — the first of the season. The only sound now was the occasional cascade of droplets as birds hopped in the branches above, disturbing the wet leaves.

Climbing onto a wood-chopping stump, they peeked through the small side window — the one they’d spied through from the tree the night before.

Pollo tried to steel herself for what she might see — Shorn Connery tied up, gaffer tape wrapped around his snout or, worse, lying unmoving on the floor. There was no sign of him. What she saw instead filled her insides with stone.

Stretched out on a camp bed, dead to the world, was von Albericht. His hands were folded over his chest like an Egyptian mummy ... or like someone who had recently enjoyed a fresh, hearty meal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sunday 13:30

‘Beat this, Sherri.’ Pollo was standing in front of the mirror of an antique dresser. She rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue — what Principal Piggott might have called a ‘minimal effort’.

Sherri looked over to Pollo, a rare frown creasing her brow. ‘I’ll come and pull faces with you when I’ve finished serving *my customer*, Pollo.’

‘Oh yeah ... sorry.’ Pollo stared at the mirror and sighed. One minute she’d been chasing a killer story that was going to change her life. Next thing she knew, her dear friend Sherri was lining up to be recruited to The Undead, and Pollo had practically served up Shorn Connery on a plate to an evil stranger.

Sherri closed the till with a clunk. ‘Your daughter will love it, I’m sure, Mr McNutty. Toodle-oo! Take care.’ She watched Mr McNutty leave then joined Pollo at the dresser.

Like all good human beings’ reflections, Sherri’s joined Pollo’s in the mirror. Pollo’s heart lifted. So von Albericht hadn’t made Sherri one of his own yet. There was still time for her, if not for poor Shorn Connery.

Sherri wagged her ears in the mirror, making her earrings jingle. ‘That’s my best party trick! Your turn now.’

‘Turn for what?’

Sherri huffed. ‘To pull a face, of course! It was your idea, Pollo.’ She peered into Pollo’s eyes. ‘What’s the matter with you today? Ever since you came in here you’ve been moping around like a single sock. I’d have thought you’d be out chasing your big story.’ She opened a drawer of the dresser. ‘It’s nothing to do with this, is it?’ She pulled out Pollo’s long black scarf — the one that had been tied around Shorn Connery’s neck the night before.

Pollo gasped. ‘You know then!’

‘Know what, exactly?’

‘About von Albericht! About what he’s done to Shorn Connery!’ wailed Pollo. ‘Poor Shorn Connery has vanished!’

Sherri sighed. ‘Listen, kiddo. I’m sorry to hear that he’s gone missing, really I am. But it’s nothing to do with Viktor. All I know about Viktor is that he makes breaded udder to die for, and he has the sort of gentlemanly manners I haven’t seen since my last cruise.’

‘Breaded what?’ Pollo’s mouth curled.

‘They call it “uđer pane” where he’s from. Breaded cow’s ... never mind. Anyway, Shorn Connery darted off last night as soon as we tried to tie him to the verandah post. We looked for him but we just assumed he’d make his own way home. He’ll turn up.’

Pollo grabbed Sherri’s arm. ‘Shorn Connery ran off? Von Albericht didn’t suck out all his lifeblood?’

‘Suck out all his what?’ Sherri’s tower of curls jiggled in astonishment. ‘Why on earth would Viktor do a thing like that?’

Relief and dismay seesawed in Pollo’s head. So von Albericht hadn’t captured Shorn Connery last night! But if von Albericht wasn’t one of The Undead, she’d lost her story — and maybe Sherri, by the way she was looking daggers at Pollo now.

Beneath all the confusion one fact remained. If Shorn Connery was alive he’d have come home by now. Von Albericht had to be at the bottom of things somehow. There was way too much coincidence otherwise.

Pollo looked sideways at Sherri. ‘Viktor might do something like that if he was a ...’ A heavy silence enveloped them.

‘Was a what, Pollo?’ Sherri said eventually, her lilac eyelids blinking as she waited for Pollo to answer.

‘Well ...’ This was ten times harder to say out loud! But she couldn’t *not* say it — Sherri had no idea of the danger she was in. ‘Well ... for one thing ... if he was a ... vampire.’

Sherri’s eyes widened. She stuck out her neck and pursed her lips as though trying to kiss something just out of reach. She covered her mouth and rushed from the room towards the kitchen out the back.

Oh-oh ... Pollo had never seen Sherri upset before. What was she supposed to do now?

Suddenly, from behind the screen a loud snort erupted, followed by alternating splutters and gasps. This metamorphosed into a succession of long, drawn-out hoots that rolled through to the shopfront where Pollo sat glowering, twisting a silver pendant from a nearby display case around and around in her palms.

Sherri returned after a minute or so, sniffing and dabbing at the corners of her eyes. ‘I’m sorry, Pollo,’ she said. ‘What were you saying?’

Pollo scowled. ‘I don’t see what’s so funny. I’m telling you this for your own good, you know.’

Sherri pulled Pollo’s stiff torso towards her and gave her a hug. ‘You don’t think you might be trying a bit too hard to finish the *Riddle Gully Gazette* with a bang, do you? It would be perfectly understandable.’

Pollo flopped back in her chair and, avoiding Sherri’s eye, explained what she could — the graveyard, von Albericht’s strange rituals, his name, the way he dressed, the bats, his sleeping at midday and now Shorn Connery’s disappearance. How it all added up.

‘Firstly,’ said Sherri, ‘I’ll forgive you for spying on Viktor and me only because I know how much this story means to you. Secondly, it all adds up, yes — but not to what you think.’ Sherri sat down at her desk. ‘Viktor is from Romania. He’s a zoologist — part of an international project for preserving endangered animal species. He’s after a particular type of bat around here, but until he can find out where it lives the poor thing’s in terrible danger.’

Sherri could be so gullible, thought Pollo crossly. Of course von Albericht would have a cover story! One point was interesting though. ‘Did you say he was from Romania?’ she asked, weaving the chain of the pendant between her fingers. ‘Isn’t Transylvania in Romania?’

‘Possibly ... well, yes, I believe it is,’ said Sherri. ‘But don’t you go getting ideas. Transylvania is a real place with real people. Viktor tells me the mountain scenery there is spectacular.’

‘So he *is* from Transylvania!’

Sherri rolled her eyes. ‘Look, all I know is that the poor man is up half the night trying to find these creatures, starting at the cemetery at dusk where they like to

hunt and the open sky makes them easier to spot. That's why he's asleep in the middle of the day. Not because he's a you-know-what!

'That's what he tells you, Sherri!' said Pollo. 'What about the little animal he was about to eat when Shorn Connery showed up?'

'Rubbish! The animal you saw was an injured bat. It's one of the endangered ones he's trying to protect! He's hardly likely to eat it!'

'Well, okay then,' said Pollo. 'But what about the blood you were both drinking? And the dead animal he was pouring it from?'

Sherri laughed. 'It wasn't blood. It was blackberry wine. And that dead animal you refer to was a traditional goatskin wine bladder. His father gave it to him to remind him of home. Europeans use them all the time.'

'So ... what about that creepy organ music he was playing? There's something seriously wrong with anyone who likes that!'

Sherri tossed her head, her earrings tinkling. 'Honestly, Pollo! As it happens, a passion for pipe organ music is something Viktor and I share. Remember I felt I'd seen him before? We worked it out. We were side by side at a recital at St Paul's in the city last month. How about that! Last night's music was a recording of the concert. A pity it was cut short.' She arched her eyebrows at Pollo.

Pollo shuffled. This wasn't working out at all like she'd planned. She made a last effort. 'What about the funny way he dresses and talks?'

Sherri shrugged and smiled at Pollo. 'Old habits die hard, I suppose. He *is* from Transylvania, after all.'

Pollo sat in silence while Sherri, this time at a more leisurely pace, disappeared, humming, into the kitchen, leaving Pollo to think. There was a ring of truth to everything she'd said. But wasn't it possible that, although Sherri believed what she said was true, she herself had been hoodwinked by von Albericht? It was the investigative reporter's old nightmare — the reliability of information.

Sherri returned with two glasses of water. 'I've a suggestion,' she said, handing one to Pollo. 'I'm meeting Viktor at the abandoned railway bridge later for a picnic tea. We thought we'd make the most of the last of these summer evenings and combine business with pleasure. Viktor thinks that the clearer sky where the bridge

crosses the gorge might be good for sightings of his bat. He's going to show me how his bat detector machine works. "Bat detector" — it sounds spooky, eh?"

She patted Pollo's knee. 'Why don't you and Will join us? Will probably hasn't been to the old bridge yet, and you can watch Viktor at work and grill him for yourself. Who knows? Maybe we can even help you find Shorn Connery.'

Pollo hunched in her chair, roping the chain of the silver pendant around her index finger. She'd been wanting all along to take a long, close look at von Albericht. And she certainly couldn't take Sherri's word for everything. 'Sounds like a plan,' said Pollo, 'though my last-ever *Riddle Gully Gazette* won't be nearly as good if what you say is true.'

If ... She repeated it softly to herself.

'It's all settled then,' said Sherri. 'Ooh! Speaking of your gazette — you know the graffiti? Someone's got a guilty conscience from the looks of it. A bloke saw a young person with a blue backpack trying to clean it off.' Sherri chuckled. 'In disguise, would you believe? Whoever it was had a curly blonde wig, but their short dark hair was sticking out underneath. They should have asked Mayor Bullock for advice on wearing the wig, eh?'

Pollo tried to look grateful. 'Thanks Sherri. I'll follow it up.' She got to her feet. 'Well, I'd better be going. I think I'll head up the hill road. See if I can spot Shorn Connery from there.'

As she was leaving, she noticed by the door a stack of old copies of the Coast regional newspaper — the paper in which she hoped her stories would soon be appearing — set out ready for recycling. There were never any around at home. Aunty Giulia always nabbed them to keep down the weeds in her vegetable patch.

'Could I have these, Sherri?' said Pollo. 'I might look over them — see if I can find a new slant on an old story.'

'Of course,' said Sherri. 'Several came while I was away so I didn't even read them. I'll drop them round for you. I'm closing up soon.'

'That'd be awesome. Thanks.' Pollo put her shoulder to the door.

'Oh, Pollo?'

'Uh-huh?'

‘I think you’ve got something of mine. You’ve been fidgeting with it ever since you told me of your concerns, shall we say, about Viktor.’

Pollo looked down at her hands and flushed to the colour of von Albericht’s wine. The pendant she’d been fiddling with, its chain still wrapped around her fingers, was a large silver crucifix. She’d picked it from Sherri’s display without even realising. ‘Err ... Sherri? Do you think that maybe ...?’

Sherri sighed. ‘Go on then! Keep the jolly thing if it makes you feel better. But only on the condition that you come meet Viktor for yourself this evening.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sunday 14:30

Pollo stood astride her bike on a gravel cut-away looking for Shorn Connery, hanging on to the sliver of hope she'd had since talking to Sherri. She was shadowed by a large signboard, erected on Mayor Bullock's insistence, that announced the patch as the Riddle Gully Scenic Lookout. The view consisted mostly of flat farmland reaching to the low, tree-covered hills behind the town and, just below and a little to the right, the sprawling council rubbish tip. Mayor Bullock might have thought twice about the sign if he'd ever got out of his car to look.

Next year, jammed onto the meadow between the cemetery and the forest, would be the mayor's flashy Diamond Jack Experience Tourist Centre with its grotesque ten-metre statue of Diamond Jack for all the tourists to wonder at. Meanwhile, the rubbish tip would have to do.

That tourist centre was shaping up to be more like a bad theme park, thought Pollo, with its life-sized gallows and virtual executions and the shooting gallery with troopers for targets; not to mention the awful giant statue that, from the sketches, would bear a remarkable resemblance to Mayor Bullock himself. Next thing there'd be poker machines like the ones that had made him rich before he came to Riddle Gully!

Mayor Bullock was always harping on that Riddle Gully was behind the times and wasting its potential. Pollo was pretty sure that wasting potential, in Mayor Bullock's eyes, was worse than stealing from people and shooting troopers like Diamond Jack had done. If the Diamond Jack Experience Tourist Centre was his idea of progress, thought Pollo, he could keep it.

She put Mayor Bullock to the back of her mind and began looking for Shorn Connery, scanning the land all the way to the hills. Maybe there was a pocket of bush she'd overlooked when she was riding around earlier. Maybe she'd spot his lone round figure in a paddock somewhere, staring at a barbed-wire fence, pondering how to get through.

One sweep at a time, her hopes sank. Eventually she swung her bike around to leave. Just then, on the gravel track leading to the tip below, she spotted a familiar

figure approaching fast. He was head down, a blue backpack bobbing from side to side, pedalling a bike at breakneck pace.

The rubbish tip! Of course! It was a brilliant spot for Will to look! The place was chock-a-block with wild lupins. Shorn Connery could chomp away there, hidden by all the junk, and not care whether it was night or day.

Wheeling past Mayor Bullock's fancy sign, she pointed her bike towards a shortcut through the bush. She'd head Will off at the pass.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sunday 15:00

Will was in a world of his own — one in which police with Taser guns were after him — racing along the track. Even though it was wrapped in newspaper, he could hear the empty spray can inside his backpack clinking madly. It had been fine on the smooth bitumen roads, but out here on the gravel the steel ball-bearing inside the can had started to clang like a church bell. The sooner he got to the tip and ditched it, the better.

Out of the blue, a figure came pelting down the hill straight at him, screeching his name. He wobbled wildly, only just managing to stay upright. He was sprung! He pedalled faster. He couldn't think what else to do.

'I'd fix that if I were you,' Pollo yelled, pedalling hard to fall in alongside. 'Sounds like you've got a bearing loose in your rear hub!'

Will pedalled faster still. Maybe if the wind was rushing in her ears the clinking wouldn't sound so loud. His mind was whirring in time with his bike wheels. Why was he out here? What could he tell her?

'Wish I'd thought of this earlier!' yelled Pollo, still keeping up.

'It's not what it looks like!' Will pumped his legs as fast as they'd go.

'True,' Pollo huffed. 'A rubbish tip to us but heaven to a sheep! It's brilliant to look for Shorn Connery there! No wonder you're in a hurry!'

They reached the tip's wire fence and skidded to a halt. Will wiped sweat off his face with his arm. 'Well ... yeah ... I ... err,' he mumbled between puffs. Very carefully, he removed his backpack and placed it on the ground next to his bike. Pollo dropped her bike down next to it.

'It's the one place I didn't think to look. Thanks, partner,' said Pollo.

They set off among the dead tractor tyres, machinery carcasses and thick lupins, Pollo calling Shorn Connery's name, Will half-expecting police officers to leap out from behind every pile of debris.

It was soon clear that Shorn Connery wasn't around. Pollo sat on an old washing machine and rested her chin on her hands. Will perched on a rotting couch,

steel springs stabbing up either side of him. He picked a sourgrass stalk. How could he get rid of her?

‘I saw Sherri earlier,’ said Pollo. ‘She had explanations for everything.’

Will snapped his head towards Pollo. ‘What sort of everything?’

‘About von Albericht and Shorn Connery, of course,’ said Pollo.

‘Oh! ’Course!’ Will exhaled as quietly as he could.

She brought him up to speed with what Sherri had said. ‘So,’ she finished, ‘Sherri doesn’t believe what we both did after seeing von Albericht in his hut this morning.’ She frowned and looked at Will. ‘Come to think of it, how come you rode all the way out here looking for Shorn Connery? I mean, you didn’t know he’d escaped.’

‘Aah yeah ... that,’ said Will. ‘Well, I had an idea that you ... that is, we ... might have been jumping to ... well, you know ... conclusions. So I thought I’d ... have another ... you know ... look around ... kind of thing.’

That went all right, he congratulated himself. And the first bit was even true. Von Albericht asleep had reminded him of his old housemaster at boarding school. He hadn’t looked half as evil up close as Will had expected.

‘What Sherri says doesn’t prove anything, of course,’ said Pollo, biting her thumbnail.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, von Albericht could easily have got hold of Shorn Connery after Sherri left. Sherri’s only going on what von Albericht has told her. He could be sucking her in. You know, softening her up before making her his victim. By the look on her face when she talks about him, he’s doing a pretty good job.’

Pollo suddenly banged the washing machine with a fist. ‘He’s taking her on a picnic, would you believe? At dusk! At the old railway bridge!’ She drummed the hollow metal with her heels. ‘It’s where people go to get all lovey-dovey.’

Will wriggled the sourgrass stalk so that its flower did circles in front of his nose. ‘Has Sherri ever gone for a picnic with your dad?’

‘No,’ said Pollo. ‘She hasn’t.’

‘Oh.’ Will did figure-eights with his flower.

‘Sherri wants me to come tonight and see von Albericht at work,’ said Pollo after a while.

‘Yeah?’ said Will. ‘That would be kind of spooky, wouldn’t it? Are you going?’

Pollo looked at Will. ‘She thinks you should come too.’

Will sprang off the couch. ‘Hang on a minute! I’ve kept my part of our deal. Going back to the hut with you today was extra.’

‘But I didn’t know then that Sherri was meeting him tonight!’ said Pollo.

‘That’s your problem, not mine,’ said Will.

‘Don’t you listen? Von Albericht could have been telling her anything! Sherri’s been taken in by him! I thought you didn’t trust him either. Otherwise why did you come with me today?’

‘Huh!’ Will kicked the couch. ‘You didn’t give me much choice, rocking up at my fence out of the blue with HB right next to me! You’d have dobbed on me if I didn’t do what you said.’

‘I never had any intention —’

‘And anyway,’ said Will, ‘I didn’t mind all that much then I s’pose. We were looking for Shorn Connery. But this is different. I’ve got enough problems already. Why would I want to start chasing von Albericht?’

He had a whole town after him, a backpack clinking with criminal evidence, a dad who’d forgotten he existed and a mum who was going to wish he didn’t. He glared at Pollo. ‘You wouldn’t care so much if you didn’t want a big story to get that newspaper job.’

‘That’s not true! This isn’t about the cadetship at all!’ As she said it, Pollo felt a twinge of guilt. It was maybe a teensy bit true. Headlines about von Albericht had been popping into her head ever since Friday night. She didn’t ask them to come — they just did!

She jumped off the washing machine and began stalking back and forth. ‘We need to protect Sherri, don’t we? Her life could be in danger.’

‘Will you quit saying “we”?’ said Will. ‘Von Albericht’s got nothing to do with me. Besides, Sherri’s old enough to look after herself.’

‘But you know what adults are like!’ cried Pollo. ‘Sherri can’t see past his “old-fashioned manners” and his “deliriously deep brown eyes”!’

‘And you can’t see past the fact that he comes from Transylvania and dresses and talks weird,’ said Will. ‘Maybe he’s not even a vampire! Come to think of it, the way he dresses isn’t all that different from you — all that black you both like. Maybe Sherri should be scared of you!’

He stomped off towards the bikes.

‘You’re mad because of that fire you were covering up yesterday!’ Pollo shouted. ‘All that stuff you told your mum and stepdad!’ She was coming after him. ‘You can tell me what’s wrong, Will,’ she said more softly. ‘I won’t turn it into a story. I promise.’

He walked on.

‘Won’t you even help me look for Shorn Connery?’

‘I’ve got things to do,’ said Will, reaching the fence and turning to face her. ‘I’m going to make a veggie garden for my mum, like I said I would. If you want to go so much tonight, go by yourself — unless you’re as chicken as your name!’

Pollo’s jaw dropped. ‘Don’t *you* act all high and mighty!’ she said. ‘You’re only making that silly garden because you cornered yourself into it! You’re not a good son — you’re just a liar!’

Will felt the fire whoosh up in his chest. He recognised the feeling from the day before when he’d charged off to the school. He wanted to yell something or throw something or kick something. He looked at Pollo’s bike lying on the ground. It was asking for it. It’d be easy ...

He clenched his fists and held still. He forced himself to take three deep breaths. Then, yanking his pack onto his shoulders, not caring what noise it made, he snatched up his bike and rode off in a skid of stones and dust.

The trouble was, he thought, squinting against the dry wind and pricking tears, Pollo was right. Everything he said was just noise — no better than that stupid ball-bearing clanging in its empty can.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Sunday 17:45

Pollo stood in her bedroom eating a carrot and rechecking the equipment set out on the floor. Her insides felt like a bucket of slugs. She could hardly bear to think about what Shorn Connery might be going through ... or already had. And now she had to face going alone into the bush on the edge of night to meet von Albericht — neither Will nor her faithful assistant around to help.

She took a bite. Ever since last night, she'd somehow pictured Will alongside her — or perhaps in front — when the time came to confront von Albericht face to face. They'd made a pretty good team. Who'd have thought he'd turn so mean?

Maybe he was right about one thing. Maybe she was chicken. How else could she explain deep down hoping that her dad wouldn't let her go out? But the next day was a pupil-free day, so instead it had been, 'Say gedday to Sherri for me! Have a nice time!' Couldn't he be unreasonable just once?

At least she was prepared. And she had to admire her weaponry. There was the pocket mirror (to check for reflections — or lack of them) and her pen-knife (it would only take a tiny nick to see if he healed spontaneously). If she had to fend him off, she had cloves of garlic from the pantry, Sherri's crucifix and, if worst came to worst, a sturdy wooden stake (from Auntie Giulia's veggie patch) with which to pierce him through the heart.

And there was one more item — her most precious. After the tip, she'd gone to the cemetery, removed the old flowers from a jam-jar vase at one of the graves and, nursing the container of murky water, paid Father Perry a visit. She'd held the jar up to him and, as he'd leaned over to look at it, let fly with the gluggiest sneeze she could fake. 'Bless you!' the old priest had cried. And with those words, there being no one around to split hairs over how the blessing was intended, Pollo held in her hands the most powerful weapon in an anti-vampire arsenal. Holy water! A mere drop could kill! Back at home she'd decanted it into a sturdy plastic water bottle. This now rested alongside the stake, crucifix, garlic, pen-knife and mirror.

With everything in order, she opened her laptop and checked her log entries of the last two days, searching again for something she might have missed. She clicked on the draft of the amazing special edition of her gazette. Its front page was still blank.

Turning to the pile of old newspapers that Sherri had dropped off, she flicked through the pages, jotting a few things in her notepad, keeping one eye on the clock. She could see nothing worth doing a follow-up on. There was way too much of Mayor Bullock — claiming credit for this, having his say on that. Unless she could get a scoop on von Albericht, or possibly the Graffiti Kid, in the little time remaining, the final edition of the *Riddle Gully Gazette* was going to be as exciting as a wet firecracker.

It was time to go. She wrote the time and her destination on a sheet of paper and propped it on her pillow. After all, it might be the last anyone ever heard of her. She wrapped her black scarf around her neck, pulled on her beanie and gathered up the rest of her equipment. Having no spare pocket, she took a huge bite of carrot and jammed the remainder into the pen jar. She left the room, her cheeks bulging.

At the back gate she hesitated. The sky and treetops were blurring to a soft golden light. It was hard to imagine how creepy it would all become once the sun went down. She sucked in a deep breath and, before she could change her mind, ran through the gate into the dying afternoon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sunday 18:00

Pollo walked quickly along the track behind the houses. As she reached Will's yard she slowed. She could hear the rhythmic crunching of a spade into soft dirt behind the fence. Sergeant Butt's voice was clear in the late afternoon stillness.

'Jolly good idea of yours to do this for your mum, son.'

'I dunno about that. I guess so.' Will sounded glum. Good, thought Pollo.

'Little and often, remember. Not too much dirt on your spade at once.'

Pollo ground her teeth. Will had too much dirt on his spade already — way too much! But he sure had the 'often' bit down pat. She stood tensed in the middle of the path, twirling the wooden stake in the sand, listening to them talk as though Will were some kind of angel.

It would be so simple to dob him in then and there. He'd broken the spirit of their deal, no question. All those juicy fat lies of his that she'd kept to herself in exchange for what? One measly night-time stroll down Diamond Jack's Trail.

On the other hand, he had gone to the tip to look for Shorn Connery all by himself. She owed him one for that. And the bottom line was, no matter how bad a deal she'd made, when it came to the crunch, a deal was a deal. She had to live with it. She tiptoed on past Will's towards Diamond Jack's Trail.

By the time Pollo reached the cemetery the tombstones were casting long shadows. Off in the distance, on the far side of the meadow near the forest, Pollo noticed two figures. Having been deserted all through summer, the cemetery lately was like a shopping mall! The larger of the figures was standing back, as though issuing orders, while the other looked to be banging in a stake. She squinted through the half-light. Several other stakes fluttering with neon-pink tape were dotted about the field.

As Pollo watched, the larger man touched his hairline in a gesture Pollo recognised. Mayor Bullock! What was he doing out here? She couldn't let him see her, dressed in her surveillance gear and carrying her anti-vampire arsenal. Pushing aside a frond with her wooden stake, she hurried on.

To reach the abandoned railway bridge she'd have to go past the ranger's hut. A few hundred metres beyond it, the trail forked, the two halves curving away and almost meeting again, like the outline of a heart. The track on the left went down to the bridge where Sherri and von Albericht would be waiting for her. Pollo knew the spot well. She'd spent a good deal of time there spying on the citizens of Riddle Gully, though not so much from on top of the bridge as from under it, perched on the slimy rocks, fat black spiders in the nooks of giant crossbeams watching her every move.

The other track rose to the clearing where Diamond Jack had been riddled with bullets. That's where she was headed.

It was eerily quiet on the trail without Shorn Connery, every twig-crunch underfoot sounding like a gunshot. She forced herself to keep marching, humming a lively tune and clicking her fingers. Through the trees ahead she caught a glimpse of the ranger's hut. Not much further to go. She softened her tread, taking care to step on patches of moss and not the crunching limestone.

A few minutes later she'd reached the fork. She drew back against a tree and pulled her beanie low. She could make out voices below her. Sherri's snorting laugh shot through the trees. There was no mistaking that.

She turned to the right and crept along the narrow, winding track to the small clearing and the clump of boulders in front of which Diamond Jack had dragged his last breath.

Sherri might have given up on her by now. Pollo hoped so. You found out a lot more about people when they weren't expecting you.

She edged into position against the largest boulder, still warm from the sun. The two voices were clear. Von Albericht's, deep and intense, was doing most of the talking, the main sounds from Sherri being admiring *ooohs* and *aaahs*. Pollo crouched against the rock, her notepad at the ready, straining to make out what von Albericht was saying.

Suddenly the voices stopped. Pollo waited but the silence continued, broken only by the fluttering of dry leaves to the forest floor. Still nothing. Pollo inched her nose up the side of the boulder, barely breathing. She'd be able to see them ... over the top ... of the rock ... any second.

As a frog in warming water realises too late the danger it's in, she became aware of another sound above the gentle stirring of the forest. A sound soft and regular. Sneaking up behind her. The sound of someone breathing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sunday 19:00

Pollo grabbed her stake with both hands and spun around. The point of her elbow caught the intruder smack in the face, sending him reeling. He circled twice in a whirl of dead leaves before thumping to a halt against the trunk of a tree.

Will bent from the waist, his face scrunched, the fingertips of both hands pressed against the bridge of his nose.

Inside Pollo, relief and anger jostled to be first in line. Anger won. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ she hissed, tiptoeing across to him. ‘Couldn’t you just say “hello” like a normal person?’

Between Will’s fingers, blood welled. It trickled down the backs of his hands. It began to drip from his wrist-bones and splash onto the spiky leaves of the bush at his feet.

‘Hello,’ croaked Will through his cupped hands. ‘I thought you’d be pleased to see me.’

Pollo stood motionless, staring at the dark liquid brimming through Will’s fingers. With each drip, somewhere in her brain an alarm clanged more insistently.

All at once, it came to her. Blood ... vampires ... Viktor von Albericht! She jiggled from one foot to the other. ‘Will!’ she rasped. ‘You’ve got to stop bleeding! He’ll smell it!’

‘Smell what?’ said Will.

‘The blood, numbskull! Lie down or something. Make it stop!’

Just then they heard the scraping of footsteps along the winding track to the clearing. Through the trees Pollo caught glimpses of a tall, black shape moving closer.

‘It’s him! He’s coming!’ She fumbled the cloves of garlic from her pocket, scrunched off their papery skins and began rubbing them all over her face and arms.

‘What are you doing?’ said Will, screwing up his face and trying to duck as Pollo rubbed them over him too.

‘It should slow him up. Quick! Hide in there!’ she said, shoving Will down into the spiky bushes at the foot of the tree. She snatched the silver crucifix from

beneath her T-shirt so that it hung in plain sight. She thrust her hands in her pockets and drew out the mirror. She patted her hip pocket and felt the bump of the pen-knife.

Yanking the bottle of holy water off its shoulder strap, she tossed it to Will. ‘My life could be in your hands!’ she whispered. ‘If he comes at me, throw this on him. You’ll only get one chance — so don’t miss!’

‘Err ... good ... right ... got it.’ Will rolled the hard plastic bottle in his blood-sticky hands, frowning.

Pollo edged back to the clump of boulders. She backed up against them, half-closing her eyes to focus better through the dim light. In one hand she held the mirror and in the other the sharp-pointed wooden stake. Was this how Diamond Jack had felt? She hoped she had better luck than him.

They waited, barely breathing, listening to the footsteps drawing closer along the path.

‘Hey, Will!’ Pollo whispered.

‘What?’ came a voice from the bushes.

‘I didn’t mean what I said at the rubbish tip. I’m sorry. Thanks for coming.’

‘No worries!’ In his patch of prickles, Will smiled. Maybe he’d done something useful at last.

His smile didn’t hang around long. At that moment, the tall outline of von Albericht loomed among the dark trees. It hovered at the edge of the clearing.

Pressed against the boulders, Pollo waved the mirror towards the man. A wild succession of reflections — sky, rocks, her runners, treetops, Will — leapt before her eyes. Not one contained the image of von Albericht. She threw the mirror aside and with a white-knuckled hand raised the wooden stake.

Von Albericht stalked into the centre of the clearing, his eyes on the move, searching. They fell on Pollo, flattened against the boulder, her stake at the ready.

He took a step towards her.

Pollo grabbed her silver crucifix and brandished it towards him.

Von Albericht’s eyes flickered. He smiled slowly and took another step.

Pollo couldn't wait any longer! She sprang from the rocks! Forgetting about aiming for his heart, she swung the stake wildly. With a quick thrust of his hand von Albericht caught the end of it. He and Pollo looked at one another for a second, then each began pulling at their end of the stake in a frantic tug of war.

'Go back to Transylvania!' screeched Pollo. 'I won't let you kill Sherri!'

Abruptly von Albericht stopped pulling, sending Pollo flying onto her backside in the dirt. His mouth was open, his eyebrows knitted. He leaned over Pollo. 'You think that I —'

He didn't finish the sentence. From out of the scrub a hard plastic bottle, heavy with holy water, whizzed through the air. It caught von Albericht square on the temple to a loud 'Howzat?!' from the bushes.

For several moments, von Albericht teetered from side to side like a bowling pin. Then, slowly and silently, the tall man crumpled to the ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sunday 19:10

Will, his face still smeared with blood, dashed from his hiding place to join Pollo. Von Albericht lay sprawled on his back. His deliriously deep brown eyes were closed.

‘What did you do to him?’ squeaked Pollo.

‘What you asked me to,’ Will croaked. ‘He’s not dead, is he?’ He nudged von Albericht with his toe.

‘I don’t know.’ Pollo crouched beside the fallen man, taking in his plaster-white skin, his long bony fingers, his placid expression.

‘He doesn’t put up much of a fight for a vampire,’ said Will. ‘Aren’t they meant to be super strong? My mum could have licked him without too much trouble.’

Pollo didn’t know what to think. She held her palm close to von Albericht’s mouth. ‘He’s still breathing. That’s good ... maybe.’ She looked up at Will. ‘You were supposed to throw the holy water *on* him, not *at* him.’

‘Holy water?’ said Will. ‘So that’s what it was. I get it now!’ He smiled. ‘Same result, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Afraid not,’ said Pollo. ‘A vampire needs to get wet from it for it to kill him.’

Will picked up the bottle of holy water from the dirt and brushed it off. He wrinkled his nose at all the flecks of slime floating around in it.

‘We probably shouldn’t leave anything to chance, should we?’ said Pollo. ‘I mean, we’ve still got the holy water. It’s ready to go.’

‘I dunno,’ said Will. ‘Maybe just a little bit.’

‘A few drops,’ said Pollo. ‘A test patch.’ She got to her feet and nudged Will. ‘Go on.’

Will unscrewed the lid and, holding it loosely against the mouth of the bottle, trickled a stream of grimy liquid onto von Albericht’s outstretched palm. The palm twitched, then went still.

Will looked at Pollo. She nodded. He stepped across von Albericht’s torso and wet his other hand. This time he groaned. Will and Pollo sprang backwards.

Suddenly von Albericht began to drag both hands across the ground towards his head. His eyelids started to flicker.

Pollo's nerves were jumping like electric sparks. 'Maybe they take longer to die in real life!' she squawked. 'Here, gimme that!' She grabbed the holy water from Will. 'Hold him down!'

Will planted a foot on von Albericht's chest while Pollo stood over his head. Von Albericht gave another, much louder, groan and his eyelids fluttered open. As his eyes began to focus, Pollo, with deadly accuracy, upturned the rest of the slimy holy water onto his bewildered, and then alarmed, face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sunday 19:15

Pollo was shaking out the last drops when a familiar voice cut across the clearing.

‘Apollonia di Nozi! What in God’s name are you doing?’ Sherri rushed across the clearing to where her picnic companion lay spluttering. She knelt beside him and glared at Will, who hastily removed his foot from von Albericht’s chest.

Sherri narrowed her eyes at Pollo and helped her friend to sit up. ‘This had better not have anything to do with that silly vampire business!’ she said. ‘I asked you to come and meet Viktor — not to accost him!’

Pollo’s nerves were still zinging. She stepped back, avoiding Sherri’s eye. There was still one more test to do on von Albericht — and she’d never get a better chance. It was for Sherri’s sake, after all! True friends did what needed to be done, didn’t they? She pressed the bulge of the pen-knife in her pocket.

Sherri had relieved Will of his T-shirt and was using it to clean Viktor’s face and hair. Will, who feared that attempted murder would now be added to his rap sheet, crouched next to her, pointing out the bits she’d missed.

Sherri looked up at Pollo. ‘Well, don’t stand there like a letterbox! Come and meet the man you nearly killed.’ Pollo shuffled forward.

Sherri cleared her throat. ‘Everyone, this is the world renowned bat specialist, Dr Viktor von Albericht. Viktor, this is Pollo di Nozi and this, I take it, is Will.’

Will and Viktor shook hands. ‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance,’ said Viktor, sounding as pleased as someone who’d got a toilet brush for Christmas. He offered his hand to Pollo.

Pollo didn’t move. Will and Sherri looked at her, then at Viktor’s hand, hanging in mid-air, then back again. She was rigid and glassy-eyed.

Her mind, on the other hand, was whirring. The stakes were too high! Just one more test and she’d know for certain, once and for all!

She snapped to life and plunged her hand into her pocket. She grabbed Viktor’s hand and squeezed hard with both fists.

'Eee-aah-ooo!' Viktor's howl of pain sent a flock of cockatoos squawking and flapping into the dusky sky.

Viktor clutched his hand, pressing his left thumb into his punctured palm, and looked up at Pollo, his face distorted by puzzlement and pain.

'Why do you wish to kill me? I am a zoologist. I love the animals.' Viktor looked as though he might cry. 'I am a nice person!'

But his protests weren't heard by Pollo, her ears, along with her head, being clamped under Sherri's armpit as the older woman dragged her across the clearing. Pollo's arms cartwheeled, but Sherri held her firm in a headlock mastered in countless jujitsu classes from her cruise-ship days.

Through her squished face, Pollo shouted. 'Will! Check his hand! If there's no blood on it, run for your life!'

Sherri jiggled her. 'Stop this nonsense immediately, Pollo, or I'll tie you by your tonsils to that tree over there.' She swung Pollo around to show her the one she had in mind.

Will trotted over and tapped Pollo on the top of the head. 'Err, Pollo?' he began.

'Sherri's gone to the dark side!' shouted Pollo. 'And it's too late for me! Just do me one favour, Will! Look after Shorn Connery if he ever comes home!'

'Umm, Pollo?' said Will. 'Viktor's actually —'

'What? Healing? Tell me straight! I can take it!' wailed Pollo.

'Viktor's actually bleeding quite a lot, Pollo. Look.' He gestured to Viktor to hold up his hand.

Pollo stopped struggling for a moment and screwed her head sideways to eye the man. Looking away and pouting, Viktor held up his palm, from which dark blood oozed like sap.

Viktor suddenly waved both hands in the air. 'I do not understand!' he said. 'Why is this good that I bleed like a stuck pig?'

Pollo went limp. She'd thrown every test she could at von Albericht ... and he'd passed them all with flying colours. She had to face it — the big story that was going to change her life was in tatters.

From Sherri's armpit, she scraped together what dignity she could. 'Errrm, Sherri ... The evidence seems to have rearranged itself to form a picture that differs from the one I'd expected.'

Pollo waited a moment but there was no response. 'You can let me go now, Sherri.'

'If I'd wanted a speech from Mayor Bullock I'd have asked him along,' said Sherri, tightening her hold even further. 'Say what you mean, girl!'

Pollo gulped. 'I was wrong about Viktor.'

Sherri released her clamp on Pollo's head. Pollo rubbed her ears and walked towards Viktor. Viktor began scrambling to his feet.

'No, wait!' said Pollo.

Viktor paused. Keeping his eyes glued to Pollo he sat back down. He remained tense, ready to jump.

Pollo held up open hands. 'No weapons, see?' Carefully she took up his bloodied right hand and shook it.

'I'm very, very sorry, Viktor,' she said. She looked at Will and smiled crookedly, then turned back to Viktor. 'I wanted to write a great story, you see. And I hoped you were ... a certain type of person so badly that I saw what I wanted to see. And then Sherri got mixed up in it and Shorn Connery went missing. Everything's a great big mess.'

For the first time ever, Pollo looked Viktor von Albericht in the eye. 'I'm Pollo di Nozi — supersleuth and soon-to-be-former editor of the *Riddle Gully* ... well, never mind. Call me Pollo. I'm honoured to meet you, Viktor.'

'As I am you,' said Viktor with a slow, deep nod. 'Someone with a passion for their work. This I understand.'

Sherri squatted beside Viktor and began wrapping his hand in Will's T-shirt. 'What say we call it a night, Viktor, and go see to this head of yours ... and this hand

... and these wet clothes?’ Will and Pollo looked at each other sheepishly. Sherri grimaced. ‘And this stench of garlic that’s all over everything!’

Viktor gestured to Pollo and Will. ‘May I invite you to my humble abode?’

‘Cool!’ said Will. ‘Can you show us that little bat?’

Pollo elbowed Will in the ribs. ‘If you’re feeling up to it,’ she added.

‘Yeah, ’course ... that too,’ said Will.

Viktor was about to get to his feet when suddenly his face lit up. He pointed high above him, up into the pale purple sky above the clearing. ‘Look, my friends! There! See?’ Small creatures were flitting back and forth, more and more by the second, diving and darting, their dark wings silhouetted against the soft gleam of the rising moon.

Pollo recognised them and shuddered. But Viktor von Albericht was smiling. More than that, he was grinning from ear to ear, looking a lot more like someone in a hi-fibre cereal commercial than a vampire.

‘So many! So many!’ he hooted in delight, lying back in the dirt of the clearing, pointing upwards. ‘See how the wing tips appear to bend? These are the ones I am looking for! And by the scores I see above me now, I believe I am homing in!’

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sunday 20:00

Viktor and Sherri led the way back, Viktor carrying the silver metal case that Pollo recognised from the cemetery. Inside the old ranger's hut, the timber walls were lined with stacks of scientific journals and books, strange gadgets and crates of supplies. A single bare light bulb dangled from the roof. Viktor laid the case on the table and went to his patient, the injured bat, waiting in a blanketed crate in the corner of the room.

Pollo sidled up to the table. Handwritten on masking tape stuck to the lid of the silver case was: BAT DETECTOR — THIS SIDE UP.

Right ... Well it made perfect sense now! How was she supposed to know? She emptied her pockets of her weaponry and lined up the items alongside the machine. It seemed the right thing to do.

Viktor, under Sherri's orders, was now sitting quietly on the low camp bed, a packet of frozen peas bandaged tightly to his head. Sherri was making cups of tea for everyone while Will rinsed his bloodied T-shirt in the sink.

Pollo should have felt relaxed. But now that she knew Viktor hadn't killed Shorn Connery, terrible thoughts of what had happened to him instead kept creeping around her mind. If her faithful friend was somehow still alive, he must be suffering. And here was the last place she'd seen him.

Will spread his T-shirt out to dry in front of the kerosene heater. He sat down on an upturned crate next to Pollo and bent forward to pick dirt off the bandaid around his big toe.

As he did, Pollo noticed a bright-red patch on Will's shoulderblade. 'You've got nose-blood on your back!' she said. She dipped a finger in her tea and leaned across to rub it off. But the red gripped the skin tightly.

Pollo rubbed harder. It was sticking like ... like ...

Dried paint.

Pollo's hand drifted away. Dried paint the exact same colour as the graffiti on the school wall! The few things she really knew about her new friend began to muster in her head. She raised her mug of tea to her mouth, pretending to drink, trying to think.

Will had a close connection with Sergeant Butt — someone he didn't seem too crazy about. And then there was his amazing string of lies about sheep that rose from the dead and holes in fences. What was all that about? Lighting a fire in a garden wasn't so bad, was it? Why had he been so desperate to cover it up?

A nasty thought crawled up her neck and under her beanie. What if Will had been burning something he needed to hide? Pollo's mind was whirring now. Last night he'd let slip that he'd been at the school that morning. And the Graffiti Kid's backpack was blue — same as the one Will had at the tip. And the hair under the Kid's wig was dark and straight — just like Will's. And, now that she thought about it, that rattle coming from Will's bike had sounded a lot like the rattle of a spray-paint can.

Pollo's eyes narrowed into slits.

She shook her head. No! Stop it! Now that her front-page story about Viktor was wrecked, she was bending the facts to get another one, wasn't she? Seeing what she wanted to see?

There could be other explanations. Like ... well ... she couldn't think of any right now, but there were bound to be! She'd jumped to conclusions with Viktor — a perfectly innocent man — and look at him now, sitting there with a packet of peas strapped over a big lump on his head!

Besides, Will was a friend, whatever else he might have done. He'd come to the clearing tonight to help her out. If he was the Graffiti Kid, her telling the world wouldn't fix a thing. It would only make Will's problems — and he looked like he had a few — worse. She sighed deeply. It would just be gossip — gossip that might make her look good to the editor-in-chief of the Coast news network.

She turned away from the bright-red smear. 'You'd better wash it off as soon as you get home,' she told Will.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sunday 20:15

Viktor leaned forward on the edge of his camp bed. In the palm of his gloved hand he held a reddish-brown, furry creature not much bigger than a mouse. It was on its back, its head towards him, Viktor's thumb, on the paler fuzz of its stomach, gently pinning it still. The head was dome-shaped, the ears and muzzle snubbed. Its only sound was a soft cooing from time to time, like Bubl  made when Pollo scratched his head.

Pollo forced herself to look. Viktor had gone through so much for the funny little thing and its mates that she felt she owed it to him. And it helped push aside her new worries about Will.

'Beautiful is he not?' said Viktor. 'I found him in my mist net just before dawn the other morning. Sadly, he was not in the best of health. It would have put him in great peril to release him in his condition — all the hungry birds up and about.'

He held the creature to eye-level and smiled. 'But I am happy to say he has made a full recovery. Tonight we will return him to the forest and tomorrow at dusk he will be flying above the gorge with his friends.'

'No offence, Viktor, but he looks kind of ordinary,' said Will.

'Aah! But wait!' said Viktor. Very carefully he extended the bat's rubbery wing. 'See how the edge angles down? This, along with sonar matches from my bat detector, enables me to confirm that he is a *Miniopterus schreibersii bassanii* !'

Will, Pollo and Sherri looked at one another.

'A Southern Bent-wing Bat!' said Viktor. 'The rare subspecies of the Common Bent-wing. He is one of a population that comes to Riddle Gully each year to spend the winter. Under your country's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, he is listed as a critically endangered mammal.'

Pollo looked at the furry blob in Viktor's hand. 'But it's only a bat,' she said. 'Would it really be all that terrible if it ... you know ... disappeared?'

'Ai-yai-yai!' said Viktor. 'Most terrible indeed, Pollo! This little fellow pollinates flowers, he spreads plant seeds, he keeps insects to the levels that Nature intended. But even when something seemingly trivial like a worm becomes extinct — here, my friends, the Lake Pedder earthworm, a former resident of Tasmania, comes

to mind — it is a cause for much concern. Each and every organism is part of an intricate biological community on our planet. This community is a beautiful tapestry made of many, many coloured stitches. The more stitches there are, the harder it is for the tapestry to tear.’

Sherri produced a tin of biscuits from her basket. ‘Speaking of hard to tear,’ she said, taking off the lid, ‘see if you can get your teeth through these. I might have left them in the oven a bit long.’ Will took one and crunched into it.

‘We humans seldom know all there is to know about a creature or a plant,’ said Viktor, as Will ran his tongue over his teeth, checking for chips. ‘Take this little fellow here, for instance,’ he said, lifting the bat. ‘What might be the effects of losing him?’ Viktor shrugged. ‘Maybe nothing. Zip, as they say! No one would ever know the difference if he were to disappear.’

He leaned in closer to Will and Pollo. ‘But maybe, just maybe, he could make a great deal of difference. Perhaps he is the key to another creature’s survival. Or he holds the clue to a medical cure, or the answer to a great mystery we have not yet thought to wonder about. Who knows, eh? And wise not to take the chance, yes?’

‘But isn’t the Tasmanian Tiger Australia’s only extinct animal?’ said Will. ‘Apart from that little worm maybe?’

Viktor sighed. ‘I wish this were so, Will. But sadly, the Thylacine is in the company of many animals — to my knowledge, fifty-five altogether — half of them mammals, as we are. All of them gone! Kaput! Never to be seen again. And these are only the ones that we know of!’

‘But how come *this* bat is endangered?’ said Pollo. ‘We see lots of them every autumn and spring. It doesn’t seem endangered.’

‘As you say, Pollo, you see them every year,’ said Viktor. ‘It is natural to take them for granted. But it grieves me to say that there are only one third as many Southern Bent-wings now as when your parents were born. They are going down the hill fast!’

Viktor cupped the bat between his palms and held it to eye-level. ‘You have had enough, have you not, my friend?’ He turned to the others. ‘You will please excuse us for a moment? It is time to return him to the forest.’

Keeping his head erect so as not to lose his peas, Viktor eased off the narrow camp bed and made his way into the darkness outside. Sherri held the door open, looking out after him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sunday 20:30

Viktor placed his protective glove on the desk and began unwinding the bandage from his head, Sherri hastening to take over the task. ‘An excellent result!’ he said, bobbing up and down between Sherri’s arms. ‘Our friend flew away most happily! If only I could grow wings and follow him!’

He strode across to his sound system. ‘May I suggest a little of Bach’s *Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor* to celebrate his recovery?’

‘Magnificent!’ sighed Sherri.

Soon, eerie tumbling pipe organ music was filling every crack in the room. For Pollo, every old vampire movie she’d ever watched was filling every crack in her head. It was making her jumpy all over again. And something else was wrong too ... something she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Another sound she’d heard.

With a jolt, it dawned on her. She jumped up and flapped her hands at Viktor, who hastily muted the volume.

‘Viktor,’ she said, ‘when you went outside did you hear anything funny?’

Viktor scratched his head. ‘I confess, I was singing bat sounds to my patient as I walked. I didn’t hear a great deal.’

‘This might sound silly,’ said Pollo, ‘but I think I picked up a sound while the door was open. It was strange — sort of echoey. But a little bit like ... well ... like Shorn Connery.’

Viktor, Sherri and Will all started towards the door.

‘No, stop!’ Pollo called. ‘Don’t worry about it. I think the organ music must have got to me. If Shorn Connery was out there he’d have come to the hut, same as last night. It was probably Viktor’s singing I heard.’

‘This is likely,’ said Viktor. ‘My singing has been mistaken for many things in the past.’

Pollo was keen to change the subject. ‘Viktor, what did you mean before, when you said the bat was one of a bunch that came here every year?’

‘Aah, this is most intriguing, Pollo!’ Viktor began pacing the room. ‘Allow me to explain. Each community of our Southern Bent-wings has both a winter residence and a summer residence. Like movie stars, no? The winter residence — one such as I believe is close here in Riddle Gully — it occupies all to itself. The summer residence, however, is what we in the field call a maternity cave. This cave, it shares with many, many other communities of the subspecies.’

He rubbed his hands together as though about to tuck into something delicious. ‘At the start of every summer,’ he said, ‘Southern Bent-wings in their tens of thousands make their way from all their different winter caves back to the same maternity cave. Up to three hundred kilometres they fly! And there, at the maternity cave, they give birth to their little bat pups. Year after year, generation after generation, it is a grand reunion!’

Will frowned. ‘But why do they fly all that way to the one cave? Can’t they just do their business here in Riddle Gully, or wherever they hang out over winter?’

‘Ah! Nature is very cunning!’ said Viktor. ‘You see, when the vast numbers of bats all cluster on the roof of the maternity cave, the chamber becomes warm and humid — just like the crowded room. It becomes perfect, then, for the raising of their pups. A natural humidicrib, if you will.’

‘They put *me* in a humidicrib when I was born!’ said Pollo. ‘Dad said visitors didn’t know what to say because I looked like a skinned rabbit!’

Viktor chuckled. ‘The bat pups too are hairless, much like baby mice. They clump together, hanging from the roof of the cave. But come the end of summer, they have glossy fur coats, are weaned from their mothers’ milk, have learned to hunt, and are ready to flap all the way home to their family’s winter cave.’

He stroked his chin. ‘You have noticed the bats hereabouts lately, yes?’

Pollo suppressed a shudder.

‘Riddle Gully’s Southern Bent-wings coming home for winter!’ said Will.

‘Precisely,’ said Viktor. ‘And, let me tell you, from now until the truly cold weather, they will be very busy. Every evening, they will fly out from their cave to fill their bellies with as many insects as they can catch, trying to get as fat as sausages,’ he said, patting his stomach. ‘For soon the bugs will become hard to find. The shops, so to speak, will shut.’

‘What will they do then?’ said Will.

‘Ah! They have a trick up their wing!’ said Viktor. ‘They will find the darkest, coldest part of their cave and go into a very deep rest — or hibernation, as we say. They will hang from the roof and let the temperature of their bodies fall to as low as two degrees — barely above freezing! Their bodies will run so slowly they will need no food for months. The fat they have acquired will see them through. “Au revoir,” they’ll say, wrapping themselves snug in their wings. “Wake me up when it’s springtime!”’

‘Cool!’ said Will.

‘Indeed,’ smiled Sherri.

Viktor looked around the group. ‘My task, my friends, is to point the pin to the winter cave of Riddle Gully’s Southern Bent-wings. I believe that what we witnessed this evening, above the clearing where we had so much fun, was their nightly exodus from this nearby cave in search of food. We are close, my friends — very close indeed.’

‘Are you sure you need to know *exactly* where the cave is?’ said Pollo. ‘Isn’t it just nice to know the Southern Bent-wings are around here somewhere?’

Viktor resumed his perch on the camp bed and pressed his palms together. ‘It is a most delicate situation, Pollo,’ he said. ‘The two maternity caves that remain in your country are quite famous. One is even on the World Heritage List — the bats that go there are celebrities! But sadly, the winter caves to which the bats disperse are very different. Most of them are on private land and are extremely tricky to keep the eye on. The owners of the land may clear trees, or build close by, or spray crops with pesticides that sneak into the bats’ systems. They may even — mon Dieu! — use the cave itself as a rubbish tip! They may not realise they are doing any harm at all.’

Viktor sighed. ‘On top of this, when the bats are deep in hibernation they are most vulnerable indeed. A disturbance, if it does not kill the creatures outright, forces them to stir and use the lovely fat they acquired to last them through the winter. They may wake up in spring close to starving — or not wake up at all. Without finding and protecting their winter caves,’ said Viktor, ‘I am afraid anything else is not worth the pinch of pepper.’

He drummed his chin with his fingertips. 'Imagine a grand orchestra, if you will. Each week, one less musician is able to come and play. Eventually there is only the percussionist, all alone. She taps the rhythm with her foot and every few bars plays a *ting!* on her triangle to cheer herself up. It could be this way with the Southern Bentwings, my friends. If, one by one, their winter caves are damaged and disturbed, it will not be long before the yearly reunions at the maternity cave are not so very grand at all.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sunday 20:45

The four sat quietly, sipping their tea to the soft hiss of the kerosene heater and the hoots and squeaks from the forest. This time, Pollo couldn't hear Shorn Connery in any of them, no matter how hard she tried.

Viktor coughed gently. 'The picture I have painted is perhaps a little too gloomy,' he said, stroking his chin. 'After all, we are not too late to protect the bats here in Riddle Gully. Once I complete my survey, we can talk with the council about the development to be linked with this Diamond Jack's Trail — on the meadow between the forest and the cemetery. This is still some months from commencement.'

'Gosh!' said Sherri. 'I'd forgotten all about Mayor Bullock's precious tourist centre. Everything seems to have gone quiet on it since I got back from my holiday. So that might impact on the bats, you think?'

Viktor pressed together the tips of his long fingers and nodded. 'Most certainly. The plans show a large car park and amusement ground, a cafe and an information centre. There is, as well, an extremely unpleasant giant statue,' he said. 'The charming meadow and many, many trees at the edge of the forest will be levelled to make way. But alas, this is all vital hunting ground for our Southern Bent-wings.'

His face brightened. 'However, once I have documented the presence of a critically endangered species, I see no reason why your mayor cannot transfer his development to the other side of the cemetery. The hiking trail will not be far away.'

'People can walk through the cemetery and say hello to Diamond Jack's ghost on the way!' said Will.

'And as I say,' said Viktor, 'we have time up the sleeve.'

Pollo shifted on her crate. 'Viktor, this is the Diamond Jack Experience Tourist Centre you're talking about, right?'

'I believe this is its official title,' said Viktor. 'Work is due to commence at the end of winter.'

Pollo rested her tea on the floor and fished her notepad from around her neck. She flicked to one of her last entries, scanned it and looked up. 'I'm sorry to be the one to tell you all this, but there's less time than we think.'

Will twisted over her shoulder to look. ‘What have you got there?’

‘I was going through those old Coast newspapers you dropped off, Sherri,’ said Pollo. ‘One of the articles was on Mayor Bullock’s announcement that work on the tourist centre had been brought forward.’ She referred to her notepad. ‘So that it could be “fully operational for the spring holiday traffic”. Site preparation was starting within the month, it said.’

Will stabbed at the page. ‘Is this the date the article was written?’ he said. ‘It’s three weeks ago!’

Pollo gasped. ‘That must be why Mayor Bullock was at the cemetery this afternoon!’

‘Mayor Bullock was at the cemetery?’ said Sherri. ‘It would have to be something big to get him off his couch on a Sunday.’

‘He was with another man,’ said Pollo. ‘They were banging in stakes with bright pink tape tied to the top.’

‘Markers for the bulldozers!’ said Will.

‘Mon Dieu!’ said Viktor. He sprang to his feet and began pacing up and down the room, running his fingers through his hair. ‘This would be why two colleagues who were to join me this week found the caravan park fully booked. All the workmen are coming! Ai-yai-yai!’

He paced some more then suddenly shook his fists at the ceiling. ‘But the environmental assessment — it has barely begun!’

Pollo looked at him sadly. ‘That’s probably the whole point, Viktor,’ she said. ‘Let me guess — Mayor Bullock knew that your institute was surveying the area, right?’

‘Correct,’ said Viktor. ‘I wrote to the council seeking permission to use this hut. They took a very long time before deciding to give it to me.’

‘I bet Mayor Bullock was buying time!’ said Pollo. ‘Then, rather than risk your survey turning up anything that could delay his pet project, he rushed construction forward. Sherri and I heard him only yesterday — he’s too good for “red tape”, isn’t he, Sherri?’

‘But there are the compromises!’ cried Viktor. ‘The alternatives!’

‘Oh, piffle!’ Sherri tossed her head. ‘That wouldn’t have stopped him. The mayor does whatever he thinks is best for him. Once the damage is done, it’s done. If he cops a fine, it’s nothing. He’ll call it the price of progress.’

‘But it sounds like a heap of trouble to go to,’ said Will, ‘just so that Riddle Gully gets a tourist centre. What’s in it for him?’

‘I’d say it’s the glory,’ said Sherri. ‘That preposterous giant statue of Diamond Jack looming over the entrance, for instance — it’s Mayor Bullock, only thirty kilos lighter! And then there’ll be the Diamond Jack Family Tree in the foyer, with the mayor’s ugly mug right at the top.’

‘But this bushranger fellow,’ said Viktor, ‘was he not an escaped convict? I do not understand. Why is he to be honoured in this fashion?’

Pollo, Will and Sherri all looked at one another. Will shrugged. ‘Australians are just like that, I guess.’

‘When the tourist centre’s finished,’ said Pollo, ‘Mayor Bullock will carry on worse than ever about progress and how he’s brought Riddle Gully into the twenty-first century. He’ll want to be re-elected so that he can boss everyone around and have things his own way for years to come.’

‘Oh golly, don’t even talk about it,’ said Sherri.

Pollo wove her scarf between her fingers. ‘There could be another reason he wants the tourist centre so badly. Though it’s just speculation. There’s no proof. I probably should shut up.’

‘Most certainly not!’ said Sherri.

Will nodded eagerly. ‘Just don’t put it in your gazette.’

‘Please, Pollo!’ said Viktor. ‘Feel free to spill the bean!’

Pollo smiled. ‘Well, Mayor Bullock made his money by selling gambling equipment around the countryside, right? Poker machines and stuff like that. The thing is, a few months ago, my Uncle Pete was at a Chamber of Commerce dinner in Maloola. Mayor Bullock was there too, and let’s just say he’d had a few too many. Uncle Pete says he was rabbiting on about Riddle Gully being the perfect place to turn into a mini Las Vegas! Quite a few people suspect that the tourist centre, in his mind, is just the first step.’

‘Gambling!’ said Will. ‘That’d be robbing people worse than Diamond Jack ever did!’ He looked at Viktor. ‘Isn’t there anyone who can stop him? Can’t we go to a judge or something — like they do on TV?’

Viktor flopped down on the camp bed and put his head in his hands. ‘In my experience, Will, life is not like the television show. Court actions take time — alas, more than we have.’

He pressed his palms to his temples. ‘In any event, without us being able to point the pin precisely to the location of the Southern Bent-wings’ wintering cave, no court would listen to our protests. We need the hard evidence that this development will affect them. Without this we are kaput!’ He combed his hair with his fingers. ‘Ai-yai-yai! If only I had begun my survey a few days earlier!’

‘Has anyone got a mobile?’ said Pollo. ‘How about we find out exactly how much time we *do* have? Sherri is friends with half of Riddle Gully. She could make some calls.’

‘If you rang the caravan park,’ said Will, ‘they could tell you when the workers were coming.’

Sherri rummaged in her picnic basket. ‘Never leave home without it!’ she said, waving her phone triumphantly. ‘You never know when a handsome zoologist might call!’

They waited while Sherri went through the pleasantries with the owner of the caravan park before getting down to business. When she turned to them, her face was arranged in a brave smile.

‘You guessed right, Viktor,’ she said. ‘The park is booked out by a construction company. They’re coming on Tuesday to start work first thing Wednesday. It could be worse though ... we’ve got tomorrow.’

‘Mon Dieu!’ said Viktor. ‘Hectares can be levelled in the blink of the eye!’

Pollo was thinking. ‘Tomorrow’s the third Monday of the month, right?’ she said.

Sherri nodded. ‘Mmm-hmm.’

‘That means there’s a town council meeting tomorrow night! Anyone can go along!’

‘We could go and stop the project!’ said Will.

‘But this mayor of yours — he always gets what he wants, no?’ said Viktor mournfully.

‘Well, yeah,’ said Pollo. ‘But what Mayor Bullock wants more than anything is to be thought of by the voters as a successful, popular leader. If the whole town objected to the project he might change his mind about what it was that he wanted. What do you think, Sherri?’

‘I think the man needs a good psychiatrist,’ muttered Sherri. ‘But yes, I agree. The only thing that stops him from doing exactly as he pleases is public opinion.’

‘So,’ said Will, ‘if we could somehow find the bats’ wintering cave tonight ...’

Pollo grinned. ‘And convince everyone in Riddle Gully to go to tomorrow night’s meeting, then ...’

‘Bongo!’ yelled Viktor. He leapt from the camp bed and began striding around the room, shrugging into his long black coat and collecting his equipment. ‘Who is coming with me?’ he cried.

Pollo threw up her hand.

‘Count me in,’ said Sherri.

‘And me!’ said Will, yanking on his T-shirt. ‘And after we’ve found the cave, I’m going to design something that’ll make everyone go to the meeting. I already know what I’m going to paint!’

Pollo swung round to look at him. ‘On paper, right?’

Will looked startled. ‘Well ... err ... yeah, of course. What else?’

‘Oh nothing! Just checking!’ Pollo looked closely at Will until he found something fascinating on the ceiling to study.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Sunday 21:05

HB was in the lounge in front of the TV unit, jabbing one remote control after another towards it, when Angela, carrying two glasses of wine and Will's sketchpad, came in to join him.

'Where's the lad when we need him?' muttered HB. 'I'm darned if I can find that episode of *The Force* he said he'd record for me last night.'

'Just as long as everything's working for the *Golden Summers* finale tomorrow,' said Angela, handing HB his drink and curling on the couch beside him. 'It's the wedding you've been waiting for, eh?'

She patted HB's knee. 'Leave that for a second,' she said, opening the pad and pointing at a sketch. 'I found this in Will's room just now. As much as I don't care for the subject matter, it's a remarkable likeness, don't you think?'

HB put down his glass and took the pad in both hands. 'Golly! It's Clive all right. It's remarkable!'

'He's got so much talent, that kid,' said Angela, 'but he keeps it all to himself.' She took a sip of wine. 'Come to think of it, though, I did find a flier for that art academy in Maloola in the bin. I presume Will picked it up from somewhere. The place sounds wonderful but you need to submit a portfolio to get in. That would have scared him right off.' She sighed. 'Just as well in a way. It costs the earth. There's no way I could afford that kind of money.'

HB sat staring at the sketch.

Angela knuckled him in the chest. 'I feel like I'm talking to myself! Are you listening at all?'

HB's sigh was long and heavy. 'You know, I wish you hadn't shown me this in a way,' he said.

'Why do you say that?'

'Well ...' HB shifted in his seat. 'I'm not entirely sure that he has kept his talent to himself ... so to speak.'

'So to speak?' Angela leaned back to look at him. 'What are you getting at?'

HB passed the sketchpad back to Angela. He leaned forward and, forearms on his knees, began cracking the knuckles of each finger in turn.

‘HB?’

‘You know how some bloke came into the station with a description of an odd-looking person trying to clean off that graffiti?’

‘Uh-huh,’ said Angela, slowly taking a sip.

‘Well, love, I didn’t mention this to you but,’ HB screwed up his large nose in dilemma, ‘from what the bloke who took the report told me, it sounds like it could have been Will.’

Angela spluttered her wine. ‘What? But it was a young woman, wasn’t it?’

‘It was someone in a dress and a blonde wig. That’s all,’ said HB in a flat voice.

Angela put aside her glass and crossed her arms. ‘But why would you even put Will there in the first place? He’s a good kid!’

‘Angela, love,’ he said gently, ‘there are a lot of things about Will’s behaviour this weekend that don’t add up. I didn’t say anything at first because I didn’t want to spoil your birthday. I figured I’d already done enough in that regard.’ HB gave his middle fingers an especially hard crack.

‘You need a lot more than behaviour that doesn’t add up before you hang a criminal offence on a kid.’ She had bumped down to the other end of the couch and was pressed against its arm, glaring at HB.

‘Well, take the way he suddenly shot off tonight. Going on a night trek with a friend? I didn’t want to interfere, love, but he hasn’t got any friends here, has he? And telling us that if Clive rang, to say he’d gone to Antarctica. What the dickens was that about?’

Angela tossed her head impatiently. ‘So he’s been a little edgy. That doesn’t mean he’s a criminal.’

Staring at the carpet, HB said, ‘My bottle of turps is missing. I went to find it in the shed today and it was gone.’

Angela said nothing.

‘And then the description of this person came in. Love, the blonde wig sounds like the one you were wearing when you fertilised Clive’s motorbike. How could I forget it? It was the first time I ever laid eyes on you.’

After a long silence, Angela spoke, her voice shaking slightly. ‘Curly blonde wigs are a dime a dozen.’

‘Maybe.’

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked its way through the minute.

Suddenly Angela got up and marched out. HB stared at the blank TV screen, listening to her thumping from room to room, opening and closing cupboards and drawers. For his stepson’s sake he hoped she’d find the silly wig, that he was wrong. But, having crossed the line he had tonight, would Angela forgive him if he was?

Sometime later, Angela returned, blinking back tears. HB held out his arms. She sank into his lap and HB wished there was twice as much of him to hug her with.

They’d been like that a while when the phone rang. HB levered himself up to answer it. He returned to the lounge room, holding the phone out to Angela.

‘It’s Clive,’ he said. ‘I told him Will wasn’t home but he wanted to have a word with you. I didn’t mention Antarctica.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Sunday 21:05

Viktor and Sherri were to go by Diamond Jack's Trail back to the old railway bridge and the clearing, leaving the forest further along the gorge to Pollo and Will. Pollo knew that the kangaroo trail behind the hut that she and Will had used earlier in the day cut through the bush in the right direction. They'd take that.

'We shall meet back here on the hour,' said Viktor, 'unless we hear from one another first, yes? Pollo and Will, you have my mobile telephone?'

Will patted his pocket. 'Yep.'

'Excellent! Then let us depart. Happy hunting, my friends!' Viktor and Sherri strode off down the track, leaving Pollo and Will alone on the edge of the softly creaking forest. Pollo switched on her torch and led Will behind the cabin, where the light spilling from within barely reached the ground. No more than five metres off, the tangle of trees and bushes merged into dense blackness.

Pollo pointed. 'The roo trail's back that way somewhere,' she said. 'We follow it a little way, then there's a sidetrack to the gorge.'

'You sure you're okay to do this?' said Will.

Pollo nodded.

'We'd better ... you know ... get going then,' he said.

Pollo swallowed. 'Will? Would you mind if we ... I mean ... I promise I won't write anything or think anything of it ...' The hand not holding the torch hung loose at her side. Will took it and Pollo breathed more easily. It was possibly the hand that had graffitied the school but it was the hand of a friend nonetheless. 'Thanks,' she mumbled.

'No worries,' said Will. 'Just keep thinking of what Clive says — "Everything's the same at night as in —"'

'Already on it!' said Pollo.

They plunged into the forest and found the thin trail, just wide enough for a kangaroo to push through.

'You sure you don't want me to go first?' Will offered.

‘Thanks,’ said Pollo in a small voice, ‘but if you miss the turn-off to the gorge we could end up spending the whole night out here.’

The bushes, many laced with tiny thorns, were head high. Every few paces, spider webs dragged across their faces. Pollo was soon forced to drop Will’s hand in order to push her way through. They pressed on, Pollo casting the torch beam in a figure-eight motion, never able to see everything at once.

Suddenly she stopped. ‘Did you hear that?’ She swung round to Will, who was chasing a spider off his neck.

Will looked up. ‘No? What?’

They stood motionless. From somewhere in the distance a low mournful sound penetrated the thick undergrowth.

‘That!’ said Pollo.

‘Definitely bushrangers ...’ whispered Will, ‘... dying in terrible agony!’

‘Be serious!’

Again, low and insistent.

‘It’s like an animal,’ said Pollo. ‘A crow ... or a cow or ...’

‘Shorn Connery!’ they both yelled. They took off in the direction of the noise, scrambling over branches and down potholes in the crumbly forest floor, their arms held high against the bushes snatching at their clothes and skin.

They called Shorn Connery’s name as they ran. After a minute or so he was answering them back. Every few steps he was louder and louder. Eventually, his bleating was so clear and raucous there seemed nowhere further to run. They came to a halt on a patch of rocky ground, hands on thighs, gasping for air.

Baaa-aaa-aaa-aaah! It seemed to be all around them.

‘He’s got to be right here!’ puffed Pollo. ‘I can’t understand it.’ She swung her torch from side to side.

Baaa-aaa-aaa-aaah!

‘It sounds weird,’ said Will. ‘Kind of hollow.’ He began walking away from Pollo into the bush. ‘Like it’s coming from under ... What the ...? *Whoa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-oa-ohhh!*’

Will's vanishing voice and the slithering and tumbling of rocks were closely followed by the swirling willy-willy of a swarm of tiny animals. They headed straight for Pollo, who dropped to her knees and covered her face as they whirled around her. The creatures came in waves, from nowhere, from everywhere, flapping in a frenzy, flipping her face with their wing tips, jagging strands of her hair. After a moment, the flurry subsided and the bats, if that's what they were, flapped off into the night.

Baaa-aaa-aaah?

'Is that you, Shorn Connery?' Pollo yelled, scrabbling for her torch in the dirt.

Baaa-aaa-aaah!

A voice came from far away. Will's voice. 'I sure hope it's him! It's big and greasy and won't stop butting my face!'

Pollo jumped up. She would have hugged Will with happiness if he hadn't appeared to be locked in the earth about ten metres below.

'Will! Are you all right?'

'Yeah! Fine! And guess what?'

'What?' shouted Pollo.

'We've found the bats' wintering cave!'

'No way! Are you positive?'

'It feels like a huge cavern. And there was all that flapping when I fell down here. And it sure smells bad!'

Pollo swallowed. 'Will?'

'Yeah?'

'There's only one way to be sure. I'm going to drop the torch down to you!'

'But you need it up there!'

'I'll be fine!' she yelled. I'll just have to be, she thought.

'Okay then. Look out though!' called Will. 'The cave entrance falls away out of the blue. After that it's a long slide and then a drop to the cave floor. But up where you are, there's no warning!'

Pollo inched through the bush in the direction of Will's voice. Eventually, she spotted the hole, barely a metre across and almost completely obscured by the fronds of low bushes. She dropped to her hands and knees.

'Stand back!' she yelled.

Baa-aa-aah!

'You too, Shorn Connery!' She reached over the lip of the hole. 'Here it comes!' She released the torch and listened to it rattle its way down the tunnel, plunging her into blackness.

She edged away and knelt in the dirt, waiting for her eyes to adjust, taking deep breaths.

'It's incredible!' Will's voice sailed up from below. 'There's, like, squillions of bats in here hanging from the roof — Southern Bent-wings like the one at the hut. We've done it, Pollo! We're heroes!'

'Call Viktor and Sherri!' yelled Pollo. 'And tell them to bring ropes!'

There was a long silence beneath her. 'Will?'

'Umm ... yeah?'

'The phone's not busted is it?'

'... No.'

'Well, what's happening?'

'Err ... Pollo?'

'What's wrong?'

'I can't get a signal!' called Will. 'There must be too much interference from the rock!'

Pollo closed her eyes. She tried to steady her breathing. Everything's the same at night as in the day, only it's like you've got your eyes shut. She repeated it over and over as, on hands and knees, she fumbled for the edge of the cave entrance. She leaned over. 'Will? I'm going to go and get Viktor and Sherri.'

'We could wait till daylight, I s'pose, but ...' Will's sorry voice trailed off.

‘We both know there’s no time for that — for the bats or for Shorn Connery. But thanks anyway!’

‘Well ... be really careful then, Pollo. I’m not kidding. There could be holes all over the place.’

Baa-aa-aah!

‘Just sit tight — both of you,’ yelled Pollo.

‘We’re not going anywhere!’ called Will, from his prison deep below.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sunday 21:45

Pollo unwound her scarf from around her neck. She found the last row and bit into it, then plucked at the wool with her fingernails.

Her dad's knitting didn't put up much of a fight. The scarf began unravelling and she soon had a good length. She ripped a page out of her notepad, made a neat tear in from the edge and slipped it onto the yarn. Then she tied the end to a tall bush near the cave entrance. The fluttering white paper would catch even the weakest beam of light.

She felt what was left of the scarf in her hands and did a quick calculation. Her dad had often marvelled at how much wool it took to knit a single row. She should have plenty.

Bit by bit, Pollo retraced the route along which she and Will had blundered through the bush, ignoring the faceless scuttlings around her. As she went, she unravelled her scarf, draping it high over the bushes behind her, every now and then attaching another sheet of paper.

Hansel and Gretel, eat your hearts out!

Will, having switched off the torch to conserve batteries, lay staring into utter can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face blackness.

Beneath his head was the sleeping Shorn Connery's rising and falling belly. Beneath the rest of him was a spongy carpet of sharp-smelling bat droppings, interspersed with little brittle dead bat bones. With each breath it felt like he was sniffing oven cleaner. With each twitch of his hand a worm or a bug twitched back.

Every now and again he flicked on the torch to reassure himself that he wasn't, in fact, dead. The distinction wasn't easy to make.

It seemed a lifetime ago that he'd tried to make a birthday breakfast for his mum, before everything had spun out of control. How simple that time seemed now. He could comfort himself with one thought though. He couldn't sink any lower.

Just then, from somewhere high above, a large splat of wet, fresh bat poo landed on his face.

Wrong again! He pursed his lips and wiped it off as best he could with the side of his grimy hand. That was it! If he ever got out of there, the first thing he was going to do was come clean. And he didn't mean take a shower, though that was right up there on the list. He'd break this crazy cycle he'd got himself into! He'd tell Angela and HB about the graffiti and the lies and take the punishment! They had art classes in prison, didn't they?

One thing was for certain. He never, ever again wanted being mad to make him do something he'd be sorry for later.

Will had fallen into a deep, relaxed sleep when excited chatter woke him. He remembered where he was when his pillow suddenly grew legs and struggled to its feet. His head dropped — *splap!* — into his stinking mattress.

Baa-aa-aah!

'We're coming, Shorn Connery!' Pollo's voice rang down from the cave entrance. 'Will? Are you still there?'

'No, I've gone surfing!' shouted Will, flicking on the torch. 'Of course I'm still here!'

With the sudden noise and movement, more bats were spiralling to the cave exit. Hundreds, maybe thousands! Will could hear Viktor's yelps of delight ... followed by rhythmic thumping on the crumbly rocky roof above.

'You guys aren't dancing up there, are you?' he yelled. 'Do you want the cave roof to fall in?'

The noise abruptly stopped. 'No-no ...' It was Sherri. 'We were just ... just ...'

Viktor called down. 'The happiness, Will! It makes us forget! So sorry, my friend! We shall turn to the business that is pressing!'

Immediately above Will's head, where the tunnel opened out to the cave itself, the weighted end of a rope soon appeared. Will tied a slipknot and worked it under Shorn Connery's front legs and around his torso. Bellowing all the way, Shorn Connery was hoisted to the top.

Alone on the cave floor, Will waited for the fuss of Shorn Connery's rescue to pass. Eventually, his turn came and, with the torch between his teeth and the other

three pulling the other end of the rope, he clambered up the tunnel, through the cave exit and out into the pure night air.

Pollo and Sherri clamped their noses and stepped back sharply as Will appeared, Viktor's bright torch illuminating the dark, grainy mix of damp and dried bat poo that clung to every bit of him.

Viktor, on the other hand, leaned in and breathed deeply, his nostrils quivering like an eager dog's. 'Aa-aa-ah ... bat guano!' he said, a look of bliss flooding his face. 'I never thought it could smell so good.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Sunday 23:55

When Will got home and saw the lights on, his heart sank. He'd pictured sneaking in, cleaning himself up and facing Angela and HB in the morning. The less he looked like a deranged criminal when he confessed, he figured, the better.

He paused in the shadows on the porch. They were both still up, talking. Well, at least he wouldn't have to sweat through the rest of the night wondering what they'd do to him. He opened the front door and stepped into the hallway.

'Will? Is that you?' Angela sounded edgy.

In the confined space he could smell the sharp pong all over him. He'd have run away from himself, if he could. As he closed the front door he heard movement on the other side of the wall.

'Stay where you are!' he yelled.

The footsteps stopped.

'I've got something to tell you and I don't think I can do it face to face.'

'Son ...' It was HB. 'We don't want —'

'Stay away — please!' Will interrupted. He slumped against the wall among the coats hanging on the rack. There was no way to ease into it. He squeezed his eyes shut. Just get it over and done with.

'It was me who did the graffiti at the school!' he blurted. 'Mum, I know you think I'm a good son but I'm not. I don't know why I did it but I just did! I suppose that makes me criminally insane or something. Maybe even evil! I don't know. But, HB, I'm really, really sorry. I don't think you're a pig's you-know-what at all. In fact, I think you're a really good stepdad, even if sometimes you're a bit ... well ... anyway,' he hastily moved on, his eyes still shut tight, 'I'll totally understand if you want to throw me out or send me to reform school or prison or whatever. And Mum, I'm really, really sorry that I'm not who you think I am. That I'm just a delinquent. That I've let you down.'

The blood was rushing so hard through his head that he couldn't hear another thing in the world. Suddenly a hand gripped his shoulder. He jerked, ramming his head into a hook of the coat rack behind him.

Grimacing with pain, he became aware of Angela and HB standing in front of him and, despite his filth and his stench, his mum was trying to hug him.

‘But ... but ...’ he stammered.

‘That’ll do, son,’ said HB.

Even though every centimetre of him had been rolled or dipped in bat poo, Angela insisted on pulling him down next to her onto the couch and putting her arm around him. They wouldn’t hear another word about his criminal activities. They were much keener to know why he was covered in scratches and stank worse than old kitty litter.

Will filled them in as best he could, to a string of gollies and goshes and by-jiminies.

When he was done, Angela put her hand on his. ‘Your father called while you were out,’ she said. ‘He asked me to tell you that he hadn’t forgotten you. Apparently your baby brother dropped Clive’s mobile down the toilet, so he lost all his contacts. And the police station wouldn’t give out our home number, of course.’

Will smiled. It figured.

‘He got the number from Nan eventually.’ Angela sighed. ‘I guess this week’s been harder on you than I realised. You could probably have used a chat with your dad. I’m so happy here I just assumed that settling in for you would be a breeze.’

She suddenly looked Will in the eye. ‘You can ring Clive whenever you want to. You know that, don’t you, love?’

‘Yeah, I s’pose so,’ said Will. ‘But it feels funny now in the new set-up. Wouldn’t it make things awkward for you and HB? Let’s face it, Mum, you don’t want to know about Clive at the best of times.’

Angela pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. ‘I’m sorry, love. You’re right — I don’t always behave as I should. But it will always be okay for you to love your father — to show it, I mean. When we split up, I never thought for a second that *you* would stop loving him ... more than anyone else who came into our lives.’ She gave HB a crooked smile and turned back to Will. ‘And I know for a fact that Clive will never stop loving you, no matter where you are — or what you smell like!’

They laughed and hugged.

‘Why don’t you give him a ring now?’ said Angela. ‘He wanted to talk to you as soon as he could. He won’t mind that it’s late.’

Will jumped off the couch and had reached the doorway when HB spoke. ‘Before you do that, son ...’

Will paused.

HB cleared his throat. ‘Clive mentioned something that was worrying you and I’d like to clear it up.’ He began tugging his left earlobe and then switched to his right. ‘I want to reassure you, lad, that even though your mum and I are married now, I’d never ask you to change your surname to mine. I had a shocker of a time with it when I was a youngster. Hell’s bells! Half the reason I joined the force was to stop people having a go at me!’

Will grinned at HB then dashed for the kitchen.

A phone call and a warm shower later, he reappeared feeling happier than he had in a long, long time. He was about to say goodnight and sink into the comfort of clean sheets and an inner-spring mattress when HB patted the empty space on the couch between himself and Angela.

‘So now, son,’ he said. ‘Let’s have a quick chat about this artistic streak of yours.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Monday 07:30

This was one pupil-free day they wouldn't spend kicking back, swatting flies. They all met at Sherri's shop at seven-thirty. Viktor had been dashing around all night collecting and sorting data on the bats, and Will and Pollo had got up before dawn, Will to paint his poster and Pollo to put together what she could of her final edition of the *Riddle Gully Gazette*.

There was no time to wait for the town council office to open to use their copier. Soon Sherri's old machine was running hot, churning out Will's poster by the dozen, to Bubl 's excited twittering. Beneath beautiful sketches of the bats was a push, in big bold letters, for the whole town to come to the council meeting that night. Pollo, Sherri and Viktor agreed that the poster was a masterpiece that would make everyone seeing it want to devote the rest of their lives to protecting *Miniopterus schreibersii bassanii* — the Southern Bent-wing Bat.

Pollo worked on her laptop at Sherri's desk, incorporating Viktor's photos and data into her *Riddle Gully Gazette* Special Edition, then it too was printed. No sizzling vampire story leapt from the front page, nor apology to Mayor Bullock. And it was a lot slimmer than usual, containing, as it did, only the one article — Riddle Gully's endangered bats and the mayor's reckless development. But there was no doubt about it — it was her best work ever.

By eight-thirty, the gazettes and the posters were in neat bundles on Sherri's desk, ready to hit the streets. Sherri brought out a plate of honeyed crumpets and they all dug in.

Will licked his fingers and tapped the pile of gazettes. 'I like the way you didn't put in anything about the graffiti, Pollo,' he said.

Sherri and Viktor looked at him oddly and Will reddened. 'I mean, with it being my stepdad and ... you know ...' He trailed off. Would he ever learn to keep his big mouth shut?

'I thought about it,' said Pollo. 'But I decided it would be unprofessional to jump to any conclusions — in print at least.' She flicked Will a wink.

So Pollo *did* know! And was keeping quiet! Will stuffed the rest of his crumpet into his mouth to camouflage his smile.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Monday 19:15

The Riddle Gully Town Hall was a chilly place no matter what time of the year. But it was much chillier for Pollo when the only other people in it were Sherri, Viktor and the glowering Mayor Bullock.

Pollo nibbled her thumbnail. Where was everyone? Even her own father wasn't there yet. And more to the point, where was Will? They'd spent the whole day putting up posters and talking to people. Her feet were still complaining and her hands were stained a deathly hue from rolling Blu-Tack. Will had worked just as hard. He wouldn't have suddenly lost heart, would he?

Or maybe Sergeant Butt had pinned the graffiti on him! Was Will in a holding cell somewhere with only a giant silent tattooed man for company? Pollo shivered. Poor Will.

By the oversized clock on the wall, it was seven-fifteen — only a quarter of an hour before the meeting was due to start. The mayor was seated at the centre of a long wooden table directly across from them, the points of his starched yellow handkerchief spying from his top pocket. He ordered and re-ordered his papers, pausing every now and again to check his gold wristwatch and glare at Pollo. Sherri, meanwhile, doggedly hummed a jaunty tune. Viktor hunched in his coat on his aluminium chair, stroking his chin nearly down to the bone.

Every thirty seconds, Pollo twisted to see if anyone else had by some chance joined them. Each time, the scraping of her chair's metal legs on the wooden floor reverberated around the cavernous space like an angry elephant's trumpet.

The time ticked by, uninterrupted.

She looked at the agenda for the meeting for the third time. The 'Diamond Jack Experience Tourist Centre' was Item Seven. This time she noticed Item Eight. 'Graffiti Action Plan'. Her heart clenched. It all became clear to her. No wonder Will was staying away.

At seven-twenty the town councillors began to dribble in, greeting one another and Mayor Bullock like long-lost friends, though most only lived around the corner. To Pollo's dismay, the next person to arrive was Principal Piggott, without her dog.

She took a seat in the row behind, where Pollo could smell her April Violets perfume but not see her. Sherri patted Pollo's knee.

Two minutes later, Pollo's dad bounded down the centre aisle. 'Sorry everyone,' he puffed. 'Mare down at Five-Mile had a tricky labour. Mum and filly doing fine now though!'

'Golly, Joe!' said Sherri. 'What would Riddle Gully do without you?'

'You're here now!' said Pollo, jumping up and giving her dad a hug. She introduced him to Viktor. The two men shook hands in front of Sherri. Each seemed reluctant to be first to let go. Eventually Sherri pointed to a chair and suggested Pollo's dad make himself comfortable.

One by one, a few townspeople trickled in. It was seven-twenty-nine. Pollo began drumming her feet on the floor, heedless of the rattling it was setting up along the row of mostly empty chairs. The whole thing was going to fall in a heap! They should have got out there with a megaphone today! There weren't nearly enough people here to sway the council, much less Mayor Bullock. And Principal Piggott would be voting against them.

At least Will wouldn't have to see Mayor Bullock's horrible victory. With a loud click, the last two digits on the hall clock flipped over.

Seven-thirty. Mayor Bullock sneered at Pollo, licked his lips and cleared his throat. He tapped the microphone.

At that moment there was a loud crash as the heavy double doors at the back of the hall flew open, hitting the wall. Pollo swung around to see Will, his mum and Sergeant Butt jogging up the aisle. They were closely followed by Auntie Giulia and Uncle Pete. From outside, the noise of chattering and cars swinging into the car park filled the hall.

Mayor Bullock looked daggers at Pollo and tapped on the microphone again. 'I call the meeting to order!'

But his words were drowned in the hubbub. One after another people were pouring down the aisle, bustling and clattering and scraping as they exchanged hellos and took their seats. Pollo, Sherri and Viktor looked at each other. There must have been two hundred or more!

Will flopped into the chair behind Pollo. He leaned forward and puffed, ‘Sorry, Pollo. What a nightmare! Angela insisted I sit through the whole final episode of *Golden Summers* with her. Apparently on Saturday I made some kind of deal. It was torture! Weddings and people nearly dying and kissing all over the place — I thought it would never end!’ He looked at the mob settling down around the room. ‘Looks like we weren’t the only ones watching.’

Mayor Bullock, his thick lips pursed, opened the meeting. He trawled at snail’s pace through the first few items on the agenda. Pollo leaned towards Sherri. ‘Everyone’s going to die of boredom before we get to the bats!’ As she spoke, an agenda transformed into a paper plane flew from behind them and wafted to the floor in front of the mayor and his councillors.

People were slumped in their chairs, eyes glazed, by the time Mayor Bullock announced, ‘Agenda Item Number Seven — the Diamond Jack Experience Tourist Centre.’ He leaned forward on his elbows, steeping his fleshy fingertips together, and looked along the table from one end of the row of councillors to the other.

He glared at Pollo and began. ‘I think it fair to say that my fellow councillors and I are agreed that any disruption to this exciting development, which I would remind people is due to start the day after tomorrow, would be a reckless waste of tourism potential and a savage blow to the progress of Riddle Gully.’

He droned on for several more minutes, then stacked his papers to move on to the next item. Not looking up, he muttered into the microphone, ‘I’ll take comment from the floor.’

Silence. Mayor Bullock smirked and tilted the microphone to his mouth. Just then, old Mr McNutty shuffled to his feet. He lifted his quavery voice. ‘What about the environmental assessment?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Mayor Bullock. ‘You’ll have to speak up.’

‘The environmental assessment, Your Worship. What about it? It’s not finished yet. You’re jumping the gun.’

Murmurs of support buzzed around the hall.

‘We’ve done as much environmental assessment as the project requires,’ said Mayor Bullock. ‘I — rather, we — have a contract with a construction company to keep in mind.’

Viktor moved to jump up but Sherri clasped his arm. ‘Best to let Riddle Gully do the talking,’ she said gently.

‘What about our contract with the wildlife?’ came a voice from the back. Everyone craned to see a youngish woman in khaki shirt and shorts, a headscarf and sturdy boots. Her face, one Pollo didn’t recognise, looked like it hadn’t smiled in quite a while.

‘I think you’ll find that all the wildlife have been consulted,’ said Mayor Bullock. The crowd tittered and the mayor flushed. ‘That is to say, concern for our wildlife has been at the very heart of negotiations.’ He placed his open hand on the right side of his chest then hastily switched it to the left.

‘What about the bats, sir?’ It was Ms Ferguson, the softly lisping librarian, newly posted to Riddle Gully.

Mayor Bullock shook his head impatiently. ‘I didn’t catch that, miss. You’ll have to repeat it.’

A burly youth in overalls got to his feet. He lived a few doors up from Pollo and spent hours every day on his driveway, tinkering with an old Holden. ‘She said, “What about the bats?” The ones in the *Riddle Gully Gazette* today and on all the posters — the ones on the government’s critically endangered list?’ He glanced across to Ms Ferguson, blushed to his ears and sat down. Ms Ferguson smiled shyly and blinked thick lashes behind her spectacles.

The youth’s father, a man held in awe for his wandering glass eye, was sitting next to him. He added in a gravelly voice, ‘The blimmin’ animal’s right in our own backyard and you’re going to build a flamin’ car park on top of it! With a ruddy great ugly statue to boot!’

Mayor Bullock checked his toupée with his fingertips and coughed. ‘A car park *and tourist centre* — let’s be clear about that. As for the statue, I can assure you it’s a work of the highest measure of good taste!’

This was greeted with loud jeers and boos. Mayor Bullock ran his tongue around his lips. He plucked his yellow handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to his forehead and mouth.

Slowly Pollo stood, every eye but one turning towards her. ‘Can I make a suggestion, Your Worshipfulness?’ From behind his hanky the mayor’s glare

narrowed. ‘Isn’t there a lot of tourist potential in Riddle Gully being home to a rare and endangered animal species? Why don’t we relocate the tourist centre further away from the bats’ habitat and extend it to include a Wildlife Appreciation Centre?’ Pollo swallowed and continued. ‘We could set up a camping ground so that people can come and see the bats in autumn and spring! Can I, like, move a motion or whatever?’

A ripple of excitement ran through the room. Bravo! That would work! Great idea! Pollo sat down to smiles and nods and a volley of pats on the back.

Mayor Bullock pursed his lips. ‘Thank you Miss di Nozi, but under the by-laws a minor is not permitted to move a motion. Now, if that’s all the discussion on the subject ... We have a lot to get through tonight.’

‘Mr Mayor!’ Principal Piggott’s voice cut through the air.

Mayor Bullock sank in his chair. ‘Yes, Principal Piggott?’

‘I’ll trouble you to sit up straight when I’m speaking to you!’

The mayor and half the room sprang to attention. Several people put their hands on their heads.

‘I would like to move a motion. How did Pollo put it?’ Principal Piggott repeated Pollo’s suggestion, finishing with, ‘Pending a rigorous environmental assessment to be conveyed to the community in full.’

Principal Piggott paused and took in the room, a slight twitch at the corners of her mouth. ‘Nothing, Mr Mayor, is to be swept under *your* — oh, I do apologise — *the rug!*’

Principal Piggott resumed her seat to deafening applause. She caught Pollo’s eye and with a twinkle in her own gave her the thumbs up. Pollo, beaming like a lighthouse, turned and whispered behind her hand to Principal Piggott. The older woman smiled and jumped to her feet again. ‘And, for heaven’s sake, do away with that dreadful giant statue!’

The roar of approval swelled even louder. Both Mayor Bullock’s hands were groping his head, checking that his toupée was in order. As the applause receded, he lowered his hands, using them instead to straighten his tie. He spread his fingers on the table and stared at them several seconds. Then he smiled, levered himself to his feet and tugged on the cuffs of his jacket.

Sherri leaned across to Viktor. ‘Watch! The magician will now perform his next trick!’

Mayor Bullock cleared his throat. ‘I think that my ancestor, Diamond Jack, would heartily approve of what we have witnessed here tonight,’ he said, in a slow, deep voice. ‘The little people have been given a voice! I am so very deeply humbled, ladies and gentlemen, to think that any idea of mine —’ at this point he closed his eyes and tapped his fingertips against his heart ‘— has been the seed of such a worthy initiative as what is proposed. It is my great honour to second the motion!’

He slathered a broad smile onto his pink face. ‘Okay, folks! Let’s put it to the vote!’

As the secretary intoned the motion to the crowd, Mayor Bullock remained standing, smiling down on everyone like Father Christmas. Pollo herself could almost believe he’d pushed the proposal all along.

‘All those in favour?’ Hands waved like a field of wheat.

‘Against?’ The mayor searched the room. ‘Motion carried unanimously, all site development work at the current location to be cancelled forthwith and —’ here his voice cracked just a little, ‘— the giant statue to be removed from the plans.’ As everyone clapped, Pollo, Will, Sherri and Viktor reached in and clasped hands. In the corners of Viktor’s eyes, tears of happiness and relief glinted.

Mayor Bullock resumed his seat, his beneficent beam already slipping. He pulled out his hanky, dabbed his face and shoved it back into his breast pocket. It hung there like a dead canary.

‘Order!’ he called, holding up his hand for silence. ‘I know you’re all very excited but we need to move on. Now, Item Eight. The Graffiti Action Plan.’

The paper plane launched earlier had belonged to Will, crafted from his crisp, unread agenda. Now, happily rocking on the back legs of his chair, the mayor’s announcement hit him like a left hook. He grabbed Angela’s and HB’s arms, barely stopping himself from clattering to the floor.

Mayor Bullock rubbed his hands together. ‘Sergeant Butt, I realise this is without notice, but would you be so kind as to bring the meeting up to date on this despicable incident?’

Very slowly, HB rose to his full height, clasping his big hands behind his back. Will gripped the sides of his chair.

‘Herrr-ugh-hum,’ said HB. The crowd hushed. ‘I am afraid this is a matter concerning a juvenile, Your Worship. I am therefore not at liberty to discuss it.’

Will was chewing on his bottom lip. Did that mean HB couldn’t talk about it? It sounded like that’s what he’d said. Is that what he said?

HB cleared his throat again. ‘However, I can reassure the meeting that the matter is being dealt with by the authorities and that the juvenile in question is unlikely to reoffend. It is my firm opinion that no action on the part of council is required.’

Mayor Bullock pouted like a toddler who had dropped his ice-cream cone.

HB took his seat, staring straight ahead, his fingers splayed across his knees. Will wondered if other people could see the slight trembling in his stepdad’s hands.

‘Thank you, Sergeant.’ Mayor Bullock pulled in his bottom lip. He dug a humbug from his pocket and rammed it into his mouth. ‘Any general business before we close and get out of here?’ he mumbled around the lolly. He banged his stack of papers on the desk and began buttoning his jacket, the humbug bulging from one cheek to the other.

‘Just one thing, if I may.’ The voice came from a slim fellow in corduroy trousers and a baggy leather jacket a few chairs away from Pollo. ‘I’m not a ratepayer, Your Worship, so perhaps I shouldn’t be speaking. But it occurred to me that some form of commendation to Ms di Nozi and Mr Hopkins is surely in order. Their excellent teamwork in the matter of the Southern Bent-wing Bat could well have averted an ecological disaster. These young people showed remarkable initiative and citizenship in bringing it to our notice, I think everyone would agree.’ The man looked around the room at a sea of vigorously nodding heads.

Mayor Bullock hunched forward on the table and crossed his arms. His eyes turned to slits and his face reddened like a boiling crab. ‘And who the tinker’s bell are you, might I ask?’

‘I’m Everett Evers, Your Worship. Editor-in-chief at the Coast news network.’

The mayor gave a sharp, choking cough — then all eyes lifted to follow the arc of his shiny stripy humbug sailing through the air.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Wednesday 18:45

It was hard to imagine that the meadow in front of her and much of the forest would have been dug up today if things hadn't worked out. Pollo was leaning against a tombstone on the edge of the cemetery, *Last Slayer IV: The Dark Count* in her lap. A little way off, Shorn Connery browsed peacefully and, nearer the trees, Viktor stalked in circles with his bat detector. Pollo jumped as Will tapped her on the shoulder.

'Thought I'd find you here,' said Will. 'Sherri told me the good news. So it's official, eh? The Youth Reporter cadet! So much for Mayor Bullock and his friends in high places!'

Pollo laughed. 'To think it nearly stopped me!' she said.

Will lowered himself onto a nearby grave. He put his sketchpad beside him and looked at Pollo. 'Thanks for not dobbing on me.'

Pollo shrugged. 'It's okay. You'll have to tell me one day why you did it. I've been wondering, though, what's going to happen to you?'

'HB put in a report to the station,' said Will. 'I'm on notice, as they put it. If I mess up again I'm in serious trouble. I feel rotten for putting HB in that situation.'

'That's what he meant at the meeting, then, when he said it was being dealt with by the authorities?'

Will smiled sheepishly. 'Actually, he was talking about Nan and Pop,' he said. 'Nan blasted me big time. I have to go to an anger management course. Everyone reckons it helped my mum. And I'm spending a week of the holidays in their retirement village weeding everyone's gardens and doing odd jobs. But I want to do it.'

'Of course you do! You'll be stuffed full of cake and biscuits all day! You won't want to leave,' said Pollo.

'I meant the course,' said Will. 'I want to get on top of my feelings, instead of it being the other way round. I've done dumb stuff before, but this last time ...' He huffed and shook his head. 'It felt good for about five minutes, then it was total manure from then on.'

'You'll be fine,' said Pollo. 'I'm sure you will.'

‘One good thing,’ said Will, ‘everyone wants me to try out for that art academy in Maloola. I didn’t even know they knew about the place. Clive wants to pay for it ... if I get in.’ Will tapped his sketchpad. ‘I need to submit a portfolio.’

‘Will! That’s brilliant! You’ll get in for sure. Look what your poster did. It was like you’d mesmerised everyone into coming to the meeting!’

Will shrugged his shoulders. ‘I dunno about that.’

‘Well, put it this way — what have you got to lose by applying?’

‘My pride?’

‘Your pride?’ laughed Pollo. ‘It’s buried in bat poop on the floor of that cave!’

Pollo ducked as a clod of grass hit the tombstone behind her. Will yanked out some more, ready to pitch it.

‘Stop!’ yelled Pollo. ‘There was something in that!’ She scabbled in the grass and fished out a tiny object. Her eyes widened as she brushed off the dirt.

‘What is it?’ said Will.

‘I bet it’s from that woman at the meeting,’ whispered Pollo. ‘The one who was wearing all the military gear.’

‘The one who asked about the wildlife?’ said Will. ‘It wasn’t military gear. It was hiking gear.’

‘She had this weird look on her face all night. I’m telling you, she was dodgy.’

‘She wasn’t dodgy,’ said Will, picking up his sketchpad and getting to his feet. ‘And you were sitting with your back to her. How would you know what look she had on her face?’

‘And now this!’ said Pollo, her eyes glued to the thing in her hand.

‘Is that what I think it is?’ said Will.

Pollo raised the object between her thumb and forefinger. ‘A bullet casing!’ she said. ‘Twenty-two calibre. The suspect must have dropped it!’

‘Suspect?’ said Will, backing away. ‘What suspect? Someone’s been out hunting rabbits or feral cats or something.’

‘You said it, Will! “Or something.” Something bigger,’ said Pollo. ‘I haven’t seen ...’ Pollo narrowed her eyes. ‘Well, I can’t think of who off the top of my head, but I bet there’s someone I haven’t seen lately. That woman was suspicious, Will! Wait till the editor-in-chief hears about this!’

‘Stop it, Pollo!’ said Will. ‘You’re doing it again!’

‘Doing what?’

‘Seeing what you want to see. Jumping to conclusions.’

‘*Drawing* conclusions, Will,’ said Pollo. ‘Entirely different from jumping to them. You could ask your stepdad if anyone’s gone missing!’

Will was heading for the track behind the houses. He called over his shoulder, ‘Nuh-uh! No! I couldn’t!’

‘Just one tiny favour?’ shouted Pollo. ‘Why not?’

‘Because people find bullet casings all the time!’ Will shouted back. ‘It doesn’t mean someone’s up to no good!’ He was marching doggedly away from her.

‘But how do we know for sure?’ Pollo yelled.

Will didn’t hear. His sketchpad tucked under his arm, he was singing at the top of his voice — *La-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la!* — index fingers jammed in both ears.

Pollo grunted in disgust. Some people had no nose for news. She put the casing in her pocket and marked the tombstone with a limestone rock. She pulled out her notepad and jotted down the time and location of her find.

Will’s silhouette was diminishing across the field of graves. But even at that distance she could see a spring in his step. A smile snuck onto Pollo’s face. She had to be honest — it was for the best. Will’s heart really wasn’t in this investigating business. He was an artist. And now that she was Youth Reporter for the region she couldn’t have him holding her back.

Real supersleuths worked better alone ...

Baa-aa-aah!

... or with only an utterly faithful assistant.

The End

Alienation and Boundaries in Selected Works of Tim Winton

Written for Adults and for Young Readers

Like many in this country, I became an admirer of Western Australian author Tim Winton's work when I read *Cloudstreet* a little over twenty years ago. The book gave a picture, so I believed, of the area across the railway from where I'd lived several years in a 1910 house I imagined as part of the backdrop to the narrative. (The house of the novel *was* in West Leederville, wasn't it?) But more than that, through the stories of its humble, colourful, sometimes odd but always, in some way, familiar characters, it filled gaps in the stories of my own parents and grandparents and their lives in the Perth of a time gone by. It was, as far as I recall, the first Australian novel that engaged me, that opened my naïve (and arrogant) eyes to the fact that, while characters like Anna Karenina were wonderful, there were possibilities in the 'ordinary' people around me.

Of course, by the time he published *Cloudstreet* Winton was well known to anyone with a literary bent. He'd been a co-winner of the 1981 Australian Vogel Award with his first novel, *An Open Swimmer*, had won the 1984 Miles Franklin Award with his second novel, *Shallows*, and the following year, with his short story collection, *Scission*, the West Australian Council Literary Award. His popular and critical acclaim nowadays is unambiguous, both in his homeland and internationally, as evidenced by three further Miles Franklins (*Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music* and *Breath*) and two (Man) Booker Prize shortlistings (*The Riders* and *Dirt Music*). In 2009, the Miles Franklin Literary Award Trust spoke of him as 'standing alongside Ian

McEwan and Philip Roth as one of the major chroniclers of the human condition, a writer of novels that are at the same time simple and profound, relentlessly gripping and deeply moving.’¹

To me, that Winton’s novels are ‘moving’ rests on the vibrant realism of the characters who people them. In general, Winton’s main characters defy stereotyping (although one could perhaps identify a ‘stereotype’ within his body of work of the gentle-natured, intelligent and environmentally attuned male). His characters tend to be humble and unadorned, and unapologetic for being so. They frequently do not speak the language of the well schooled. As well as courage and resilience, they have weak spots, softnesses, secrets and frailties. They are, as Bruce Bennett puts it, ‘intent on getting by rather than getting on’.²

Winton’s characters, also, are often alienated in some way, and it is this aspect of them in particular that interests me. By alienated, I mean that they are unable to connect fully with their community, either by being shunned or marginal, or by the characters themselves eschewing community. Winton’s stories, says Bennett, ‘are pointers to the powerful need [...] for a rediscovery of the sources of community within Australia.’³ Winton’s characters are often estranged from the person whom, or the place where, they would like to be.

Implicit in the concept of ‘alienation’ is the existence of some kind of demarcation — a boundary beyond which those who are alienated, or who feel alienated, are positioned. This is why, in this discussion, I am addressing the two concepts — alienation and boundaries — in tandem.

Winton once said, ‘I think that if we accept boundaries then we’re just suckers — boundaries that other people set for us.’⁴ I couldn’t agree more. The hypocrisy, arbitrariness, fickleness or downright silliness of many boundaries has long raised my hackles, dating back to times when my hackles weren’t raised by much. I remember one early evening in summer, as an eight-year-old, sprinting after my mother as she

¹Miles Franklin Literary Award Trust.
[http://www.milesfranklin.com.au/biographies/2009/shortlist_2009_TimW; Accessed 15 Feb 2013.]

² ‘Nostalgia for Community: Tim Winton’s Essay and Stories’, in Bruce Bennett. *Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood*. Perth: Network Books, 2006, p.44.

³ Ibid.

⁴ B. Watze. ‘An Interview with Tim Winton’, *AWP Chronicle*, Old Dominion, Norfolk VA, May 1992, p.5; cited in Sahlia Ben-Messahel. *Mind the Country: Tim Winton’s Fiction*. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 2006, p.91.

sailed up the hill in her orange Mini Minor, shouting for her to stop, willing her to hear me, frustrated tears welling. I had been plodding home from my friend's house — the overnight stay sanctioned by her mother, suddenly cancelled by her father when he got wind of it. My mother, thinking I was safely accounted for, was driving to the home of family friends for the evening. My own house was empty. I knew where our friends lived and set off after my mother on foot, arriving well after dark.

The reason my friend's father disapproved of my staying overnight, I learned later, was that my parents had separated. In the sixties, this was not okay, unlike nowadays, when divorce and separation barely twitch an eyebrow. My family had crossed an invisible line, a boundary of acceptability. In my friend's father's mind, I was from a 'bad family'. Ergo, I, the child, was bad. I didn't articulate this to myself at the time. I didn't think about it much at all, thank goodness. But my friend's father's attitude did, I think, help imbue an early suspicion of subjective boundaries. It's a suspicion that has made its way into my creative work (in a previous young readers' novel and in the two works of this thesis) in the theme, among others, of 'seek the individual, look past appearances, before fearing or forming judgement'; or as Winton's Egg in *Lockie Leonard, Scumbuster* says, 'Uniforms — they're all bulldust. Don't look at the uniform, look at the person' (10)⁵.

Not all of the boundaries that Winton explores concern acceptability and/or alienation. He uses the notion of boundaries in many guises to tease out a range of themes and questions. In eliciting alienation — the focus here — the boundaries that Winton's stories and characters hinge on, push, and cross are numerous, and include those between the past and the present, ocean and land, the urban and the wild, colonisation and national assertiveness, the soul and the body, adulthood and childhood, morality and survival, madness and sanity, to name some. In his writing for both young and adult readers, Winton explores boundaries and alienation and the tensions created by them, for, as he says with a simplicity that belies his finesse, 'If everything was happy and resolved I'd have nothing to write about.'⁶

Winton's offhand statement opens a tantalising window into his creative process, but for authors seeking to develop their skills, it begs the question of how, in

⁵ *Scumbuster* page numbers refer to the Australian edition (Sydney: Pan MacMillan Australia, 1993).

⁶ ABC Radio National. Interview: *Life Matters* with Natasha Mitchell, 30 October 2012. [<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/tim-winton-signs-of-life/4334124>; Accessed 30 October 2012.]

a *practical* sense, does he so successfully convey the drama born of this tension? Consciously or unconsciously, how does Winton craft the many elements of storytelling to achieve such powerful and engaging results? Germane to this discussion is the further question: Does Winton vary his approach in writing for young readers and for adults? And if he does — how, in what way and to what extent?

I hope it will be helpful to approach these questions by narrowing the focus to the single theme of alienation and the boundaries associated with it, concepts in Winton's work that, as mentioned, I personally find compelling. By looking at the various elements within *Dirt Music* and *Legend* (characterisation, language, setting, etc.) and using alienation and boundaries as a reference point, I am curious to see if there are distinctions in Winton's technique between his writing for, on the one hand, an adult audience and, on the other hand, his writing for a predominantly young audience that might be anchored to their respective audiences.

True, there are numerous guides and courses on the subject of 'how to write for children' that offer guidelines to writers of young readers' fiction.⁷ These are generally helpful and I've subscribed to them with modest results in terms of publication. But I wanted to go beyond these generalised guidelines to look at how a single author, highly regarded by literary measures and resiliently successful in terms of his young readership (the *Lockie Leonard* books are enjoyed twenty-odd years after their publication), varied his technique, assuming he does, from one realm to the other.

In this discussion, I will first look at Winton's treatment of alienation and boundaries in *Dirt Music*, focusing on narrative elements in the loose and intermingling categories of plot, themes, content, character, setting, structure, point of view and narration.⁸ I will then focus on *Legend*, using the same broad categories of analysis, drawing attention to significant similarities and differences as they arise, in particular, as they relate to audience. From time to time, too, I will draw attention to instances where Winton has drawn from his personal experience in bringing his stories to life because this, I feel, is an important element of the creative process. I

⁷ Current examples would be Sandy Asher's *Writing It Right! How Successful Children's Authors Revise and Sell Their Stories*, Martha Robinson's *Writing For Children*, or the Australian College of Journalism's correspondence course, *Professional Children's Writing*.

⁸ This list is both an amalgamation and simplification of numerous texts such as James Wood's *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage Books, 2008) and John Mullan's *How Novels Work* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

hope that, by this approach, some useful comparisons will emerge on Winton's techniques in creating for children and for adults that will add meaningfully to the discourse on Winton himself and on young readers' literature in general. More selfishly, I hope that, as a writer of fiction for young readers myself, I may gain some insight into Winton's methods and concerns that might be absorbed for the good into my own writing practice.

On the matter of how we define a book for young readers as against a book for adults, there is lively debate. One aspect, though, appears unchallenged — that young readers' literature is defined by its audience rather than its content. No other genre is similarly categorised, with the possible exception, cited by Perry Nodelman, of 'popular literature' — blockbuster novels like those of Stephen King or Danielle Steele — who are categorised in anticipation of their being read by a wide cross-section of consumers.⁹

John Rowe Townsend says the only true definition of a children's book is 'a book which appears on the children's list of a publisher'.¹⁰ Publishing companies decide whether or not a text is for young readers, regardless of its author's intention and, on occasion, of its content and style. In a recent keynote address, Anthony Eaton demonstrated such anomalies, presenting three novel excerpts, all of which contained a similar level of 'mature content' (for example, marital/sexual issues for protagonists in their twenties).¹¹ The two texts with the more complex language were being marketed as 'Young Adult' and the text more simplistic in tone as 'Adult'. Another instance of clouded demarcation is a 2012 marketing brochure from Random House Australia — 'Books for Secondary Schools' — which directs educators to numerous novels commonly considered adult, for example, John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* 'suitable for' Year 7s, Gail Jones's *Sorry* for Years 11 and 12, and the Human Rights Commission's *The Stolen Children — Their Stories* for Years 9 and 10.¹²

⁹ Perry Nodelman. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, p.3.

¹⁰ Cited in Peter Hunt. *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991, pp.62-63.

¹¹ 'An Historical Perspective on Young Adult Fiction'. *Celebrate Reading National Conference*. The Literature Centre. Fremantle, Western Australia. 26-27 October 2012.

¹² Random House Australia, Brochure, *Books for Secondary Schools, 2012 Issue*.

However, while recognising that classification is invidious, I agree with Peter Hunt, who says Townsend's definition of children's literature has little practical value: 'The subject needs some delimitation if it is to be manageable. [...] It will be clear, from a careful reading,' says Hunt, 'who a book is designed for: whether the book is on the side of the child totally, whether it is for the developing child, or whether it is aiming somewhere over the child's head.'¹³

On the thorny issue of classification, Winton expressed his ideal in an interview with Jeri Kroll: 'The best kids' books are those that everyone enjoys.'¹⁴ The unfortunate fact is, though, that as our leisure time becomes imposed upon, making the reading of fiction seem a luxury, we as adults naturally respond to 'facilitating' filters, such as sections of the library or bookshop — the taxonomy of literature — that steer us away from 'books for young readers' and that avenue of delight and satisfaction.

In this discussion, I am using the term 'young readers' as against 'children' in an attempt to more precisely (or less imprecisely) signal the audience for whom the *Lockie Leonard* series is designed. The historically more common 'children's books' classification can be misleading, I think, in that it tends to evoke images of picture books or books for very early readers. Whilst Winton has written for these 'early reader' categories — *Jesse*, *Bugalugs Bum Thief*, *The Deep* — those works are not focal here, for reasons that will later be explained. The term 'books for young readers' comfortably incorporates texts for adolescents and pre-adolescents — including the label of 'Young Adult' commonly applied to the *Lockie Leonard* books — in a way that 'books for children' does not. It seems reasonable, though, to assign some sort of age limit to what, in this study, 'young readers' refers. Andrew Melrose observes that, broadly speaking, the oldest age category on the fiction shelves in libraries is for twelve to fifteen year olds — what he terms 'young teen fiction'.¹⁵ Age group categories, he says, reflect in general terms not only length but 'the level of the story in terms of experience, knowledge and knowability'.¹⁶ The inside cover of *Lockie Leonard*, *Scumbuster* in its American edition invites readers of 'Ages 10–14'. As this

¹³ Hunt, op. cit., pp.63-64.

¹⁴ Jeri Kroll. 'An Interview with Tim Winton', *Southerly: A Review of Australian Literature*, Vol. 51(2), 1991, p.223.

¹⁵ The more recent 'Young Adult' label is, he says, 'open to slippage'. (Andrew Melrose. *Here Comes the Bogeyman. Exploring contemporary issues in writing for children*. London, New York: Routledge, 2012, p.73.)

¹⁶ Ibid.

complies closely with Melrose's observation, it seems reasonable to settle upon the age of fifteen as the approximate upper limit for what in this study is termed fiction for 'young readers'.

The reference to categories and labels raises another dilemma. This discussion proposes to compare Winton's writing techniques in addressing different audiences. But how can one be sure for which category of audience — young or adult — Winton was writing in a given text? When Richard Rossiter asked Winton in 2004, if he 'was conscious of writing something called a kids' book', Winton responded: 'Hard to say in simple terms. I'm usually expending energy imagining my way into the story first and foremost, then figuring a way, by trial and error, of telling it the best way I can and then keeping a kind of organic consistency while I'm doing that. Keeping the voice, I suppose. The question isn't really whether kids or adults will like it. More an issue of whether I'm still interested myself. I'm easily bored.'¹⁷ Earlier in the interview, though, when asked if he found writing for children distracting while he was working on an adult book, Winton embraced the notion of different approaches for different audiences. 'I use it deliberately as a means of avoiding being stuck,' he said. He went on to say, 'I used to literally move between three desks. I guess I see it as all the same work; it's all story. In fact characters from adult novels drift in and out of the kids' stuff because the settings are often the same.' (One guesses that his phrase 'used to' reflects the fact that in 2004 it was six or seven years since he'd published for children, rather than a change in writing habits.)

The only certainty is that, in this study, one is comparing works 'deemed by the publisher's marketing department to be written for' young readers and 'deemed by the publisher's marketing department to be written for' adults.

My choice for this study of *Lockie Leonard, Legend*, within the context of the *Lockie Leonard* series, was straightforward for there is clear indication that Winton wrote the series with young readers in mind. In a 1991 interview shortly after the release of the first of the three books, *Human Torpedo*, Winton said he considered it to be a family book: 'I'm hoping that parents will get as much of a kick out of it as kids will'.¹⁸ But he also spoke of acquiring the confidence to write for young readers from having his own children, adding that the style of the book and especially the dialogue

¹⁷ Richard Rossiter. 'The Writer and the Community: An Interview with Tim Winton', *Westerly: An Annual Review*, Vol. 49, 2004, p.32.

¹⁸ Kroll, op.cit., p.223.

came easily to him because he had never been able ‘to drag [him]self out’ of teen culture.¹⁹ It was a distinctive style that carried through the second book, *Scumbuster*, and on to the third and final book four years later, *Legend*. *Legend*, then, meets Barbara Wall’s criterion: ‘If a story is written *to* children, then it is also *for* children, even though it may also be for adults ... It is not what is said, but the way it is said, and to whom it is said, which marks a book for children.’²⁰ There is an accord, it seems, between the audience Winton had in mind and the category in which the *Lockie Leonard* books have been marketed. It is this intersection of the writer’s intention and the book’s perceived category that makes any of the *Lockie Leonard* series ideal young readers’ texts on which to focus a discussion of Winton’s technique when shifting from one category of audience to another. Added to this is the fact that alienation and boundaries, in particular that of childhood–adulthood, are central themes.

Other books by Winton might have been considered, for Winton has written many novels and stories voraciously consumed by young readers (as part of high school curricula if for no other reason), such as *Cloudstreet*. But only *Lockie Leonard*, *Human Torpedo*, the picture book, *Jesse*, and the early reader, *Bugalugs Bum Thief* were recognised by Rossiter and Jacobs in 1993 as being books for children.²¹ The picture book, *The Deep*, and the remaining two *Lockie Leonard* books, *Scumbuster* and *Legend*, would bring this list up to date at the close of 2012, with the possible addition of *Blueback*, widely considered a ‘crossover’ book (that is, for children and adults). Books with young or teenage protagonists such as *An Open Swimmer* and *That Eye the Sky* were listed among the adult books, as would be *Breath* in an updated edition. Winton may well have hoped these would be read by young as well as older readers but to include them in this discussion would be muddying and ultimately of little help. *Jesse*, *The Deep* and *Bugalugs Bum Thief*, though obviously intended by Winton for young readers, contain minimal text and therefore do not give the scope of technique required here. The *Lockie Leonard* books, though, combine the thorough development of elements — structure, plot, language, theme, etc — that one would

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.222-23.

²⁰ Barbara Wall. *The Narrator’s Voice: The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction*. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1991, pp. 2, 272; cited in Richard Rossiter. ‘Speaking to Adults, Speaking to Children: Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* and *Lockie Leonard*, *Human Torpedo*’, *Southerly: A Review of Australian Literature*, Vol. 53(3), 1993, p.98.

²¹ Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs (eds). *Reading Tim Winton*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993, p.ii.

hope of an adult book, with the correlation discussed above between intended audience and readers. Of the three books in the series, *Legend* is the most contemplative. There is deep significance to the narrative of alienation, incited by Lockie's mother's depression. It is also the book in which Winton effectively kills off the 'child' protagonist, Lockie, by having him cross the boundary from childhood to adulthood, the mantle of desperate, gawky early adolescent transferring to Lockie's younger brother Phillip.

In an interview with Michael McGirr,²² Winton revealed he'd never expected to write more than one *Lockie Leonard* book. He'd stopped at *Lockie Leonard*, *Legend* because, as he put it, 'I thought I'd let the poor bloke be. Let him grow up in private, in peace.' He could have kept the series going for the money, he said, but he wanted to do something else. That something else appears to have been *Dirt Music*, which was published in 2001. The Film Australia documentary, *The Edge of the World*, completed in 1997,²³ shows Winton contemplating (through Winton's narration) and researching *Dirt Music* at a wilderness camp in the far north of Western Australia. The novel, Winton has said, took seven years to write²⁴, which means he began it no later than 1994 and, accounting for production time, most likely earlier. *Dirt Music* — Winton's 'something else' — does not meet Wall's criterion of being written *for children*, and I think may be uncontroversially assumed to be a book written for adults.

Dirt Music is the focus of Winton's adult writing here for two factors. The first is its proximity in time of publication to *Lockie Leonard*, *Legend*. *Legend* was published in 1997 and *Dirt Music* in 2001. No novels or story collections intervened, only the picture book, *The Deep* (1998). I'm using the two books — one for young readers and one for adults, written in part over the same period of time (given it was begun by 1994) and published in close proximity — to provide a snapshot of a writer in a particular point of his writing journey; that style and technique in the two texts might be less altered by factors associated with the passage of time.

²² Michael McGirr. *Tim Winton: The Writer and his Work*. South Yarra, Victoria: Macmillan Education Australia, 1999, p.80.

²³ Don Featherstone. *The Edge of the World* [Documentary]. Lindfield, NSW: Film Australia, 1997. [1997 on 'in-film' credits; 1998 on label.]

²⁴ Paul Daley. 'Dirt Smart'.

[<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/05/29/1022569782495.html>; Accessed 19 November 2012.]

The second reason for my choice of *Dirt Music* is that, in its exploration of wilderness, rejection and haunting pasts, it is as powerful an example as exists of Winton's writing on the themes of alienation and boundaries.

In 1993, Richard Rossiter, in an essay addressing perceptions of children's versus adult literature, found that in Winton's *Human Torpedo* and *Cloudstreet* there were more similarities (content, structure) than differences (narrative voice).²⁵ So, twenty years after Rossiter approached Winton's work in terms of defining children's literature, I'd like now to narrow the focus to, firstly, *Dirt Music* and, secondly, *Legend* — specifically to Winton's rendering of alienation and boundaries within them — to see what comparisons might emerge in terms of their creation.

Dirt Music is a starkly striking work that has become an iconic Australian novel. It combines distilled, intense characterisation and narration with spectacularly depicted wide-ranging geographical setting. Thematically, it addresses alienation, especially self-alienation, and the search for one's place within the contexts of human expectation (society's and one's own) and one's past. Boundaries, in *Dirt Music*, are a theme in themselves and emerge as instruments of alienation. Other key themes are humankind's spiritual connection with the earth and the redemptive power of music.

The narrative concerns two main characters — Luther (Lu) Fox and Georgie Jutland — and two predominant locations — the fishing town of White Point (a fictional version of Lancelin) and surrounds, and Coronation Gulf (a fictional version of Admiralty Gulf) in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.²⁶ Lu Fox is the last surviving member of what had been a socially marginal but close family. Beset by grief at the loss the year before of his loved ones, he is living a ghost-like life on the outskirts of White Point, subsisting by poaching the local professionals' lobster pots and selling the catch in Perth. In stopping by her stranded vehicle, Fox connects with Georgie Jutland, the dispirited de facto wife of the White Point top dog, Jim Buckridge. Fox and Georgie's relationship brings down the wrath of the local White Point community that doesn't like to see its leader humbled. When his dog is killed and his truck shot up, as much to escape the burden of living itself as to escape

²⁵ Rossiter, 1993, op.cit., pp.92-97.

²⁶ This interpretation of 'real-life' locations is confirmed in Sahlia Ben-Messahel's *Mind the Country: Tim Winton's Fiction*. Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 2006, Prelims — map, unpagged.

imminent harm, Fox heads north to an island in the remote Kimberley where for months he attempts to live in solitude free of the human race and the trappings of modernity. While Georgie, in White Point, disentangles her feelings towards Fox and Buckridge, Fox meanwhile, in the Kimberley, realises that a life of wandering and solitude is untenable for him. The narrative ends with Fox rescuing Georgie when the sea plane in which she and Buckridge have been searching for him ditches into the water and Georgie, in turn, bringing back Fox from the brink of death.

Winton articulated the underlying thrust of the novel, his motivation in writing it — the question of to what extent a person needs society — during the filming of a documentary about him in the mid-nineties, in the early stages of his writing and researching of *Dirt Music*. This documentary, *The Edge of the World*, was located in part at the One Tree Beach camp in the Kimberley–Admiralty Gulf region in which *Dirt Music* was substantially set. Winton said:

Part of what I'm chasing up here is this idea of disappearing into landscape, about somebody who's a fugitive from his own kind — you know, from the human race. Every time I come here I imagine what it would be like to be here alone. The question I always ask myself is how long would I last before I went mad. Which is a kind of a moot point for the novel, for the purposes of this book [...]. What happens when all the other stuff's gone, what happens when all the trimmings are left out, when the only conjunctions you make are the relationships you have to the landscape and the physical environment around you — just the business of shelter, food. What happens to you then? I wonder. I really wonder.²⁷

In the completed novel, Winton explored this question lavishly through the figure of Fox, but he also explored alienation through the other characters, particularly Georgie Jutland and Jim Buckridge. The various manifestations of alienation in Winton's main characters, and the causes, or catalysts, behind them, will now be looked at — firstly Lu Fox, then Georgie Jutland and, lastly, Jim Buckridge.

²⁷ Featherstone, op. cit.

The alienation of Winton's central character of Lu Fox, as already noted, is the thematic impetus of the novel. Bruce Bennett²⁸ observes that 'the primary basis of community in Winton's fiction is the family' and this is exemplified in Fox who, with his family all dead, hasn't much holding him to earth. Fox is a man alienated from both the community and from himself. His family had always been marginal, his parents before they died working their watermelon farm in harsh country on the outskirts of White Point. Similarly to Lu, his father would supplement his income by poaching. Fox tells Georgie that his father used to 'liberate a few lobsters from the pros' pots. Boil em up, sell em on the sly down the highway' (98). The family, although loving and easy among themselves, was considered contemptible but for their gift of music, which he, his brother and sister-in-law hired out occasionally in the White Point community. When Georgie learns Fox's identity, she already knows his family by reputation as the 'disreputable Foxes' (98). As Avis, a White Point resident, sums it up: 'Those Foxes. They were low. And thieves. And druggies' (283). Now there is just Lu.

Lu Fox is also alienated from within. Fox's withdrawal to the wilderness is a necessary escape from those who would do him harm, but it is his *self*-withdrawal — his need to escape his present — that propels the narrative. Life as Fox had known it evaporated with his family's tragic accident the year before. Now thirty-five, he had been an orphan since his teens. His older brother Darkie, Darkie's wife Sal (a White Point local) and Fox had 'more or less grown up together, the three of them' (112). While Darkie and Sal made music on the verandah, Lu had kept the farm going and nurtured their children, Bullet and Bird, loving them as his own. All were killed in the rollover on the farm's dirt driveway the previous year. Fox no longer plays his guitar.

Fox's whole life now is one of, mentally as well as physically, slipping through the cracks. This peripheral lifestyle of stealing under cover of darkness is echoed by Winton in Lu Fox's surname. After the last funeral Fox burned all his papers and went off the grid. He explains to Georgie:

I did think about goin north [...] Just wanted to leave everythin and bolt. You know, disappear. I already felt like a ghost. [...] Like I was dead anyway but the news still hadn't

²⁸ Bennett, op. cit. p.40.

got through to my body [...] But then I thought, I'm gone already. Why not disappear without leavin'? (98-99)

After this, in solitude on the riverbank at the foot of his property, his reflections are a poignant summary of his sense of alienation from within, his need to cut himself off from himself:

How might he have told her that the way he lives is a project of forgetting? All this time he's set out wilfully to disremember. And some days it really is possible, in a life full of physical imperatives you can do it, but it's not the same as forgetting. Forgetting is a mercy, an accident. So it's been no triumph, but it's got him here, hasn't it? Through a whole year without burning up. (103-4)

A passage set in Broome before Fox heads into the wilderness articulates his impulse to lose himself even more deeply and lays bare his sense of alienation in White Point:

What he wants is to slope off into the bush somewhere, do what he should have done more than a year ago instead of slinking around the edge of White Point like a feral dog. If you want to be left alone then clear out. Go somewhere clean. Some place with water and food so you're not skulking at the margins to keep yourself alive. A place where you can stand alone, completely alone. No roads, towns, farms — no bloody civilians. Just walk off into the trees. It's been lurking in his mind for days, beaten down by talk, by the frigging ordeal of other people and his own numbness. The idea of a place to be truly alone in — wilderness. (294)

Eventually, through Fox, Winton addresses 'the moot point of the novel', quoted earlier — the question of how long a person could last in solitude, in total alienation, from society. Fox emerges from a fever and realises that he needs the rootedness he had been trying to escape:

He's not a nomad, he can't even imagine such a life. It's not just exhaustion that disqualifies him but his instinct to linger,

to repeat, to embellish. A way of living isn't enough. Fox has to stay, to inhabit a place. [...] He feels he's dragging a life and a whole snarled net of memory across foreign country. (419)

Georgie Jutland, too, is an alienated character, although less desperately than Fox. Where Fox's alienation is central thematically, Georgie's might be considered to contribute more in terms of giving momentum to the plot. Georgie is alienated from her current de facto family, her family in Perth, and from the White Point community. When Winton introduces her, she is feeling marooned in White Point. She is three years into a de facto relationship with Jim Buckridge, a man whose potential for violence is a backdrop to their relationship, despite seeming a 'decent enough' man (9), and unwelcome substitute mother to his sons, Brad, eleven, and Josh, nine, whose mother died of cancer. Having been a sailor, she recognises the way things have become as being 'dead in the water' (11).

The boys, with whom she has clearly once had a fond relationship, are significant in Georgie's unhappiness. She has become 'a meek puff of steam [...] in the boys' playroom' (10). They have become resentful, treating Georgie more as a housekeeper than carer or confidante, and rejecting the tenderness she tries to bestow on them as she has in the past. Josh, in one scene, furiously holds a photo of his mother over Georgie's head, saying 'Stranger danger. Stranger. Danger' before swatting her about the face with it (49). In another scene, when Brad complains of the new teacher who wants to form a choir and Georgie responds, 'Great. You used to sing so much. You've got a lovely voice,' Brad stings her with, 'Not anymore [...] And no *woman*'ll make me' (35).

Georgie eschews her family and her privileged background in Perth, describing herself as 'a refugee from the winner's circle' (100). (As with Fox, Georgie's background is echoed in her surname, the Western Australian byway of Jutland Parade being an icon of privilege and wealth.) Georgie, who has recently turned forty, thinks of White Point as a 'personality junkyard' and counts herself among those who have 'washed up [there] to hide or to lick their wounds' (17). She alienates herself, too, from the White Pointers and their social-climbing hypocrisy; they, in turn, are suspicious of her:

Socially she had always remained ambivalent, not because she came from the world of private schools and yacht clubs but because there was something dispiriting about hearing the wives of illiterate millionaires complain of the habits of crew families, at how squalid their women were, how foulmouthed their children. These were women maybe five years out of the van park themselves, who hid their own shiners beneath duty-free makeup and thought of themselves already as gentry. Georgie had always held back and she knew what it cost her. There was always some lingering doubt about Georgie. She wondered if they felt her faking it. [...] Besides, she had never been much of a joiner. (18)

The character Jim Buckridge is alienated from the man he would like to be by the unwelcome legacy of his father and a haunting past. Like Fox, Buckridge lives in the shadow of dead loved ones — a mother who committed suicide and a troubled, violent father after whom, in conforming to his father's and the White Point community's expectations, Buckridge has unconsciously shaped himself. His father is described thus: 'Big Bill was, by all accounts, not merely a man's man, but a bastard's bastard whose ruthless cunning was not confined to fishing' (37). In Broome, he tells Georgie of his father's effect:

By the time I came along that was all I knew, this scary, vicious bastard. That's what they miss in White Point. This prick I hated. I couldn't even tell you the things he did. [...] Jesus, sometimes I can feel him in me like some kind of poison. You can feel it's passed on — [...] The fucking good old days. I wasn't a nice man. (398-99)

Buckridge, nearing fifty, is imbued with bullying malevolence: 'Well, what're you waiting for — a printed fuckin invitation?' (31). The violence inherent in Buckridge — conveyed in retrospect by Fox, in reflection by Buckridge himself, or at other times in the present action (e.g. the corporal punishment of his son) — is pervasive. But he regrets his past deeds and his behaviour toward his wife Debbie, whom he loved. He sees the world as 'a vengeful balance sheet' (401) according to which he's in debt. He is anxious to make amends and prove he is not a bad person — that the past is

escapable. Feeling responsible for Fox's disappearance, he drags Georgie on a search for Fox, hoping that by delivering him to her he will atone for his shortcomings — 'Prove to myself that I'm different — and get free. At least in my head,' he tells Georgie (401).²⁹ But Buckridge is emotionally strangled and thus thwarted. In the wilderness, Georgie wakes in the middle of the night: 'In the moonlight Jim's head was cradled in his arms and she knew he hadn't slept yet. She sensed that he wanted to talk. She fell asleep waiting for him to speak' (417).

Buckridge, throughout most of the novel, is the villain, being wrongly assumed by Georgie and Fox to be at the root of the violence towards Fox — the killing of his dog, the shooting up of his truck — before his run north, and being tainted in Fox's mind by Fox's memories of him as a cruel teenager. But Buckridge's earnest attempts to redeem himself against the odds make him a moving character.

Both Buckridge and Fox are alienated by the legacies of their past, but there is a subtle difference. Fox wants to reach a point at which he can cope with tragic events of his past, whereas Buckridge shuns his past altogether.

Winton's fictional township of White Point³⁰, while not homogeneous enough to be considered a character in my view, is an ongoing subtle source of violence that exacerbates the alienation of all three main characters — Fox, Georgie and Buckridge — in different ways. It is the malevolent backdrop to a large portion of the narrative. White Point is depicted as comprised of aggressive types who give their boats names like *Slayer* and *Black Bitch* (30); its females are gilded 'lobster molls'; its social hierarchy is based on wealth and a capacity for violence. There are exceptions, though, within the unsavoury populace — colourful or likeable minor characters who add sparkle and veracity to the narrative, like the rough-as-guts mechanic Beaver, Georgie's hippie friend Rachel or Yogi Behr, the volunteer ambulance driver.

At this point, the issue of violence in the novel in general calls for a closer look, as it is a significant factor in relation to alienation and boundaries. There is actually little outright violence, but there are violent undertones and implications throughout, chiefly through Buckridge, White Point and its rough inhabitants, and

²⁹ In her article, 'Coming and going: a literature of place. Australian fiction 2001-2002' (*Westerly*, Vol. 47, Nov 2002, p.42), Shirley Walker calls Buckridge's impulse towards atonement rather than revenge 'one of the surprises and strengths of the novel'.

³⁰ White Point is a partial representation of the fishing town of Lancelin where Winton has spent many years (stated in Ben-Messahel, *op.cit.*, p.4, but inferable from physical depictions such as appear in McGirr, *op. cit.*, pp.1-2.)

through the spectre of the accident that killed Fox's family, in both instances this undertone deepening their alienation. Winton doesn't pull back, either, from depicting events in harrowing detail. We see the gruesome aftermath (the death itself is not witnessed by the reader) of Fox's companionable dog having been killed by his master's truck at the edge of the White Point lagoon: The dog lies 'in a stain of itself on the chain's end. Fragments of hair and meat discolour the sand' (131). In a passage of violence received emotionally rather than imposed by another, the reader becomes witness, in retrospect, to the incident at the heart of Fox's alienation — his discovery, one by one (in the truck, across the limestone track, at the stony edge of the paddock), of his dead, brutalised loved ones. The scene is related in the intimate slow-motion detail of the traumatised — Sal 'just a horrible wet noise', the smell of 'shit and Juicy Fruit', 'the hot rain of her urine', Bullet's head 'rent like a cantaloupe, still smelling of soap, pyjamas clean', 'Bird. Like a fallen kite there in her nightie, breathing, breathing but there's no way he can lift her', 'the wheatbag noise of her on the dirt' (116-9). In this lengthy scene, Winton shows the reader no mercy.

Moving from the manifestation of alienation within the main characters, we find that the fluidity and futility of boundaries in *Dirt Music* is, in itself, a theme. Winton uses boundaries both to engender alienation in his characters and to impart the sense of it to his readers. The notion of boundaries, in many instances, has entrenched or deepened his characters' alienation. Boundaries that Winton draws on to this effect — which have *agency* in the characters' alienation — are those between the past and the present, acceptability and unacceptability, battlers and losers, and love for family and hateful resentment. Other boundaries come to light, too, which Winton taps into in order to convey to the reader the sensation of his characters' alienation — boundaries used in a more strategic or crafting sense, rather than as agents of alienation themselves. These are the boundaries between life and death, and the conscious and subconscious. One boundary that serves both purposes — creating and conveying alienation — is that between the colonized and the wild. These also warrant closer examination.

The blurring of the past with the present — the past's unwelcome infiltration into the present — is pervasive in *Dirt Music* and is a wellspring of alienation in its main characters. In a 2004 interview with Richard Rossiter, Winton said 'The past has

its consolations but often it's just a knife twisting in an old wound.³¹ In Fox's case, the more recent past — the death of his family — haunts his present and is the major plot catalyst of the novel; in Buckridge's case, the twisting knife is a legacy of violence. The mechanic, Beaver, tries to open Georgie's eyes to the fear that plagues her de facto husband:

Someone like you, the past is just an awkward place to visit. That's how much regret there is. Some people ... you can't even imagine, Georgie. [...] Some men, he hissed, some men aren't embarrassed about things they've done, Georgie. They don't get pangs about their past. They're fuckin terrified of what they've been. And they're scared that they might be the same person they used to be. (287)

His words paint a picture of Buckridge's self-alienation. Buckridge says at a later point, 'It's like the past keeps at you. Whatever you do, however you change' (436).

The infiltration of the past also impacts on the fluid boundary between 'goodness' and 'badness' — what might be regarded as acceptability and unacceptability. By this fickle distinction, Fox is outcast and Buckridge is elevated. In both Fox and Buckridge there is an interesting dichotomy between perceived 'goodness' and 'badness', influenced by events of their pasts. Fox is on the wrong side of the boundary, perceived as 'unacceptable'. The deaths of his family members have cast a pall of 'unluckiness' over him; he and his family were notorious layabouts; he is a poacher, pulling the lobster posts of men who have paid a hefty licence fee to fish legally; and in the wilderness he resorts to thieving to sustain his self-imposed exile. Yet Fox is to the reader, by most measures, 'a good man' — morally honest, humble and caring. In Buckridge, the perceptions are reversed. In White Point, Buckridge is admired for his professional success and natural leadership, and is capable of grand generosity. Yet he harbours a callous, domineering strain and a past in which violence, learned from his father, is implied. Like all good villains, though, Buckridge is a complex character. He is capable of love and rues elements of his past. He has well-meaning impulses on which he acts, if clumsily, in an attempt to redeem himself, even though these impulses would be seen as weakness by those White Pointers who admire him.

³¹ Rossiter, *op.cit.*, p.38.

Aligned with the notion of acceptability, in *Dirt Music* (as in *Legend*) Winton touches on the unreliable boundary between battlers and losers. That Fox is the wrong side of this categorisation is part of his alienation from the White Point community. When his brother and sister-in-law were alive, the Fox family had been grudgingly tolerated for their musical ability, in particular his brother. In the wilderness, Fox reflects on this:

The boy could play a wet string bag. It was what saved you all from complete disgrace. It made you battlers, not losers; it was what earned you that last grudging shred of respect in the district.... (378)

But with the family's death, that shred has dissolved. Long regarded as contemptible because of their poaching and general lack of industry, they are now considered unlucky as well. When a White Pointer passes Fox on the road he crosses himself 'as though warding off the evil eye' (33). Compare this with Buckridge whom the White Pointers see as 'their talisman, the lucky one, the Golden Boy' (398). Buckridge is not so much a battler in this context as a clear winner.

Another boundary that undermines Fox, in his grief, is the clouded one between love for family and hateful resentment of them — what Sahlia Ben-Messahel describes as 'brawling love and loving hate'.³² Fox harbours guilty resentment of his dead brother and sister-in-law, which he acknowledges only in the Kimberley wilderness. Fox catches at a memory of picking watermelons:

Hot Christmas. The sun on the back of his neck. And he looks up to see them, Darkie and Sal, sprawled on the verandah steps watching him work. (371)³³

In another instance, Fox, in extreme pain, has what he calls 'disloyal thoughts':

Neither of them — you might as well bloody admit it — neither of them ever lifted a finger. It was always you out in the melons, you at the fences and up to your elbows in the generator, you in the kitchen and at the bloody school parent nights. [...] And mostly you didn't mind, you were happy to

³² Ben-Messahel, op.cit., p.47.

³³ This idea of an older sibling taking a younger one for granted is repeated in a more bitter and bullying way with Frank and Max Leaper in *The Turning*'s stories 'Sand' and 'Family'.

be along. [...] Besides, there were the kids, there was the music and you were your brother's brother. [...] [But] the music wasn't in them. They barely felt it. [...] Both of them were as careless with it as they were with their children.

There it is, he tells himself in a cloud of pain, you've thought it. (378-9)

Fox asks himself why, then, he has lived the previous year in homage to Darkie and Sal, and admits:

Because you loved them. You did it out of love. And owning up to what they were really like won't change that. (381)

In conveying Fox's alienation to the reader, Winton utilises the sometimes indistinct boundary between life and death — breathing or not breathing, feeling or not feeling. Life and living are barely relevant to Fox. We see Fox's desolation by the river that runs near his farmhouse: 'He stares along the dappled bank. As a boy he thought that place was alive somehow. [...] And now [...] there is only work. It's a world without grace. Unless the only grace left is simply not feeling the dead or sensing the past' (104). In another scene, Fox pushes his body's limits when diving, in no hurry to return to the surface: 'He kicks up lazily. From too far and too long down. Poisoned and happy' (127).

Winton taps into the boundary between the colonized and the wild to serve both purposes alluded to — as an agent of alienation within Fox and to convey Fox's alienation to the reader. Fox is drawn to the wilderness precisely because of its distinction from places that are colonized (i.e. the townships and highways of 'civilisation') or even inhabited by an indigenous population. But once there, he struggles in his nomadic isolation and his sense of alienation deepens. In heightening to the reader Fox's physical alienation, Winton also draws on the inherent irrelevance of boundaries and maps, betraying the fluidity and arbitrariness of the distinctions they make. Having described the vastness of the area into which Fox has paid a pilot to take him, Fox meets two Aboriginal men, the younger of whom, Axle, furiously burns Fox's precious maps. The older man, Menzies, says 'Just trouble, maps. [...] Like they suck everything up.' Axle adds, 'Go on the country. [...] Not on the map.' Cut adrift, Fox feels helpless: 'And what the fuck does that mean?' With the

destruction of the colonialists' map, the land is now 'wild' and Fox must find his bearings by different means.

Aside from rendering his character's thoughts, emotions and experience, in *Dirt Music* (as in most of his work) Winton plumbs the narrative element of setting to further his aims — in this case, the evincing of alienation. In *Dirt Music*, we find that landscape, especially wild landscape, is particularly instrumental in both communicating the sense of alienation to readers and engendering it within characters. Winton draws extensively on what he sees as the 'mystery' of the Western Australian land.³⁴ His strangely spiritual landscapes — from the glaring dunes of White Point, past the mesas of the Pilbara, to the gulfs and archipelagos of the Kimberley — are indispensable in developing for the reader a clear sense of Fox's atavistic journey, inviting them along visually as Fox fulfils his urge to leave behind the trappings of his life and return to, as Winton expressed it, 'just the business of shelter, food.'³⁵

But the landscape is itself an agent in the deepening of Fox's alienation, as we have seen. When Fox heads north, therefore, Winton's depiction of landscape becomes integral in terms, not only of setting, but also of plot — Fox leaving behind the safety of land he knows for country that is vast and unwelcoming. Fox's view from a light plane of the country into which he is about to be landed and left is described thus:

The great delta is webbed with rivulets and tide wrinkles and where the Fitzroy spills into King Sound the water is the colour of milk chocolate. [...] The plains, with their sparse, grey tufts of mulga scrub, rise into the high skeletal disarray of the sandstone ranges where rivers run like green gashes toward the sea. All rigid geometry falls away; no roads, no fences, just a confusion of colour. Out at the horizon the jagged, island-choked coast. (298-99)

When Fox is inhabiting this same wild land, Winton from time to time draws on the mystical dimension of his surroundings, depicting them in a way that illustrates to the reader Fox's hyper-alertness in and to his solitude:

³⁴ Rossiter, 2004, op.cit., p.33.

³⁵ Featherstone, op.cit.

The night sky is purple now and red stars spin earthward. [...] He's awake. Not drone-stoned but conscious and present [...] [T]he sky is wild with red falling stars as though he's dreamt them or sung them up. (372)

Frequently, within this vast wilderness, Winton draws in the focus almost breathlessly, using miniscule detail to convey Fox's transcendent state, his spiritual connection with his surroundings, within his diminishing physical condition:

Dark falls. The air quivers. He oils his eyes and feels the sound in his throat. Feels every living thing, each heating, cooling form lean in on him. His skin crawls with things that were and with those pending. (451)

A similar narrow focus on the boab tree in the instance below, illustrates Fox's yearning for companionship, for Georgie:

At dusk he gets up and shuffles down to stand beside himself. He touches her, breathes in her nutty odour, shudders as his hip brushes hers. [...] It's warm-blooded even after dark and its skin so smooth, its clefts so sculpted. (405)

Later, Fox thinks: 'He'll have to go in because every poor tree and turtle, any bird, every creature will end up having to be her' if he stays (451).

Winton doesn't only put wild places to work, though, in underscoring his characters' alienation: like a modern-day Brueghel, he interweaves into his descriptions of the land sketches of its people and their obsessions. It is a warts-and-all rendering, incisive and often cruel, although sometimes affectionate. In the following passage, there is a blending of natural, man-made and human detail that gives a clear sense of what it is that Fox wishes to withdraw from:

At the Payne's Find roadhouse Fox [...] buys a Coke and sits in the sweltering shade while his driver, having made it plain he wants to eat alone, hoes into a baconburger at a table inside.

Caravans towed by Pajeros and Range Rovers pull in from the north and line up for fuel. Old people with baggy shorts

and leathery tans cross the oil-tamped dirt of the forecourt to the reeking bogs. (219-20)

Similarly, the scene Winton builds when Georgie and Buckridge arrive in Broome is a 'peoplescape' that makes Georgie feel 'bewildered by the crowds' and 'confused within herself about being [there]' (392). For Georgie, the passage illustrates her inability to find repose; for the reader it acts as a vibrant foil to the asceticism of Fox in his island-wilderness setting, which has been described on the immediately preceding page.

Georgie sat listless and heat-stunned by the resort pool while on sun-lounges all around her, fellow guests tinkered with laptops and spoke into cell phones. [...] She walked down through coconut palms to the beach where red soil faded into white sand. The water was opaque, turquoise. There was no wind. Down here it was all camel rides and thong swimwear. White boys and girls played didgeridoos. Someone in orange shorts dangled from a parachute towed by a speedboat. (391)

The inanity of the human activity — including the trampling of ancient traditions with girls playing didgeridoos and the general superimposing on the land of unattuned people (laptops and cell phones) — envelops the two lines of quiet respite in which nature only is described: 'She walked down through coconut palms [...] There was no wind'.

Although not itself an agent of alienation, one recurrent setting by which Winton communicates Fox's alienation to the reader is the ocean. Aided by the flowing language used for Fox's thoughts in water-based passages (to be discussed later), the ocean is depicted as a spiritually healing force for him. It provides evidence that Fox is capable of serenity, even bliss, and thereby exposes the depth of Fox's alienation when on land. In an early example, when Fox is diving, the reader is witness to his euphoria:

Way up there his boat hangs from the anchor rope like a party balloon. It looks so buoyant, so beautiful, that he has to go back and see. [...] [A]s he crashes through the glittering surface where his body still does the breathing for him, the rest

of him settles for simple ecstasy. He lies in the half-world.

Tingling. (127)

Beyond acting as a foil for the reader, the ocean enables the character of Fox to resolve his alienation and find self-acceptance. In the final pages, after the crash of Georgie and Buckridge's sea-plane, it is the medium in which Fox rescues Georgie. (He also inadvertently spiritually rescues Buckridge, who had pinned his hopes of redemption on bringing Fox to Georgie.) Fox realises who he is — 'what he does' — and begins, the reader is invited to presume, the healing of his alienation. Fox brings Georgie to the surface when her seaplane ditches:

His ears pop as he plunges through the milky deep with his eyes burning and his breath aglow like a coal in his chest. You can do this, he thinks with a bright mad flush. This is what you do. (458)

It would be tempting to leave the discussion of alienation and boundaries in *Dirt Music* here, having looked at the plot, at the characters themselves and what they feel and experience, or have experienced, and at the settings in which they operate. But there are other elements of Winton's narration that play a vital role in creating the intensity and power of the novel's portrayal of alienation. Winton draws on narrative elements other than actual words — what might be grouped as 'sub-linguistic' elements (such as structure, point of view, tense, syntax and sentence length, even punctuation) — to bolster the undercurrent of alienation.

The structure of *Dirt Music* is important in depicting alienation to the reader. Winton manipulates structure to convey in a subtle way the alienation between the lovers, Fox and Georgie. Flexing from standard to split narrative and back again over eight parts, the structure parallels the trajectory of their narrative, mirroring the disconnection and alienation of Fox and Georgie, followed by their reconnection and resolution. Their narratives converge and separate, converge and separate — Georgie's being related in simple past tense and Fox's in the present — until, finally, they join. Despite what might be seen as disjointedness, Shirley Walker asserts, 'The novel is fast moving and finely plotted. The narrative never flags from the first scene [...] to the dénouement.'³⁶

³⁶ Walker, op.cit., p.41.

I use the term ‘split narrative’ after John Mullan, to mean a narrative propelled by multiple, discrete narrators.³⁷ Part I, the first third of the novel, interleaves chapters from the points of view, with rare exceptions, of Georgie, Fox and, in one chapter, Buckridge. All chapters move along the same narrative path — Georgie’s and Fox’s building romance and their two past stories — finishing with Fox’s break for anonymity and solitude. Parts II through to VII interleave points of view, part by part, to become a split narrative. Georgie’s and Fox’s stories are unveiled on the back of their dangerous romance. We follow Georgie in her stalled de facto marriage, in her difficult relationships, present and past, with her family in Perth, and in her journey of self-discovery (parts II, IV and VI); and we follow Fox in his bolt for the State’s north — his isolation and, on reaching his destination, his degeneration, his spiritual reconnection with music and the land, and his self-revelation (parts III, V and VII). The structure within these parts — the total isolation of point of view — intensifies in the reader the sense of the isolation and alienation of the two main characters.

In the final part, Part VIII, as Georgie and Fox close in on one another spatially in Coronation Gulf and the narrative builds to its climax, the stories converge physically on the page also, reflecting the narrative of alienation and rejoining to the reader. Points of view revert to being separated by chapters only, as in Part I, rather than parts. By the second-last chapter, as the pace accelerates and the tension builds (in the question of whether Fox, Georgie and Buckridge will reach one another in time), they are separated only by section breaks. By the brief final chapter, Georgie’s and Fox’s points of view, with their two different tenses, arise without any separation other than line breaks.

Over the novel’s final paragraphs, Winton challenges the reader, using Georgie’s (and, briefly, the narrator’s) simple past and Fox’s present tenses conjointly as the two characters reunite in the flesh. In part, the finale runs:

Georgie looked at the martyred jut of his hipbones, the twigs in his hair, the livid ulcers all down his thin legs. [...] The fishing guide worked the tiller and licked his lips as though lost for words.

³⁷ Mullan, op. cit., pp.175-7; this is distinct from ‘parallel narratives’, signifying multiple stories linked by a common feature such as a setting or, as in Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, a novel.

She looks in from the sky. Eyes wide as a fish's. Real or not, he should breathe. He feels his lips split in a smile. Soon. There's plenty of time for that.

Georgie saw his eyes roll back and his hips lift toward her. My God, he was blue. (460-61)

In this instance, the word 'feels' is the only marker by which the reader navigates out of Georgie's point of view (from the preceding paragraph) and into Fox's. It suggests that Fox and Georgie are now separated by only the flimsiest of margins, if at all.

Dirt Music's final structure — the question of what to include, at what point to include it, and what to exclude — was a challenge for Winton, and its resolution is interesting, if not disturbing. His original conception did not leave the story where the published novel does, with Fox's rescue in the wilderness. In 2005 Winton said, 'The problem with *Dirt Music* was that in order to shape it into a novel I had to narrow it down from a grander conception and I only really confronted that on the day the novel was due.'³⁸ Winton started over and rewrote the novel — which to that point had taken seven years — in fifty-five days and nights.³⁹ ⁴⁰ Winton's 2012 play *Signs of Life* has since revived a lot of what was excised from *Dirt Music* at the last minute. Winton said recently: 'I cut the book in half really. [...] So a lot of Georgie's story [...] past that point where we left Lu and Georgie in *Dirt Music* [...] was still out there for me and I was interested in reeling it back into our world.'⁴¹ It is perhaps comforting, perhaps alarming, to an aspiring author that someone of Winton's renown would, after so many years of writing, cull half the narrative at the eleventh hour.

For me, the structuring of *Footprints* threw up a challenge and I took heart from *Dirt Music* that it was possible for different styles to interact to create a cohesive whole. *Footprints* moves between different modes, drawing on present-day narrative, present-day reflection on the past, passages set in the past and letters written in the past. I wanted to anchor the narrative in the present, rather than adopt a chronological

³⁸ Caroline Lurie. 'Turn, Turn, Turn: After a twenty year gap Tim Winton returns to his first love, short stories.' *Good Reading Magazine*. Dec 2004-Jan 2005, p.25.

³⁹ ABC TV. 'Interview with Tim Winton', *Enough Rope* with Andrew Denton. 25 October 2004. [<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/enoughrope/transcripts/s1227915.htm>.]

⁴⁰ Daley, op.cit.

⁴¹ ABC Radio National. Interview: *Life Matters* with Natasha Mitchell, 30 October 2012. [<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/tim-winton-signs-of-life/4334124>; Accessed 30 October 2012.]

approach, so that modern attitudes could act as a foil for historical events and attitudes; also to establish early the concept of the past reaching into the present and of human transience. I chose to open, though, with a passage set in the past — Hiroshi's drowning off Broome and his love of an Australian woman — because I felt that, apart from tying together the diverse cultural and geographical elements to follow, it gave 'cause' or context to the whole story. Whilst perhaps depriving the narrative of the uncertainty that can create impetus (what might be termed 'soft suspense') I felt it added intensity to the narrative that succeeded it, especially those concerning the old lady, Nan/Pearl. Mullan says of reverse chronology: 'Characters follow in uncertainty narrative paths that are already clear to the reader [...] so instead of a plot there is an uncovering of causes and connections.'⁴² This gradual 'unpeeling' was an effect I was aiming for.

Earlier, I touched on the shifts of tense associated with the structural shifts of point of view (the convergence and separation of the Fox–Georgie narratives). This variation of narrative technique by Winton warrants a closer look. Passages centred on Georgie reflect her overall emotional stability. They are written in simple past tense and are syntactically sound, exemplified by, 'Georgie Jutland had been a sailor of sorts, so she knew exactly what it meant to lose seaway, to be dead in the water' (11). Passages centred on Fox, though, are narrated in the present tense, which helps convey Fox's precarious state of mind. Fox's 'present tense' life is even expressed in the text itself: 'All day he holds up. Living in the present tense. Only to come to this' (53); and later, 'There's nothing left of him now but shimmering presence.' (450). Winton's use of the present tense with Fox implies to readers that Fox is a man who is barely holding up from one moment to the next. The future — Fox's future — the point from which a narrative is usually told, is not assured. His life is provisional.

Late in the novel, while maintaining Fox as the focalising character, and Fox's present tense, Winton utilises a shift to second-person narration to shout Fox's physical and social isolation. Until late in the novel, the narrative is in third-person narration — 'he thinks', 'she thought' and so on. But when Fox is physically on a knife's edge in the wilderness, in pain and alone but for the boab trees with their strangely (alluring) feminine form, he begins talking (in reality, thinking) to himself in

⁴² Mullan, *op.cit.*, p.163.

the second person, confronting the reader, and himself, with his desperation and self-loathing:

That sideways look that Darkie had. He never *looked at* you. You loved and loved him and always wondered and despised yourself for your wondering. Yes you did. Hated yourself for it secretly. (378)

This second-person narration runs just over three pages.

Winton also uses variations in syntax and sentence length to give readers the sense of Fox's alienation surging and ebbing in response to different settings. In contrast to the syntactically relatively traditional passages for Georgie, the sentences for Fox vary from stabbing and truncated to expansive and rhythmically flowing. When Fox is on his family farm, the cropped sentences often used by Winton impart a sense that Fox can manage to think only in snatches: 'The library empty. Keats open like a gull on the seat of the rocker. Wind moans in the chimney.' (52).

The language, despite or perhaps because of its truncation, is often poignantly poetic, reminding the reader that Fox, for all his near-muteness, is a man who senses intensely, making his alienation seem all the more acute:

Gulping creek. Stones alight and ahum. The yellow sand jitters with the chime of that National guitar. It drones, drones in the metal bedframe and at his ear the hot Vegemite breath of a child. Rosin. Brass-wound strings. Campfires, campfires. Spill of dirty blonde. (53-4).

In contrast, when Fox is in water, the lavish flow and ease of the sentences imparts the sense that here Fox is in his medium. In water he can connect with his soul. Water-based passages act as a foil to the land-based ones, reminding readers that Fox has not always been as we find him on land, intensifying the alienation we see in him. Compare the above passage with this when Fox is diving:

He hovers motionless over soft corals and sponges, across hard yellow plate and rifts of purple-blue. There's staghorn and brain coral, eels and blennies and blackarse cod and the feelers of a hundred wary rock lobsters. The sea is thick with

clicks and rattles, the encrypted static of the silent word speaking. (126-7)

Winton imbues in the character of Fox the sensations that Winton himself says he experiences when diving with only a snorkel and mask, no air tank: ‘It’s the eternal present tense. You have no past and no future, it’s just what’s there in front of you.’⁴³ This ‘eternal present tense’ carries through into the novel in the present tense that Winton uses for Fox throughout, as discussed, and in making the water a place of refuge for Fox.

Winton pushes the conventions of punctuation in a way that, intentionally or otherwise, helps convey his characters’ alienation. There is no distinction through punctuation between speech, thought and narration on the page. No quotation marks. Only line breaks between speakers and general context indicate the speaker. The reader absorbs the language and interprets from its context its meaning. The reduction of punctuation seems in keeping with the general loose structure of the novel and its spare tone. But it also gives a sense of both the sparseness of conversation between Fox and Georgie — only the bare necessities — and, along with truncated sentences, the general truncation of Fox’s, Georgie’s and Buckridge’s emotions. Winton has used this technique in other works for adults, including throughout *The Turning*, which, as a collection of stories, had a variety of structures, tones and characters.

Finally, in discussing Winton’s rendering of alienation in *Dirt Music* in its final form as a published novel, I think it is pertinent and enlightening in a practical sense to go back to the very beginning — to look at Winton’s thought processes during the conception of the novel and at the narrative instincts he transmuted into the fictional form just discussed. (The following is based, in large part, on the documentary, *The Edge of the World*; unfortunately, material giving similar insight into *Legend* was not to hand.)

Winton told journalist Paul Daley in 2002, ‘I don’t start with a plan or a plot or anything. I just start with a few little flickers, you know, and just wait and see what they end up being.’⁴⁴ Speaking of the embryonic novel in *The Edge of the World*, he described these flickers thus:

⁴³ Featherstone, op.cit.

⁴⁴ Daley, op.cit.

I have a kind of an intuitive structure [...] I have these images and pictures and little things show up and I can feel them slowly moving like pack ice, every now and again clunking and grinding in the night. [...] But I'm frightened that if I jump up and down on one or another of them too much then it'll upset things and shoo them away rather than hope that they come together. It's not in the slightest bit sensible in its trajectory. It's more of an intuitive thing, many things coming together.⁴⁵

Reluctantly, he gave examples of these images:

An overturned ute on the side of a country road, a dead young woman, a dead young man, a dead boy about age eight and a crushed and crippled little girl about age six, and a man in his early thirties, more or less unscathed, climbing out of the wreckage and surveying the scene; and these are the last people in the world that he's related to, and he was in love with one of them and not married to her [...] A man wandering through mangroves, barefoot.⁴⁶

Walking near the One Tree Beach camp, he revealed further insights:

'For some reason I have in my mind the image of a man alone here and a tree. [...] He's been a man who's never actually engaged with society properly, partly because of the family background, partly because he's the kind of person who's just never somehow connected, who's had some cataclysmic event in his life which has made him want to walk away [...] And he tries to bury himself in landscape. [...] And I have this image of a woman who begins to have an idea of his whereabouts and who knows him before. So you know in a way it's a kind of perverse love story ... it's shaping up that way.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Featherstone, op.cit.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

From this congregation of images and snatches of plot pathways, woven into his central question, raised earlier, of how much a person needs the society of humankind — ‘What happens [to a person] when all the other stuff’s gone?’⁴⁸ — Winton crafted the story we now know as *Dirt Music*.

In the discussion to now, we have seen how in *Dirt Music* Winton draws on his extensive powers of narration and narrative technique to evince the theme of alienation in a variety of contexts — from society, from family and from oneself; and via a range of catalysts — the death of loved ones, legacies of the past, ostracism, family dysfunction, violence and isolation.

Lockie Leonard, Legend is crafted within a similar framework in terms of location (country Western Australia) and main characters (white⁴⁹ middle to lower-middle class). There is a large overlap between the two texts, as will be shown, in the issues it confronts, the picture it paints of society, and the alienation that arises in his characters. Yet on the surface the two would appear to have nothing in common. In *Legend*, we see a one-eighty-degree turn in the tone of Winton’s writing. It is at times hard to imagine that Winton actually wrote the *Lockie Leonard* series when one compares them with his intense, at times dark, works like *Dirt Music*, *The Riders*, *The Turning* or *Breath*⁵⁰.

So how does Winton, in *Legend*, achieve this tone, so popular with young readers, while delivering weighty themes such as alienation? What is his approach, and in what ways does it differ from his approach in *Dirt Music*?

An overview of the *Lockie Leonard* series is important in order to give an idea of the context in which *Legend* sits. The series comprises three books — *Lockie Leonard*, *Human Torpedo*, *Lockie Leonard*, *Scumbuster* and *Lockie Leonard*, *Legend* — published in 1990, 1993 and 1997 respectively. The timeline of the series arches from Lockie Leonard being ‘twelve and three quarters’⁵¹ to Lockie’s fourteenth

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ I make this assumption hesitantly because it is based only on the fact that it isn’t explicit in the text that these main characters are indigenous Australians, which is not the case with two of *Dirt Music*’s minor characters. A television version of *Lockie Leonard* depicts Lockie’s friend Egg as indigenous Australian.

⁵⁰ Although the voice of the young Pikelet in *Breath* has similarities to the voice of Lockie Leonard.

⁵¹ Lockie’s age is expressed in this naïve way on page 6 of *Human Torpedo*.

birthday — a little over a year. *Human Torpedo* is set at the beginning of Lockie's first year of high school in the country town of Angelus to which his family has just moved; *Scumbuster* is set at the start of summer holidays at the end of that first year; and *Legend* at the end of those same summer holidays, edging into his second year of high school. They may be loosely clumped as a 'coming of age' narrative.

The overarching 'coming-of-age' theme is interwoven with others such as family love, responsibility for family, community and the environment, not judging according to stereotype, eschewing peer pressure, and relationships — family, platonic and sexual. The boundaries explored by Winton most integral to the theme of alienation across the series include city versus country, alienation versus acceptance, childhood versus adulthood, sanity versus madness, coping versus failing, child versus parent roles, and ocean versus land.

Simply by being novels written for and centred on adolescents, each of the books in the *Lockie Leonard* series is almost, by definition, about boundaries. Richard Rossiter⁵², writing on *Human Torpedo*, calls adolescence 'a site of fragmentation, a site in which opposing value systems are contested.' He cites Patricia Meyer Spacks: 'Adolescents ... always remind us of the society's divisions. Symbolically [they represent] one polarity — passion as opposed to reason, say; or dependence as opposed to power.' These struggles of emotion, wisdom and selfhood are paramount in the series.

In *Human Torpedo* alienation is a central theme, as are community (its perils in particular), and self-awareness, especially as it tussles with sexual awareness. The narrative is centred on Lockie's newness to Angelus and his gaining a foothold at his new high school: 'It was one thing going to high school for the first time; but it was a whole different hockey match going to high school for the first time in a town where you didn't know a single soul, not a single poxy face' (6). His integration or, more accurately, his acceptance within the Angelus high school community is achieved largely through his surfing prowess and his relationship with the popular, smart and sexually adventurous Vicki Streeton. Lockie later speaks out against his peers in defending Vicki and, alongside her, becomes marginalised. Ultimately, Lockie rejects

⁵² Patricia Meyer Spacks. *The Adolescent Idea*. London: Faber, 1981, p.292; cited in Richard Rossiter. 'Speaking to Adults, Speaking to Children: Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* and *Lockie Leonard*, *Human Torpedo*', *Southerly: A Review of Australian Literature*, Vol. 53(3), 1993, p.95.

Vicki's invitation to cross the physical boundary between childhood and adulthood. Lockie tells Vicki, '[Sex] doesn't feel natural for me right now. [...] Geez, I look at seventeen year olds, twenty-five year olds and they don't look so blissed that I suddenly want to be like them.' Vicki replies, 'I hate being thirteen.' Lockie responds, 'See? I'm weird, I love it' (122). The book ends with Lockie 'bursting back into his own skin at last', the scene implying an embrace of childhood with Lockie and his younger brother Phillip 'hanging wheelies all the way down the street' (132).

Scumbuster picks up shortly after Lockie has lost his 'first and fabulous and only girlfriend,' Vicki Streeton. He is dejected and, after his unpopular stand in defence of Vicki, socially alienated. Lockie the surfrat finds close friendship in the unlikely form of Egg (Geoffrey Eggleston), a 'bogan' who can't swim and wears Doc Martin boots, black jeans and a death-metal T-shirt. Lockie teams with Egg to rid Angelus Harbour of polluting effluent. Themes of environmental responsibility and not judging according to stereotype are uppermost. Bubbling along within the narrative is Lockie's agonising crush on the visiting Dot Cookson, keeping hormonal angst to the fore.

In the close friendship between Lockie and Egg, Winton uses the doppelganger motif — a device in which the boundaries between 'self' and 'other' become blurred. Robyn McCallum describes a doppelganger as 'an imagined or real counterpart or twin who is either a mirror inversion or duplicate of [a] character and whose presence is crucial for that character's sense of identity.'⁵³ Lockie the surfrat and Egg the bogan are in many ways strikingly similar — they both are relative newcomers in Angelus and both have fathers in jobs that distance them socially (police officer and Baptist pastor). We're told, 'They had weird things in common. They were city kids whose fathers got transferred here to the country. Without admitting it, they were both a bit bummed out and lonely' (19). At the same time, though, in Lockie's mind, there are big differences between the two boys and Lockie has grave misgivings. 'Face it: Egg was a bogan, and bogans were the *other* tribe; they were the enemy. Just why they were the enemy Lockie couldn't quite recall, but he was loyal to his surfing mates, even though he had none just now' (19). Happily, Lockie's natural affinity with Egg nudges him across the social boundary between

⁵³ Robyn McCallum. 'Other Selves: Subjectivity and the *Doppelganger* in Australian Adolescent Fiction'; in Clare Bradford (ed). *Writing the Australian Child*. Nedlands: University of WA Press, 1996, p.17.

surfers and bogans. Egg, though, has problems. He has dark, depressive moods and his parents fight bitterly. Lockie, through Egg, his 'mirror inversion', sees his family for perhaps the first time, as loving and steady and himself as buoyant and resilient. He then uses this self-knowledge to coax Egg out from under his dark cloud.

Legend is the last novel of the series, and the last for young adults written by Winton. (The crossover book *Blueback* came out in 1997 and the picture book *The Deep* in 1998.) Winton's intention to write only one *Lockie Leonard* book, as mentioned earlier, may account for the time gap between publication and for the subtle shift in tone (less frenetic, more contemplative, to my mind) between *Legend* and the first two, *Human Torpedo* and *Scumbuster*. In *Legend* Winton effectively 'kills off' the child character, Lockie, in keeping with the overarching coming-of-age theme of the series. The first two novels are about adolescent angst and adventure; the third is about the much more complex theme of leaving childhood behind, of crossing the boundary into adulthood in an emotional sense, beyond bodily awakening.

Lockie's alienation in *Legend*, rather than stemming from his school peers as in *Human Torpedo* and *Scumbuster*, emanates from his own mother and is exacerbated by his fears of ill judgement by the Angelus community. Life for Lockie in Angelus has become 'beautifully boring' (10), but his pleasant status quo is disrupted when his mother, Joy Leonard, has an episode of depression. As Winton put it, it 'freaks Lockie out. It's not "life as usual".'⁵⁴ With his mother in hospital and his father, the Sarge, needing to go off to work, Lockie shoulders the load of caring for Phillip and their baby sister, Blob, while keeping the household functioning. Help emerges in the form of Lockie's old girlfriend Vicki Streeton, whom Phillip calls their guardian angel (129). In the background Joy Leonard slowly improves, the novel climaxing with her release from hospital. Aided by his wise mother and the morally brave Vicki Streeton, Lockie grows from a solipsistic thirteen year old to a much wiser, more compassionate youth who on his fourteenth birthday derives delight in pleasing someone other than himself, thereby crossing the boundary from childhood into adulthood.⁵⁵ 'He listened to his mother's laughter as [the dolphins] leapt around her and that laughter was the sweetest sound he ever heard' (188).

Aligned with the aforementioned 'shift in tone' from *Human Torpedo* and *Scumbuster*, it becomes apparent on a closer reading of *Legend* that in many respects

⁵⁴ McGirr, op.cit., 79.

⁵⁵ This is not to say that wisdom and compassion are universal among adults.

it isn't what might be considered a 'typical' young readers' book. That Winton diverges from several commonly accepted conventions for writing for young audiences, yet writes the novel in such a way that it retains its appeal to them, makes his crafting of it all the more intriguing; and one must remember the underlying reality — that without maintaining its appeal to his young audience, *Legend's* theme of, among others, alienation would fall on deaf ears.

What are these conventions or strategies, then, to which Winton deliberately or instinctively pays little heed? A useful set of observations to use as a springboard for discussion is provided by the educator Myles McDowell. In his essay 'Fiction for children and adults: some essential differences' he notes several what he calls 'general orders of differences' between young readers' fiction and adult fiction:

[C]hildren's books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order, probability is often disregarded; and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity, and adventure.⁵⁶

One examiner of this thesis, Professor Nigel Krauth, voiced reservations about the use of McDowell's summary as a point of reference, so in the next few paragraphs I will attempt to preempt similar concerns by other readers. Krauth writes:

McDowell's article was published in 1973. In the ensuing 40 years, writing and publishing for children developed far beyond the range of thinking and understanding of the early '70s. For example, in 1973 Young Adult fiction was in its infancy as a recognized category — the developed existence of that category now impacts on arguments about the difference between children and adult categories. To use a 40-year-old

⁵⁶ Myles McDowell. 'Fiction for children and adults: some essential differences'. *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 4(1), 1973, p.51.

analysis as a yardstick in this context — even for the Lockie Leonard series published 20 years after McDowell in 1973 — raises questions about the argument’s authority.⁵⁷

He cites Kimberley Reynolds, who argues:

Undoubtedly the expansion of writing for teenagers (Young Adult fiction) has been instrumental in challenging ideas about what children’s literature is and does; there are now many stylistically complex books that include sex, swearing and violence, and that end bleakly.⁵⁸

I acknowledge the issues raised by Krauth and Reynolds, as does McDowell himself. In his essay, McDowell is careful to qualify his observations, saying:

The point is not to legislate for essential differences, but simply to note observable general orders of differences between the large body of children’s fiction and that of adult fiction.⁵⁹

He draws the following metaphor, depicting how the two categories, whilst largely being separately identifiable, merge:

A pot of green and a pot of orange paint might be spilled on the floor [...] and where they run together a murky brown is formed [...] but he is a fool who cannot distinguish the green from the orange.⁶⁰

Clearly, McDowell is not proposing that literature is comprised of two discrete realms — for adults and for children — each having prescribed elements. He merely draws attention to some commonalities within the children’s literature realm as opposed to the adult realm. His blended ‘murky brown’ is where, in 2013, most of the novels we

⁵⁷ Thesis Examination Report, 23 August 2013. Held by Graduate Research School, University of Western Australia, 2013 (Unpublished), p.3.

⁵⁸ Matthew O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds (eds). *Children’s Literature Studies: A Research Handbook*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p.7

⁵⁹ McDowell. *op.cit*, p.51.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

dub Young Adult (which include the *Lockie Leonard* series) sit, alongside a host of other novels for readers of the full age spectrum.⁶¹

That blurring between categories exists (exemplified by Young Adult writing) hasn't seen McDowell's ideas dismissed from the literary studies arena. To the contrary, his 'observable general orders of differences' have enjoyed intellectual longevity, demonstrated by his essay being cited 35 times since publication — relatively recently (and favourably) by Perry Nodelman in 2008 and by Reynolds (reservedly) in 2011, to offer two examples.⁶² In this thesis, McDowell's observations are used as a backdrop of strategies and conventions that held currency at the time of *Legend's* creation and, importantly, it would appear, still do. They are a foil against which to bring to light various aspects of Winton's technique; to address the question raised in the introduction, 'Does Winton vary his approach in writing for young readers and for adults?'

As a foil, I might have drawn, instead, on the observations published in 2003 of Judith Hillman (observations that bear a distinct similarity to McDowell's). Hillman lists five characteristics common in children's literature:

[Content is based on] typical childhood experiences written from a child perspective; children or childlike characters; simple and direct plots that focus on action; a feeling of optimism and innocence (e.g., happy endings are the norm); a tendency toward combining reality and fantasy.⁶³

Nodelman, writing in 2008, calls Hillman's list 'insightful', but McDowell's observations, he says, offer more detail.⁶⁴ In the context of this thesis, this detail — expressed simply, and articulating broadly existing perceptions from 1973 and from current times — better supports my aims. I do not wish to enter the fraught argument over what does and doesn't constitute a young reader's book — the debate was

⁶¹ A familiar example of texts in the 'murky brown' area would be most of the novels in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series — extraordinarily popular with young readers (as young as six or so), yet substantially longer than most adult novels.

⁶² Nodelman. *op.cit.*, p.189; Reynolds. *op.cit.*, pp.6-7. Reynolds is concerned that McDowell's observations may over-simplify, thereby strengthening the prejudice that literature for young readers is intrinsically inferior to literature for adults.

⁶³ Judith Hillman. *Discovering Children's Literature*, 3rd ed. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003, p.3; cited in Nodelman, p.189.

⁶⁴ Nodelman, *op.cit.*, p.189.

touched on in my introduction and the parameters of my use of the concept of ‘fiction for young readers’ set. My concern here is for techniques rather than definitions.

Before proceeding to a detailed discussion, a snapshot of the ways in which Winton departs from the strategies or conventions outlined by McDowell may prove useful. The first instance concerns introspection, for the novel abounds in it, whether by Lockie or by his ‘alias’ the narrator (who speaks as though Lockie himself). Introspection is the major vehicle by which we learn of Lockie’s alienation — his initial shame at his mother’s ‘insanity’, followed by his self-loathing at his inadequacy towards her. Winton’s second departure concerns child protagonists. Certainly Lockie, the chief protagonist, is young, but the novel as a whole is far more concerned with adults than is the majority of young readers’ fiction — Lockie’s mother and her illness and, less critically to the plot but more intimately narrated, Lockie’s father and his response to his wife’s troubles. Winton’s third departure concerns McDowell’s observation that young readers’ books tend to be ‘optimistic rather than depressive’. In *Legend*, arising from Joy Leonard’s depression itself (clearly ‘depressive’), there are the troubles of Lockie, Phillip and the Sarge arising from her illness, and of Vicki (herself, her parents), all underscored by potentially confronting glimpses of other sad lives (anorexia, criminality, drug abuse etc). But, in addition to this, it is only towards the end of the novel that Winton allows Lockie much cause for optimism. With a mere five pages to go, the reader receives a summary, optimistic update:

[Mrs Leonard’s] good days got better and there were more of them. Her smile came back for longer periods and the spark returned to her eyes. It wasn’t all laughs, but the good days crept up on the rotten ones until it was at least an even fight (183).

Winton’s fourth departure concerns the distinctive order of plots. *Legend* has a drifting nature that reflects the ebb-and-flow of Joy Leonard’s illness. Even what could be considered the book’s climax — the recovery of Joy Leonard to the point whereby she can return to her family — must be received with restraint, the astute reader, having been party to her unpredictable recovery to that point, being aware of the strong possibility of relapse.

I have not raised Winton’s atypical approach in *Legend* in order to overshadow the primary purpose of this discussion, which is to compare *Legend* with *Dirt Music* in

Winton's rendering of alienation and boundaries. But they do, I feel add an interesting dimension to the discussion — that in many respects, 'on paper' as it were, *Legend* presents as a work for adult readers while being highly resonant with young readers. With this in mind, I will move, now, to a two-pronged discussion of the concepts of alienation and boundaries in *Legend* — comparing it with *Dirt Music* across the various narrative elements; and, where there are departures from the writing-for-children norm by McDowell's observations, looking at the means by which Winton offsets or circumvents these potential challenges to his young audience.

Thematically, *Legend* and *Dirt Music* have much in common, addressing themes that, by and large, relate to people's interaction with humankind. As in *Dirt Music* and the first two *Legend* novels, alienation is a major theme, entwining with other key themes of coming of age, compassion and family relationships.

The legacy of the past, though, is an important area in which the texts diverge. Whilst it is a major concern in *Dirt Music*, in *Legend*, with the protagonist being all of thirteen years old, this is not the case. Lockie has not yet accrued the years by which concepts such as regret, pasts one rejects, the fear of becoming one's parent, guilt or sorrow can be explored in depth in the context of the map of one's life. The texts diverge, too, in the area of spirituality, *Legend* having little content of this nature, except perhaps in the magic of the ocean, while *Dirt Music* delves extensively into a person's innate spiritual connection to the earth and the elements.

Boundaries, on the whole, are utilised differently in *Legend*. In *Dirt Music* the fluidity of boundaries (past and present, acceptability and unacceptability, battlers and losers, love for family and hateful resentment) *as a cause* of alienation is a theme in itself. In *Legend*, boundaries are more significant in their being crossed *as a result* of characters' alienation. There are two key boundaries crossed (in the second instance, inverted) in this way — childhood to adulthood, and parent to child. The fickleness of the boundary between sanity and 'craziness' is explored lightly, but it is not an actual vehicle for alienation within the text. Joy Leonard's experience of her mental illness is not much delved into — for the purposes of Lockie's alienation (and the novel's plot) her 'insanity', albeit temporary, is accepted.

One could say that Winton arrives at the same destination in both novels but by different routes. In *Dirt Music*, through the notion of boundaries Winton presents

people as fluid, liable to change or be changed depending on circumstance. Although the fluidity of boundaries is not itself a theme in *Legend*, the novel still leaves the impression of people being vulnerable to misfortune and the vagaries of public opinion. This is achieved mainly through the easier-to-conceptualise vehicle of compassion.

A closer look, now, at the ways in which alienation and boundaries arise and interact in *Legend*'s main characters will give further insight into *Legend* itself and provide another level of comparison with *Dirt Music*.

For Lockie, alienation (and his response to it) is the vehicle by which Winton expands and brings to a close the coming-of-age thrust of the series. *Human Torpedo* and *Scumbuster* establish Lockie as an engagingly ebullient but naïve and self-centred character whose overriding concerns are surfing and his love life, and this is continued in the opening chapters of *Legend*. But as *Legend* unfolds, through his response to alienation in its various guises — Lockie's own, his mother's, Vicki Streeton's — we see the development in Lockie of compassion and the broadening of his egocentric view of the world, signifying his crossing the boundary from childhood to adulthood.

In order to develop compassion, Lockie must first deal with being alienated from his mother and feeling alienated from society. Early in the narrative, his mother denies his existence, saying that Lockie is dead (37). Lockie is stunned and responds by risking his and his brother's life skateboarding down the treacherous Zig-Zag hill (37-44). Lockie struggles, too, with the ignominy of having a mother suffering a mental illness: 'Was it all over town in a single week?' he wonders. 'Joy Leonard in the loony bin?' (102). When Vicki Streeton appears about two-thirds of the way into the narrative, Lockie must contend with shame at his family's troubles: 'Having her come round playing Mother Theresa. It made him angry. Like she was rubbing his nose in his own snail trail' (137). Lockie's resilience in the face of these concerns is tested, but out of loyalty and love for his mother he soldiers on.

The growth of compassion in Lockie is a slow process beginning with his recognition of his parents as people like him. In *Human Torpedo*, Lockie credits his parents with little life beyond him: When Lockie's father compliments him on a spectacular wave-ride and adds, 'Used to ride like that myself, once,' Lockie responds with 'Pull the other one, Dad. It plays the anthem' (12-13); in *Legend*, Lockie's initial reaction to his mother's disarray is to tell her that she is 'getting a bit slack' and

suggest she ‘show just a little bit of interest’ (24). But he has a shift of outlook when he learns his mother has been hospitalised:

Had he ever really thought about her at all? Really thought about her? [...] He felt like a scumbag for taking all that love for granted. And now she was too busted up to even talk sense, too hurt to look after herself let alone anyone else. It just killed him to think of it. (55)

As the above excerpt shows, tied closely to Lockie’s developing compassion is the awakening of a sense of shame and self-loathing — a form of self-alienation — triggered by what he sees as his inadequate response to his mother’s needs. This self-loathing is heightened when, at a later point in the story, Winton manipulates Lockie’s perspective on events of the previous book, *Scumbuster*, turning his achievements in *Scumbuster* into a source of disgrace in *Legend*. In the chapter ‘A Bit of Fresh Air’, Lockie reflects on his mother’s involvement (in *Scumbuster*) in the campaign to save Angelus harbour, in retrospect crediting her for their success:

It felt great being in on all that, but Lockie knew that while he was wimping out and disappearing for a surf in the middle of the campaign, his mum was busting her buns to get the job done. It hit him then, thinking of the summer she’d had. It was no long hot season at the beach for her. She’d done it tough. And he’d been carrying on as though it was business as usual. It made him so ashamed he couldn’t stand it. (60-61)

This bending of the *Scumbuster* plot giving Joy Leonard the credit for saving Angelus harbour contravenes modern conventional wisdom that young protagonists, not adults, should be the characters who save the day. But it is (re)written from the safety of the book *following*. In *Legend*, Winton has Lockie take a step backwards in maturity from where *Scumbuster* left him in order to serve the narrative at hand. Yet in the spirit of a series, continuity with *Scumbuster* is maintained.

In a blurring of the boundary between adult and offspring, in several instances, the usual father–son relationship is inverted, strengthening Lockie’s compassion for his parents. Lockie is required to give his strained father (referred to throughout as ‘the Sarge’) moral support and cope with his emotional disarray. In one scene, Lockie finds his father staring into the refrigerator at two in the morning. He asks:

‘You alright?’

‘No,’ said the Sarge. ‘I’m coming to bits. I feel like I’m gonna lose my family.’

‘You’re doing good, Sarge.’

‘No, I’m not.’

And right there in the cold light of the empty fridge, Lockie saw his dad break down and cry. A grown man. A police sergeant. Sobbing like a baby. In his jarmies. (125)

This is a pivotal moment for the maturing Lockie — realising that his father, like Lockie’s mother and Lockie himself, is not invulnerable. Winton is drawing, here, on an event in his own life at about the same age, when he stumbled upon his father in his shed, his hanky stuffed in his mouth, ‘crying his eyes out’, as he described it. ‘It was shocking in one sense,’ he said, ‘but I was kind of gratified by it because I realised [my father] was human and loved him more for it.’⁶⁵ Like Winton, Lockie appreciates his father more keenly on seeing him struggle.

It is hard to miss the similarities between Lockie, thirteen years old, and *Dirt Music’s* Fox, thirty-five. Lockie and Fox are similar both in general demeanour — modest, caring, sensitive to the point of vulnerability. They are also both of humble backgrounds — to Lockie’s grandparents and the students at Angelus High, the Leonards and Lockie are losers, and to the White Pointers, so is Fox. Both Lockie and Fox have big family and household responsibilities that contribute to their alienation. For Lockie his sudden (and temporary) responsibilities are a physical, practical strain on him that deepens his concern for his family and his sense of alienation. Fox, while shouldering responsibilities out of love, guiltily discovers they are a source of resentment of his brother and sister-in-law, which is a contributing factor to his alienation. In terms of plot, the responsibilities are an overarching anxiety in *Legend*, whereas in *Dirt Music* it is only one small strain of Fox’s disquiet.

The illness of Lockie’s mother, Joy Leonard, although not the story itself, is a vital catalyst for *Legend’s* plot. On the surface Joy Leonard appears to have a relatively small role. What we glean of her is filtered through the perceptions of other characters — Lockie’s, the Sarge’s or Vicki Streeton’s (simply) reported

⁶⁵ Featherstone, op.cit.

conversations and thoughts. On Lockie's second visit, for instance, we're told, 'His mum cried for half an hour and didn't talk at all' (121). Later, after learning that Joy Leonard felt as though the cloud had passed, the narrator informs readers: 'But Mrs Leonard's cloud came back and she stayed in the hospital in the fog of the pills' (122). Via these sparse statements, though, the narrative is imbued with Joy Leonard's quiet struggle, and Lockie's personal growth hinges on it.

The choice of depression as Joy Leonard's illness has strategic advantages that would not apply if Winton were writing for an adult audience. Firstly, depression is not a visually graphic ailment, throwing up gruesome images that might be obtrusive or disengaging to a young reader, especially when concerning a parent; more importantly for a writer wanting to keep the tone light-hearted, as Winton clearly did, it is something from which Joy Leonard might be hoped to recover, unlike, for instance, the dementia of the children's stories discussed by Jill Manthrope in her 2005 paper.⁶⁶ An additional strategic advantage is that Joy Leonard's recovery from the illness takes long enough that Lockie's maturation is plausible (unlike hospitalisation for, say, a broken leg).⁶⁷ Lockie is given plenty of time to shine — taking centre stage in picking up the pieces, especially with the narrative being set in school holidays — and ample opportunity to grow emotionally.

But depression serves the novel well in ways other than purely strategic ones. Most importantly, it is an illness that prompts self-examination by Lockie (something pertinent to all realms of writing). Lockie worries whether, or to what extent, he is part of its cause and, significantly, how he must change to be part of his mother's recovery. Through Joy Leonard's depression, Winton is able to touch, too, on the effects of the breakdown of 'community'. Joy Leonard's illness has not arisen in isolation. Apart from the challenges of her home life, she feels alienated in Angelus. Her resilience has been undermined by 'things pil[ing] on top of her', as the Sarge tries to explain to his son, citing her difficulty in making friends in Angelus, exacerbated by her new baby and not sharing the same interests as other police wives (106-7). In a similar vein, having depression at the centre of the narrative enables Winton to spotlight the alienating effects of society's ignorance and fears in regard to mental illness and the uncertainty of its boundaries.

⁶⁶ 'A Child's Eye View: Dementia in Children's Literature'. *British Journal of Social Work*. Vol. 35, 2005, pp.305-320.

⁶⁷ Mrs Leonard's removal to hospital for the entire period is less plausible, but not something a young reader would be likely to question.

On this last point, Winton adopts a certain ‘cut to the chase’ didacticism. In part, he almost certainly has in mind enlightening his young readership, but perhaps this approach is also due to the economy of words, the compaction, enforced by the shorter form of the novel set by the preceding books in the series.

Common ignorance is most clearly expressed through Joy Leonard’s parents, Nan and Pop, in a lengthy conversation with the Sarge, which Lockie overhears. Nan says things like, ‘In my day [...] we didn’t look for excuses. We couldn’t afford to get sick. [...] No one wants to work anymore. Everyone’s slacking off if you ask me.’ Pop chips in, ‘The whole country’s spoilt and soft [...] If you’re soft you’ll always live like this. [...] Like losers’ (96-97). Somewhat more subtly, through Lockie, Winton brings to light common fears in regard to mental illness. When Lockie first visits his mother in hospital, he observes: ‘His mum looked a little puffy in the face but she seemed *normal* enough. But what was he expecting, a lunatic in a straightjacket? [...] [R]ight now he felt totally weird. He was scared of his own mother. When she took him by the hand he flinched’ (114).

But Lockie’s fears are shaken off when he ventures to ask her about her illness:

‘What’s it like?’ asked Lockie. ‘How you feel.’

She looked towards that tiny slice of sea and sighed.

‘It’s like a bad dream you can’t seem to wake up from. You know it’s a dream, you know the things you feel aren’t quite real, and you want to wake up from the dream but you can’t.’

‘Sounds like my love life.’

‘No, I’m not *that* crazy.’ (115-6)

The passage also raises the fickleness and uncertainty of the boundary between ‘craziness’ and sanity. Vicki Streeton, too, highlights this when she reveals to Lockie that, whilst visiting her brother, Monster, in the psychiatric ward, she has been calling in on Joy Leonard. She tells him: ‘Geez, I tell her things I’ve never told anybody in my life. She’s been a kind of shrink for me. [...] She’s the sanest person I know’ (153).

Lockie’s compassion and newfound respect for his mother having been established by way of her illness, Joy Leonard is instrumental in guiding Lockie away

from self-pity (which is fuelling his self-alienation) towards reviewing his self-centred assumptions about Vicki Streeon and accepting her help and friendship.

In the *Lockie Leonard* series in general, but especially in *Legend*, Winton renders teenage alienation poignantly through the character of Vicki Streeon. Phillip Roth in *American Pastoral* said, ‘getting people right is not what living is all about. It’s getting them wrong that is living.’⁶⁸ Lockie, like many people in *Angelus*, gets Vicki wrong. Initially, he is intimidated by her, thinking she is brimful of confidence with the world at her feet when, in fact, she is miserable, alienated from the community and her parents, and left to contend alone with her drug-addled brother, the biker Monster. Lockie’s initial shallow assumptions provide an important additional platform from which Lockie comes of age. Vicki’s elevation to the centre stage alongside Lockie two-thirds through the novel sparks a back-stepping in his maturity. He reverts to being petulant and awkward around her. It is similar in its effect to Winton’s retroactive minimising of kudos to Lockie for saving *Angelus*’s harbour. In needing to overcome his pride and insecurities in order to be a worthy friend to Vicki, Lockie grows emotionally.

Vicki is a troubled and alienated young person. When we are introduced to her in *Human Torpedo* she is smart, pretty, confident and popular. But in *Legend* it emerges that Vicki is miserable. She writes off her parents as shallow and greedy, calling them ‘nylon pirates’. In wanting to ‘get up’ them the previous year she had been rebellious and self-destructive, acquiring a bad reputation that has followed her into *Legend*. But Vicki tells Lockie: ‘Five days a week I hate myself,’ and adds, ‘All the confidence is a front, Lockie. I’m a mess’ (165). The depth of her sadness and her alienation from her family is revealed when she runs away from a moment of joviality and optimism in the Leonard household. Through tears she admits to Lockie:

I mean, I’m happy for you, you know. All of you. But ... but I hate you too, you know. [...] Because your mother’ll get better and my brother’s gonna be a loony the rest of his life. And my family will stay the way it is, cold and horrible. [...] Lockie, I’m a mess. I’m so lonely. I’m alone. Don’t you get it? I feel like I’m dying from the inside. (175-6)

⁶⁸ Quoted by James Wood in his text, *The Irresponsible Self. On Laughter and the Novel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004, p.8.

By the end of the book, perhaps in deference to realism, considering the complexity of Vicki's problems, or perhaps simply because the scope of the book did not enable Winton to tie off every loose end, Vicki's problems have not been resolved and her alienation not been dispelled, although it has been ameliorated, one guesses, by her renewed friendship with her soul-mate, Lockie. Vicki is left with her alienation and her struggle for self-acceptance, without there being much hope of change.

Like Lockie and Fox, Vicki and Georgie are similar in their underlying characters and types of alienation. Both are clever, caring, sassy, somewhat aloof, and vulnerable to being misunderstood by those who love them and by their communities. Their alienation is, in both characters, partly self-imposed. They are both people who 'have (or had) everything' but who reject their families and, hence, are disappointments to them. Vicki's story across the whole *Lockie Leonard* series has close parallels, too, with that of Slack Jackie in the story from *The Turning*, 'Boner McPharlin's Moll'. Vicki is only a year or so younger than Jackie. Both girls are basically 'good' but, from frustration or ennui, indulge in risky behaviour that brings the hypocritical opprobrium of the community raining down on them.

In practical terms, Winton's ramping up of the character Vicki Streeton, well into the story, offsets the potential challenge or difficulty (by McDowell's analysis) of there being a weighty load of adults — more accurately, a weighty load of their influence — in the story. In a narrative so concerned with adults, the elevation of a second young character to share centre stage with Lockie significantly enhances the younger–older character balance. This helps to engage rather than alienate young readers, girls as well as boys. Belatedly, Winton applies to *Legend* the same template as the previous books in the series: in *Human Torpedo* Lockie shared centre stage with Vicki and in *Scumbuster* with Egg and to a lesser extent, Dot Cookson.

Vicki performs two further functions. She provides a unifying continuity with the first two books of the series in which she is either a major or minor character. Her reappearance rounds out the series and contributes to a satisfying closure in the overall plot. Moreover, with her emergence, the question arises of whether or not she and Lockie can establish a workable friendship or romance. This introduces an element of low-key suspense to a plot that is light on momentum. In Vicki, Winton introduces a rich new plot-thread (her alienation, her effect on Lockie's emotional growth and the general frisson between the two teenagers) to overlay Joy Leonard's slow recovery.

The character of Lockie's eleven-year-old brother Phillip is interesting, and is one of the vehicles by which Winton skirts a potential over-abundance of introspection. His troubles in response to his mother's illness are evident and touching (the resumption of his bedwetting, for instance) but, by and large, his story is kept on the back burner. He plays an important role, though, in evincing Lockie's alienation to the reader: Firstly, his presence as Lockie's sidekick allows valuable revelations through conversation and general interaction between the two brothers. Beyond that, Phillip behaves similarly to a Greek chorus, bringing to light Lockie's inner state. His naïve and vociferous commentary on events involving Lockie gives Winton a lot more flexibility in disclosing Lockie's troubles within the confines of the close third person (at times, bordering on first person) narrative style, generally reducing (although not removing) the need for introspection by Lockie (of which there is already a lot). An example of Phillip's 'Greek chorus' role is when Lockie is awkwardly trying to cope with the sudden presence of his ex-girlfriend Vicki in the Leonard kitchen, having discovered it's been her leaving meals and flowers on the doorstep. Phillip blurts, 'She's an angel, Lockie. Aren't you glad you kept her photo all this time?' (132). Without Phillip's indiscretion we would be denied this piece of information that reflects Lockie's woes. (Lockie's angst in regard to his romantic feelings for Vicki is a secondary plot line, and exacerbates his glum situation.) In *Legend*, and the *Lockie Leonard* series generally, Winton shifts much of what might otherwise be introspection or interiority — reflecting or talking to oneself — out of Lockie's head and into the mouth of his noisy, well-meaning younger brother.

In *Dirt Music*, Winton has no qualms about introspection and interiority. It is used almost exclusively for Fox, permeating his present tense. Interiority is not only fitting for Fox's non-verbal nature, but it counteracts Fox's physical isolation and the potential problem for Winton of a lack of interlocutors, such as Lockie's Phillip, through which Fox can reveal himself. In *Legend*, Lockie reveals himself most commonly through interaction with Phillip, his parents or Vicki, or via the narrator (which, as will be discussed, is an extension of Lockie). Where there is interior dialogue in *Legend*, there is a high likelihood, unlike in *Dirt Music*, of there being thought tags such as 'He wondered', to help the reader navigate in and out of reflections.

The difference between Winton's depiction of children in *Legend* and in *Dirt Music* is significant. In *Legend*, all the young main or supporting characters are

depicted sympathetically. In *Dirt Music* this is not the case, and is a large part of Georgie's loss of traction in her life with Jim Buckridge. Winton has Jim's sons, Brad Buckridge, eleven (the same age as Phillip) and Josh, nine, being problematic for the simple fact of them being children, although they are both broadly comparable to Lockie and Phillip in interests and outlook. Winton renders Brad and Josh with often touching insight — they, too, are characters who have lost, or are losing, their way — but they are not depicted sympathetically, as a child protagonist would be in a text for young readers — as Lockie is in *Legend*, despite his shortcomings. Winton instead plays up the hurtful disregard and surliness of Georgie's de facto stepsons — things likely to elicit adult readers' sympathy, if not empathy, for Georgie. In *Legend*, on the other hand, readers are assumed to be peers of the young protagonist.

It is unusual for Winton to render children negatively in works for either young readers or adults. When asked by Andrew Taylor why children and childhood figured so prominently in his work, Winton said: 'I'm interested in people who are vulnerable, who are not yet constrained by their culture into rigid ways of seeing. [...] A child takes you places that are hard to get otherwise.'⁶⁹ In *The Edge of the World* Winton said, 'I think I've always maintained a kind of a nostalgia for childhood, because of how wide your eyes are, how far you see when you're a child, how unbound you are by convention, by style, by fashion. Of course it's going to be the child who says that the emperor's got no clothes 'cause the grown-ups are too gutless to admit it.'⁷⁰

Winton conveys alienation to readers in other less tangible ways than through character and plot. One such way is through the backdrop of the country town of Angelus (which might be considered a character in itself). Angelus acts as an inhospitable amalgam of gossiping people and surly weather. Within the high school perimeters hostility is specific and targeted at Lockie and/or Vicki. Spatially, the location of the town and of the Leonard home within it push boundaries. Angelus (a fictional representation of Albany⁷¹) is geographically liminal, being situated on the southern coast of Western Australia, the edge of the continent and many kilometres from other population clusters to which a person might retreat. Within the township, the Leonards live in a marginal area — an 'un-rich and 'seriously un-glamorous' part

⁶⁹ 'An Interview with Tim Winton', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 17(4), 1996, p.375.

⁷⁰ Featherstone, op.cit.

⁷¹ McGirr, op.cit, p.10; Ben-Messahel, op.cit., Prelims — map, unpagged.

of town — in a police-issue house, all of which chips at Lockie’s confidence before the trouble with his mother even begins. But it is socially that Angelus wields most influence. The Angelus community, particularly its high school, is a wellspring of much of Lockie and Vicki’s sense of alienation. Its people have consistent, stereotypical traits. In an often darkly humorous way, the community is fickle, opportunistic and gossip mongering. The high school girls wear short skirts and chew gum and the boys jealously seek and guard prestige. (Exceptions are the science ‘nerds’ in whose hut Lockie sleeps on school camp; but Lockie has chosen their company because they too are alienated, albeit happily, and he knows he won’t be bothered whilst with them.) The high school community is a force against which Lockie and Vicki must contend with their alienation, examine their relationship and bravely mature. The first day back at high school, in the school library, Lockie overhears a discussion about Vicki and himself:

‘Vicki and Lockie are back on.’

‘I can’t believe her. What a moll.’

‘Gets him back round her little finger.’

‘His mum chucked a mental, you know. Went straight to the loony bin. Do not pass Go, do not collect \$200.’

‘Lockie’s turning into a bit of a loser.’

‘Cute, but yeah, he’s way losing it.’ (179)

It is a case of Lockie and Vicki against the rest of the high school community.

Lockie is also painfully aware of his parents’ alienation within their small-town community. The Sarge, a literature-loving policeman, confides in him, ‘Some days I feel like the only emu in the chookhouse. [...] I’m a copper so I must be a beer-swilling racist male thing’ (106). In wondering who might have left food on their doorstep, Lockie can’t think of anyone who might care enough to have done it. He considers the environmentalists with whom his mother had teamed earlier in the summer (in *Scumbuster*):

[N]one of them had been around since the harbour campaign ended. Lockie’s mum had wondered aloud about being too straight for them. [...] One week the house is full of dreadlocked sisters and the next week nothing. (102-3)

And his mother didn't really belong in the church either:

[N]ot after all that eco-fuss. Most of the people from church loved their neighbours like the good book said. As long as their neighbours weren't hanging around with greenies and hippies and women with hair under their arms. (103)

Dirt Music's White Point is less amorphous in its characters and physically more clearly described than *Angelus* — its lagoon, beach, jetty, Beaver's yard, the highway. But in both *Legend* and *Dirt Music*, Winton exploits the potential for malevolence in small towns and their capacity for collective memory, often used ungenerously. Speaking with Michael McGirr, Winton said, 'Small towns have a more intimate atmosphere. You need to do less to be a hero in a small place. And less to stuff up. Failures really stick to you in a small place. They can hang on forever.'⁷² In *Legend*, Lockie is alienated because he is afraid of being labelled (forever) as a loser, the son of a crazy lady; in *Dirt Music*, White Point's collective memory alienates Fox and, ironically, through its inhabitants' expectations of him, its 'Golden Boy', Buckridge.

It might be helpful at this point, before moving to other vehicles such as setting and language, to see what broad comparisons can be drawn with *Dirt Music* in terms of content. The reader will have picked up, by now, that the plots of *Legend* and *Dirt Music* have little in common. Winton builds two disparate stories in which the two sets of characters move within their respective narratives towards very different outcomes. In terms of broad content, though, several similarities can be detected. The narratives of each text centre on the wellbeing of its characters rather than the unfolding of a plot; and both have strong elements of family love and of romance. Additionally, and perhaps surprisingly given the effervescence of the overall tone of *Legend*, the content in both texts is not especially pretty.

The confronting content of most of *Dirt Music* is well established — the loss of young lives, grief, disillusion, retribution, loneliness, loss of purpose, prisons of silence, bodily privation to the point of near-death ... the list goes on. In *Legend*, too, though, readers are challenged in the way of content — another facet in which Winton departs from the norm described by McDowell. They are presented with a plot that revolves around the rejection of a teenage boy by his mother; her mental illness; the

⁷² McGirr, op.cit., p.77.

boy's desperate struggle to 'save' his family; the fears of a husband and father of losing his wife and soul-mate and being unable to support his family; and the deep sadness of a teenage girl who hates her parents and herself. Added to this is the fact that Winton doesn't shy away from gritty detail that could at times be confronting to a young reader. He sets out, it appears, to illustrate the sad truth that Lockie is just one person among many experiencing problems in their lives. There is reference to the belting of children (62) and their self-harm (66); the back of Lockie's father's paddy wagon smells of sick and sweat and Pine-o-clean (88); Lockie's mother shares a hospital room with a young girl near death with anorexia and, down the corridor, is the bikie, Monster, who is in and out of institutions having 'fried his brains with drugs and booze' (113). These are just a few examples.

As will be discussed in more detail later, though, in *Legend* Winton crafts the work so that its overall impression is lighthearted; in *Dirt Music*, he does not.

I am hesitant because of the subjectivity of the next comparison, but it appears to me that in *Legend* concepts related to alienation are more readily grasped and able to be resolved than in Winton's novel for older readers. In *Dirt Music*, there are concepts such as grief, disillusion, or those associated with older age or the past — regret, pasts one wishes to escape, or the fear of whom one has become — that hang over the characters like a dark cloud and are not easily dispelled. The key intangible in *Legend* — compassion — can be learned, at least in Lockie's case. That is, Lockie's lack of compassion may be 'fixed' more readily than, for example, Jim Buckridge's regret. The close of the opening chapter of *Dirt Music* provides an example of Georgie's disillusion with her life: 'She lay back in the water wishing some portal would open, that she might click on some dopey icon and proceed safely, painlessly, without regret or memory' (12). In contrast, the opening of *Legend* (not addressing alienation) deals with a very tangible dilemma — Lockie is chased to shore by a shark. 'He was still paddling when he hit the dunes' (6).

On the matter of intangibles, there is distinctly less spirituality in *Legend* than in *Dirt Music*. Lockie experiences moments of euphoria when in the ocean, but not that connection to one's surroundings which transcends the physical self as occurs in *Dirt Music* when Fox is in the wilderness or in the water.

Another point of content divergence is sexuality — not only in terms of explicitness and form, but also in its relationship to Lockie's and Fox's alienation. In

Legend, physical intimacy is exemplified by the relatively innocent: ‘She leant in and kissed him on the ear. His hair stood on end and a ripple of agitation went through the quadrangle’ (182). It is the connection of two young people trying to work out the terms of their friendship; it is part of the resolution of Lockie’s alienation. By contrast, in *Dirt Music*, sexuality serves to deepen Fox’s alienation. The more graphic language aside, the physical intimacy between Fox and Georgie brings him to unconscious tears, ripping apart his carefully constructed isolation of the past year. It also brings a whole new set of problems for Fox in the form of his nemesis, Buckridge. Sexuality is used, too, to deepen Fox’s *self*-alienation by way of his lust for his brother’s wife, Sal, a guilty secret he has in common with Buckridge, who is likewise burdened by it. In the wilderness, it demonstrates Fox’s alienation through the eroticism Fox sees in the womanly boob trees to which, in his solitude and yearning for Georgie, he is drawn for company.

Winton’s treatment of violence for the two audiences differs, but the variation is not as clear-cut as one might expect. In *Legend*, Winton does not draw on violence to elicit alienation. But this cannot be said to be due to the young reader audience because, in the earlier book in the series, *Human Torpedo*, there is significant violence. In that novel, the Sarge is shot at while attending a bloody domestic-suicide — ‘Just a lot of fuss, and then his brains are all over the living room’ (90); at another point, Lockie is beaten up by Vicki’s ‘bogan’ friends (96-97).

Winton, it seems, does pull back, though, from rendering these acts of violence as confrontingly as he might were they in *Dirt Music*. The attack on Lockie’s father, for instance, is described only after it is known he is safe — ‘The day the Sarge came home early, Lockie knew something had happened’ (89); the attack on Lockie is described in a funny, slapstick way:

[T]he two bogans came down on him like a five minute burst of AC/DC. Lockie felt his nose flatten and blood spurt hot onto his chin. His head hit the boards and he saw (double) up several girls’ skirts. Maybe it was one girl’s skirt. He thought she should wear jeans skating, for safety reasons. (96)

As with some of the more confronting detail in *Legend* alluded to earlier, Winton seems to want to give the reader a prod, to remind (or show) them that these issues exist, without in this text dwelling on them. Neither in *Legend* nor in any of the books

of the series is there anything described that is nearly as confronting as *Dirt Music*'s shot-up remains of Fox's loveable dog, or of Fox's discovery of his dead and dying family on the farm track.

Moving from plot, content and detail to the narrative element of setting, I find that, compared with *Dirt Music*, in *Legend*, Winton draws on setting to convey his theme of alienation in quite distinct but nevertheless critical ways. Whereas the lasting impression, for me, of setting in *Dirt Music* is its spiritual dimension, the wilderness beckoning Fox as a place in which to lose himself to modern humanity and connect with the land, with the tentative exception, perhaps, of the ocean, this spiritual dimension of setting is absent in *Legend*. In *Legend*, setting tends to have more practical than thematic applications — as a place for contemplation, as an open backdrop that offsets interiority (mitigating against introspection, the minimisation of which in young readers' fiction is pointed out by McDowell), as a refreshing circuit-breaker, as an infusion of energy into the story, or as a reflection of characters' states of mind.

When he wishes to spell out to the reader Lockie's feelings of alienation, Winton frequently shifts the action from indoors — at Lockie's home or the hospital — to the beach or the outdoors generally (the town jetty, Mount Clement). There, without the press of chores and familial duty, Lockie can take a breath of fresh air and take stock of himself and his situation. His contemplations tend to act as pointed 'summaries thus far', directing the reader towards interpretations usually relating to Lockie's building self-knowledge and compassion for his mother. The setting of the wide outdoors serves a double purpose here — not only enabling contemplation but, in a crafting sense, offsetting and integrating in an uplifting tone what is essentially a slab of interiority or introspection — an element whereby Winton diverges from the conventions highlighted by McDowell.

Linked to this, for Lockie's contemplations are often preceded by an urge to 'get out of the house', settings of the outdoors also act as circuit breakers against grimness in an almost structural way, as 'a bit of fresh air', as one of the chapters is called. Early in the novel, for example, when Lockie has learnt that his mother thinks he's dead, Winton removes them from their unkempt house and Phillip's wet bed-sheets to the summit of Mount Clement where 'the breeze cooled the sweat on their faces' (38). This leads into the Zig-Zag skateboard ride — a short, funny high-action

sequence in which ‘Lockie felt ... reckless and stupid and hurt and exhilarated all at once’ (39). The humour and exhilaration enabled by the outdoors gives respite from the grubby upheaval of the Leonard domicile, lifting the reader’s, as well as Lockie’s, spirits.

In instances such as this, locations of the outdoors, always involving action to some degree (in addition to contemplation), are also platforms for Winton to infuse vigour into the narrative, again in a structural way, to avert any perception of a lack of momentum in the plot. As mentioned previously, the main story in *Legend* concerns characters rather than action, and Joy Leonard’s illness does not enable a clear, forward-moving plot trajectory. Winton interposes settings of the outdoors — ocean, beach or hillside — between chapters based indoors — the home or hospital — creating action and energy where actual narrative pace is light on.

Of all the settings instrumental in *Legend*, the most critical is the ocean. Apart from being a place for taking stock, it acts as a counterpoint to Lockie’s alienation, intensifying his alienation, when it does surface, to the reader. This is similar to its effect on Fox in *Dirt Music*. No matter how alienated Lockie may feel in other aspects of his life, the ocean grounds and restores him. In this, Winton is imbuing Lockie with his own teenage experience. In an interview with Andrew Denton, he remarked, ‘When you’re a teenager you feel overcome by all these problems [...] so in a way, jumping into the ocean and diving deep was a way of getting over myself, you know, a way of leaving myself.’⁷³

The ocean is where, at the end of the novel, Lockie’s family is reunited, where their alienation is resolved, again, similarly to *Dirt Music* and Fox’s rescue of Georgie. On the final page, Lockie takes them to a special place along the cliff to swim, where ‘a dolphin reared out of the water and hung like a thought.’ Lockie and his delighted mother jump in and swim with the dolphins. It is Lockie’s gift to her — a celebration of her return from a mental wilderness.

In the same way that Winton frequently uses the sparkling ocean to reflect Lockie’s wellbeing, throughout *Legend* Winton uses rain to underscore depression, disorder, drudgery and loss of hope. Lockie realises his mother is off-kilter when he wakes at dawn to find her pushing an empty pram through the mud ‘on the driveway in her nightie in the pelting rain’ (51). In another scene, Lockie and Phillip take refuge

⁷³ ABC TV, op.cit.

from a thrashing storm in a church. Lockie feels pitifully alienated from the Heaven depicted in the stained glass windows. ‘Kids sitting with lions and lambs. Rainbows. Doves. [...] He just wanted to bawl, he felt so lost and miserable’ (127).

The verandah, when looked at across both texts, emerges as a setting where alienation is either deepened or allayed. It is, itself, a kind of borderland or boundary — an abutting of spaces that are sheltered and exposed. With the wall of the home on one side and an unbounded wider world on the other, Winton uses the verandah as a location of neutrality, for the exterior to connect, but not impact, on the interior, for troubled characters to think or regroup. In *Legend*, it is where Lockie is told of his mother’s illness, and where Vicki leaves her tokens of help — a lifeline from the outside world. In *Dirt Music*, it is where Fox’s happy memories of his dead family are rooted, as they play their guitars; the balcony is where Georgie contemplates the White Point lagoon and her stale life, and from where she first spies Fox.

Turning now to structure, we find some surprising differences between *Legend* and *Dirt Music*. It is also another area of departure by Winton from the commonalities observed by McDowell — specifically here, that young readers’ fiction tends to have plots of a distinctive order. *Legend* is more drifting than *Dirt Music*. Unlike *Dirt Music*, *Legend* is an episodic, somewhat meandering narrative rather than a forward-thrusting one with a clear trajectory. This mirrors to the reader, at a subconscious level, the fact that Joy Leonard’s depression — the catalyst of the plot — is not a predictable, readily mapped illness. Despite Winton’s stated preference for novels ‘that crack along’,⁷⁴ this novel does not, at least not on a superficial level. It is a story about human responses rather than action. After charging from the blocks with a shark encounter for Lockie while surfing (a beginning crafted both to entice young readers and refresh their acquaintance with the Lockie of previous books in his signature setting) it eases back to a fluid, often, reflective mode.

The main factor mitigating against Winton’s relaxed plot order and momentum is his deployment of what I will call ‘interludes of colour’. Such scenes, or chapters, while not integral to the plot, contain humour (sometimes of the bitter-sweet variety) and pizzazz that revitalises the narrative when it threatens to become gloomy. In the same way that Winton interposes settings of the outdoors to create energy where the plot threatens to lag, he interposes these scenes in a structural way. Examples are

⁷⁴ Kroll, op.cit., p.224.

when Vicki catches Lockie buying nappy wash (she, too, is embarrassed at being seen buying sanitary pads); the visit (and quick departure) of Nan and Pop, who wear matching canary-yellow tracksuits and are obsessed with golf and bowel function; Lockie's friendship in the hospital, based on a humorous instance of mistaken identity, with the biker Monster; Phillip's attempt to wash and appropriate a stray dog, splattering the bathroom with 'foul hound-pubes', only to have it '[hack] a hole in the screen door never to be seen again' (122); and the arrival of Cyril, the 'prisoner' ram that the Sarge brings home from the police lockup. Added to this is the infusion, in the same 'non-plot-progressing' vein, of light relief through Lockie's baby sister Blob, who tries to eat everything she can get her gums on.

Although *Legend* navigates by the tortuous course of Joy Leonard's healing and has a drifting plot, the novel is chronologically linear. In *Dirt Music*, on the other hand, linearity is bent almost to breaking point, its split-narrative structure demanding substantial chronological overlapping and, within each story, many passages or whole chapters being seated in the past. Given this, it is perhaps surprising that it is *Dirt Music* that has more sense of a story building towards a climax. *Legend's* resolution is exemplified by the willfully undramatic: '[Joy Leonard's] good days crept up on the rotten ones until it was at least an even fight' (183). In *Dirt Music*, on the other hand, Winton uses the time-honoured 'ticking clock' device: the question in the final part, Part VIII, of 'Will Fox be rescued or turn himself in before Georgie and Buckridge leave Coronation Gulf?' gives a surge of suspense in the run to the novel's conclusion.

Despite the absence of a ticking clock, or even of a plot with a distinct trajectory, Winton does suffuse *Legend* with low-key suspense. Always simmering beneath the narrative is the question of whether Lockie can keep the family afloat until his mother recovers; and with the reappearance of Vicki, the question of how their relationship will pan out. Winton having created such a likeable character as Lockie, the narrative reaps the benefits of the reader's concern for him.

Supporting this is the narrator's predilection for prolepsis, or the foreshadowing of events. This is used by Winton to enhance interest in what is to come. Some examples are: 'Lockie's evening didn't get any better' (27); or 'Lockie wanted his life to stay the same. He didn't want trouble. But any idiot could see something was up. Something bad' (35); or 'Sometimes when you have a hunch you'd much rather be wrong' (52); or 'Let's face it. Just when you think nothing worse can possibly happen

[...] something always comes along to really rub your nose in it (62); or ‘The first day of school was the usual diabolical pandemonium’ (178). In part, this kind of prolepsis is an extension of the lively narration, creating the sense that the narrator is bubbling over to tell the story, but it also demands that the reader ‘stay tuned’.

This brings us to other elements of narrative style and language in *Legend*. An overall observation is that, whereas in *Dirt Music* Winton manipulates narrative elements in order to underscore the alienation of his characters, in *Legend* Winton manipulates them to offset for his readers the potentially deterring effects of his undercurrent of alienation. In other words, it is mainly through its narrative style and language that Winton circumvents the potential challenges for a young audience flagged by McDowell.

The narrative features of *Legend* are its close third person narration, bordering on first person, its use of the vernacular and its humour. Of these, humour — its level and its type — is the most striking point of difference between *Legend* and *Dirt Music*.

In *Legend*, I doubt there is a single page that does not contain levity in one form or another. In *Dirt Music*, humour is a secondary element of narrative, although doubtless intended by Winton to offset the glumness of the content at times. *Dirt Music* has wryness and irony — glancing in the mirror, Georgie observes that ‘she was no triumph of middle aged womanhood’ (21); the occasional upbeat metaphor — ‘He was [...] a potato burst from its jacket’ (24); and amusing vernacular — ‘[G]et ya missus down the ambo shed and tell her to put her teeth in!’ But by no measure could *Dirt Music* be considered a ‘funny’ book, as is *Legend*. Humour is the clearest, most pervasive aspect of *Legend* by which the novel maintains its appeal, and is created by a mix of events, characters and narrative style. Humour works to offset all the potential challenges to a young reader that McDowell’s observations bring to mind — a drifting plot, depressing content, introspection and the potential overload of adult characters. Winton uses humour as a watercolour artist might use a background wash. In a blend of linguistic and physical or slapstick forms, it is ever-present — cheery, corny, wry, improbable or otherwise — imbuing a lightness of tone throughout that makes the novel accessible.

Winton having established Lockie’s character so engagingly, much of the humour in *Legend* stems from the reader’s compassion for Lockie and his unhappy

situation. Aristotle argued that ‘Compassion is the enemy of laughter,’⁷⁵ but *Legend* seems to run counter to this. In *Legend*, the compassion Winton draws from the reader is key to unlocking the humour in Lockie’s self-deprecation, his wryness and the various slapstick, physically punishing events surrounding him. Readers feel compassion for Lockie after the fashion of, as James Wood puts it, the modern novel’s ‘comedy of forgiveness’⁷⁶ — *There but for the grace of God go I*. The humour born of compassion mitigates against readings of Lockie as self-pitying.

Repeatedly, Winton delivers the challenging material demanded by the narrative and either imbues it or follows it up with humour or light-heartedness, thereby counterbalancing it. For example, Lockie’s and Phillip’s first inept attempts to bring order to the home involve ‘lashings of toast’ for dinner and washing-up suds ‘heading for the back door as though trying to make a getaway’ (27, 29); after the poignant scene in which, while fishing from the rocks, Vicki tells Lockie of her deep unhappiness, a ‘green streak of [fish] poop squirted down Lockie’s arm and splattered his chin’ (167). By contrast, in *Dirt Music* Winton does the reverse, tamping the comedy of a scene in which Georgie is stranded naked by the pool in front of her nephew and niece, by ending it in Georgie’s hurt and humiliation. ‘After a moment she registered the kids’ eyes wide as anemones and she was just turning to Ann when her sister grabbed her in a blanketing hug that felt for a few moments like love but was, she realized, nothing more than shame’ (177).

Integral to *Legend*’s humour is the narrative style employed by Winton, particularly his variation on close third person point of view and his use of the vernacular. Far more than in *Human Torpedo* and *Scumbuster*, the narration in *Legend* is so close as to render the narrator a kind of alias of Lockie himself. This ‘narrator as Lockie alias’, combined with liberal free indirect style, enables the constant infusion of easy humour through the appropriation of Lockie’s upbeat manner and vivid use of the Australian vernacular. This snippet of narration illustrates the narrator as an alias of Lockie:

Let’s face it. Just when you think nothing worse can possibly happen, when you think your bum is bouncing on the bottom

⁷⁵ Quoted by James Wood, *op.cit.* p.7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8.

of the barrel and you can't go any lower, something always comes along to really rub your nose in it. (62)

The narrator presents as a distinct character (a version of Lockie) who/that demands engagement by the reader. The narrator directly addresses the reader as an interlocutor might, inviting the reader to agree with them with the phrase 'let's face it' — implying with the words 'us', 'you' and 'your' the co-existence of a 'me' — and using vernacular that Lockie himself would use like 'bum' and 'rub your nose in it'. The slippage into first person narration draws the reader in, making them the narrator's buddy.

From time to time, the close narration goes even further, slipping across the third person–first person boundary entirely by using the pronoun 'me', thereby becoming indistinguishable from Lockie. An instance of this is:

But whenever he saw Vicki in the street — and *believe me*, in a town the size of Angelus it happened all the time — he broke out in a grimy sweat and felt his heart creep up in his throat like a flaming fur ball. (9; my italics)

The vernacular is crucial in supporting humour in *Legend* and in the brief quotes above we have seen several instances. It is a vehicle for a constant stippling of humour, whether through Lockie, his alias narrator, or other characters like Phillip or the Sarge. It is, moreover, essential to establishing convincingly the lively voice of the narrator, or Lockie alias. Through this vernacular-loving narratorial voice, even the adults continue to be depicted through an upbeat perspective rather than the usual more detached perspective, helping to allay the possible demand of adults having a weighty role in the novel.

Apart from imparting humour and establishing the voice of characters, the vernacular performs the additional function in both *Legend* and *Dirt Music* of denoting Lockie's and Fox's social backgrounds and/or aspirations — in Fox's case, the absence of aspirations. The vernacular used by Lockie and Fox marks them as being from humble backgrounds, more humble than their respective love interests, and in Fox's case, his nemesis Buckridge. It suggests that they are already, to some extent, marginalised and 'on the back foot'.

Winton's infusion of the vernacular takes many forms, sometimes of casual diction (e.g. 'Lo' when Lockie answers the phone [*Legend* 168], or 'I did think about goin north' [*Dirt Music* 99 — note the absence of the apologetic apostrophe that usually denotes a missing letter]); sometimes of phrases like 'stacked my hog' ('fell off my motorbike' [*Legend* 123]); at other times drawing on patterns of speech ('She likes you. The poems *and everythin*.' [*Dirt Music* 248; my italics]). Contrast these with Buckridge's 'And you don't have a fucking clue what you're talking about' (*Dirt Music* 399) in which even the expletive is pronounced well.

The vernacular is woven throughout both novels, almost as an element of setting, helping create a soundscape in which the characters exist. Winton said in an interview, 'I've found it interesting to try to take vernacular language more or less on its own terms and give it some kind of poetry in a way that better writers [like Twain] have done before me. [...] What I loved about [...] American regionalism in general is the ability of novelists to wear their locality and to stand by the colloquial language of their place and their time [...] like a refusal to be cowed [by] your own language'.⁷⁷ Speaking of the *Lockie Leonard* series he said, 'Most of [my letters from fans] tell me I've got it right.'⁷⁸

In *Dirt Music* we see the manipulation by Winton of what I called sub-lingual elements of narration — structure, point of view, tense, syntax and sentence length, and punctuation — that adds enormously to his rendering of alienation. By contrast, in *Legend*, with the exception of structure, which has already been discussed, Winton's handling of these elements is more direct and straightforward. There are no tense shifts or point of view shifts. Winton maintains Lockie's simple past tense, close third person point of view consistently throughout. This is making an exception for the brief slippages by the brimming Lockie-alien narrator, with whom, in 'his' excitement, we see the occasional 'you', 'we', 'us' (third person to first person) and past to present tense (in the manner of free indirect style), e.g. 'Sometimes when you have a hunch you'd much rather be wrong' (52). (Although *Legend* has none, it would seem from my limited experience that point of view shifts, at least if separated by chapters, are tolerated more readily in fiction for young readers than shifts in tense. Both *Mystery at Riddle Gully* and my earlier novel *Spider Lies* — each novels for readers a few years

⁷⁷ Taylor, op.cit. p.374.

⁷⁸ Geraldine Brennan. 'Children's literature: Tim Winton on teenage angst.' (Interview). *Times Educational Supplement*, Issue 4142, Nov 17, 1995, p.S13(1).

younger than *Legend* readers — have chapters from differing points of view. In contrast, two purposeful shifts in tense in another of my young readers' manuscripts were rejected by a publisher as 'problematic'.)

In syntax and punctuation, unlike the variations that Winton uses to illustrate the two sides of Fox — the alienated man, and, in the ocean, the contented man — in *Legend* the syntax is consistent through Lockie's or Vicki's emotional highs and lows, and sentence structure is conventional (accepting the abbreviation of sentences for occasional emphasis, or in free indirect style for 'voice'). Punctuation, too, is conventional — unlike in *Dirt Music* — and generously directs readers. Between the two texts, there is a striking difference, for instance, in the way Winton distinguishes between speech, thought or reflection, and narration. In *Legend*, context is complemented by quotation marks and by speech tags such as 'said', 'thought' or 'remembered' whereas in *Dirt Music* these are distinguished largely through context alone.

To summarise what I see as the key aspect of *Legend* in its exploration of alienation and boundaries, I suggest that despite its many challenges (when held up to the common conventions and strategies observed by McDowell), *Legend* is anything but a turgid book about sad adults. Winton succeeds in keeping things jaunty, upbeat and appealing. Narrative elements such as humour, a narrator that acts as an alias of Lockie, the vernacular, outdoor locations, colourful interludes, engaging characters and gentle suspense form a deceptively steely framework on which Winton is able to hang his heavier themes.

Before leaving the discussion of *Legend*, I wish to clarify something. I am concerned that over the course of the discussion I might have been seen to imply that books for young readers cannot successfully contain challenging material unless this material is somehow 'cloaked' to keep the tone light. This is clearly not the case, given the number of extremely successful books for young audiences with dark, confronting or depressing subject matter, such as works by Sonya Hartnett, Margo Lanagan, John Marsden or J. K. Rowling. In this discussion, I have outlined the way in which Winton offsets challenges in *Legend*, according to his preferred tone and style at the time he was writing. Authors of other books containing challenging

material make them digestible and appealing by manipulating the elements of storywriting in other ways and combinations.

In many instances, it is precisely the challenges within a ‘dark’ book that make it appealing, and there has been much psycho-critical writing on this phenomenon. Andrew Melrose contends that the main gap between the child reader and the adult author is one of experience, rather than factors such as interests or abilities. ‘It is the writer’s job’ he says, ‘to try and recognise the gap [of experience] by providing a text allowing it to be bridged.’⁷⁹ *Legend* is not a dark book, but a proportion of its readers would have been enabled to face up to dark subject matter in the reading of it, Winton providing a ‘bridge’ built of humour, engaging characters and so forth across the child–adult gap of their experience.

Winton appears to embrace Melrose’s theory, in a recent radio interview extending it to readers of all ages: ‘You bring people into an experience, introducing them into someone else’s life, and you leave them there for a while,’ he said. ‘That’s all you’re really doing. You’re opening them up to other possibilities and other imaginative experience.’⁸⁰ As his character the Sarge in *Human Torpedo* put it, ‘Once you’ve read a book, you’ve experienced it, you’ve lived it, and no one can take that experience away from you. It’s the bee’s flamin’ knees as far as I’m concerned’ (117).

The Sarge’s comment expresses, at least in part, the motivation in the reading of *all* fiction by both adult and young readers — the vicarious experiencing of life.

I began this exploration of Winton’s writing curious about whether, when viewed through the lens of his rendering of alienation and boundaries, there might be variations in his technique and manipulation of narrative elements in his writing that could be anchored to his young or adult audiences. Over the course of the discussion, significant variations, as well as similarities, have emerged. It can’t be known (I suggest, not by Winton himself) to what degree these variations have arisen as a consequence of Winton’s mindfulness of a particular audience or of his natural

⁷⁹ Keynote address. ‘The Hidden Adult and the Hiding Child in Writing for Children?’ Australasian Association of Writing Programs Conference, *Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds*. Southern Cross University, Byron Bay, New South Wales. 23-25 November 2011. [<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april12/melrose.htm>; Accessed 24 March 2013.]

⁸⁰ ABC Radio 702. Interview: ‘Tim Winton speaks of new “Signs of Life”’, *Drive* with Richard Glover, 29 October 2012. [http://blogs.abc.net.au/nsw/2012/10/tim-winton-speaks-of-new-signs-of-life.html?site=sydney&program=702_drive; Accessed 6 November 2012.]

writer's instinct. I offer them, though, in the hope of adding to the discourse on Winton and the more general field of writing for children as compared with adults, as well as of enhancing my own writing practice.

Before closing, I offer an apology. The dissection I have just indulged in is precisely what Hannah Bell in *Storymen*, her book on Winton and Bungai Mowaljarlai, bemoaned. On returning to teaching English Literature in 2001, she found the focus of education had shifted from 'appreciation of story as a sublime, emotional journey that could be enjoyed as an experience in itself' to the 'search for the tricks used by poets, novelists and playwrights to 'con' [her students] into believing or seeing the world in particular ways.'⁸¹ Her students, she said, were required to 'become distrustful of text, context and text producer in order to demonstrate their analytical skills.'⁸² In the numerous interviews Winton has given over the years it is clear that he too is bemused, if not appalled, at the ripping apart of his work — as would be most storytellers — and I apologise for adding to the carnage. I earnestly suspect, though, that no matter how messy the hands of the dissector may become, the magic and integrity of Winton's stories for young readers and for adults — that 'sublime, emotional journey' — will remain unspoiled.

⁸¹ *Storymen*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.3.

⁸² *Ibid.*

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