

# The Forked Road Of Narrative In The Hero's Journey

Volume I: Cards for the Samurai (A Novel)

By

Con Anemogiannis

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thesis Title Page		i
Table of Contents for Volume I.		ii-iv
Abstract		v
Declaration		vii
Acknowledgements		viii
General Introduction		ix-xii
Volume I: The Creative Work, the novel entitled, <i>Cards for the Samurai</i>		1-253
Part One	The Postmaster	1-59
CHAPTER ONE	The Postmaster	1-11
CHAPTER TWO	The Legend of the Bullroarer	12-18
CHAPTER THREE	The Girl Ninja	19-26
CHAPTER FOUR	The Cavern of Loneliness	27-36
CHAPTER FIVE	The Telephone Bar	37-47
CHAPTER SIX	Death of a Princess	48-54
CHAPTER SEVEN	The March of Time	55-61
Part Two	The Wedding Factory	62-189
CHAPTER EIGHT	The Exit Clause	62-67
CHAPTER NINE	The Map of Xs	68-73
CHAPTER TEN	The Marriage of Shirts and Biscuits	74-77
CHAPTER ELEVEN	The Waste Land	78-83

CHAPTER TWELVE	The Speed of Light	84-88
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	The Department of State Lotteries	89-90
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	The Arrival of Sluts	91-99
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	The Acting Coach	100-107
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	The Dressing of Sluts	108-117
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	The Darling Priest	118-125
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	The Carnival and Theatre	126-132
CHAPTER NINETEEN	The Coup	133-136
CHAPTER TWENTY	The Magic Mirrors	137-141
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	No Place for Old People	142-145
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	The Intonaco	146-151
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	The Man of Learning	152-156
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	Shanghai Lil	157-160
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE	The Gravity of the Task	161-164
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX	Pomp and Vanity	165-169
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	Blackmail and Slander	170-174
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT	The Samurai's Arrival	175-180
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE	The Thundering Geisha	181-184
CHAPTER THIRTY	A Task Not Beyond Us	185-189
Part Three	The Lost Cards	190-253
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE	The Oriental Traitor	190-194
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO	The Arrival of Brooms	195-201
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE	The Wedding of Shirts and Biscuits	202-208
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR	The Fountain of Youth	209-218
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE	The Shogun and Emperor	219-225
CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX	The Event Horizon	226-229

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN	The Revenge of the Geisha	230-237
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT	The Ringmaster	238-241
CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE	The Postmaster Arrives	242-249
CHAPTER FORTY	The Departure of the Samurai	250-253

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is entitled, *The Forked Road of Narrative in the Hero's Journey*. The Exegesis accompanying the creative work, *Cards for the Samurai*, is entitled *The Hero At the Crossroads*. It discusses perceived changes and abridgements to the hero-quest in literature and cinema. The research questions I seek to answer in the Exegesis, and by execution in the creative work, are:

Has there has been a shift, or abridgement in the hero-quest narratives of cinema and literature?

Is the role of the 'monster'—as I term the narrative impediments that the hero must face—becoming more important than the narrative resolution?

Are writers of quest novels—like myself—making the jeopardy more important than the 'grail,' or prize the hero seeks? Is this a result of audience, or reader expectations?

Are such perceived changes being guided by writers and screenwriters seeking a more economical narrative to the plodding hero-quest of old?

In the Exegesis I investigate how these perceived changes, or abridgments to the hero-quest may have come about. I question if it is because of incremental changes to hero-quest narratives that began with the original Grail re-tellings. I then trace incremental changes in hero-quests back to classical texts like *The Odyssey*, and to modern classics such as *Moby-Dick*. Examples from thriller, horror, and crime genres, as well as an historical overview, are used to see if the age-old narrative where the hero has to first defeat the monster, before attaining the 'grail,' or 'prize', is becoming pruned.

For answers to these research questions, and speculations, I engage with the theoretical hero-quest models of Joseph Campbell, and Vladimir Propp.

In the latter part of the Exegesis I discuss how my creative work uses the hero-quest as a narrative device in the light of these theoretical models. I discuss how I negotiated my way through the perceived changes and narrative conflicts of hero-quest narratives.

Ultimately in the Exegesis I suggest that there may be an inherent division, or bifurcation in the uniform models of theorists such as Propp and Campbell, and that writers of quest narratives—like myself—consciously, or unconsciously try to bridge this division. Along with examples from literature and modern cinema, and my own creative work, I detail the difficulties this perceived division poses not only for writers but readers and audiences.

## DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree, or diploma in any university, or tertiary institution, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published, or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signed

Dated

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In this thesis the creative work of Volume 1, the novel entitled, *Cards for the Samurai*, tries to employ the two different types of narrative quest that I identify in the Exegesis. These are *the adventure-triumph model*, and *the sacrificial-redemptive model*. In the creative work I use them in tandem as an alternating and cascading sequence of events, rather than as one long narrative string sequence.

*Cards for the Samurai* does this by intertwining two quests in alternating paragraphs. The novel uses the memories of what happened to ‘Nickie’, the child protagonist, as an equal narrative counterpoint to what Nicholas the adult is experiencing. It attempts to integrate quite different narrative quests that the Exegesis of Volume 2, *The Hero at the Crossroads* argues are inherent in the supposedly uniform theoretical models of Vladimir Propp, and Joseph Campbell.

Additionally, but to a lesser degree, my creative work *Cards for the Samurai* is a departure from Australian multicultural fiction. Such fiction is more usually concerned with immigrants in conflict with the dominant culture as they try to negotiate identity. *Cards for the Samurai* bypasses this traditional and (in my view) perhaps more clichéd conflict mode in favour of an ironic hero who worships cultures and heroes outside his own immigrant experience, and Anglo-Australian culture.

The theoretical framework that is used in the Exegesis of Volume 2, *The Hero at the Crossroads*, is a comparative analysis of a number of texts, novels, screenplays and their denouements, along with an historical overview. This is to ascertain the veracity of the claim of the changing role of the ‘impediment,’ in quest narratives, where the narrative ‘impediment’, or the ‘monster’ as I define it, becomes more important than the ‘grail’ the hero seeks.

In the Exegesis, this comparative analysis and historical overview, of necessity, precedes discussion about my creative work and how I execute narrative resolution.

In the Exegesis I use the word ‘hero’ as shorthand to include ‘heroine,’ and not as something specifically gender-related. I also use ‘Grail’ to mean both the Grail that occurs in Grail re-tellings, as well as the lower case ‘grail’ of modern parlance. This is the reward, or boon awaiting the hero, near the end of the hero’s narrative sequence or journey. By ‘monster(s)’ or impediment, I also mean the jeopardy, obstacles, villains, and dangers the hero must confront. The term ‘bifurcation’ is used to mean, divergence, division, splitting, or branching off. It is not used in the sense of Bifurcation Theory of Mathematics and Physics.

Ultimately the Exegesis analyses whether there is a central fault, or misapprehension in the respective theoretical models of Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell. It suggests that in these theoretical models there is a complex bifurcation. It argues there is a fork in the narrative road of hero-quests that has not only been underestimated and inadequately understood but that also determines a writer’s choices, and substitution of genres.

In part it explores whether Melville’s hero-quest novel, *Moby-Dick* is the seminal work that bridges hero narratives of the past to those of the present. The Exegesis consists of four chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter One, *The Acceleration of the Hero* asks: are modern hero narratives being abridged? Are certain narrative stages of the hero-quest being omitted, or combined, to accelerate the hero-quest narrative because of audience, or reader impatience?

Chapter Two, *The Hero Slows Down*, is an historical comparative analysis that investigates whether such an assertion is historically viable. It poses the question of whether such truncations were visible in early narratives.

Chapter Three, *The Dividing and Uniting Road in the Hero's Journey* is an engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of these perceived abridgements, or changes in the hero-quest. It examines the supposedly uniform models of Joseph Campbell, and Vladimir Propp, suggesting there is a bifurcation in their respective models, which writers—like myself—try to bridge. It contends that these theorists have perhaps glossed over this perceived divergence to maintain uniformity in their respective models.

Chapter Four, *The Writer as Hero*, closely focuses mainly on my creative work in fiction. It discusses how I negotiate hero-quest narratives. I attempt to show how the suggested bifurcation operates not only in theory but in how I practice. The chapter discusses how the fork in the narrative road influences the choices I make in my novels, as well as the choice of genres. The main emphasis is on the current creative work, the novel, *Cards for the Samurai*, and how I resolved problems of the dual quest narrative in this work. Additionally I detail how I resolved them differently in my previous published novel, *Medea's Children*.

The Conclusion, *The Road Ahead for the Hero or, The Road Behind*, summarises some of the arguments of the Exegesis. It acknowledges some of its limitations. At the same time it details what my contribution to the understanding of hero-quests, and narrative has been.

## CARDS FOR THE SAMURAI

### — PART 1 THE POSTMASTER —

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#### CHAPTER ONE    **The Postmaster**

Every year Nicholas received a birthday card, no matter where he was in the world. But the card never wished him many happy returns, nor was it from friends or family. It was certainly never perfumed, or suggestive of an ex-lover. Not suggestive of anyone really, because it was always unsigned. And it was always in a plain envelope left anonymously at whatever hotel Nicholas was staying in, regardless of the country or city he was visiting. And Nicholas liked to keep his itinerary a secret.

The ritual arrival of this single card, being one that started on his forty-seventh birthday in London, slipped under his door at the Russell Hotel in Bloomsbury. A card whose envelope read: *For the Guest, Nicholas Harris*, in 12pt Roman Italics.

The second time, on his forty-eighth birthday, the following January, it was at the Hotel Olympic on the Greek island of Kalymnos, and Nicholas was certain no one knew he was there.

But the card that arrived at the Hotel Europa in Yerevan, Armenia, on his forty-ninth birthday, was the one that really spooked Nicholas, because he had only gone to Armenia on a whim. And in Yerevan, had only booked into the Europa Hotel on the recommendation of a toothless taxi driver picked at random at the airport.

A card like all the others, not a playing card, but a trading card, from a long-forgotten television series Nicholas used to be a fan of when he was a kid in 1960s Sydney. The card being from a television series called *The Samurai*, featuring the derring-do feats of the series' Samurai hero, Shintaro. A Samurai whose mission was to slay as many evil Ninja as possible to protect Japan's seventeenth century Shogun.

All of which made Nicholas think someone from his childhood was following him, trying to tell him something. Except this year, on his fiftieth birthday, in Bangkok where he had gone to live, at his hotel, the Pinnacle, it was different. This time there was no card in an envelope, just an unsigned note of apology, also in 12pt Roman Italics, that said,

*Sorry Nickie, Card 50, like card 6, and 3 is missing.* Nicholas thinking, *how dare they call me Nickie?* It lacked good manners since that was his childhood name.

But Nicholas was also sorry that there was no card this year, because whenever the cards arrived they made him remember how much *The Samurai* excited him in childhood. It always set off a firestorm of reminiscences. Nicholas thinking, *maybe that's what the Postmaster*—as he called whoever was sending them—*intended*.

....

But then again *The Samurai* wasn't just Nicholas's favourite television show in Australia in the 1960s. It was everyone's.

....

Because Australia in the sixties had never had a Japanese show on television. And Nicholas recalled, it was much more exciting than Australian shows like *Bellbird*, whose Australian country town setting seemed to an urban kid like 'Nickie,' as he was called back then—and by 'the Postmaster' now—like a nursing home surrounded by desert. And a soap opera called, *You Can't See Round Corners*, which was about – what? The unpredictability of fate? Maybe that's what the title meant.

And on his second beer now, not at the Pinnacle, but in a fancy Bangkok bar called the Sirocco, where he celebrated his fiftieth birthday alone, Nicholas, courtesy of this year's 'apology' for lack of a card,

remembered more about *The Samurai* series. But for the life of him couldn't determine why the previous cards or this year's unusual 'apology' were being sent.

....

Remembered how excited he used to get as a child sitting in front of his black and white TV waiting for *The Samurai* to come on. Lying on the ground, on a mat because the linoleum was too cold and the *Vulcan Conray* heater not hot enough since only one of its three rods was functioning. Nicholas ruminating how different that time was compared to his life now, because in Bangkok, there was no cold and television meant nothing—Nicholas drinking in the view of the city from the luxury of a roofless bar, celebrating his birthday alone. Or so he thought.

....

But the cards of previous years and this year's 'apology' reminded him how, as Nickie, he waited with eagerness in the living room of his house in Newtown—where his Greek immigrant family lived—for the entire imperial story of *The Samurai* to be played out in daily instalments, and how dreadful he felt when each year's series finished.

....

Nicholas remembering how his mother used to say,  
'Why are you so upset darling? Why are you crying? Did someone die?' And how he used to say,  
'Yes,' meaning something had died within him, because it was impossible for him to wait for next year's series. And he didn't.

....

Unlike now, where Nicholas waited for each day and night without enthusiasm, since for him middle age meant each day was like any other. Except of course for birthdays, when ‘the Postmaster’s’ cards arrived, or this year’s ‘apology’ for lack of one.

Nicholas aware that back then he was less passive, less reflective, taking action much like Shintaro his hero. As a child, writing to the TV Station, Channel 9, asking if they could put it on again. Telling them that repeats were nothing to be ashamed of, and that if anything they reinforced viewers’ loyalties.

Granted though that Nickie back then, wouldn’t have used, at seven-years of age, big words like ‘reinforced’ or ‘loyalties’, rather words like ‘please,’ but hindsight now suggested to Nicholas his simple childhood language covered the same sophisticated marketing concepts.

And Nicholas recalled how at that time, young Nickie was a bit of a Postmaster himself, because he often tried to write letters to Japan’s Emperor, Hirohito. His first effort beginning,

*Dear Your Majesty,*

But it sounded fake and cloying. Back then, abandoning it so as not to insult the Emperor with the wrong form of address, thinking he’d suffered enough atomic bombs dropped on him. Actually, Nicholas remembered when Nickie changed tack addressing the Emperor, as,

*Dear Mister Hirohito,*

In that sort of blokey egalitarian Australian way, it also felt false, since Nickie had never been especially blokey. His mother saying,

‘What are you writing now?’

‘A letter.’

‘Who to?’

‘His Imperial Majesty, the Occupant and Heir of the Chrysanthemum Throne.’

‘Not the Rhododendron one?’

As if. Was she kidding? In Japan, she would've been arrested for treason—and quite rightly.

His mother seeing all the crumpled sheets of false starts in the wastepaper basket, adding with exasperation, 'I don't know where you get these ideas from. But do you have to use so much paper?'

....

Paper that these days could have symbolised Nicholas's love affairs, their false starts and brevity, but his mother certainly wasn't the Postmaster sending cards or apologies since she was in a nursing home with dementia. Nicholas recalling as he drank, drinking in the panoramic nightscape offered by the Sirocco, how the young Nickie would say ...

....

'... Because the Japanese Mum ...' pausing for effect, '... believe in perfection,' knowing he had to get it just right. To which his mother would say,

'Whatever,' because she didn't know his request to the imperial household was for Nickie a matter of life and death, not just good manners. And how once, he even came close to finishing the letter because he thought he started it perfectly with,

*Your Imperial Highness ...*

Which he was pretty sure was correct. But, having explained that he needed the Emperor to intervene from on high with NHK and Channel 9—Australia's poor local surrogate, to repeat the series, he got confused with how to end it.

*Your Admirer*, sounding absurd.

*Your Fan*, worse. And,



*Your Humble Vassal and Subject*, too medieval and ridiculous. Possibly even illegal, considering that, as an Australian at that time in the sixties, even though he was Greek, Nickie was—on paper at any rate—a British subject. Back then the possibility of an Australian republic wasn't even a dream let alone a nightmare.

....

And at the Sirocco where Nicholas drank, recalling all this, he wondered if there would be a belated card tomorrow, on the heels of the Postmaster's 'apology'. Also recalling how during that down-time in transmission, as a kid, he used to console himself by playing with his Billy cart made out of soapboxes. The one with technologically advanced wheels made of ball bearings that revolved wheel within wheel much like the galaxies but more noisily.

Bearings that made the same grinding grating noise now made by skateboards, perhaps even *Tuk Tuks* in Bangkok, but to him at that time, the music of the spheres. And how back then, Nickie used to race his chariot much like Ben-Hur, past all the grimy terraces that Nickie preferred to think of as catacombs. Up and down the working class streets of Newtown where many had no work, let alone income.

Not following their example though, diverting himself by making money, sixpence, ahead of decimal currency, by collecting beer bottles strewn all over Newtown—because people sure did drink a lot in the 1960s.

....

Much as Nicholas did now in Bangkok, particularly the local whisky, *Mekong*, which was his favourite. But here at the Sirocco Bar, since whisky was expensive Nicholas stuck to beer. Didn't need whisky or

champagne to celebrate turning fifty—the waiters at the Sirocco taking away Nicholas’s beer bottles efficiently.

....

Almost as efficiently as Nickie did back then in Newtown with his wheelbarrow up the road to the man who collected them—smelly as they were—paying Nickie a penny per piece. A Collector of Beer Bottles, who used to say,

‘That all you got today kid?’ looking at Nickie’s wheelbarrow and its paltry six bottles. To which Nickie would say,

‘They didn’t drink much last week,’ *they*, referring to the drunks in the park he collected them from. The Collector saying,

‘What’s the matter with them mate? They haven’t introduced prohibition.’

But in truth these activities were no consolation at all.

....

Even less of a consolation than all the beers Nicholas had consumed this last year in Bangkok, either in girly bars, or up here in the star-lit luxury of the Sirocco, the bar in the clouds, where he celebrated a milestone, disappointed he didn’t get a card.

....

But back then what was also disappointing was the fact that the mail never brought letters from Channel 9 or Japan about Nickie’s request for repeats. A disappointment repeated twice a day, because the mail came twice a day then. The mail in those days quite a serious business, as

important as email today, perhaps even Facebook where pictures of all your friends and lovers alive or dead, can feature for eternity – whatever that is.

Nickie back then saying to that era's mailman,

‘You sure there’s nothing for me this afternoon?’ To which the mailman would say,

‘You asked me this morning.’ Nickie responding,

‘And I’ll ask tomorrow,’ taking the bills from him, not wanting the mailman to think this was something he’d forget about.

No, none of it was any good. In the sixties, the only thing that eased Nickie’s pain, the dreadful sense of yearning and emptiness that accompanied the end of *The Samurai*’s transmission, was by looking at pictures of the series’ star, Shintaro, the Master Swordsman.

Looking at his own set of the trading cards that promoted the series, cards that were identical to the ones sent to him over the last few years. Cards produced by a chewing gum company called *Scanlon’s* whose gum wasn’t particularly good or chewy—there were better brands he could rate much like a wine connoisseur, and give stars to, like current film critics.

....

These days when it came to beer brands, Nicholas wasn’t fussy. Not much difference to him between a *Singha* and a *Heineken*.

....

Nickie saying to his friends back then,

‘This one has more bite,’ almost as if he’d anticipated a life of review.

....

What Nicholas did now, writing book reviews for pocket money. Mainly reviewing *How To* books, like, *How to Retire to Paradise*, a topic about which he was no authority. More recently books on the Burma Railway, of which there were plenty, the certainties of past hells more popular than paradise's vicissitudes. Over the years, having had any number of jobs, documentary producer, journalist, part-time novelist or 'pornographer' as some people called him. Jobs that sort-of explained his visits to London and Armenia. It certainly beat the brief job he had at the Australian Embassy, when he first arrived in Thailand, where in their immigration section as a clerk, he spent time helping the better-paid staff reject visa applications. Which is probably why he quit, had suffered enough rejection in his personal life, so didn't want to make a career of it.

....

As a child saying stuff like,

'This one has more bite,' to the other kids, because Nickie wanted their gum and the precious Samurai cards in their packets to complete the set. Because to Nickie, the cards were icons, the photographs and scenes taken from the series were just as precious. All seventy-two of them, which, after you had collected the whole set, you could lay out on the floor card by card in a mosaic. The mosaic on their flip side forming the picture of the Master Swordsman himself, standing tall and proud, Samurai sword sheathed but ready, in a purple robe that was actually a kimono. Standing proud in his trademark thongs and socks, although the kimono, like all things Japanese, was exquisite, looking as if it had been designed by Armani, if Armani had been around in the 1960s or had ancestor tailors in seventeenth century Kyoto.

....

These days in Bangkok, Nicholas's own wardrobe was largely shorts and thongs without socks, certainly a far cry from the wardrobe of his hero. But here at the Sirocco Nicholas did wear shoes and trousers despite the heat, maybe because the house rules of the Sirocco insisted on it.

....

Anyway, back then, collecting the whole set of seventy-two cards was no easy feat. And murder on your teeth because often you'd wind up with multiple copies of the same card, rather than the ones you really needed which were numbers, six, three and fifty, which were rare. A fact his obscure Postmaster, seemed aware of, whoever he or she was. Nicholas thinking of half a dozen candidates, people he knew as kids, though he wasn't sure if any were still alive.

....

Nicholas quite amazed why a torrent of recollection about this TV series came to him, simply because a stranger sent cards each year. But was in a way thankful for it because it was nice to go that far back, to wade in the swamps of nostalgia.

Actually, even though he was in Thailand, Nicholas on his third beer, began to contemplate making it his life's ambition to track down, maybe not the Postmaster, but the whole deck, since his own set of cards had gone missing over the years, like so many of his loves and ambitions. This Capitoline vision or 'light bulb' moment probably switched on by the drink coaster he played with.

As he drank, Nicholas becoming more expansive, thinking that he might track each card down as a sort of retirement project, as a way of catching up with people he'd lost touch with who might have kept some for sentimental reasons—as an excuse to see them. Maybe as a way to glimpse,

if not quite sip at the fountain of youth they constituted, whose waters now seemed diverted. And he needed to go one more time to Australia for a final visit anyway. Not only—if he could be bothered—to perhaps find who was sending them, from his admittedly spurious list of candidates, but to research a novel he was writing but hadn't finished. A novel whose climax was to be about ... And Nicholas also had a storage cage filled with personal items that needed to be released. And as these quests in his mind blended, Nicholas thought, *why not?* Preferring to think of his quests as cheeky and youthful, perhaps just quirky, the pronounced trait of some Australian movies.

Nicholas further remembering, how Nickie used to lay those cards out with devotion on a blue velvet blanket. Placing each card on the blanket the way the gods used to place stars in the night sky, their favourite heroes fallen in action. Heroes like Orion, who now twinkled above him at the Sirocco before being obscured by clouds, his belt a flash of lightning.

## CHAPTER TWO    The Legend of the Bullroarer

Nickie back then, always wearing white gloves so as not to damage the cards. White gloves like the ones American military police wear when they escort dead bodies like that of JFK, one of their many shot presidents.

Nickie probably looking a sight with the long black scarf he used to wrap around his head and throat as a sort of flat turban, sometimes even using a tea towel, trying to imitate the look of Tombei the Mist, Shintaro's sidekick when decked out for battle in his Ninja outfit. And the scarf gave him a sort of Islamic appearance, which was unusual for the times, because Islamic people were rare in Australia in the sixties, even in immigrant suburbs like Newtown.

Then, Newtown was mainly full of Greeks like Nickie, New Australians as they were called, to distinguish them from the old and decrepit. Although there were also Italians and people called You Goes, who Nickie thought were named such by the compatriots they'd abandoned in their old country. People who were often mystified why Nickie was entranced with Japan, why he wanted to be Japanese, considering like them, he was already exotic.

....

Even his mother who'd say,  
 'You look silly in that.' To which Nickie would say,  
 'I ... am in the service of the Shogun.' His mother saying,  
 'That ... is a tea towel, and it hasn't even been washed,' seeing his head and mouth covered with it Ninja fashion. His father saying angrier things to his mother like,  
 'You're spoiling him.' To which she would reply,  
 'Am not.'

‘Sure are. He’s withdrawing into a world of fantasy, thinks he’s a Jap not a Greek, or even Australian.’ Pretty perceptive of his Dad back then, because the notion of self-delusion wasn’t as popular as it is now.

....

And all this was so many years ahead of chat shows where delusions now get an airing.

Nicholas as an adult had been on some himself, just before he left Australia in his forties—much in demand actually. And for a while among his varied jobs he even produced some chat shows for television, although it was more usual for him to work in documentaries. Which to most people is slightly more respectable, but to Nicholas only slightly.

....

His Mum saying to his Dad,  
‘He’s only a boy.’

But it was big of her to allow him to return to his cards, his mosaic and his incantations, mainly dialogue drawn from the series, gems, like, ‘Why you ...’ which Shintaro and Tombei his buddy, always said to evil Koga Ninjas before slaying them, leaving the insult, the noun, empty and un-predicated.

....

Much like the rest of Nicholas’s life now, certainly at the moment—the Sirocco half empty.

Nicholas going over in his mind the list of candidates who might be sending him cards, or might be following him, inventing preposterous theories why they would do so. Thinking maybe it was because they were in



love with him, or to unsettle or intimidate him—his theories ranging from admiration to paranoia, as he toyed with his drink coaster.

....

Recalled how his mother used to say,

‘And I don’t want you running around the house all day in pyjamas.’

His mother dismissive of his warrior garb thinking it was sleepwear when actually it was a suit of armour that Nickie believed sometimes rendered him invisible. But not always, because design faults had been built into it, possibly because it came from Newtown’s *Reuben F. Scarf* shop rather than from Kyoto’s master tailors. Design faults that were self-evident because sometimes his mother could actually *see* him on top of a ladder, trying to attach himself to the ceiling, imitating the Samurai’s foes, the Koga Ninja. His mother saying, ‘You get down from there. What do you think you are? A fly?’ Not realising that Nickie back then was simply taking on the role of the Samurai’s enemy to understand what made them so evil, in an early but spirited display of what is now called psychological profiling. ‘And put that ladder away before your father gets home, or you’ll break your neck, and go see what your little brother is up to,’ referring to someone Nickie liked to think of as his half-brother, the future Shogun, who, like Shintaro’s brother, was too young to rule, the one over whom he presided as Regent.

Nickie saying,

‘Come here Paulie,’ as he took him away from his rattle. Sometimes he even dressed Paulie up like an adult Shogun, putting him in their mother’s terry towelling dress, sitting him on the floor with all the fabric spread about him, while he tied to Paulie’s head, a can of spaghetti. Also attaching a string as a strap under his chin, much like the Shogun and his priests did in the series.

But Paulie, his baby brother wasn’t that into it. Too young for swordfights and yet to master English let alone Japanese. Which Nickie was

convinced he himself spoke and could understand because he used to lip read the strange sounds Shintaro made when his lips kept moving long after the English dubbing of the show had finished. Nickie thinking Japanese was a simple language, just more drawn out than English.

....

If only now for Nicholas, Thai was as easy, because he didn't speak that either. Although Nicholas had to admit Nickie's Japanese vocabulary in the sixties was perhaps more extensive than Nicholas's current Thai, extending to essential Japanese words such as *sayonara* and *Edo*, where Shintaro and Tombei were always going to, or coming from.

....

All this, long before anyone had ever learned to say, sushi or Suvarnabhumi, Bangkok's Airport—the one Nicholas drifted in and out of like so many others. Nicholas remembering other details from the past to flesh out his childhood, or perhaps just to keep him company. None of which pinpointed who was the Postmaster.

....

And at the Sirocco Nicholas recalled other phenomena in the 1960s that went beyond television. For instance how as a kid he was often told Australia was a nation beset by Flood, Fire and Drought. And these three vicious elements were worse than feuding Japanese warlords themselves. Nicholas thinking, *no wonder I got up and left when I grew up – for self-preservation*, although he had to admit his departure came late in life and a little bit suddenly, only going to Japan once though, for a week, despite his childhood fascination.

True, he'd been to many other places like London, France, Armenia and Greece, all places where the Postmaster found him. And he had seen the killing fields of Cambodia by day in that giant ossuary that lay beyond the dark horizon Nicholas stared at, from the Sirocco. Had visited it as a tourist when more was known about what had actually happened, even the reasons, though any semblance of reason is still missing.

And as Nicholas stared at the dark where he placed this unfortunate country—Cambodia that is, not Australia—he remembered how as a child in Sydney, all the information he ever received about Australia was unreliable because all his information was also secondary.

....

Unreliable because Nickie had never been exposed to primary sources and had never been allowed to witness a flood or a fire. Had never ventured beyond Newtown – then an inner city slum. And when he did it was only to the bigger slum, the City, to castles among the detritus, department stores like *Anthony Hordern's* and *Grace Bros.* Stores long since reduced by takeovers to rubble, or accommodation centres for students and backpackers.

The information was unreliable because for Nickie it came from School Magazine, a radio program broadcast to his primary school classroom over a loudspeaker attached to the wall above the blackboard.

....

And it was almost as if Nicholas could still hear how his primary school teacher Miss Mobbs used to say,

‘Now children ... It's time for School Magazine. Turn to page twenty-three, to ‘The Legend of the Bullroarer,’ – broadcasts accompanied by a booklet Nickie's class had to follow.

The announcer on the crackly speaker droning on about the Legend of the Bullroarer, a bullroarer being a noisy tube that could, if not quite raise the dead could at least communicate with them. Could open a portal, a channel, through which you could make an appointment.

....

And maybe that was what the Postmaster sending Nicholas the cards or 'the apology' was doing now. But why be so elaborate about it?

....

Then, after reading the story of the Bullroarer, the announcer would tell the children about Australia's magnificent achievements in the export of coal and steel and its excellence in the export of wool. Nickie thinking the announcer talking about coal and wool, or more importantly Flood, Fire and Drought, was telling lies. Because back then, from the top of his four-story terrace house, his own little Sirocco Bar in Newtown there was no evidence of such things. No sheep, no wheat, no coal, certainly no Flood or Drought, or signs of the Australia the broadcaster referred to.

Just the smoke stacks of factories, belting out chocolate bars, polyester shirts, soft drinks, and items for cars made out of metal.

Which made Nickie think if the rest of Australia, beyond where he lived in the factory belt of Sydney, was full of bullroarers that were malfunctioning, and sheep dying of thirst ... that if it really was as the announcer said, always in the grip of, Flood, Fire, and Drought, then he, Shintaro's apprentice in Newtown, should do something about it. Nickie deciding to escape, to get away from Newtown, even Sydney, to go see the real country being rent by Flood, Fire and Drought, and help save it much like his hero. Needing to find the people responsible, and then, with his

sword put them to death. Nickie practising this slaughter by shouting in blood-curdling Japanese,

‘Hai ya!’ Practising with a cricket stump on his sofa, even though he wasn’t sure, what Flood would look like, if he came across him.

....

Nicholas unable to remember why Nickie turned Flood into something human, maybe because people are easy to kill, or because he was somehow aware death was the full stop of narrative in art, and the natural order. Maybe because to Greeks ancient and modern, everything is animate, even the Sun, the Sea, the Night, Sorrow and Pity.

### CHAPTER THREE      The Girl Ninja

Back then, clear to Nickie he first had to escape if he was going to save the nation.

....

Not escape from Australia that came later for Nicholas and not for reasons of heroism.

....

But the four-story terrace that Nickie's Mum and Dad sealed off from the dangers of the night with a DEAD LOCK. And only his Dad and Mum kept the key, refusing him a copy, saying,

'We don't want a child who is *a latchkey kid*,' a phrase that initially sounded caring, but was more a ruse to keep him captive. To escape, Nickie deducing he needed camouflage so he could roam around the country undetected.

....

A bit like the latter day shorts and thongs Nicholas now wore in Thailand, whose purpose wasn't comfort but anonymity, and that he cherished, although the annual arrival of the cards meant anonymity evaded him.

When suddenly a waiter at the Sirocco said to Nicholas,

'Very quiet tonight sir,' startling him, Nicholas unsure if he meant the bar lacked patronage, or was referring to the city, or to him. Nicholas replying,

'Prefer it that way,' indicating, yes, another beer, even though now it was half past eight, and he'd already been there two hours. Ordering again

probably because his smaller quest, to get drunk on his birthday was easier than the other quest he had toyed with—not about the unfinished novel, but about going back for all the cards, maybe to find the Postmaster.

Nicholas wondering why he'd invested so much personality into Flood, Fire and Drought, wondering if as a kid he had confused them with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Nicholas thinking, *I couldn't have, because Revelations was too scary and never taught to kids in scripture.*

Although when Nicholas thought about it, in the sixties, the Apocalypse was always looming, particularly after the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Four Horsemen suspected of being ready to ride into town, but not for anyone's betterment, regardless of the flags decorating their saddles: stars, stripes, hammers and sickles.

....

Not that Nickie was concerned about that, only with escaping at midnight. Perhaps not the safest time to be wandering around the dark streets of Newtown where drunks lived in the parks, sipping the beer out of the bottles that the Collector of Bottles and Nickie wanted.

....

Parks quite unlike where Nicholas currently drank in star-lit luxury among linen-covered tables, still unable to identify the Postmaster, although his list of suspects expanded.

....

Drunks who back then also lived in the gutters,  
'...Where they belong,' Nickie's Dad always said.

And, even though Nickie knew he wouldn't be able to get back in without a latchkey, Nickie shut the door behind him, because it didn't matter, his mission was critical.

Nickie going up his own *Silom* Road in Newtown, the one called King Street and down the Prince's Highway that led to Victoria Park, that all-green field with a swimming pool in the middle of it, that was his first taste of ... *the Outback* ... scared to be honest. The Park was so big and wide and dark. Frightened because at night he'd never been out by himself ...

....

... Unlike in Bangkok where Nicholas rarely saw daylight ...

....

... Back then, Nickie only going out at night with his Mum and Dad to dances at the Police Boys' Club. Or at Christmas to the Peanut Butter Factory that had a garish puppet display, behind the factory fence, of the nativity they used to stare at.

In the park, Nickie unaware he looked ridiculous in his pyjamas, socks and thongs ...

....

... What now in Bangkok was Nicholas's usual uniform give or take a few yards of fabric.

....

Nickie thinking it might be best at midnight, in the park, to rest, when he heard rustling in the Moreton Bay fig trees around him not caused



by wind, but by what Nickie feared, Ninja. Because suddenly by moonlight, he could see he was surrounded. Maybe ambushed, because in the branches there were black-clad and black-mouthed figures hiding with their knees dangling over branches. And they jumped down from their perch running to him with their swords drawn, screaming like Ninjas do, 'You die.'

Nickie saying,

'No, I am Shintaro, and it is you who will die,' as he raised the cricket stump above his head, with assertiveness, winning his first battle, or so he thought. But then these mysterious tree-hidden figures started to laugh,

'Ho, ho, ho,' and, 'ha, ha, ha,' sounding like evil Santa Clauses. Nickie pointing his cricket stump at the moon, so as to look lethal, saying,

'Who are you?' But they just kept laughing and pointing at him. Nickie demanding, 'Who is your Master?' thinking one of the evil warlords, who controlled the Pestilences, the Four Horsemen or whatever, had sent them.

When one of them came forward and took the black cloth off her head, saying,

'Nickie, it's me,' not even using his proper title, Shintaro, or Tombei the Mist. Of all things a girl! 'Me, Jessie.' To which he said,

'Jessie?' Because the only Jessie he knew was Jessica, a girl at school, who although in his class, was like all girls, condemned during lunch and recess to inhabit another limbo, a separate playground because of her inferior status. Jessie saying,

'Yes, Nickie, Jessie, you fool,' which blew up any hope of a truce. Remembering how he told her,

'Girls can't be Ninjas.' Young Jessie saying,

'Well they can now. And put down that stump, before you hurt yourself,' making him lower his sword of steel when he could have just dispatched her. Nickie asking,

‘And who are they?’ Pointing to the other Ninjas behind her, who hadn’t revealed themselves, the ones who had resorted to laughter. Jessie saying,

‘My followers. Come on guys, show Nickie who you are,’ the other five Ninjas, taking off their black hoods, revealing themselves to be, Arthur, Michael, Tom, and yet another girl—imagine—who went by the name of Karen.

....

Nicholas wondering if one of them was the Postmaster sending him cards as an elongated joke, but he dismissed the thought as absurd.

....

Nickie going with them, to where Jessie spread on the ground the black towel she had been wearing over her head. As they all sat down in their socks and thongs, most of their socks now pretty filthy, Jessie saying,

‘We’re out for a good cause.’ Nickie saying,

‘Me too, but what’s yours?’

‘No, Nickie, that’s not fair. You tell first.’ Nickie telling her he was out in the middle of the night because *Pestilences* afflicted the land. But Jessie did not understand that. Nickie saying to her, the simpler word,

‘Plagues,’ but she found this term equally difficult. Nickie changing this to, ‘Bad things,’ which Jessie did understand, even though this was reductive since it made the calamities facing Australia sound no big deal. Nickie going on to explain that Australia was beset by Drought, caused by someone who lit fires, and by Flood, caused by someone who had diverted the rivers. Jessie saying,

‘So what are you going to do about it?’ Nickie saying,

‘Slay them.’ At which Jessie laughed, spoiling their intimacy,

‘Hear that guys? Nickie is going to save Australia.’ Nickie thinking this was a bit mocking, because he so much wanted to like her, and for her to like him. Asking her,

‘Well then, why are you here?’ Jessie saying,

‘We always come here. Me and the ... boys,’ failing to mention Karen.

‘Why?’

‘Just because ...’ And Jessie seemed to get upset at that.

‘Aren’t you going to tell?’ Jessie saying,

‘None of your business,’ beginning to sob. The others saying,

‘Leave her alone. You’re a bully.’ Something Samurais never were.

....

Nicholas thinking maybe the Postmaster was perhaps now bullying him.

....

Nickie saying to Jessie,

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to upset you,’ but Jessie kept crying. Whispering closer to her ear, ‘sorry, really, sorry,’ touching her mousy hair that was so pretty because even at that young age he thought her beautiful.

But this didn’t mollify her. His touch seemed to put fire in her belly, because she turned to him angrily saying,

‘I’ll tell you why we’re here Nickie, since you really want to know,’ then calming down, ‘But promise you’ll keep it a secret.’ Nickie saying,

‘I promise.’

‘Promise you’ll never betray us?’ To which he said,

‘Never,’ which was ambiguous. Jessie saying,

‘Okay, but remember your promise.’ Jessie saying how in her house, its occupants, her mother and she were subjected to what she called, beatings. And slapping. And beltings. And things done with a horrible implement called, the Strap. All at the hands of an assailant she called her Stepfather. The other kids saying they too suffered similar indignities, some naming their real fathers, others, naming the boyfriends of their mothers. Or, ‘gentlemen friend,’ as one said his mother called him. Some of them showing on their arms, blue marks and bruises that they hadn’t painted on, others, black marks that weren’t for camouflage. And Jessie’s arms were the bluest of all, almost as if she had a sickness, as if she found being black and blue all over, normal. Jessie saying, ‘I can’t stand it anymore. At home, he’s always trying to kill me.’ The others saying,

‘We can’t stand it either.’ Karen saying she herself had never been hit, but worse, that she was often left for days in an empty house because of what she said was, ‘shift work,’ and that it was safer to be out with company.

Which made them all sound different from him, because though Nickie was a child, he was on a mission to help the nation, not running away from personal troubles.

....

How different things were for Nicholas in Thailand now, where, no matter how he looked at it, he was a man on the run, if not from the law, from himself—and that was the truth, wondering if the Postmaster was one of the kids from that night. From that same night where Jessie pleaded,

....

‘Help us, Nickie.’ The others saying,

‘Yeah help us.’ Jessie finishing,

‘And we can help you.’

At which point Nickie stood up and held his cricket stump with his hands, pointing horizontally at the distance ready to kill whoever might harm them, saying,

‘You have my word,’ because along with Drought, Fire, and Flood there were others needing to be slain.

....

Nicholas unaware some needed to be slain now.

## CHAPTER FOUR                      The Cavern of Loneliness

This pledge cut short by intruders shining flashlights in their faces. The adult Ninja, shining the brightest flashlight asking,

‘What are you kids doing?’ But they weren’t Ninjas, just the police. To which Jessie said,

‘We are just playing, officer,’ more experienced than Nickie in the craft of subterfuge called spying, basically just lying. The officer saying,

‘It’s three in the morning. Your parents will be worried sick about you,’ something the officer wouldn’t have said if he’d heard their stories about beatings and punishments. Another cop saying,

‘Come on,’ the police taking Nickie and his friends home in a paddy wagon. Tom and Mark dropped off first, at the end of the street, the one Nickie terrorised with his chariot. To their homes that were little semis, nothing like his grand terrace.

....

But certainly better than the hotel room Nicholas now occupied in Bangkok.

....

Their parents saying much the same thing when the police officer explained where they’d found them. Not:

‘My little darling, I’m so glad you’re safe,’ as you’d expect, but, ‘You little brat. What the hell were you doing?’ When in fact hell was what they’d run away from.

But it was Jessie Nickie felt sorry for, because her stepfather said, ‘The strap's too good for you,’ grabbing her by her blue arms, showing he’d already devised more violent forms of punishment.

Actually, it was Karen that Nickie really felt sorriest for, because at her house no one was home, just as she said. Karen saying,

‘See. I told you. There’s no one here. They’re never here.’ The police officer saying,

‘Well you can’t go back to the park that’s all. Don’t you have a key girl?’ Humiliating her into admitting that she was one of them, what his parents never wanted Nickie to be: a latchkey kid. Karen saying,

‘See you later Nickie,’ as she vanished into the darkness to a place that was more a cave than a home, a cavern of loneliness where her voice almost echoed.

And at that instant even the police officer felt for her a twinge of pity. The officer saying,

‘Come on mate, you’re last but not least,’ but Nickie felt he could’ve at least used Nickie’s real title, Shintaro, or Master Swordsman, or Tombei, rather than, mate. The police delivering Nickie to his parents, who answered the door in dressing gowns, unaware that he’d been missing; his escape plan had been that successful.

But the look they gave said it all. A look that said there would be consequences. His mother saying,

‘Go to bed. We will talk about this in the morning.’ After she’d put Nickie to bed, adding ‘Wandering around the park at night ... do you know what sort of people live there?’ When Nickie knew it was people like him.

....

The next day, Nickie, while eavesdropping with a glass against his ear pressed to the closed door, spying on his family at the breakfast table, he heard his Dad say,

‘Something has to be done about him and this Japanese crap.’  
His Mum saying,

‘It’s harmless.’  
His Dad saying,

‘Wouldn’t be talking like that if he was missing this morning.’ His Mum saying,

‘Keep your temper,’ because he sure could shout. His Dad saying,

‘He needs to be taught a lesson,’ which was ridiculous because back then, though Nickie didn’t like to boast, at school he was top of his class, particularly at what they called composition.

....

What Nicholas now knew to be fiction, like so many of life’s promises.

....

Back then his mother saying,

‘And what do you suggest?’ His father saying,

‘A dose of reality,’ just as his Dad with one hand, shoved open the door from which Nickie fell face forward like some clumsy Ninja. His Dad adding, ‘We’re listening at doors now are we?’ To which Nickie said,

‘No, there’s no we, only me.’ His Dad saying,

‘Tzentlemin don’t listen at doors,’ because *tzentlemin*, or ‘gentlemen,’ to give it its proper spelling, were things his father liked, and one of his few words of English. Nickie saying,

‘What about the rough ones?’ Saying this because of what had been said in the park about gentlemen friends. At which point his father raised his hand, as if to slap him.

To Strike Him Down! To Bind his Face In The Dust, the way the Lord said he would do to Job, at least to his enemies, which is what the scripture teacher said in Bible class, using the word, *smote*, which no one does these days. But maybe that wasn’t from *Job* but from *Psalms*.



....

Nicholas didn't really remember, *Psalms* in Thailand so unimportant in a land that is largely Buddhist and for the main part peaceful. Nicholas paying the bill, calling the evening quits – but there was no way of quitting memory because memory doesn't accept resignations.

....

Back then his Mum saying,

'Enough of that.' His father saying,

'Fine,' calming down, bringing down his arm, 'you deal with it. I'm off to work.' And then to Nickie, 'but get that tea towel off your head now.' His father grabbing the cricket stump that Nickie had tied around his waist, saying, 'Gimme that,' angrily trying to snap it over his knee. Which he couldn't, it was too thick and hard, 'God damn it.' Swearing, 'Bloody thing,' because he'd hurt his hands and his knee. Saying, 'Aw, shit,' storming out of the house not having the civility to hear out Nickie's version: that what Nickie had set out to do was for the good of the nation.

After his father's outburst, his mother saying,

'Now get ready for school. We'll talk about it in the evening,' delaying the confrontation. The exact thing Nickie had wanted to do to Flood, Fire, and Drought.

....

Back on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor, the smoking floor of the Pinnacle Hotel, Nicholas slamming the door to his hotel room just as hard as his Dad did. Maybe it was because Nicholas was angry with himself for not being able to identify the Postmaster. But door-slamming never silences memory and no one had forced him to celebrate his birthday alone anyway.

Nicholas in a cold sweat that night – drunk with memory. Maybe in a cold sweat because he first finished off the *Mekong* whisky bottle in his bedside drawer, or because his air conditioner was too low, its coolness exaggerated, much like what he remembered about cards, and what they meant to him. Maybe in a cold sweat because under his door there'd been another envelope. In which there was no card or apology, but a note saying,

*Sorry Nickie, couldn't make the Sirocco*, almost as if he'd been followed, when there had been no assignation, *Meet you at the Telephone Bar tomorrow night at six? Will explain*. Again in 12pt Roman Italics—again unsigned.

And this seemed out of character, even verbose, compared to what had come before.

....

Nicholas in a cold sweat that night much like Nickie was back then at school, afraid of his father's and mother's retributions. Also, because none of the other kids—Nickie meant Ninjas he had spent the night with—was there that day. Nickie holding fears for their safety, thinking some of them might even be dead, the only one likely to survive being Karen, because the police didn't alert her parents. Karen saved by shift-work.

....

Or as Nicholas saw it now, saved by indifference and callousness, if not on the part of her parents, on the part of the economy and factories greedy for their company. Nicholas thinking this in his hotel bed, now his fiftieth birthday was over, because back then, all their parents worked in factories. None of them had a white-collar job. Wasn't allowed, since they were immigrants. Promotion out of the factories, a generational thing that

happened once every twenty years, something your kids could do but impossible for them.

Factories that Nicholas later found out in his literature class on Blake, were not factories at all, but Dark Satanic Mills. But these days to Nicholas the only thing Satanic about them was their absence and transformation. And these factories he actually missed. Most now turned into apartments for yuppies with puppies and their doxies, if they hadn't been demolished.

Anyway, Nicholas's thoughts as he drifted off to sleep, were still about the 1960s. And he quite liked it there, really quite as much as the Postmaster. Wondering if the Postmaster, as promised, would be at the Telephone Bar at six, ready to reveal himself.

....

Nickie worried back then about his friends. Couldn't bear to think of their black and blue arms, even though for activities at night, he thought it good camouflage. At school, Nickie trying to put them out of his mind, steeling himself to hear from the loudspeaker over the blackboard, more tales of woe in *the Outback*, about bushfires and floods spreading.

But it seemed quite a lot of things had changed overnight because the announcer on the school loudspeakers said she now loved national disasters. The announcer saying Flood, Fire, and Drought were nice, worthy of respect, so it would have been wrong to kill them. Maybe even criminal. Making Nickie think the announcer had gone crazy. The announcer reading out,

'... *With flood, fire ...*' and something or other, '*... she pays me back three-fold.*' A poem written by a lady who hated England, even though in England there were no bad things, according to Miss Mobbs their teacher, who said such things because she was English, having, like most Australians, a distinct bias towards England. The announcer saying, again,

and again, *'I love a sun burnt country, a land of sweeping plains,'* making Nickie think that Australians were capricious since they now loved the elements tormenting them.

Thinking his own family was just as two-faced, because when Nickie went home, there weren't any consequences. No punishment, or beatings, let alone a Strap. Not that they ever beat him. Because in the living room, where his mother and father sat were his two favourite people, Shirts and Biscuits.

Actually his two Aunts, Aunt Dora and Aunt Hermione, who lived with them. Aunt Dora called Shirts because she worked in the shirt factory called *Pelaco*. And Aunt Hermione, Biscuits, because she worked in the biscuit factory called *Weston's*. Aunt Hermione the sweetest. Naturally. She even smelt of them. And both loved Nickie equally because they didn't have kids, giving him plenty of pocket money. And why he was able to collect the whole set of Samurai cards, albeit with a little horse-trading. Both saying, 'Come here darling,' at the same time, because they were twins. 'You've had a big adventure haven't you?' His Aunt Hermione saying,

'Come, no one is going to hurt you.'

Nickie obeying, cuddling up next to Aunt Hermione, to show her he valued not only the pocket money she gave him, and the biscuits she stole from the factory, but what she was offering now, her protection and patronage. His Dad interrupting by saying,

'If you ask me, Nickie deserves a good hiding, wandering around in the middle of the night in a dressing gown.'

His Aunt Hermione, alias Biscuits, saying, 'He was only having fun.' Aunt Dora, alias Shirts, repeating,

'Yes, fun, but next time you have fun, can you do it by day darling? We would have been so worried.' Biscuits finishing,

'If something had happened to you...' putting her hand to her mouth in horror.

....

And as Nicholas drifted off to sleep it was almost as if he could hear his teacher Miss Mobbs, saying,

‘No one has seen Mark, Tom, Arthur, Jessie or Karen at all. No?’  
Because from school they were absent. ‘Has any one seen them?’

Nickie’s hand shooting up ...

‘... I saw them last night. They are in danger.’ Miss Mobbs saying,  
‘What sort of danger?’

‘I can’t tell you, they swore me to secrecy.’ Which was true, it was sworn with a trust Samurais couldn’t break, stricter than that of the confessional.

And how when the bell rang, Miss Mobbs with concern on her face, said,

‘Okay children you can go home now’. Saying as the others rushed out, ‘but Nickie ... you stay behind,’ kneeling down to his height saying, ‘is there something you want to tell me?’ But Nickie just shook his head from side to side, because he couldn’t tell Miss Mobbs the truth.

....

Nicholas dismissing any idea that Miss Mobbs was the Postmaster since she died in the sixties.

....

The next morning when he woke at the Pinnacle, Nicholas deciding to check the closet to make sure it still held his one good suit, the one made of white linen like the table-cloths of the Sirocco, that in a rather clichéd way made Nicholas look like a foreign correspondent from central casting. A cliché he didn’t mind actually. Had to check it was clean because he

wanted to look smart that night at the Telephone Bar where his correspondent had promised to appear.

Nicholas spending the day, trying to put the evening coming up out of his mind, but that was impossible, even with the aid of a massage. Impossible even with a haircut that made him look more youthful, done by a hairdresser with a facemask who feared foreign hair was radioactive. And it was impossible even with a swim, at the Pinnacle Hotel's rooftop. At five o'clock Nicholas putting on his suit, even some aftershave, *Old Spice*, the odour of memory – enthusiastic about at last meeting someone who for years had been faceless.

....

Dressing with the same enthusiasm he did back then as Nickie, who dressed in a white dressing gown and purple cord, before slipping out into the street in his socks, and thongs, taking his cricket stump to save his friends. Nickie also taking with him some star knives—weapons used in *The Samurai* series. Actually, they were lids from empty cans of spaghetti and meatballs—his favourites—that he fashioned into sharp points, into Wheels of Destruction with the aid of his Dad's tin snips.

....

Nicholas wondering if he should take a weapon with him to the Telephone Bar —not that he had one, or would know how to use it— dismissing the thought as ridiculous. Courage would be enough, wasn't as if he was in danger, surely... There'd been no indication of that. Not so far anyway.

....

Back then Nickie, going up the road, deaf to the jeers of other kids in the street thinking they were just envious of his outfit. Up past the rows of Moreton Bay figs, past other tall terraces, all built facing south in case the Gulf Stream that warmed England decided to come visit her great aunt the Pacific. Nickie first having to pass the Newtown synagogue that Jews built like a Greek temple, probably to confuse their enemies. Jewish people that Nickie liked, who were actually in colour, unlike where he first saw them, in black and white, thin, shot or incinerated, piled up as skeletons, in a television documentary series that came on after *The Samurai* called, *The March of Time*. A show about how time had marched over them in tanks built by the Nazis.

....

All this coming back to Nicholas in Bangkok as he walked up Convent Road towards the Telephone Bar in *Patpong* with its Carmelite monastery and plane trees, in his cream linen foreign correspondent's suit from central casting even though he wasn't a correspondent really, now just an occasional reviewer sure, maybe simply foreign. But Nicholas was still uncertain about who it was sending cards although his suspects were narrowing.

Preferring to walk to the Telephone Bar rather than take a taxi because he liked to walk in Bangkok despite the heat, and Bangkok not having many footpaths. And he liked staring at the street vendors grilling on racks squid that puffed up like pride. And he enjoyed staring at the shoeshine boys whose services weren't needed by the foreign thong-wearing public.

....

## CHAPTER FIVE

## The Telephone Bar

Nicholas going down the side streets of *Saithorn* and *Sala Dang* on his way to the Telephone Bar in *Patpong*, wondering who'd be there, or if they'd be there at all, considering they hadn't made it to the Sirocco, and whether he was just being teased.

....

Much the same way back then Nickie ducked down some of the lesser side streets of Newtown that didn't have grand terraces, not even tall ones.

....

The way Nicholas now angled his way through Bangkok traffic, and the throngs in throngs in the night markets along *sois* that he knew as companions. Wondering if he was being followed.

....

Nickie going down meaner streets full of workers' cottages, like the one Tom lived in, cottages that clattered and shook in time to the coal and passenger trains on the railway lines above them.

....

The way the Sky Train did above Nicholas now.

....



Nickie going first to Tom's house, thinking that'd be the easiest, knocking on the door, getting no answer. And more insistently, knock, knock, then more insistently, knock, knock, knock. But then a fat man, in a singlet, shorts and thongs without socks—how terribly un-Japanese and vulgar—with a fag hanging from his mouth, opened the door, saying,

'If it isn't the little Jap,' when Nickie was in fact Greek, New Australian at any rate. Insulting that exquisite race whose boots that slob wasn't fit to lick. By exquisite race, Nickie naturally meant the Japanese. The oaf saying, 'But get this straight, if you're here for Tom he ain't coming out to play. He's leaving that Japanese bullshit behind.' The monster.

To which Nickie said,

'I haven't come for Tom. I've come...' drawing his cricket stump from his robe, holding it out '...to warn anyone harming Tom, that they'll have to deal with me,' holding the stump high to show he meant business.

But all the man said was,

'You little brat. Who are you threatening?' Trying to grab his stump, forcing Nickie to retreat or at least move on to Karen's, where naturally there was no one home not even Karen. But just to let them know he was serious, he embedded a star knife – a spaghetti tin lid in her front door as a calling card. When it hit its target, screaming out,

'Hai ya.'

But it was at Jessie's that things really got out of hand because her father, stepfather, whatever the rogue was, hit him, the way Jessie said he hit her, saying,

'I'll show you manners, you little creep...' Nickie hitting him back using the blunt end of the stick,

'Hai, ya. Take that.'

....

This all coming back to Nicholas as he threaded through Bangkok's night stalls selling T-shirts and pornographic DVDs, along *Soi Four*. Nicholas thinking, *boy did I have a nerve. Where did I get that sort of confidence?* Wondering if the Postmaster was behind him, or perhaps secretly manning a T-shirt stall.

....

But Nickie only hit Jessie's father once though, on the bum.

....

*Okay, Nicholas thought, let's be honest, I hit him twice.*

....

'Hai ya,' because bums are symmetrical, but only did so in self-defence. Jessie, cringing at the door, shouting,

'Nickie stop it. Go home. He'll kill you.' Meaning he'd kill her. 'Please. Do it for me. Please. Now.' At which point he bowed to her as if to say, her wish was his command. Which it was, because despite Jessie's un-Japanese mousy hair, he thought her an imperial princess, he had such a crush on her, his bow silent, and formal. Only then running back home.

Back down the winding side streets and lanes with the workers' cottages called 'semis' where the trains rattled in his ears, in unison.

'You're in trouble now. Real trouble now.' Back past the synagogue where he thought maybe he should ask for refuge, unsure though, if they let Japanese kids in, or Greek ones. Down through the park with the twisted steel in the shape of swings and dippers, sops to kids, supposedly to amuse them, arriving back home breathless.

But Nickie was too late, and his mission was perhaps even a failure. Clear because in the dining room his Dad sat toying with one of his star knives, and he didn't look pleased. Saying,

'Come here, Nickie,' seeing Nickie about to sneak to his room. His father holding up a star knife, saying, 'What's this?'

'A star knife Ninjas use. I made it with your tin snips,' which Nickie shouldn't have said since his father didn't like anyone playing with his tools.

'You can take someone's eyes out with this.' Nickie saying,

'Not if they're good and honest.' Which Nickie also shouldn't have said because he could see his father's face was more furious than all those Stepfathers, and Fathers, and Gentlemen Friends Nickie had tried to sort out. His father saying,

'Karen's father was just round, he saw you throw this at his door.' Nickie saying,

'Nice of him to bring it back.' His Dad saying,

'Don't get cheeky with me, running around damaging people's doors. And take off that dressing gown.

'Later.'

'Now!' Probably because his Dad feared Shirts or Biscuits might countermand his orders, but they couldn't, because his Aunts were at church where they went looking for husbands.

....

What Nicholas now called *cruising*, a pastime adapted from battleships, because back then in the Newtown of the 1960s, there were lots of single men in the Greek Orthodox congregation who moved about in convoys that his Aunts liked to navigate as suitable prospects.

Like now in the Telephone Bar where gay men sought out one another in *Soi Four*. A street full of gay bars reserved for them amidst other

bars with all-male sex shows featuring nude acrobatics, where lithe bodies conjoined in various poses for the entertainment of arthritic tourists. Bars called the Future Boys and Dream Boys, even though the future of those on exhibit, lacked certainty. And dreams remained just the wisps and fancy of darkness.

But though not personally gay, Nicholas had never had a problem with gay men, never having been their quarry. Not even in his handsomer youth. He certainly wasn't now. And the Telephone Bar was a bar that Nicholas really liked. And his correspondent, the Postmaster was aware of that since he'd suggested it. Seemed aware he liked to take all his foreign friends there, particularly female friends because of the lack of competition. And Nicholas liked sitting outside at the Telephone Bar looking at the passing parade of the street as if seated in a loge at the Paris Opera, even when he was alone, lost in memory. Liked the politeness of the staff that knew him as a regular, that is, when he had foreign female company.

A bar that was called the Telephone Bar because it used to have candlestick telephones on every table so you could call up whoever you fancied, maybe just to relay a message, a plea even. Whatever. A bar though, that now despite its name, had eliminated its phones, because in an age of mobiles such theatrical props were as out-of-date as Samurai cards and the series itself. And now that Nicholas had a comfortable seat, while waiting to see who'd turn up, even above the noise of the street and the bar's music, it was almost as if he could still hear his father saying,

....

'Nickie, did you hear what I said? Take that gear off now. And bring me your cards.' Nickie saying, because Nickie didn't like anyone touching them,

'Why?' His father saying,

‘Because I want to play cards,’ smiling. And Nickie had to obey... placing them in front of his father, on the table with the vinyl tablecloth, instead of on their blue velvet blanket. His Dad picking them up not with white gloves but his bare hands, which was criminal; his Dad shuffling through the deck roughly, damaging their edges. The vandal.

....

Much the same way Nicholas toyed with the edges of his wet cardboard drink coaster that said *Singha* that had fallen to pieces. His coaster quickly replaced by the staff at the Telephone Bar with another coaster that said *Tiger*. Nicholas wondering if the Postmaster would turn up or if he was just being made a fool of, in this now a tropical game of cat and mouse.

Also wondering, once again, whether he would actually ever finish that half-finished novel of his, where a lot of these recollections featured. Or really go ‘home’ to find the rest of his once precious cards. Had enough reasons to return, sentimental as they were. Needing to see people who were important to him once. Needed for a start, to sort out that bloody storage cage as he called it.

But maybe what Nicholas really needed to return to Australia, is what police call ‘a stronger motive’. Thinking *and maybe the Postmaster might provide that, if he fronts*. Nicholas ordering,

‘A pitcher of Margaritas, please,’ because Margaritas at the Telephone Bar were weak, didn’t have to worry about making a fool of himself with whoever showed up.

And Nicholas could still hear how back then his father said,

....

‘Now you go like this,’ as he ripped up Nickie’s cards up one by one.

....

And Nicholas could still see himself as Nickie saying,

....

‘Dad, no.’ Trying to grab them from him. ‘Dad, please no,’ tears streaming down his face as his father ripped them into halves. His Dad saying,

‘Stop that crying. Now your turn,’ taking another card from the deck, forcing Nickie’s hands to rip them.

....

The way Nicholas at the Telephone Bar ripped up the new drink coaster that said *Tiger* in imitation of the past, maybe to dispose of it, of the past that is. Maybe because he was annoyed and wasn’t sure he had the courage to go on any of the quests he had entertained. Might have been fun though, this reconstitution and reconciliation with friends through ‘recollection’—stupid idea that it was. But ... they could wait. Had waited so far. So had his unfinished novel. Wondering, who the hell would show up, dismissing his quirky projects as nonsense.

....

Exactly what his father said back then,

‘This nonsense will stop once and for all.’ Nickie wailing,

‘It isn’t nonsense.’ His father saying,

‘Complete Japanese rubbish.’ Nickie saying,

‘Japanese don’t make rubbish,’ because even then he knew anything Japanese was of good quality. But his Dad though, got tired of ripping cards up one by one, gruffly taking them to the landing where he threw them into the garbage along with Nickie’s robe, thongs and cricket stump. Going back into the kitchen, where, from under the sink he took out something called methylated spirits, pouring the bottle into the garbage. Fumbling around in his pocket for his cigarette lighter with which he lit one of the cards.

....

Nicholas remembering how suddenly, the way only one ember of coal is needed to ignite the fires of hell, the bin went up in flames in one great whoosh.

....

Nicholas perhaps reminded of this because there in the street—there in *Soi Four*—from his outdoor seat under the canopy of the Telephone Bar that spilt into the street in his ‘loge’ as he liked to think of it, a barman was throwing batons of fire into the air that he juggled and caught in a circus act. Perhaps to beguile customers waiting for other customers, or just to disturb the dark, a juggler who seemed to know only flames can conjure up the emotional conflagrations of the past.

....

Back then, above the flames his father saying,

‘Now go to your room,’ as the fire, raged in the garbage bin.

Nickie going up the stairs, sobbing, glad to be away from that ghastly inferno, thinking his father foolish to think this had cured him of his Japanese fetish.

Crying even louder when he heard his Mum come through the door, and even louder when he heard the return of Shirts and Biscuits, who asked him down, saying,

‘Why are you crying dear?’ Nickie pointing to the garbage, Shirts saying, ‘You’re upset about the garbage?’ She could be so dumb. To which Nickie just shook his head. Biscuits saying,

‘What’s so bad about the rubbish darling?’ Biscuits no rocket scientist herself. Leaving it to his Mum to divine that what was upsetting him was inside it. His Mum lifting the lid, seeing the smoking charred remains of his cards, thongs and socks, even his charred cricket stump, all of which now looked like skeletons in the documentary series, *The March of Time*.

At which they all exhaled,

‘Ooh, ah,’ with fear and surprise looking around for Fire, his Dad. And he was there, right behind them, the old tyrant. His Dad saying,

‘That’s right. It’s over now, no more of that Jap crap.’

Which forced Nickie to break his oath, break the seal of the confessional because in a few shameful words, to use the vernacular popular then, he ‘dobbed’ on his friends, saying,

‘I was only trying to help. Jessie’s father beats her. He keeps trying to kill her.’

....

Oh, if only Nicholas could have his time back, live his life over, how he’d take those words back rather than living with the shame of giving away secrets. A shame that still clung to him much like a muggy Bangkok night, such as this was.

....



Back then Nickie saying,

‘Hits Jessie all the time.’ His Dad saying,

‘Go to your room.’ When they heard the front door go, bang, bang, bang. His father adding, ‘What the hell...’ as he opened the door to the...police, who said something Nickie couldn’t hear.

The police showing his Dad something that appeared to be a photograph, his Dad shaking his head up and down to show that he recognised it, talking quietly to them. Nickie hearing words, like, ‘sorry,’ and, ‘terrible,’ maybe even, ‘son of a bitch.’ Then his Dad gave back the photo and closed the door.

....

When suddenly at the Telephone Bar the barman with the flaming, twirling batons dropped them, bowing to receive applause. Nicholas wondering if he’d been stood up, it all seemed so mocking.

....

Much the same way Nickie at school began to wonder whether something serious, even tragic, was afoot, because at school—just as Miss Mobbs was about to switch on the loudspeaker for the School Magazine—there was also a knock at the classroom door. And again, it was the police. Miss Mobbs taking from them the same sized photograph that they’d shown his Dad, Miss Mobbs also nodding in agreement. Once she’d returned the photo, and had closed the door on them, Miss Mobbs, came back and took a tissue from her sleeve, dabbing her eye, before saying,

‘All right children. Open your books. This afternoon, you will do some comprehension when I get back,’ leaving the room, forgetting all about the radio and the breathless announcer. But Nickie had no comprehension as to why Miss Mobbs was agitated. And Nickie actually

felt sorry for Miss Mobbs because he didn't like to see her upset since she was nice. So nice, he wondered why she never married, considering like Nicholas now, back then, she was near fifty. Miss Mobbs saying when asked in the past, 'Maybe because I'm too good for... *them*,' leaving the meaning of *them* vague, not letting Nickie know why none were welcome.

....

The time at the Telephone Bar: 6.50. The Margaritas that day much stronger than last time, something Nicholas hadn't anticipated although he had anticipated or hoped someone would show, hoping he wasn't the butt of a joke.

## CHAPTER SIX

## Death of a Princess

Nickie wondering on the way home from school, what's going on? Particularly when Jeff, one of the toughies, who used to shoot him on the back of the neck with a peashooter, came up and said,

'Suppose you heard Nickie boy,' when he was just a boy himself.

'Heard what?'

'You'll find out soon enough.'

'If you're not going to tell me, piss off.'

'Jessie's dead. Her Dad killed her.'

Nicholas remembering how it was lucky Nickie could control his temper, because right at that moment, he wanted to beat Jeff's brains in. Maybe just wanting to do Smite him, what his scripture teacher said God often wanted to do to those that crossed Him.

Nickie yelling,

'Is not. You're a liar,' hoping his denial would resurrect Jessie.

'Am not.'

'How do you know?' Jeff saying,

'Because my Dad's a cop,' which was true, and from where Jeff got his thuggish traits. 'Told me.' And that made Nickie's heart sink, because it now seemed true. Made Nickie think, *maybe I was the cause of it, and I shouldn't have listened to Jessie. I shouldn't have been chivalrous, and far from tapping her oaf of a stepfather on the bum, should've flattened him.*

....

And Nicholas wondered if the Postmaster was watching him in the Telephone Bar, writhing in this pit of memory as a punishment.

....

Nickie, walking home feeling empty, vacant, un-predicated, there is no other way to put it. Unable to think, or say anything as he walked past the new *Coles* supermarket, the one that had the two most amazing things of all for Newtown in the 1960s, both a cafeteria *and* an escalator.

Past the florist run by Greeks, and the Odeon Record Store that only had records sung in languages Australians didn't speak. And the Dry Cleaners, the one with the hot musty smell that Nickie enjoyed.

Dry Cleaners that had a large fish tank in it, where carp the size of sharks, bubbled and gasped, fish mouthing to Nickie as silently as everyone else had,

*Help me*, which Nickie couldn't, failing them as well. Nickie wondering what he would say to his Dad, to his Mum, to Shirts and Biscuits as he went past the synagogue, to his terrace.

But when he finally saw them, Nickie knew they knew. Knew why the police had come the previous night with the photo of Jessie—to assist with identification. Everyone was home early, even Shirts and Biscuits, even his Dad and Mum. All had been given an early mark from the factories because of the tragedy. And none of them said anything, looking awkward, as if they had committed a sin themselves. There was no,

'Hello dear. How was school today?' Which sometimes Nickie found cloying, not even, 'would you like some milk and biscuits?' Stop-gaps so that he wouldn't faint before tea, usually steak and vegetables. Something so un-Greek it was almost inedible.

....

Even now Nicholas wasn't sure why his family cooked such stuff back then, when it wasn't part of their cuisine. Wondered at the Telephone Bar if he should order a *Tom Yum* Soup to dilute the Margaritas if not the memories. Not yet having given up hope someone would show. Had to.

Eventually. They'd promised. Surely. Hadn't they? And had already sort-of stood him up once already, even if it was in a unilateral assignation.

....

Nicholas recalling how back then, no, there were no restoratives. And how they just stared at Nickie. And seemed sad. And how after the silence went on for a minute, his Mum hugged him tight in case he again tried to escape, fearing he'd suffer Jessie's fate at the hands not of his Dad, but a stranger in the park. His Mum saying,

'My darling boy,' passing him to the others as if he was some precious doll, first to Shirts, and then to Biscuits, who did the same thing, holding him even tighter than Shirts did. His Dad saying,

'Nickie, come here,' meaning away from Shirts and Biscuits to where he sat. Biscuits saying,

'Go,' with a gentle shove pushing him towards his father, who said, 'You knew, didn't you? Knew Jessie was in danger and were trying to save her.'

'...Yes.' His father getting up out of his chair, picking him, up like a rag doll—a kewpie doll at any rate, which was humiliating—and despite Nickie's elevation, a loss of stature. Then he held him aloft to the light as if trying to see who he really was, as if checking to see if he was made of gold, or glass, before bringing him back down. Then he hugged him tighter than Shirts, tighter than even his Mum, or Biscuits, saying,

'You are my true son,' forgetting about Paulie, his younger brother, the one Nickie considered the one and true Shogun, saying, 'In you I am well pleased,' which sounded blasphemous. Nickie feeling relieved and pleased his Dad had given him a road out of emptiness, and with such sudden approval, even one of life's predicates.

....

The time at the Telephone Bar: 7.20. And it was time for Nicholas to leave. No *Tom Yum* soups, no more Margaritas. His linen suit much like his hopes past and present, crumpled. Nicholas over-indulging memory, over-playing his hand in this wholly new game of cards manufactured for adults—taking a last salty sip of his Margarita. Clear he'd been stood up and was being made a fool of.

....

But back then, over the next few days, no one at all thought Nickie a fool. Everyone treated him special. Giving him extra treats. Obvious things like biscuits, and more shirts made by *Pelaco*. Particularly after Nickie went to the police and made a statement about what he'd heard Jessie's stepfather say. And what Jessie had said to him. Everyone treating him a hero, something he wasn't, since all he'd done was betray her, and his betrayal, though in a good cause, had come too late.

His Dad not letting Nickie go to school, maybe keeping him home because they feared something might happen to him. Nickie playing alone in his room with his spare set of cards. Always kept a back-up copy. Laying them out on the blue velvet blanket, flip side, to form the picture of Shintaro himself, to whom he bowed — not praying, but saying,

'One day I would like to meet you,' apologising for having thought he could live up to him. Saying, 'sorry,' and again, 'sorry,' elaborate prayer even then not his forte, maybe praying to Jessie, or for her, using Shintaro as intermediary.

....

And it was almost as if Shintaro heard and forgave him. Nickie feeling this because on the third day after Jessie's death, his Dad came home from the factory, holding an envelope in his hands, saying,

‘Open it.’ Nickie taking out two tickets to... the Sydney Stadium, to see—he almost fainted—Shintaro himself. Onstage. Nickie’s prayers answered. His Dad adding, ‘You and I are going to see him.’ Nickie asking,

‘He’ll be on stage with all the Ninjas?’ Not that his Dad knew what Ninjas were. His Dad saying,

‘Next month. Just you and me,’ and it was as if his father had personally invited Shintaro as a reward.

And Nickie’s happiness doubled, when the next day, the mailman said,

‘At last something for you kid,’ handing him not a bill but a letter from Channel 9, announcing they were not going to broadcast old episodes of *The Samurai*, but the new series. And Nickie could hardly wait. Really he couldn’t.

....

Nickie filling in his time more successfully than Nicholas did now waiting in the Telephone Bar for strangers.

....

By making new friends. Particularly with a Jewish boy he saw each Saturday hanging around the synagogue. Saying to this boy he came to know as Des,

‘I know all about you,’ seeing him toying with his yarmulke, a hat that normally only Popes wear except theirs is wedding dress white. A boy who sometimes also wore a scout-suit that made him look like he was going to, or escaping a jamboree. The boy saying,

‘Yeah?’ Nickie saying, ‘Yep, seen your grandparents and such. I’m sorry.’ Telling him that he’d seen them in the documentary series, *The March of Time*. The Jewish kid saying he liked *The March of Time* too, and

that contrary to what many people thought, didn't find it upsetting. To which Nickie said,

'I don't either, I think it's cool.'

....

And Nicholas wondered for a millisecond whether the Postmaster was Des, but was unsure if Des was still alive.

....

Nickie saying to him,

'What's your name?' Thrilled to meet this new Jewish boy or anyone who was in some way represented on television even if it was just in a documentary while he, Nickie, awaited the arrival of Shintaro his hero and tried to forget about Jessie's death. The boy saying,

'Benny. But no one calls me that. I prefer to be called Disraeli.' A name Nickie misheard as Des Riley, Nickie saying,

'Des Riley?' But the boy didn't correct him. Simply telling Nickie that Disraeli—Des Riley—had been a really 'cool' English Prime Minister whose first name had also been Benjamin, which is why he preferred to be called Des, believing himself to be his descendant.

Whenever his parents let Des off from the synagogue and its service, Des Riley hanging out in the park with Nickie, where they played on the same swings and roundabouts that Nickie once had contempt for. Every Saturday morning, Des Riley coming round to Nickie's place to watch the cartoons, and *Fun Fair*, a variety show where a badly dressed clown patronised kids in the audience.

....



Nicholas wondering if the Postmaster was indeed Des, but there was no reason why he would be. And Nicholas would've spotted him at the Telephone Bar straight off.

....

But back then Des did know about Jessie, and that somehow Nickie had been involved, mentioning her name, at which Nickie fell silent, Des adding, 'It's no big deal. Being killed.'

'No?' Des saying,

'Na. All my relatives got killed in the war, happens all the time,' making the war and the Holocaust sound like ongoing projects. Des adding, 'And if people didn't get killed there'd be too many on the planet. It's all about numbers.' Here it can be revealed Des grew up to be a statistician.

....

All this, coming back to Nicholas as the baton twirler spun his fiery batons faster, juggling them into a different flaming star knife, only a flood could extinguish. Nicholas oddly remembering what his scripture teacher said – that God said, after destroying the world with flood, 'The Fire Next Time', not as threat but prophecy. But there was still no Postmaster in sight.

**CHAPTER SEVEN      The March of Time**

To cement their friendship Des Riley letting Nickie wear his yarmulke, which was a great honour, Nickie returning Des's trust by letting him in on his passion for Shintaro and trading cards. Des Riley saying,

‘I have my own cards.’

‘Bet you don't have the whole set.’ Des saying,

‘I have three. And one of them I don't actually play with, because I don't want it ruined.’ To which Nickie said,

‘Wow.’ Nickie's mother approving of his friendship with Des Riley, saying Nickie should always be nice to him because Hitler did terrible things to his family, turning most of them into soap, which made Nickie feel icky whenever he bathed.

But there was no need for his Mum to tell Nickie to like Des, because Nickie liked Des anyway and loved the afternoons when Des came over, and they'd both ‘ooh,’ and ‘ah,’ at *The March of Time*, the way kids enjoy horror films. Nickie sometimes saying,

‘I've seen this one.’ *The March of Time*, much like history, big on repeats. Des Riley saying,

‘Yeah, this is the one where they get taken out of the ovens.’ And it was true. They were, but never in mint condition.

Nicholas remembering that despite his mother saying that Nickie should become friends with Des, during this unbearable time while waiting for Shintaro to show up in Australia...

....

...Almost as unbearable as waiting for someone, anyone, to show up now...

....

...How despite what his mother had said about Des's family and soap, his mother became a Nazi herself. Oh, the shame of it, truly, a fully-fledged Nazi, maybe not one wearing a uniform but just as nasty.

His mother became as feared a figure as Doctor Mengele. The one who used to greet the trains and cattle trucks emptying out people he mistook as oxen—with a twitch of a stick, sending them either to the left or the right—deciding who could live and who must die. Not because his mother wore swastikas, or began sporting a stick herself, but because she assumed the same power. His mother becoming a Nazi much like Nicholas had been when he first arrived in Thailand, working at the Australian Embassy where visa rejection was his specialty.

Nicholas recalling how each night his mother sat in their dining room, putting on her reading glasses—thank God she didn't wear a monocle—opening up sheaves of letters, not from Postmasters but from would-be Greek immigrants who'd written asking for her assistance. Asking if there was anything she could do to help them emigrate. Some pleas more emotional than others, some even to a hardened child like Nickie, who sat next to her, touching. Letters that often ended, '*Please, help me,*' often with a stamped passport picture of the applicant. Sometimes even with a wedding ring attached, to show that if she could be so kind as to find someone for them to be engaged to, they would do the right thing.

But it was true she was a Nazi because not all their pleas were successful. Though to give her credit, his mother would read the letters again and again, to see if they were worth saving. Their lives that is: not the documents. The letters showing promise, moved to the right, while those she couldn't help were gloomily piled to the left, where Nickie sat next to her as her shameful assistant. His mother always asking his advice,

'What about this one darling? Do you think we can help this one?'  
To which Nickie always said,

'Yes,' trying to move as many to the right as possible, managing a reprieve for some.

Not that his Mum was evil. That wasn't why so many got moved to the left, but because the only ones she could help, were the ones who were willing to marry, someone. Anyone she could find, so that they could get out of the old country. But the rejects that couldn't be married off, were consigned to that fate worse than death, to live in Greece forever.

Nickie's Mum in effect running not so much the Gestapo, but a matchmaking agency. And his Mum always gave first choice of the young men who wrote to her to Shirts and Biscuits. They also sat at their table, in a tableau much like the Last Supper, maybe the Last Judgement, but it wasn't them being judged but them passing judgement. Nickie's Mum saying to Shirts,

'What about this one?' To which Shirts would say,

'No, his eyes are too close.'

'Or this one?' showing another to Biscuits, who'd say,

'His hair is too curly.' To which his Mum would say,

'You two are fussy. You'll wind up spinsters.'

But in truth his Mum did try to help as many as possible, every couple of days combing through the reject pile, if she had heard of some young girl at the factory who might be interested.

....

Making Nicholas think his mother wasn't really a Nazi at all. Maybe was just a different sort of Postmaster or Mistress, more benign, less mysterious and full of humanity.

And his mother was pretty successful at bringing out aspiring emigrants. At keeping the left pile small. Nickie's house becoming known not as a common boarding house like the others in the street, but the Wedding Factory. Truly.

The last time Nicholas saw his Mum, his Mum saying,

‘In all thirteen brides emerged from our house when we had it,’ something she still says to this day with pride, ‘thirteen brides,’ again and again, maybe because his Mum is proud of it. Maybe because his Mum is in a nursing home and demented, not realising that thirteen is unlucky.

Which it was—at least for Nickie—because each time that a match succeeded, he had to be altar boy, which was awful.

....

At the Telephone Bar, the juggler’s fiery batons spinning faster; he wasn’t dropping them now, and had just needed some painful practice.

....

Perhaps for the twirler as painful a practice as it was back then for Nickie, because being altar boy meant he had to march around the altar with a tall candle, round the newly-crowned couple for hours. And the incense from the priest’s flaming handbag, or thurible in more common parlance, gave him asthma.

Nickie back then becoming a junkie, as result becoming addicted to obscure substances called, *Tedril* and *Alupent* supposed cures for asthma but in reality substances more lethal than the *Zyclon B* featured in *The March of Time* introduced in pellets through the vents in the gas chambers. Well, they were certainly more dangerous than the other fumigants advertised on TV like *Gossamer* and *VO5*. Nicholas remembering how his Mum used to be so proud of the wedding days when her matches had worked out, helping the brides with their outfits,

‘Here let me do that,’ like Coco Channel did with her models, tending to last minute hitches and stitches.

Then his Mum and Dad would escort them to church, where his Dad was often Best Man. Being Best Man something that Nicholas’s father

enjoyed, because, in that other TV show his family liked, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, a show about the circus—at these events his Dad was Ringmaster. His Dad having to crack the whip for grooms that got nervous, saying,

‘Come on, *Michaeli*. You have to marry her. Otherwise they’ll throw you out of the country.’ Actually his Dad even looked a bit like that show’s compere, Don Ameche.

....

And Nicholas hadn’t forgotten how grooms used to show up in Newtown not just on mail order, but also in the middle of the night.

Banging on that knocker much as the police did. Not for information nor for identification, but for refuge, since they had become, ‘the exploded ones,’ the *skasti*, as his parents called them, sailors who’d jumped from merchant ships. Men so desperate they were willing to risk even his mother’s wrath, unaware his Mum was a matrimonial Himmler. His Mum usually saying if they had come at a decent hour,

‘Nickie take them down to the basement,’ where they hid these refugees, three or four at time.

....

Nicholas wondering, *is the Postmaster perhaps one of them, and trying to make contact, but why?*

....

Back then, Nickie enjoying his little private store of Anne Franks, despite the fact they were male. To whom Nickie would take meals. People he’d,

‘Shush,’ to add a sense of drama, even though they were never visited by dreaded immigration officials, although his Mum sometimes turned some away if the basement was full. But not too often, particularly if she knew a girl...who might just...

....

*Rather silly of my mother now*, Nicholas thought, not to have charged for her services. Thinking he could have been rich, instead of someone remembering things that no longer matter, in the land called yesterday, devoid of dragons and real Ninjas much like Bangkok was devoid of angels. Of lands and times vanished except in the vistas of memory, secreted in the mind of someone getting drunk in a South East-Asian metropolis, waiting for an invisible correspondent who seemed to know as much about the past as he did.

Oh, Nicholas knew the saying, *the past is a foreign country*, well enough, and surely the Postmaster did too. But to Nicholas it was and wasn't, since it was so familiar. Liked to wander through it the way kings wander with authority through the rooms of their palace. Sometimes opening wings, sometimes shutting them, in rooms he didn't like, sometimes putting dustsheets over the furniture. And memory had always been more than Nicholas's palace. It remained his universe and galaxy. Something Nicholas had learnt to master—memory that is, not the universe—although as a kid, he had a pretty good handle on that as well.

....

Because in the sixties, Nickie had already anticipated String Theory and all the other explanations for the universe now fashionable, even the theories of Stephen Hawking. Anticipating them then with his own string,

even if it did come attached to a yo-yo, to a disc that spun like the Andromeda Galaxy.

String that was tied to two discs stuck together like the biscuits called *Monte Carlo* that Biscuits stole from the factory.

But enough of that, this is not about weddings or the Wedding Factory, but about *The Samurai*, about his hero and cards, and his mysterious correspondent and how the series affected the rest of Nicholas's life. Weddings and the like, cards and assignations, are just temporary diversions, and much like marriage and other quests and promises, impermanent.

....

Nicholas thinking this, until a barman changed his drink coaster again with one that said *Singha*, one that he toyed with and then flipped over, that said, in Roman 12pt Italics.

*Sorry, couldn't come. See you in Sydney Nickie?*

Again with a question mark, Nicholas thinking, *what the fuck?* Looking at customers around him but none was familiar.

Clear to him now he would go home to sort things out. Knowing it was only there he'd find the Postmaster, if at all. At the same time wishing the Postmaster would go to hell: hell, what Sydney was once for Nicholas. Deciding to go tomorrow before he lost courage.



**CARDS FOR THE SAMURAI**  
**—Part 2. The Wedding Factory—**  
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**CHAPTER EIGHT            The Exit Clause**

And courage was something Nicholas needed because two days later at Sydney Airport he felt he was entering a trap, even though the man at customs politely said to Nicholas,

‘Away you go mate,’ permitting him to begin his suburban quest, to get his cards back. Or at least find who was sending them. Or if that was too silly, then to finish his book. What there was of it. Needing to see people from the past this one last time, for a variety of reasons. Recalling as he waited at the taxi rank, how Nickie wanted to see Shintaro the very moment Shintaro arrived at the airport.

....

Des Riley saying,

‘Let’s see him together,’ showing Nickie they were Allies united against the Axis. Des Riley telling Nickie that when they met him, they should say, ‘Era shy I’m a mess.’ Des saying, ‘It’s Japanese for welcome.’ Nickie repeating,

‘Welcome,’ a beautiful word in any language, even in English.

....

Exactly what the cab driver at Sydney Airport said to Nicholas, ‘Welcome home mate,’ as if he knew him. ‘Where to?’ Nicholas hesitating...

‘To...’ had to think about it... because it was a good question and subject to many verbs and predicates.

....

Nickie saying to Des about the Japanese word for welcome,

‘Who taught you that?’ Des saying,

‘My Dad and Mum came to Australia via Shanghai.’ Telling Nickie how during the war, Shanghai had been an Open City. This making Nickie feel jealous because Des’s family seemed more exotic than his Greek one. Des Riley saying, ‘Anyway, repeat after me. Era shy, I’m a mess.’ To which Nickie said,

‘But I don’t want to call myself, ‘a mess’ to him.’

‘It’s Japanese silly, not English.’

....

Nicholas saying to the driver,

‘To... the Cross, still there isn’t it?’ The driver saying,

‘Where else would it be mate?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Kings Cross then,’ as if going to a crucifixion, and maybe he was.

Nicholas’s cab cruising down Darlinghurst Road past the strip clubs and backpacker hostels—the local versions of *Patpong* and Bangkok’s *Khao San Road* and the El Alamein fountain, that was built like him in the 1960s, his cab pulling up at the De Vere Hotel on Macleay Street.

Actually, Nicholas remembered how one day, when his Mum saw him with Des, she said,

....

‘Des Israeli, I need Nickie for a minute,’ because his Mum thought Des Riley’s name was Des *Israeli*, being more unfamiliar with English Prime Ministers than even Nickie. Nickie saying,

‘Oh, not now Mum,’ because he knew what this was about. His Mum saying,

‘Yes, I need you to go see Pater Thomas at the church.’ But it was not to book another wedding but because his Mum had had a few failures lately. Marriages that had come apart at the seams like wedding dresses not stitched properly, since some of the couples she had matched up, had proved incompatible. Needing Nickie to go, because back then, all her marriages came with a guarantee in the shape of an exit clause.

Not divorce, that took too long — this being years before the Family Law Act. They came with an exit clause Nickie was allowed to exercise as her proxy. A power that he often hesitated to use since it was so drastic.

....

And Nicholas wondered if his Postmaster knew about that as well, or had been subjected to it.

....

Remembered how he knocked on the office door of the priest at his church near Redfern, disturbing Pater Thomas, who was counting the money from the collection plate. Not that he was a bad man. Actually he was nice. Everyone spoke highly of Pater Thomas calling him neither saint nor devil, but, ‘human.’ All because whenever young women in his company tried to hitch their dresses more modestly, below the knees, Pater Thomas would say, ‘Never be ashamed to show a little leg my dear. God made many beautiful things.’

....

Nicholas over-paying the taxi driver, maybe as a thank you for saying ‘welcome,’ and as he got out of the cab, it was almost as if Nicholas could hear what Nickie heard back then, Pater Thomas counting,

....

‘Thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three...’ Nickie saying,  
 ‘Pater Thomas.’ Pater Thomas freezing mid-count...  
 ‘Thirty-four... or was that, five? Damnation Nickie you made me lose my place,’ closing his eyes in exasperation. Nickie saying,  
 ‘Sorry Pater, I can help you count it again.’  
 ‘I’m sure you’re good at it Nickie,’ which Nickie was back then, having learnt by putting coins in his Commonwealth Bank tin moneybox that was modelled on the Reserve Bank in Sydney.

....

Nicholas paying the hotel clerk for his room for three nights. In return the reception clerk handing Nicholas an envelope that said, in Roman 12pt Italics,

*For the Guest, Nicholas Harris, and on the back, Glad you could come...* suggesting the Postmaster had arrived ahead of him. But Nicholas was so used to such deliveries he didn’t even bother questioning who brought it, or when. Just said,

‘Thanks for this,’ with a sigh. ‘Just what I needed,’ which wasn’t true.

....

Nickie at that Redfern church, also sighing before saying,

‘Sorry Pater, this is urgent.’ Pater Thomas saying,

‘Don’t tell me. Not again. This is the second this month.’ Nickie saying,

‘Mum’s having a bad run.’ Pater Thomas saying,

‘Maybe she’s no longer good at matchmaking.’

....

*Which was a lie, since thirteen brides*, Nicholas thought—*many still alive—could contradict him*. Nicholas taking the key from the hotel clerk with one hand while with the other, he weighed an envelope that felt lumpier, and heavier than usual.

....

Nickie saying to Pater Thomas,

‘I’ll tell Mum to try harder.’ But Pater Thomas just shook his head, saying,

‘No, the couples themselves should, because marriage is a sacred business governed by God... A sacred...’ Nickie finishing with,

‘Trust,’ because he’d heard Pater Thomas’s spiel many times.

....

Nicholas room at the De Vere Hotel a surprisingly nice one for a three star hotel – it even had a harbour view. Nicholas counting to three before ripping the envelope open, but this time there was no card in it, or an apology, or promise to meet in any bar. Only a one-page map of central Sydney, wrapped around an empty brass shell that looked like a bullet case, or lipstick canister emptied of its crayon.

And the map it was wrapped in, marked with red Xs, the Archibald Fountain in Hyde Park; Market Street, George Street, Surry Hills, Circular Quay and Central Station. A map whose back showed a different part of Sydney, the container terminals of Botany, with a red X over Botany Cemetery that was nearby. Nicholas thinking, *what the hell?* A map marked maybe not so much with red Xs but asterisks, which are much like star knives, at least to people like Nicholas. And one X, or asterisk, marked that same church in Redfern where Pater Thomas said to Nickie,

....

‘Couples are only human,’ in reference to matrimonial difficulties Nickie had pointed out. Pater Thomas sighing again, saying, ‘Okay, let’s get it over with.’ Since it was time for Nickie to exercise the exit clause. The exit clause being the Marriage Certificate the couples had signed, that in a special deal with his mother, Pater Thomas kept in a drawer for a week as a sort-of ‘cooling off period,’ before filing it with the authorities. Because if Pater Thomas had heard... that not all was well... he would hand Nickie the papers, saying, ‘Go on, do it. It isn’t sacrilege done by an innocent.’ And Nickie would then rip them up, just like his Dad did with his Samurai cards. And Pater Thomas would look on, pinching the bridge on his nose, as if to say, *what has the world come to?*

....

Nicholas remembering how Pater Thomas said to Nickie...

‘And last week’s wedding was particularly beautiful.’ And how, as he ripped up the certificate, Nickie said,

‘One of your best.’

## CHAPTER NINE

## The Map of Xs

Because it was true, Nickie attended so many weddings he often rated them, giving them a mark out of ten. And Pater Thomas's last one had been a nine. Pater Thomas saying,

'One of my best.'

....

But Nicholas thought, *he probably meant the reception.*

....

An elaborate one in the church hall rather than where they were normally held in Nickie's backyard, and Pater Thomas had enjoyed the free booze. Pater Thomas being the one who taught Nickie how to appreciate alcohol, with communion sherry. Sherry that Pater Thomas made Nickie taste off a golden spoon, and then later from a *Duralex* glass because Pater Thomas began to think gold spoons pretentious.

....

At the De Vere, Nicholas taking a sip from one of his duty free bottles of *Johnny Walker*, looking out at the harbour that had been so important to him. It had accommodated so many ships and immigrants in the sixties, welcoming people with its beauty while deceiving others. Beguiling them like a siren to destruction; wondered if he was being beguiled now.

....

Pater Thomas saying,

‘There is nothing wrong with drinking a little during the day to forget your problems, Nickie. Our Lord did too.’

....

Nicholas thinking, *not that Pater Thomas forced me to drink it, nah, not at all.*

....

Only when Nickie asked,

‘Can I have some too?’ To which Pater Thomas would say,

‘Why? Do you have problems?’ To which Nickie would say,

‘You have no idea,’ which used to make Pater Thomas laugh, as he poured him a glass.

....

And how sweet it tasted back then, Nicholas’s *Johnny Walker* tasted a bit rough in comparison. Looking closer at the empty lipstick crayon or bullet wondering what it and the map were trying to say...

....

Pater Thomas saying,

‘A really fine wedding...such a shame.’ Nickie, sipping the sherry, saying,

‘Terrible shame.’ Pater saying,

‘And boy did we dance at the reception.’ Nickie saying,

‘Sure was good.’ Pater Thomas saying,



‘We danced like this,’ getting up and taking a handkerchief out of his cassock, which he held aloft, gyrating to music that was absent, saying, ‘*Oppa, Oppa,*’ Greek noises for pleasure as he danced on one leg and slapped his thigh.

Nickie, taking the other end of the handkerchief, making his own noises of pleasure,

‘Hai ya.’ Pater Thomas saying,

‘Not, ‘Hai ya,’ Nickie, *Oppa, Oppa.*’ Nickie saying,

‘Okay, *Oppa, Oppa,* then,’ holding the other end of the handkerchief imitating Pater Thomas’s every step and the way he slapped his thigh. Both of them going, ‘*Oppa, Oppa*’ which suggested the sherry was getting the better of them. Nickie and Pater Thomas looking like Anthony Quinn and Alan Bates in, *Zorba the Greek*.

‘*Oppa, Oppa.*’ Nickie and the priest getting dizzy, if not from the sherry, from their gyrations, there where they looked as if they were doing the twist, but not in homage to Chubbie Checker. Pater Thomas returning to sobriety by straightening up, and smoothing his cassock, saying,

‘Now you’d better go.’ Nickie saying,

‘Okay Pater.’ Sweeping up the torn pieces of paper, the *evidence*, placing them in an envelope to take back to his Mum to show her that the deed—black act that it was—was done. The way kings demanded to see the heads of enemies without the body once attached to it.

....

Nicholas taking another swig of his *Johnny Walker*, putting the empty lipstick cylinder in his shirt pocket, which reminded him of ... no one, although it suggested the sender was a woman... surely... but not certainly. Looking again at all the places defaced on the map, at all its red Xs or asterisks, clues in more common parlance.

....

But these days Nicholas didn't blame the 'incompatibles' whose papers Nickie used to tear up, because often immigration requirements—namely timetables for deportation—meant the couples only met the same day, for an hour, before having to wed. Which sounds terribly illegal, but it wasn't solely for convenience.

....

Because immigrants back then were meant to *stay* married—to raise children they could be proud of, like Nickie, if they were lucky.

And Pater Thomas, flexible as he was, had limits, because once *eight* days had elapsed, he wouldn't allow Nickie to rip up any. Even if Nickie said,

'They're not getting along. Mum says that they're at each other's throats.'

....

*To be honest*, Nicholas thought, *what Celia and I also once were, that last time in Sydney*. Remembering Celia his first girlfriend, something he didn't do often, probably because where they'd lived in Surry Hills, was also marked red on his map. But it was true. Their double room in that terrace, in their young adult union, when they were uni students, wasn't all bliss. And he hadn't forgotten how they argued, even swore at each other, somehow managing to avoid violence. The size of their double room in Surry Hills unnecessary for passion, but too small for jealousy, where it burnt bright. And perhaps for Nicholas still does.

Wondered if the Postmaster was Celia, courtesy of a map and an X. For the first time identifying a real suspect even though it was unlikely to be Celia since she never wore lipstick—Nicholas aware he still missed her.

....

Back then Pater Thomas saying to Nickie,

‘At each other’s throats? Sorry to hear that Nickie. Maybe they should pray to the Lord for guidance, because now it’s too late.’

His eight-day rule inflexible—Pater Thomas having filed the marriage papers after the seventh. On these occasions, Nickie going home with an empty envelope, a sign of failure, at the sight of which the warring couple sometimes called a truce, realising that they *could* love each other, if that is, their heart was as big as all outdoors, maybe even as big as, *the Outback*, where Nickie once set out to conquer, Drought, Fire, and Flood.

....

Anyway, sipping his *Johnny Walker*, Nicholas thought, *Forget the bloody map, and Postmaster*, knowing more than retrieving or finding any cards, map or sender of lipstick cylinders, he’d returned to finish his book.

Actually, at the De Vere, as Nicholas stared at the harbour from his hotel room, blowing smoke at it, expelling the tar of memory, he wondered if his Postmaster was harbouring a grudge, thinking, *nah, that’s silly, for what? And it couldn’t be Celia, she would’ve moved beyond that...* Touching the empty casing he’d put in his shirt pocket.

....

But back then, the excitement Des Riley and Nickie felt about Shintaro’s imminent approach, was sort-of dampened by other momentous

events Nickie hadn't counted on, such as the marriage of Shirts and Biscuits. Remembering how he said to his mother,

'Getting married?'

'Yes.'

'No,' because Nickie didn't want them to, if it meant losing them, since Nickie considered them as precious as his cards. His Mum saying,

'Don't seem happy.' Nickie saying,

'I'm not. Means they'll move out.' His Mum saying,

'They won't leave. They'll live here, with their husbands. We have plenty of space,' unaware that it wasn't space the young Nickie competed for, but affection.

....

Nicholas thinking, *maybe I still do.*

....

Nicholas in his hotel room also touching the places marked on the map with red Xs, as if the Xs weren't asterisks, or star knives, or kisses but something written in Braille, blind to its intentions, knowing it was unlikely Celia would send him anything.

....

## CHAPTER TEN                      The Marriage of Shirts and Biscuits

Worse was the fact that Nickie's Dad said his Aunts were being *given away*, like rubbish. Shirts and Biscuits having decided to marry the very men, one said, had '*Eyes too close set*,' and the other, '*Hair that was too curly*.' Maybe they were getting desperate. His mother saying,

'Now go congratulate them.' But all Nickie wanted to say was, 'You're throwing away your whole future.'

....

What many said to Nicholas years later when said he was leaving Australia.

....

Nickie saying to his Aunts not, 'how wonderful,' but,

'Are you two sure you're going to be happy?' At which his Aunts laughed, saying,

'Of course darling,' even though it was impossible for them to be certain. Nickie saying worse things like,

'But you haven't even met them,' since Eyes and Curly weren't in the country. Shirts saying,

'You have to take people as they are Nickie.' Biscuits adding,

'You have to be trusting,' which Nickie didn't agree with.

....

Nicholas staring at the harbour as clouds diminished its attractiveness, silencing its sirens.

....

Nickie extracting from his Aunts a promise though, that once they married, at the first sign of trouble they had to tell him at once. But at this they just laughed themselves silly.

....

And at the De Vere, lying on the bed to rest for a few minutes, Nicholas thought less about the map, and lipstick cylinder, and more about the incompatible couples, trying to recall why some marriages dissolved within a week. But he knew. It was because some grooms turned out to be impotent, and some of the brides frigid.

Not that words like that applied to him or Celia. Because when they got together at university—courtesy of the class on Blake—their incendiary relationship was a fiery act that went beyond sex and passion to a level of religious performance, their bodies burning with the mysteries of the flesh into a whole new substance.

Burning not so much with the longing Nicholas now felt for the past and for Celia—which to the middle-aged is sharper than lust and more enduring—but with the flame of youth, turning soft flesh to tungsten. And that is a metal photographers use in flashbulbs to illuminate and startle.

As he lay on the bed, Nicholas remembering how eventually Nickie calmed down, going with Shirts and Biscuits to meet their prospective husbands. And the scene was almost as if it were projected on his hotel room ceiling.

....

Going first to see the man whose *Eyes were too close set*, who was to marry Shirts. *Eyes* being the first groom Nickie saw step off the ship at

Circular Quay, the central headquarters of the harbour and its sirens X-ed in red.

....

Nicholas deciding to visit Circular Quay, next morning when he woke, his short nap having turned into a long slumber. Walking from the De Vere on Macleay Street, down past the navy yards to the Opera House, and Botanic Gardens, to re-introduce himself to his old city, also because the map insisted.

At Circular Quay, Nicholas looking at the overseas passenger terminal that now was just filled with tourists. And it was almost as if he could still see, Jason, *Eyes*, getting off the ship, and hear Jason saying,

....

‘You must be Nikko,’ tussling his hair. To which Nickie responded, ‘Nickie, not Nikko,’ adding, ‘come, see your *nifi*,’ meaning, *bride*, taking Jason through the crowd to the viewing platform, where Shirts sat with Biscuits, trying not to look like things being given away.

....

A viewing platform that was now just a restaurant, and he could almost hear how Nickie said,

....

‘Auntie, this is Mister Jason,’ monitoring her face to see if she thought Jason was a mistake. Jason saying,

‘And which one is Hermione?’ looking at them because it was hard to tell them apart. Jason saying, ‘Let me guess, that must be you,’ pointing to the wrong one, to Biscuits.

....

Nicholas remembering all this as he stared at Circular Quay, and its ferries, puzzled why his map included a tourist location.

Then he walked down George Street to Central Station, since the map mentioned it as well, wondering what the connection was with lipstick. Maybe just going to Central because he remembered young Nickie also went to Central, to meet Curly, who intended to steal Biscuits, because sometimes the men came by train, if their ship had berthed in Melbourne.

....

A station where Nickie used to glare at people disembarking from the overnight train, as if they weren’t Greek but Jewish, and not his mother but himself, a young Doctor Mengele. Biscuits saying,

‘There he is!’ Pointing to Curly from behind the barrier. Nickie saying,

‘You wait here Auntie, I’ll sort this out,’ what they used to say not just in *The Samurai*, but in television Westerns whenever danger reared its head in the shape of indigenous people. Nickie saying to Curly, alias Dimitri, ‘You must be *Kyrie* or Mister Dimitri.’ Curly responding,

‘And you must be Nickie.’ Twirling him through the air the way his Dad once did. And Nickie knew in that half second, they would get on famously, since he’d got his name right.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## The Waste Land

Central. A station that for Nicholas hadn't changed much, it's giant clock tower, showing the correct time—it never used to—Nicholas staring at the station's stone arcades that still housed odd shops. But not the Lost and Found anymore, the shop that housed objects mislaid in railway cars like, umbrellas, wallets, sunglasses and lipsticks. Not people, or relationships or, Celia. Nicholas buying himself a bottle of lemonade since the day was hot, a bottle that reminded him of his mother's nickname.

Which wasn't Matchmaker, or Doctor Mengele, the name Nickie briefly appropriated on the day of Curly's arrival at Central. It was, Soda, because she worked at the *Schweppes* soft drink factory. The nickname Soda devised by her sisters as a code to warn of her approach.

....

Biscuits or Shirts always saying,

'Shush, here comes Soda.' To which his mother, Soda, would say,

'There a problem girls?' Almost like a jail warder, a foreman, or forewoman, which is what they made her in the factory when one of her superiors noticed her innate superiority. Basically, how good she was at telling people what to do, particularly if it had something to do with staying in Australia.

And for many years, his Mum didn't lose her effervescence or *Schweppervescence* as the ads said about their product. Bottles of which she brought home, that Nickie tried to pass off to the Bottle Collector. But all the Bottle Collector would say was,

'These are soft drink bottles. Not beer bottles mate.'

'So?'

‘They’re no good,’ their price lower than beer in the Collector’s *Dow Jones* of recycling. Making Nickie want to go up to the drunks in the park and say,

‘Hurry up please, it’s time,’ – what they used to say in pubs.

....

‘Hurry up please, it’s time,’ what Nicholas later read at university in that poem by Eliot called *The Waste Land*, a poem ostensibly about post-war Europe, perhaps Britain, perhaps humanity, but which now to Nicholas represented Australia. Sure was a wasteland of memories. And Central hadn’t changed much. Nicholas wondering why anyone would mark it red on a map, or if Celia had.

....

‘Hurry up please. It’s time.’ What his Mum used to say to Nickie if she saw him dragging his feet at chores he didn’t like. For instance having to translate for them what *The Daily Mirror* said – a paper that reflected life’s terrors. Back then, Nickie abbreviating what it said because he wasn’t sure of the politics, saying,

‘Says more trouble in Vietnam,’ the place where young Australians were being sent – the odd prize of a lottery.

....

Nicholas also remembering how when Des Riley saw Nickie depressed about his Aunts’ double wedding, Des said,

‘What are you going to do?’ At Des’s place, a home unit in Waverley, that Des’s family had moved to. A flat that had a sprayed cement ceiling of stalactites or stucco, which Nickie and Des thought was put there

to repel Ninjas, because it was so craggy you couldn't cling to it. Nickie saying,

'I don't know,' not revealing that this was about loss.

....

The same sort-of loss young adult Nicholas felt about Celia's departure from their home in Surry Hills, also X-ed in red. The one he brought about by saying,

'If that's how you feel, then just piss off. Don't need my permission.' Not that Celia had needed encouragement. Words he should've weighed with care, since Celia vanished that night, before he returned from work. Not even leaving a post-it note of explanation.

....

Des saying,

'Do something. Have you discussed it with your Dad?'

'Not yet.'

Then, 'Come on. Let's swim. It'll help you forget,' Because Des's home unit—what in Sydney is now called an apartment—had a pool, which in the sixties was pretty fancy. And it didn't even have a security fence, drowning for children then quite optional; both of them splashing about in Des's over-chlorinated pool.

Nickie going home that evening to confront his Dad, the Ringmaster, Nickie thinking that surely he could put off the wedding 'circus' for a while. Maybe even set a rain date, what *The Moscow Circus* visiting Sydney back then used to do quite often. At that time Soviet clowns and acrobats—people who could make people laugh, or contort themselves into more acceptable positions—the only ones allowed out of the Soviet Union.

'Dad, you know how Shirts and Biscuits are getting married?'

‘About time too.’

‘Yeah, but maybe they’re rushing it.’ To which his father said,

‘Maybe you’re right. Go tell Pater Thomas to put them off for a month.’ Just like that.

Which Nickie did, saying,

‘Pater, you have to move Shirts and Biscuits wedding to next month.’ But because he wasn’t that up with nicknames, all Pater Thomas said was,

‘Who?’

‘My Aunts.’ Pater Thomas saying,

‘Oh, Shirts and Biscuits,’ laughing ‘that’s amusing, did you think that up?’

‘No, Mum. She thinks all of them up.’ Pater Thomas adding,

‘And what does she call me, *Church?*’

‘No, she just calls you, “human”.’ Which Pater Thomas had heard before, smiling, a bit flattered. Pater Thomas saying,

‘Thank her for me. I’ll see what I can do.’ Nickie saying,

‘But they call her, Soda,’ and at this, Pater Thomas cackled.

....

*Were the nicknames that funny?* Nicholas thought. *Yes, to a kid anyway.* Nicholas wondering if they had such priests now, because as far as Nicholas was concerned they were rare these days, so few of them because immigration to Australia for Greeks had finished. *Now that we are all dying out one by one, extinguished by mortality, now that we’ve all inter-married, or become Australian, which for some is much the same thing,* Nicholas thinking this, even though he was single.

And Nicholas was right, very few were coming here to be freshly minted, only the people of closer lands—when allowed that is, depending

on how close they arrive to an election since their arrival legal, or illegal is an election issue.

The only time Nicholas could see such priests, really their remnants, the ones left here to guard an outpost—maybe as a garrison—are at cemeteries like Botany. Near the other place the map marked with an X where so many immigrants are buried.

....

Where he found himself now, visiting the grave of his Dad, having caught the bus from Central. Where, from a distance, on windswept hills, he saw black and gold cassocks fluttering in the wind, not in dance, but attending funerals, such ceremonies now being more frequent than weddings.

And Nicholas could see them as stick figures against the landscape, their flaming incense no match against the winds of change. No use against the howling cold wind that sweeps over Botany and its container terminals even on hot days, bringing in and storing up what the dead once manufactured in factories that no longer exist.

Anyone can go to this cemetery, to confirm what Nicholas was seeing and thinking. Not about the ecumenical genocide called mortality, but the passing of an age, the end of the shelf life of the first wave of 1950s immigrants that Nicholas was getting sentimental about.

Thinking of it as a time made of gold, maybe even platinum, not having much time for people who write about this period of immigration as a time of hardship. Not interested in the humiliations they suffered in school because of their sandwiches—the sepia sagas not of movies but of much Australian literature. Didn't even care that he was occasionally called, 'a wog,' a word Australians rarely use these days because it's stale as a pejorative. Wondering what the red X was trying to tell him about the cemetery, wondering if the Postmaster was nearby.

....

Back then, Nickie probably not minding being called a wog because when he asked Miss Mobbs what it meant, she said,

‘A Western Oriental Gentleman,’ and he and his family did live in the Western Suburbs—the inner west at any rate. And his Dad had said being a *tzentlemin* was something he should aspire to. And Orientals, did he really have to explain either now or then? They were excellent.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

## The Speed of Light

Nicholas not having gone to the cemetery solely because a map mentioned it, and not just to visit his Dad, the old Ringmaster planted in the final Big Top, but because he liked the silence, the sense of yesterday he was once a part of. Loving its mausoleums, and crypts, some as large as Newtown houses, built by Italians to hold their whole clan, as if such homes of stone weren't vaults but passenger ships needed to ship the tribe or family past Italy, past the Pillars of Hercules to that other Atlantis called the afterlife, for which there's also no evidence.

Nicholas at his father's grave saying,

'Forgive me, or 'us', as Pater Thomas used to say, '*Eleison imas.*' Forgive us.' But gravestones never answer. Except in fantasy and horror fiction, Hollywood's religious substitutes where redemption is certain, and calibrated the way it rarely is in life, and then if not popular with test audiences, simply re-edited. 'Forgive us.'

But about what? There was no subject let alone predicate. Not that Nicholas thought there would be. Graves don't work like that.

....

Recalled how waiting for both Shintaro to arrive and the weddings Nickie studied hard, because his Mum and Dad said he had to get a scholarship to university.

....

*These days...* Nicholas thought...*they'd probably say the higher education charge.*

....

As Nickie asking,  
 ‘Why?’ To which they’d say,  
 ‘Because we can’t afford to send you there, that’s why we’re here in  
 this country,’ meaning for his ‘future.’

....

Nicholas at the cemetery, thinking, *that was it? They came for me?*  
 Nicholas unsure he’d be able to repay them. Lives not as easily traded as  
 cards. Actually, Nicholas meant he would if he could, but couldn’t.  
 Thinking this because he had found ways around this now. Guilt being  
 something he had learnt to live with.

In fact, Guilt was something Nicholas treasured. A companion who  
 was worthy of capitalisation herself, although perhaps not Italics, someone  
 who was quite as faithful as Tombei, and much like the Postmaster, ever-  
 present. And unlike lovers, senders of cards, maps, and lipsticks, or Celia,  
 Nicholas was confident Guilt would never desert him.

Nicholas and She even went to bed together. Took breakfast and  
 dinner together, even holidays, sometimes polite to each other, sometimes  
 plain rude. Sometimes Guilt stopping for him, sometimes Nicholas stopping  
 for her, Guilt that is, the way death, the greatest *tzentlemin* of all—as he  
 found out later when he studied literature—kindly stopped for Emily  
 Dickinson.

Occasionally threatening each other with divorce, but that was just  
 grandstanding. Sometimes becoming estranged, during the brief times he’d  
 had therapy, always reconciling though, in a way, almost happy.

Oh, Nicholas knew he didn’t have a monopoly on Guilt. She was too  
 popular a courtesan for that. Jews love her too. As do Roman Catholics, but  
 he liked to think She was big-hearted enough to give everyone the same  
 favours, as well as her time and little nudges. In fact, not being the jealous



type anymore, Nicholas often encourages her, saying, ‘Others need you more,’ when he needs peace and quiet.

Anyway, enough of that, otherwise the narrative of Nicholas’s return will derail. Like the goods trains and passenger trains above the semis, that still spoke to him, and upbraided him in his mind if they thought he’d done wrong. Or, if they agree he has acted right, saying, as they did back then,

....

‘*Good on you Nickie, you’re a great kid.*’ Trains that didn’t always say as he thought earlier, ‘*You’re in trouble now,*’ and soon he would again have to listen to their music. Trains that Nicholas knew must have now rotted, their carriages turned into museums for trainspotters, since the *red rattlers* were no longer rattling.

As he wandered around graves filled with strangers, Nicholas remembering how he studied bizarre things at school like, the Harrier Jump Jet. And how his teacher Miss Mobbs used to say,

‘Who can tell me what makes the Harrier Jump Jet special?’ And how since his hand was always up first, Miss Mobbs would say, ‘Yes, Nickie?’

‘The Harrier Jump Jet can take off and land vertically. That’s what makes it special,’ meaning it was like a Ninja wasn’t it? ‘And it’s made in England,’ knowing she liked that bit, being made there herself.

....

At the cemetery Nicholas thinking about this as a squadron of fighter jets flew above him. Nicholas having forgotten today was Australia Day, the artificial birthday of a country in a continent that had always existed.

....

Nicholas remembering Miss Mobbs was always saying disparaging remarks about planes called F1-11s that kept crashing, planes that Australia had bought from the US, saying,

‘I don’t know why Australia ever bought them,’ as if Nickie’s class were the Cabinet that had approved their purchase. Planes that Nickie secretly thought were cool because they could retract and move their wings backwards and forwards like birds, whereas the Harrier Jump Jet was more like a locust.

....

Nicholas thinking Miss Mobbs taught them things like that because in addition to showing off her English heritage, Miss Mobbs, became tired of the syllabus, even of School Magazine and its enthusiastic Pyongyang type broadcasts.

Thinking this as the squadron and its plumes in the distance formed a bunch of Xs not just in red, but different colours.

....

And Nickie, while waiting for these momentous events, the weddings and for Shintaro, privately studied other gospels of knowledge, such as *How and Why* books. Each of which covered different topics, like *Time*, a topic about which Nickie became an expert, maybe even a Time Lord.

....

Which Nicholas felt now, he might still be, Nicholas aware it was time to leave the dead to the dead.

Leaving the cemetery because there were other people he needed to see even if they had no cards, or had sent no clues.

Leaving his Dad in that cemetery, that Big Top, knowing he'd come back one last time, and that two visits are needed if you want gravestones to answer with something more than silence, regardless of whether they've forgiven or forgotten you. Wondering, *why was it X-ed on the map? Would've come here anyway.*

....

Back then, Nickie also studying other topics such as the Speed of Light. And there was nothing faster than that.

....

Not even regret, which for Nicholas these days comes a close second, because regrets they say are illuminations come too late.

....

All of which made Nicholas feel dark in spirit, which was understandable considering he had spent the first day of his return to Australia, of his quest or quests, in a cemetery. No cards there or clues, and there was nothing there to help his novel, its literary critics silent.

....

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN    The Department of State Lotteries

From the cemetery Nicholas deciding to catch the bus back to town, since there were no cabs about those windswept hills, certainly no *Tuk Tuks*. Nicholas fingering the empty lipstick cylinder in his pocket and its roundness, wondering if he would come back for a final visit or if anyone had been watching him.

The bus five minutes late. Cars flashing past him that the Postmaster could have driven, some fast, some slow, as if observing him, Nicholas relieved when his bus arrived.

On the bus recalling how Nickie sometimes went with the grooms to that dark cavern in Market Street in the city near the State Theatre, the other place the map had defaced in red.

Where Nicholas finally found himself amongst the living, people shuttling past him like the figures in the John Brack painting called *Collins Street., 5pm* even though Nicholas wasn't in Melbourne but Sydney.

....

Nickie back then thinking the street was called Market, because it was there that they sold three of the Muses: Opportunity, Lady Luck, and Good Fortune. Not in the Department Stores, but in the Department of State Lotteries where Nickie bought tickets for the grooms in the Opera House lottery. The financing of that structure by the immigrant class the closest they ever got to its culture.

....

But now, in this same Market Street, Nicholas could see the Department of State Lotteries wasn't there any more—replaced by a bank whose finances were more certain. Wondered why he had come to Market

Street, and why just after Circular Quay and a cemetery? Was he just following the places inked on the map, the various burial sites of memory? Maybe. Also wondering if he'd really go through with the various quests he'd promised himself as a joke, or if he'd finish his book, knowing there was one part he just didn't want to write.

....

And Market Street reminded Nicholas how Nickie won the Jackpot, *and* the Opera House lottery. Well, not the money but something better. Because Nickie got to destroy his Aunts' wedding plans without lifting a finger, courtesy of two new émigrés who came to their house, one of them being his Dad's niece, the other, one of his Mum's sisters. A niece they came to call Sluts, in the plural, even though she was single. And an Aunt they came to call Handbags, although this changed to Glomesh because she later specialised in that factory.

Sluts, from the moment she stepped off the ship, in particular bringing with her not hope—what every other immigrant had packed—but her own Pandora's box filled with scandal.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## The Arrival of Sluts

Sluts saying to Nickie, when he met her on the gangplank—kids always allowed through security,

‘Here, carry my bag, be a real *tzentlemin*,’ which was nonsense because he knew not all *tzentlemin* were nice. And what a cheek Sluts had, making a seven-year old carry her luggage. The tramp. Sluts coming down the gangplank as if she wasn’t factory fodder, or a reinforcement for the Wedding Factory but Marilyn Monroe, holding on to her picture hat, waving to strangers as if they were her fans. Sluts kissing her glove, throwing away kisses sought by no one, then she adjusted her cleavage. Sluts also giving Nickie her handbag, saying, ‘What’s your name again, *pethi mou*?’ *Pethi mou*, meaning, *kid*, a woman who really knew how to get important people like Nickie offside. To which he said,

‘Nickie.’ To which she said,

‘How nice,’ but Nickie might as well have said his name was *Apples*. Sluts looking around at the sparkling harbour that made her squint, deaf to its sirens, saying, ‘Is it hot here every day?’ Fanning herself as if her fan could bring about climate change. And it sure did in their house. Then, ‘Sydney seems the end of the bloody world.’ Sluts perhaps thinking she was Ava Gardner. Sluts adding, ‘So what now kid? What do you do for fun in this dump?’

....

Nicholas recalling this, thinking, *the cheek of her, who did she think I was as Nickie, her press agent?*

....

Nickie saying,

‘Come meet everyone,’ but something inside him, despite his hostility to her, said, *this is going to be good.*

And it was, because from the moment Sluts entered their house there was trouble. Shirts and Biscuits at each other’s throats because Sluts started to flirt with their prospective grooms, and even with Nickie. Sluts saying things like,

‘Bring me my cigarettes, *handsome,*’ which to his Aunts sounded sleazy, which Sluts was. And still would be, if she were alive, and not just living in Nicholas’s memory.

His Aunts saying to each other,

‘Have you heard how she speaks?’ Nickie saying,

‘Yep,’ even though no one asked him.

‘Nickie, this is a conversation for adults.’ Nickie saying,

‘Just trying to help,’ which he was, but not in the way they wanted.

‘And the way she looks at men!’ To which Nickie said,

‘Bug-eyed,’ holding his fingers up to his eyes, to show what a bug looked like, sort-of like Edna Everage’s sunglasses.

....

Much like the poster advertising Barry Humphries that Nicholas looked at in Market Street, at the State Theatre.

....

But his Aunts ignored Nickie’s antics, saying,

‘She’s so bold,’ from Shirts.

‘Downright dangerous,’ from Biscuits.

And Nickie knew all he had to do was sit back and watch, quite bug-eyed about it himself, because in the living room Sluts kept saying stuff like,

‘Hey *gorgeous*, can you run down to the shop and get me more fags? I’ve run out.’

Probably unnecessary to say that young Greek women in the 1960s weren’t supposed to smoke even with a long cigarette holder. Wasn’t common. Worse, the words *gorgeous* and *handsome* were directed to any man who’d take the bait.

And Nickie could see Soda, was well, ready to explode, but not in the stowaway sense. Soda saying to his Dad, in private,

‘Your niece is certainly something.’ To which his Dad said,

‘She’s only young. She’ll calm down,’ even though Sluts was pushing thirty.

Sluts, called *Sluts*, not just because she was flirtatious or actually a slut—although later this turned out to be true—or to be derogatory, but because she said her name was,

‘Soula, but everyone calls me Tassia.’ To which Nickie said,

‘Soulattasia.’ Sluts saying,

‘Yes, what did you say your name was again *pethi mou?*’

But Nickie thought it beneath his dignity to repeat it, but not beneath his dignity to keep repeating hers,

‘Soulattasia. Soulattasia, Soulattasia, Soulattsia, Soulattsia,’ in that sort-of Asperger’s type repetitive sing-song kids get attached to, much like if you say ‘toy boat, toy boat,’ again and again, your tongue winds up with a shorter concept, hence her name.

So, this time it was Nickie who’d named her by accident, and not his Mum.

....

Nicholas thinking, *maybe Nickie was prophetic.*

....



Sluts is dead now, so Nicholas can say these things, perhaps forgiving her in memory. And being dead meant Sluts was definitely not the Postmaster or sender of maps, and empty lipstick cylinders. Sluts found Monroe-esque naked in her bed, many years before any of Nicholas's 'birthday' cards arrived. Found with a bottle of pills in a hotel on a Greek island in what some papers called murder, and rival papers suicide. Actually it was on Kalymnos where Nicholas had been a few years earlier.

Anyway, Sluts died years before he moved away, and Nicholas wasn't there when it happened. And those times had sped past like the monorail did now above him in Market Street, any of whose passengers could have been the Postmaster, card, and map giver, or wearer of lipstick. And the monorail was soon to be pulled down.

....

The name 'Sluts' probably sticking, because back then, neither Nickie knew what a Slut was nor did Shirts or Biscuits. Anyway, it really wasn't meant to be insulting, and they seemed to like the sound of it, if not her. His Mum, Soda, always asking,

'And where's Soula today Nickie?'

'You mean, Sluts?'

'Yes, Sluts.'

'She's in the living room, talking to the men,' as he helped his Mum fold sheets. Sluts splayed out on the sofa that was coming apart because of his and Des's target practice, like some Greek version of Lady Recamier.

....

Which is saying something, because later when Nicholas studied art at university—or Fine Arts as it was called, to distinguish it from coarser

arts, like jealousy that he practised on Celia—he found out that Lady Recamier was pretty racy. Nicholas remembering though that the word ‘Slut’ was something Nicholas shouldn’t have said to Celia that night they argued over perceived rivals, one of which he found her with, in their Surry Hills apartment. *Was too much jumping to conclusions.* Nicholas thinking this as another monorail train tore through Market Street above him, which, like the last one, may have had his correspondent, or Celia looking down on him.

....

Back then, Nickie saying to his Mum,

‘Yeah Sluts is talking to the men,’ and his Mum’s bubbles seemed to pop. His Mum asking,

‘What are they talking about?’

To which, because the Queen of the Gestapo had promoted Nickie to Minister of Propaganda, Nickie said,

‘Sluts is telling them that she has no intention of marrying in Australia, and no intention of working in a horrible factory. Says she is just biding her time till she becomes big.’

‘Big?’

‘As an actress.’ His surprised Mum saying,

‘She certainly doesn’t need lessons,’ his Mum cross, not only because Sluts was flirting, or because of her dramatic ambitions, but because Sluts didn’t want to work. Ever. His Mum going real flat back then, totally without bubbles about Sluts not wanting to work, because though Nickie’s family were Greek Orthodox—on paper at any rate—his Mum had a solid Protestant work ethic. Had shares in it, even though Protestants both then and now, pretend it’s their monopoly. His mother saying about Sluts, ‘...Isn’t going to get the better of me, or my sisters,’ even though back then Nickie personally hoped Sluts would.

....

Nicholas remembering what he said to Celia that final night,

‘Piss off then,’ as if no longer wanting her, which wasn’t true. And there were other things he said to Celia that night that he tried to retract, like the word ‘Slut’ which was inaccurate. ‘Sorry, didn’t mean to say that.’ Then more angrily, ‘But what the hell was he doing here anyway?’ Referring to the visitor Celia just saw out, a fellow student. To which Celia said,

‘He’s gay Nick.’ Nicholas saying,

‘And how am I supposed to know that? I didn’t fuck him.’ Celia answering,

‘No, but you’ve fucked us,’ meaning their relationship. Regretting even now how for a moment, he raised his hands almost wanting to hit her, *to bind her face in the dust*, but didn’t. Not then and not ever. Celia saying, ‘It’s... okay... Nick.’ Softly, because Celia was a little bit afraid of him. ‘It will be... okay.’

....

And her explanations about visitors were always reasonable but not reasonable enough to prevent other arguments. Nicholas starting ones so trivial it would be laughable if they weren’t the fuses that lit something terminal. And Nicholas once again wondered if it was Celia who was now teasing him or tormenting him.

....

His Mum back then saying,

‘George, I don’t know why you brought your niece out. If she upsets the cart of my sisters’ weddings, I swear I’ll...’

....

Exactly what Nicholas said to Celia,

‘If you’re lying to me I swear I’ll...’ To which Celia, because sometimes she was unafraid and defiant, said,

‘You’ll what exactly?’

....

Exactly what his Dad said to his Mum,

‘You’ll what exactly?’ His Mum saying,

‘Nothing. I’d better go see what she’s up to,’ making Nickie not hate Sluts, but barrack for her. In his mind saying, *good on ya, Sluts. You’re a champ.*

....

Then it occurred to Nicholas what he was actually doing in Market Street. And it wasn’t just because the map had marked it. Nor was it because he needed to see the Department of State Lotteries.

It was because he needed to make pilgrimage to the same State Theatre where he’d hurried that night to apologise, knowing Celia had fled there after their argument, having tickets to see a visiting pop star. And in his mind’s eye, he could still see her in the lobby talking to others, and her look of dread when she saw him. In a lobby where he gently took Celia first by the wrist, then by the hand and said,

‘I’m so sorry,’ amidst marble chandeliers that befitted a princess but that were also a suitable contrast to him the knave and jealous peasant, where after a delay—maybe an interval—she hugged him and cried, as he repeated, ‘So, so, sorry,’ seeking forgiveness.

What at the cemetery his Dad couldn't give him, nor could anyone living. Nicholas thinking, *who was that pop star? Was it Bette Midler?* Remembering how Celia loved her. Loved that song that started, *We had an apartment in the city*, as if apartments could be found in deserts. And how when Celia came home later, she didn't say a word, just put on, *Do You Want to Dance?* Maybe because the night was moon lit, probably more lit by streetlight, but Nicholas preferred to think it was moonlight since it's more suited to memory. Has more poetry. And how they danced real close, almost not moving, moved though by the sentiment of a song that made the song less a question, and more imperative.

....

But back then, in Nickie's living room, Sluts was unaware of trouble she was creating, continuing to hold court with Eyes and Curly, who listened to her stories—and boy they were stories—about how,

'Back home a Greek shipbuilding millionaire wanted me.' Sluts hinting it may have even been Onassis, whose favours she declined, so as to defend her 'honour.' Sluts saying, 'Boys, I had to say, "no". I mean he wanted to get to know me *that way* without even proposing. And I've never been that sort-of girl,' adjusting her cleavage. The men saying,

'You did the right thing, Soula.' Sluts saying,

'Riches mean nothing to me,' overdoing it. 'I had my pride, my honour to think about,' to which they were sympathetic. Sluts repeating, 'I had my honour to think of, my, *timi*,' forgetting that *timi* not only means *honour*, but *price*. Nickie repeating in Greek,

'Your *timi*,' showing off, pretending that he understood the concept when he didn't really.

....

Not even as an adult, when he held Celia that night and kept saying, ‘Sorry.’ And his contrition was more of a performance than whoever was on at the State Theatre, there to sing sappy lyrics of innocence and experience.

*No, it was Bette Midler, Nicholas was now sure of it. Wouldn’t have made that up, otherwise why dance to that song later that night?*

....

Sluts saying,

‘*Akrivos pethi mou, ee timi mou,*’ meaning, ‘*exactly kid, my honour*’, although sitting around in her bathing suit didn’t seem to bother her honour either. And shouldn’t have bothered Nickie’s Mum but it did. His Mum saying,

‘Soula, put some clothes on, there’s a chill in here,’ which there was, but not in temperature. ‘We don’t want you to get sick,’ when in fact, his Mum wanted her to catch pneumonia. Sluts saying,

‘Why? It’s not cold. And this country is far too hot for me. It’s never like this in Greece is it boys?’ Curly saying,

‘Leave the girl alone. Can’t you see she’s hot?’ Which for them she was, red-hot. His Mum saying,

‘As you wish, I’d better go see what Shirts and Biscuits are up to,’ and to the prospective grooms, ‘Would you like me to call them down?’ Curly saying,

‘The girls can come down when they’re ready.’ Sluts saying,

‘Yeah, they can come down whenever they want.’ Soula Tassia—Sluts for short—never knowing when to stop.

**CHAPTER FIFTEEN****The Acting Coach**

But then neither did Nicholas the young adult in university days when he unleashed his jealous instincts.

‘So sorry,’ which he always was, after he’d calmed down. Repeating it when the song finished, the song that began with a question but ended with Celia’s actions as answer. Really wondered if the cards, lipstick cylinder, map, and its many red Xs were her revenge.

....

Sluts going on to say how,

‘That filthy Mister Onassis tried to have his way with me boys. And all I did was swim out to his yacht to be friendly.’ Nickie’s mother saying,

‘Was Maria Callas there too?’ Because this was a couple of years before Onassis married Jackie. Sluts saying,

‘No, she had a singing engagement in Paris,’ although Nickie doubted Sluts knew where Paris was. His Mum saying,

‘What a shame.’

But Nickie could’ve told Sluts that Callas wasn’t in Paris, but glaring at her in that very room.

....

And Nicholas wondered if jealousy was hereditary. Rather jealous himself now of people in Market Street who had purpose, jobs, and lovers. And they were people who lived in the present, who didn’t need cards, notes, maps, lipstick cylinders or unfinished novels, or to visit old friends as a reason for living.

....

His Mum going up to the room that Shirts and Biscuits shared—with Nickie close behind—where the twins sat in tears, saying to them,

‘Stop that. And do something, otherwise Sluts will ruin everything.’

Nickie further thinking about Sluts, *Go girl*, wondering how he could encourage her. Not that there was any need to, because Sluts sure couldn’t take hints, not even the hint Nickie gave her that might have improved her acting. One day when he found her alone, saying to Sluts,

‘You’re overdoing it.’ Sluts saying,

‘Overdoing what *pethi mou?*’

‘The whole routine,’ Nickie jumping up on that damaged sofa, splaying himself out like Sluts did, imitating her vamping. ‘Particularly when you do this,’ fluttering his eyes, because though he’d refused to be her press agent, he was okay about being her acting coach. At which Sluts laughed. And it made Nickie almost like her. Sluts saying,

‘You’re too much,’ when he wasn’t, she was. Nickie saying,

‘Just tone it down a bit, and you’ll be great.’

....

Which is what he said to Celia in the theatre lobby, there in Market Street. Well, said part of it anyway, because he wasn’t sure she would come home that night.

‘You know we’re great together.’ To which Celia said, after a threatening pause.

‘Nick... have to go back inside. Let me go.’ But he didn’t know she meant forever. Or did he? Maybe he did.

‘See you back home?’ To which Celia just said,

‘Bells are ringing.’ And they were, but not for the performance, for her departure, even though she *did* return for that one final night. *But for what, a last dance, a last chance to see how she felt?* Nicholas was still



unsure – would send her a card himself now if he knew her address, even an apology.

....

Sluts getting down on her knees to Nickie's level, to show they were equal, after she stopped laughing that is, saying,

'Why should I tone it down? Everyone loves me,' believing her own press. Nickie saying,

'Yeah, you're right, I made that up but I'm only trying to help,' meaning with her acting, not with anything else.

....

Hindsight now suggesting to Nicholas he should've been a director among his many career options. He could have had his own films on at the State Theatre rather than just in his head, or projected on hotel room ceilings. Wondered if his relationship with Celia really had ended because of his possessiveness, but knew there was more to it than that.

....

Back then, Sluts saying,

'People are always trying to help me.' Nickie saying, 'People like Mister Onassis?' At which Sluts just laughed, saying,

'Oh, come on. I was just having fun. I don't think anyone believed that.' Nickie saying,

'They didn't.' Sluts saying,

'Let me tell you a secret, handsome,' still on her knees.

'A secret?' Because Nickie liked secrets back then...

....

But these days, Nicholas didn't like them as much, since he had so many, as did his furtive correspondent.

....

Sluts saying,

'Yes, a secret,' at which point Nickie began to think he and she could be friends, that she could become Shirts' and Biscuits' replacement.

....

And as Nicholas went in to *Myer's* perfume counter, just off Market Street, he wondered if they still sold what Celia wore. Not lipsticks since she never liked them, but what he used to buy her, *Je Reviens*, the perfume by *Worth*, the perfume of return, the scent of which in Sydney was all about him. But all he could see were counters that said *Dior*, *Chanel*, and that old standby *Maja* that reminded him of...

....

Nickie saying to Sluts,

'What were you going to tell me?'

'Why I left Greece.'

'Because of Mister Onassis, or because you made Maria Callas angry?' Sluts laughing and laughing, then saying,

'No, darling, because of nasty things they said about me.'

'Like?'

'That I'm... no good.' To which Nickie said,

'That's silly, I think you're excellent. Was it true?' Sluts saying,

‘Yes, but not about the bits they think.’

‘Is that why Dad brought you here?’ Sluts saying,

‘Actually for a break from *Tychy*,’ meaning *Fortune*, ‘the world’s biggest *poutana*,’ which does not need translation. Sluts repeating, ‘*Tychy* brought me here.’ What the men had been trying to buy at the Department of State Lotteries.

....

After he left *Myer*’s perfume counter, Nicholas having a last look at the State Theatre, then he headed to *David Jones*, and Hyde Park to see what the map had also marked in red, the Archibald Fountain that featured a god of bronze, what people said he looked like as a youth – certainly not now.

....

And he could almost hear how back then, Sluts said,

‘...Your Dad brought me here to... save me from what that *poutana* doesn’t want to give you. Maybe just from myself.’

A statement that made Nickie begin to like her, since Samurais were partial to saving people.

But when Nickie said to his Mum,

‘Mum, Sluts is really a nice person.’ His Mum wanted to know what had brought this sea change about. Nickie saying, ‘Nothing. Just is.’ To which his Mum said,

‘I’ll have a word with her privately.’ And she did, saying, ‘Soula...’

Sluts saying,

‘I prefer Tassia.’ His Mum saying,

‘Soula Tassia...’ rapidly, maybe deliberately, ‘things are done differently here.’ Sluts saying,

‘Can say that again. The way men glare at me is perfectly scandalous.’ His Mum flabbergasted, saying,

‘Soula... Tassia... you’d have no problem if you dressed modestly.’

Sluts saying,

‘Like a widow?’

‘Maybe just in a dress. And you’ll have to work while you’re here.

We can’t provide for you.’ Sluts saying,

‘Who says I have no intention of working?’

‘...Tassia, it doesn’t matter what you do, just do *something*. If you don’t want to work in a factory...’

‘I don’t.’

....

Years later, before Nicholas’s mother lost her wits, he remembered his Mum saying,

‘Which was just as well, otherwise we would have had to call her *Bordellos* or Kings Cross, or something,’ where Nicholas was residing. Well, would be for the next few nights till he had exhausted the map’s asterisks, star knives, or daggers, or until they’d exhausted him. Maybe just until the owner of the lipstick, or bullet case fronted, hopefully without the gun it fitted.

....

His mother saying to Sluts back then,

‘If you don’t fancy factories then you can help around the house.’

Sluts saying,

‘Do I look like a servant? You brought me here to humiliate me?’

His mother saying,

‘To be honest, I’m not sure why you came, if you don’t want to work or get married.’ Sluts saying,

‘Uncle hasn’t told you?’ At which Sluts brightened up, because no gossip had been mentioned.

....

Nicholas thinking, *she must’ve, because then she apologised.*

....

Sluts saying,

‘I’m sorry, Auntie if I’ve made the wrong impression.’ His Mum saying,

‘We’re trying to help you.’

....

*Perhaps not strictly true, Nicholas thought, but it was the battle of the actresses. Maybe star with understudy.*

....

Sluts saying more contritely,

‘Auntie what do you want me to do then?’ His Mum saying,

‘I want you...to have a chat with Pater Thomas. He often knows of jobs going here and there, if you’re averse to... factories.’ To which Sluts said,

‘But I can’t go see Pater Thomas... dressed like this.’ His Mum saying,

‘No, put something modest on,’ forgetting to mention that with Pater Thomas this wasn’t strictly necessary. Sluts saying,

‘But I don’t have anything specifically for priests.’ His Mum saying,

‘Then buy something. I’ll give you money.’

‘I couldn’t ask you, Auntie.’

‘You haven’t. Here take it,’ thrusting two pounds in her hands.

Sluts brightening even more, taking the money, saying,

‘Thank you Auntie Soda, I’ll never forget you.’ To which Nickie’s Mum said,

‘Oh, none of us will forget you either,’ difficult back then for Nickie to establish who was the bigger ham. It was a photo finish.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## The Dressing of Sluts

Nicholas wondering, why the map had suggested the Archibald Fountain – was it where cards or memory were also buried? Knowing it was, since it was where he and Celia met when they courted, before arguments started. And as he sat on a park bench he recalled how Sluts said,

....

‘But I can’t go to the shops by myself. Back home, in Greece I always had an escort.’

....

Recalling how much his Mum still likes to imitate Sluts—her voice anyway,

‘A *cavaliero*, she called them,’ for the amusement of the other inmates of her nursing home—his Mum despite her years, still a good mimic. ‘*Cavalieros* nothing, she meant clients,’ which always makes the other inmates laugh no matter how many times she repeats it.

The way at the Archibald Fountain children laughed and yelped at a man with a lasso that he dipped in a solution, creating giant soap bubbles that he’d then try to wrap around them, like the bubbles of memory.

....

Nickie’s mother at the time saying,

‘You won’t have to go alone. Nickie will go with you. Won’t you Nickie?’ To which Nickie said,

‘I’d love to.’ To which Sluts said,

‘But I can’t go shopping without white gloves, I’m not common.’  
Nickie’s Mum saying,

‘Nickie, give her your gloves,’ as she left the room, meaning her ones, that he kept for curatorial reasons, even though Sluts had her own. And he had no choice. He had to.

Nickie and Sluts and walking up the street, Nickie in his school shorts and long socks, she in a long pencil skirt, with a very long slit that sort-of suited her, the white gloves a bit *de trop*, Sluts saying,

‘Thank you for being my *cavaliero* darling,’ But she did look pretty.

....

And there were lots of pretty women in Hyde Park now where Nicholas sat, French tourists with long skirts and Japanese ones activating cameras because they mistrusted memory. Felt as if he himself was trapped in bubbles. Felt that his Postmaster was in Hyde Park sizing him up, *But for what, surely not nostalgia?* Thinking, *maybe for annihilation*, but there was no evidence for that because empty lipstick canisters are romantic not threatening.

....

Back then, Nickie saying to Sluts,

‘No problem, I love being an escort, or *cavaliero*.’ To which Sluts said,

‘Thank you,’ as they walked past the Moreton Bay fig trees that Sluts said should be chopped down. And the little semis that Sluts said reminded her of stables, rather than houses. Sluts pointing to the synagogue, saying,

‘What’s that?’ Nickie lying, saying,

‘It’s a Greek temple.’ Sluts saying,



‘Is there anywhere on earth Greek men haven’t put their hand to?’

Nickie saying,

‘I doubt it,’ which was true, but at that time he meant it architecturally, trying to take her hand, because he was warming to her. She was so different to the others, since she didn’t want to marry *or* work in a factory. But Sluts refused to accept his hand, saying,

‘Stop that, *agape*. They’ll think I’m your mother.’ Nickie saying,

‘What’s wrong with that?’ Sluts saying,

‘It’s ageing. And I’m still young. My life is ahead of me,’ even though all Nickie could see ahead of them was King Street.

....

And at the Archibald Fountain, all Nicholas could see was College Street to the left of him, and Elizabeth Street to the right. And directly in front of him a brutal man in bronze slaying a Minotaur—jealousy’s stand-in. This statue of Theseus, paired with a maiden—surely Artemis—maybe Diana, sitting in serenity near an antelope. Statues in a fountain all crowned above by Apollo, whose left hand held not an olive branch—what Nicholas had often held out to Celia to compensate for wars he started, and that she finished—but the lyre of art. A statue whose right hand pointed to... what? *Maybe the Sydney Stadium, where the Samurai made his appearance*, Nicholas thought, sniggering at the irony. Because Apollo sort-of did, even though the stadium was now demolished.

Nicholas looking at the water spraying around Apollo, great jets and founts glistening gold in the afternoon light like the fool’s gold of memory. The water jets making a sort-of translucent X shape, as if it too was part of the map.

....

At the Department Store Newtown had called *Brennan's*, Sluts saying,

'Wait outside,' because she wanted to keep what she was buying a secret. And Nickie did wait outside like a guard dog. Sluts eventually emerging with boxes and boxes of things, saying, 'Carry these for me *agape*.' Nickie, not offended at being her valet anymore, saying,

'Certainly.'

....

Recalled how he thought for ages after Celia 'vanished,' that Celia must have gone off with another guy, some other guy, or that other one. He'd been jealous of so many. Their names flipping over like the tiles that show arrivals and departures at international airports, Bangkok, Yerevan, Athens, and London.

....

On the way home Nickie showing Sluts the carp that he liked in the Dry Cleaners on King Street, whose interior then was as hot and steamy as Nicholas's life in Bangkok.

'Look... Soula,' hard for him not to use the rest of the name he'd fashioned for her, 'aren't they beautiful?' About which Sluts said,

'Fish, are for eating.' Clear, even then she would never be vegan. Nickie showing Sluts the Odeon Record Store, that Tower of Babel which she liked, where she spent the rest of the money. Sluts saying, with all the forty-five's she came out with, '*Agape*, music is the most important thing in my life. I love dancing,' and in that instant, Nickie knew she and Pater Thomas would get on famous. Might even supplant him. The harlot. Her legs weren't bad either. They were on show so often Sluts could've been in burlesque, which she sort-of was. On a stage that she'd built, where his Dad,

his Mum, his Aunts, and Nickie, were a disposable chorus for a performance that turned out to be as elaborate as Shintaro's.

....

And Nicholas wondered if Celia herself, his Diana or Artemis, had used him as much theatrically. Wondered if Celia really vanished that night not because of his jealousy, but because it was time to strike the set of their relationship.

....

Back in Sluts' room, Nickie placing her boxes on the bed, Sluts saying above the noise of one of the forty-fives she put on, a Greek version of *Que Sera Sera*, whose lyrics said, *whatever will be will be...* among other platitudes,

'Leave them anywhere you can, darling,' as if her room was in a five star hotel. Sluts throwing herself on the bed, saying, 'but why must I see some silly priest?'

Nickie arranging her parcels symmetrically the way he did with his cards, saying,

'Don't, if you don't want.' Sluts saying,

'But your mother is forcing me,' burying her head in a pillow she probably mistook for a man, 'forcing me onto some ugly old priest. Yuk.' At which point, Nickie defended Pater Thomas saying,

'He's not old and ugly,' which calmed her. Sluts saying,

'Oh?'

'Nope, he's pretty young for a priest. I think he's only about thirty.'

Sluts saying, 'Thirty? He's just a child... and pretty and young you say?' Which wasn't what he said exactly. Nickie adding,

'He's nice. Everyone says he's human.'

Sluts saying, ‘Well what else would he be *pethi mou*? A fish?’ Then she paused before saying, ‘Well, let’s pay him a visit,’ getting up off the bed, invigorated. Nickie not having seen what was in the parcels, saying,

‘What are you going to wear?’ Sluts saying,

‘Why would you care? Planning to be a tailor when you grow up?’ Nickie saying,

‘I don’t know, maybe.’

....

*As it turned out, true, Nicholas thought, I did become a tailor, but of lies, running up garments posing as stories and novels, attaching a vest here, a button there, sometimes just ripping things up with pinking shears when dissatisfied.*

And he wondered—now that he had time—whether he should finish his novel, or whether he would ever find the rest of those cards. The jets of the fountain no longer making any X, but a windswept blur.

Nicholas heading down William Street, back to the De Vere Hotel, oddly in the direction of the Sydney Stadium pointed out by Apollo, no wiser about the map and the lipstick cylinder—where above the traffic and its din Nicholas could almost see and hear Sluts saying,

....

‘Let me show you little one, what I’ll wear,’ spinning around in a half twirl. ‘I am going to see the priest, as a grand European Lady,’ first cleaning her face with *Pond’s Cold Cream*, then spraying herself with perfume. Not with *Je Reviens* though, but with one called *Maja*.

Sluts also applying face powder from a packet that also said *Maja*, whose label had a Spanish woman dancing with castanets, in a red silk ball gown with a mantilla over her head. Sluts pointing to the flamenco dancer on the label, saying,

‘Isn’t she beautiful?’ Nickie saying,

‘But she’s Spanish and you’re Greek.’ Sluts saying,

‘I know *agape*, but I won’t go dressed like some common Greek girl. Here, open my boxes.’

Which Nickie did, combing through tissue paper as thick as memory.

Sluts dressing in the red silk flamenco skirt she’d bought, and black Cuban heels, as well as a black mantilla. After which Nickie escorted her out of their terrace as if he wasn’t taking Sluts to church for prayer, or career advice, but to the Alhambra or the Prado. Places Nicholas later visited.

....

Along with *La Place de la Concorde*, the place founded in a time that lacked harmony, where he and Celia ate baguettes and pate – the place where the guillotine separated people from the living for political rather than personal reasons. And Paris was a city where they were almost happy, but not entirely, since there were other men about. And Frenchmen at that, about whom Celia said, had charm. *More charm than Greeks or Australians...* Which was snooty. And sort-of insulting, leading to another argument.

....

Sluts walking in a stately fashion down King Street as if it was only natural to appear like a flamenco dancer in daylight. Not minding the stares of people like the Park Rangers, who wolf whistled, saying,

‘Hey gorgeous,’ just like Sluts used to.

....

The Rangers whistling because Sluts knew each of them *personally*, before she died Sluts telling Nicholas how she used to spend time giving them gardening advice on warm summer evenings.

Nicholas stopping on William Street for a coffee, there where it intersected Burke Street on the corner called Ten Buck Alley.

....

Sluts saying to Nickie back then, about the Park Rangers, ‘Pay no attention to them. They’re just peasants,’ exactly what she and he were, and not Japanese ones, Nickie amazed that a picture on a bottle of perfume and face powder, could be so influential.

....

But then who was Nicholas to talk? His influences came from a small box called television, and from a forgotten series about Samurai, and trivial Samurai cards.

....

Sluts saying to Nickie as they went up the stairs of the same Redfern church marked on the map,

‘*Senor?*’

‘Yes?’

‘Do I look pretty?’

....

What Celia used to ask Nicholas as well, when she felt insecure. But Celia was always magnificent, and knew it, as did others.

....

Nickie responding,

‘Yes,’ because he liked being called *Senor*, seeing this as a promotion from *handsome* and *agape*.

‘Really?’

....

Exactly what Celia used to say,

‘Really?’

‘Truly,’ because Nicholas meant it, she was beautiful and always would be, wherever she was or with whomever she was with now.

....

Sluts saying,

‘You’re supposed to say, ‘*Si, Signoretta, pethi mou.*’ To which Nickie said,

‘*Si, Signoretta,*’ and he was falling for her because Sluts had a sense of humour, also because he was adding Spanish to his excellent Japanese, Greek, and English.

....

But as Nicholas drank his *ristretto* in Ten Buck Alley, he dreaded being alone in his hotel at night when even the harbour wouldn't be visible. His thoughts about Celia having made him feel lonely. Dread rising as he looked at the giant *Coca-Cola* sign ahead, at the top of the hill, the garish display of another soft drink written in Italics. Had a feeling tonight something or someone might materialise, perhaps someone wanting back his or her bullet, or lipstick, but not the person he wanted.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## The Darling Priest

Back at the De Vere Hotel, Nicholas trusting his gut instinct, checked out, taking his bag and himself down New South Head Road, to another hotel called in a rather sixties fashion, the Vibe. Maybe not just for caution, but to be closer to what Apollo had pointed out, the site of the former Sydney Stadium, now just an expressway with the Eastern Suburbs railway above it.

At the Vibe's reception, Nicholas declining a view of Rushcutters' Bay, wanting his room to look out over the railway, and expressway—it was certainly cheaper. Asking at reception,

‘Any envelopes for me?’

‘No, Sir,’ which for once, was reassuring.

....

As he settled in, Nicholas recalling—without the aid of cards, envelopes, notes, or maps, how back then Nickie said to Sluts,

‘What are you going to say to Pater Thomas?’ To which Sluts said,

‘*Ole,*’ bursting out laughing, adding ‘but these shoes are too tight. Here, you carry them,’ completing the journey barefoot.

....

Nicholas thinking, *maybe Sluts thought she and Nickie were caught up in some suburban version of The Canterbury Tales*, wondering if he was caught up in one now.

....

Outside Pater Thomas' office door, Sluts saying,

‘Knock and announce me. Tell him who I am.’

And Nickie did. Knock, knock, and knock. ‘Pater, a poor lady from Europe wants to see you.’ Pater Thomas saying,

‘You mean a Greek lady?’

‘She doesn’t think so,’ which perplexed Pater Thomas.

‘Show her in.’

Nickie clicking his heels as he announced Sluts as,

‘*Signoretta*, Soula Tassia,’ rather than by what he normally called her. Also because being her *cavaliero*, he felt he should live up to it, flattering himself the heel clicking bit was theatrical genius.

Sluts sweeping in barefoot, offering her hand to the priest, saying, she wasn’t Spanish, but Greek. Telling him not to listen to the *micron*, the *small one*. The cheek. Pater Thomas saying,

‘Delighted to meet you, come and sit down, Miss...’

‘Soula, but I prefer Tassia.’

‘Miss Tassia, then.’ Nickie thinking that he might stay back after Sluts finished, so as to have a word with Pater Thomas about her new name and title. Sluts sitting down, crossing her legs—barefoot as she was—drawing the attention of Pater Thomas, who said, ‘What can I do for you? But before we go on, can I ask... why are you dressed like that? Are you part Spanish, or a dancer in a carnival perhaps?’ Sluts laughing before saying,

‘Just dancing my way through life,’ which made her sound carefree and philosophic. Then, more serious, ‘the reason Pater, I am dressed like this, is because I don’t have other clothes. This is all I came to Australia with,’ failing to mention her swimsuit, and her Marilyn type picture hats, and long cigarette holder. ‘And these rags are only courtesy of a Spanish girl I met on the boat who pitied me. On that infernal boat that brought me to this accursed place.’

And probably because Pater Thomas considered ‘accursed,’ swearing, he said,

‘Now, now.’ Pater Thomas also asking, ‘where are you living?’  
Nickie saying,

‘With us, with my Mum and Dad.’ Pater Thomas with a giggle saying,

‘With Mrs Soda? You must be her niece then.’ But after glaring at Nickie to be quiet, all Sluts said was,

‘Pater, they brought me out here on false pretences. Saying they would help me... get a... job... *and* a husband, things I’ve *so, so* wanted. But ever since I’ve arrived I’ve only been subjected to humiliation and cruelty.’ At which point Sluts started to cry. Pater Thomas saying,

‘Now, now, Miss Soula Tassia, no need to cry.’

‘I asked them for a loan to buy clothes to present myself to polite people like you and she...’

‘Soda?’

‘Yes...and uncle...’

‘Mister Soda...I mean George...refused?’

‘Saying I was no better than I should be. Telling me to wear what I had.’

‘My dear, they didn’t.’

‘Yes.’ Nickie saying,

‘No!’ He had to, since it was offensive to his family. Pater Thomas saying,

‘Nickie wait outside, this doesn’t concern you,’ when it did. Sluts with another glare saying,

‘Yes, *agape*, outside.’

Nickie listening at the door to her tale of woe, Sluts saying how absurd she felt,

‘... going round in clothes only fit for a ‘carnival’. And, ‘... can you help me Pater?’ Sluts saying she was willing to work, but not in a factory, elsewhere maybe.’

‘Like where, Miss Soula?’

‘Like in an office.’ Sluts saying, otherwise it would be a waste of her education considering she had finished primary school, and that Pater Thomas surely understood, being a man of letters himself.

In response Pater Thomas saying,

‘Let’s solve these problems one at a time. Do you want me to speak to your uncle George...and your Aunt Soda...about these...carnival rags...as you call them?’ Sluts saying,

‘No, if they find out I’ve come to you, they’ll throw me to the lions,’ when Nickie’s Mum and Dad were only trying to tame her. Pater Thomas saying,

‘Well, Miss Soula, Tassia, what if I was to help a little?’ Sluts saying,

‘If you could pray for me Pater, that’s all I ask.’ Pater Thomas saying,

‘Of course, but can I give you a loan perhaps?’

‘Oh Pater, it wouldn’t be right taking money from a priest.’ Pater Thomas saying,

‘Trust me; I’m sure even the Archbishop would support me on this.’ Sluts saying,

‘I’ll pay it back; it would only be a loan. Not a gift.’ Pater Thomas saying,

‘No one mentioned gifts. Here, take ten pounds.’

‘No Pater, that’s too much.’

‘Then take five.’ Sluts saying,

‘Actually, can you spare twenty so I can buy myself...work clothes as well?’ But about this increase, Pater Thomas seemed less enthusiastic. ‘You have my word you’ll have it back. If you can help me... find a... position.’

....

Although years later whenever Nicholas's mother recounts this story, Nicholas's Mum always says,

'Position nothing, she invented all the moves.' Nicholas thinking he should visit his Mum now. Probably reminded by the giant *Coca-Cola* sign he saw earlier. Wanting to visit her, even though his Mum was probably more demented, maybe less funny. And Nicholas wondered if his mother would remember any of this, or even him, or if she would forgive him for breaking up with Celia. She had refused to then. But maybe not now, if he mentioned cards, notes, maps and lipsticks.

....

Sluts saying,

'Thank you Pater.' Taking the twenty, scraping the chair as she got up, this, the signal for Nickie to stop eavesdropping. Pater Thomas, calling out,

'Nickie.'

'Yes Pater?'

'Quickly escort your cousin home. She shouldn't be on the streets dressed like this.' Nickie clicking his heels, saying,

'*Si Senor,*' and 'come *Signoretta* your *Cavaliero* is here.' Not only because of his new lingual proficiency, but because he'd been infected by her bad acting.

Pater Thomas looking at Nickie strangely as if he thought he was in on some secret denied to him.

But as they walked away from the church, this time Sluts did take Nickie's hand, after she put on the Cuban heels that Nickie offered her, Sluts saying,

'You're probably wondering what that was about.' To which Nickie just said,

'*Ole,*' throwing his hands up in triumph. Sluts saying,

‘Well *pethi mou*, I needed to double his money. But don’t worry; everyone will be paid back, *handsomely*.’ Back home, Sluts taking off her *Maja* flamenco outfit saying, ‘Now be a good boy, fold these and take them back to the store for a refund.’

‘But they’ll say you only just bought them.’

‘Tell them the dress was ripped.’

‘But it isn’t ripped.’

‘It is now,’ Sluts tearing part of the dress, much the way Nickie tore up Marriage Certificates. ‘And if you get a refund, I’ll give you a handsome tip.’

....

Nickie going back past the synagogue, back past the Moreton Bay fig trees, and the trapped carp of the Dry Cleaners, and the Odeon Record Store, to *Brennan’s* Department Store, where laden like a bellboy, he presented the packages. The Store Clerk saying,

‘What’s wrong with them?’ Nickie saying,

‘For one, this dress is ripped,’ Nickie not exactly lying about it, but being economical with the detail. The Store Clerk saying,

‘Wasn’t ripped when she bought it.’ Nickie saying,

‘She says it’s ripped and wants her money back.’ The Store Clerk saying,

‘And what’s wrong with the shawl?’ Nickie saying,

‘Nothing,’ because there wasn’t, Sluts had forgotten to rip that. ‘But if she can’t wear the dress, then she can’t wear the shawl. For her it’s sort-of all or nothing.’ The Store Clerk saying,

‘And what’s wrong with the Cuban heels?’

‘Exactly. They’re Cuban, she thought they were Spanish.’ At which point the Store Clerk gave up, saying,

‘Here.’ Giving Nickie the money. ‘And tell your Aunt...’

‘She’s not my Aunt, she’s my cousin.’

‘Your cousin then... I know she’s pulling my leg. But if she’s at a loose end this evening, I can help her out,’ which was mysterious.

....

Back home, Sluts, saying to Nickie,

‘Did you get it *kookla?*’ meaning *doll*. ‘The Store Clerk didn’t cause trouble?’

‘No, just said, tonight you’re welcome to pull his leg,’ which was sort-of true, but a rather bad paraphrase. Sluts saying,

‘Is he crippled?’ Adding ‘doesn’t matter, now, let’s look in my suitcase. Let’s see if there’s anything that can make me look decent,’ Sluts wanting to wear something she hadn’t been spotted in, to show Nickie’s Mum that she’d spent the money, which she hadn’t. Sluts opening a suitcase that smelt of mothballs, releasing the scent of scandal, the smell of suffocated clothes, and fumigated memory.

....

A smell that still reminds Nicholas of places and people he lived with, of lovers, not just of Celia but also of escorts and flophouses, and that scent is stronger than *Je Reviens* or *Maja*.

....

Nickie’s Mum saying to Sluts that evening,

‘My, what a pretty dress Soula. Was it expensive?’ Sluts saying,

‘It was a little bit more than you gave me Aunt Soda.’

‘How much more?’

‘Oh, another five pounds, wasn’t it Nickie?’ Nickie just keeping his mouth shut as his Mum took out another five pounds from her apron, and said,

‘Let me make up for it.’ Sluts saying,

‘Oh, no, no. I put my own money towards it,’ when like a bookie all she’d done was double it. His mother saying,

‘No, really.’ Forcing money on her. ‘And tell me, was Pater Thomas helpful?’ Sluts saying,

‘Marvellous.’ Sluts getting carried away, saying, ‘Such a darling little man,’ forgetting you can say *darling* about kids or grooms, but not about priests. His Mum saying,

‘Darling?’

‘I mean “human”, Aunt Soda.’ Sluts correcting herself, ‘I mean marvellously human.’

....

Nicholas now thinking that Sluts meant weak and fallible, *much like all of life’s Cavalieros.*



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## The Carnival and Theatre

Fallible—back then, what he'd been with Celia, with his accusations. And Nicholas again wondered if Celia had sent the cards and map, or the lipstick: unlikely as it was. Remembering how Nickie's Mum said to Sluts,

....

'I must go thank Pater Thomas for helping you,' which made Sluts worry. So worried she sat in the living room dressed all modest, with a little pill box hat and gloves, looking like a librarian about to go on a voyage. Which she was, but not on one she'd anticipated.

Nickie, to break the anxiety surrounding her, saying,

'Can I have my gloves back?' To which Sluts said,

'Why? They're not yours.'

'You don't need them anymore.'

'I do. They stop me from chewing my nails,' pausing before saying, 'do you think Pater will tell her, *pethi mou*?'

'About the carnival or the money?' Sluts remaining silent.

And his Mum was furious when she returned, and even more furious when she saw that Sluts, though decked out demurely, still had the grooms vying to light her cigarettes. Sluts saying,

'And it wasn't just Mister Onassis,' polishing that old chestnut.

'There was Mister Niarchos too.' Curly saying,

'You sure met a lot of shipbuilders Tassia.' Sluts saying,

'Our fishing village was pretty, that's why they visited in their yachts,' when her story hit an iceberg. Nickie's Mum saying,

'Soula... Tassia... I didn't know you spoke Spanish.'

Sluts saying,

'Just a few words.' Then to the men, 'A girlfriend taught me.'

Nickie's Mum asking,

'Did Maria Callas teach you French as well?' Sluts blushing flamingo rather than flamenco red.

....

Nicholas wondering if Celia, or whoever was the Postmaster sending him stuff, knew the story of Sluts, when his phone rang. Nicholas picking it up from his bedside table saying,

'Hello?' But on the other end all he heard was heavy breathing. 'Hello?' Then heavier breathing... till the line went dead.

....

Nicholas recalling how years later when he visited Sluts on his first trip to the Greek island of Kalymnos—before she died—when he asked Sluts why she'd been so outrageous, and where she got her ideas from, she said,

'Isn't that obvious, *pethi mou?*' *Periodica,*' meaning *magazines*. Nicholas wondering how anyone could be influenced by ephemera...

....

But now in middle-age to Nicholas it seemed easy, because ephemera had him jumping through hoops looking for people who might not want to be uncovered who might now be heavy breathers...

....

Sluts telling the young adult Nicholas that the whole *Maja* thing was from some Ava Gardner film she'd read about. Not *On the Beach*, a film

whose Australian end-of-the-world setting, at the time, she too felt trapped in, but *The Barefoot Contessa*.

....

*But at least she had style and class*, Nicholas thought, *although her death was less classy even clumsy*. Then his phone rang again, but just once though, not giving him time to answer – Nicholas staring at it... Recalling how...

....

...There sure was a scene that evening when Nickie's Mum explained to his Dad what Sluts had done. A big scene, quite suitable for Maria Callas and the Paris Opera, Nickie's Mum saying to his Dad, 'Your niece made a fool of us to Pater Thomas,' explaining how Sluts had gone to Pater Thomas dressed as, '*a theatre*.' But Nickie, back then—like Nicholas now—was sure she meant, '*carnival*.' His Dad saying,

'A theatre?' His Mum saying,

'Like some... gypsy, saying we were starving her and...' Nickie's Dad looking at Nickie, saying,

'Is it true Nickie? You were there.' Nickie saying,

'She didn't say she was *starving* exactly,' but that was about as much as he could say to defend her. His Dad saying to Nickie,

'Better get Tassia. I'd like to speak with her.' His Mum saying,

'Yes. Go get that "theatre," at once,' which upset Nickie, because as a name, he didn't think it an improvement on 'Sluts.' Nickie saying,

'I can't. She's not here. She's out at *Brennan's* pulling the Store Clerk's leg.'

'Pulling his...?'

‘Leg...least that’s what I think she’s doing,’ not actually trying to get her into trouble, but because for children, figures of speech are easily confused, particularly if they believe they speak three languages.

....

Nicholas staring at his the hotel phone wondering if it would ring again, maybe just hoping, but it didn’t. Thinking, so as to explain the heavy breathing, *it may have been an error, or someone with a stammer. Anyway, Celia’s enunciation had always been perfect.*

....

Remembered how his Dad screamed at Sluts the next morning for what he called her *behaviour* as well as her *outfit*. Sluts saying,

‘I’m sorry, Uncle, I’ll never do it again.’ Nickie’s Dad saying,

‘And where were you last night?’ Sluts saying she had a lead on a job in a department store. His Dad saying,

‘Really? What as?’ Nickie saying,

‘A leg-puller,’ but they just glowered at him. Sluts saying,

‘As a sales assistant, the Store Clerk said he might employ me if I learnt English.’ His Dad saying,

‘And how long will that take?’ Sluts saying,

‘Oh, only a week or two Uncle, that’s all it took for me to learn Spanish.’ Nickie’s Dad saying,

‘I don’t think it’s that easy, is it Nickie?’ To which Nickie said,

‘No, in English you have to pass comprehension tests, and spelling is murder,’ even though he was good at it. ‘You’re better off studying Japanese.’ After all, Sluts was so two-faced, so deceitful, she was practically a Ninja anyway. His Dad saying,

‘That won’t be necessary Tassia, because Pater Thomas has found you a job.’ At which Sluts protested.

‘I can’t go work in a factory uncle. I’m too delicate. And educated.’ Nickie thinking, *educated... no wonder my parents put so much emphasis on scholarships.* Sluts adding, ‘Soft.’

....

*Soft.* Exactly what Celia was in the face of Nicholas’s jealous outbursts.

....

...Recalled how back then his Dad said, ‘No one is forcing you to work in a factory Tassia. Although, have you thought about how we cope, going to these factories to put food on the table?’ Sluts after a pause asking,

‘Well then, what sort of job has Pater Thomas found me?’ Nickie’s Dad saying, ‘In an office like you wanted.’ Sluts saying,

‘Oh Uncle, that’s marvellous.’ Because it was true, Pater Thomas had found Sluts an office job in Martin Place, the ‘capital’ of Sydney, the centre of it anyway. In the office of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and this was impressive. Sluts delighted, saying, ‘The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet?’ Maybe because she saw herself as some future Evita. ‘That’s marvellous. He’s such a darling that priest. I mean... human...to do this for me,’ although it came as a shock to Sluts when she wasn’t given a corner office or a Dictaphone, but a mop for her new position as cleaner.

Which may sound as if Sluts, ‘that theatre,’ as Nicholas’s Mum still calls her, may have got her come-uppance, but nothing could be further from the truth because in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet,

despite the humbleness of her position, Sluts planned a coup. And it was no botched beer hall putsch either.

....

*Truly she did.* Nicholas thought, forgetting about who might have called him. *An entire Revolution, bigger in scope than anything the Bolsheviks devised, bigger than the French Revolution. A coup,* Nicholas thought, *whose repercussions are still felt to this day. People tremble at the mention of it. At least they do in my family. All of which could have been averted if Australia had listened to Miss Mobbs, and bought a squad of Harrier Jump Jets.*

....

These events coming back to Nicholas at the Vibe Hotel because he'd written them down as a sort-of background paper on his computer – to revive memory and as material for his unfinished novel.

Nicholas staring at the now silent phone, almost praying it would ring, with any heavy breather, or stutterer, maybe just wanting a conversation as a reprieve from memory: fingering the empty lipstick cylinder in his pocket that now felt hot as a bullet.

....

The scenes he'd written not germane to the main story, but essential because they gave Nicholas a taste of what Australia was like back then. Valuable, because they belonged to a time that has passed and won't come again. And much like his relationship with Celia, they reflected a golden age, or perhaps one fashioned by tin snips.

Nicholas, pausing, having a drink before continuing, because he didn't want to recall the coup Sluts carried out, the one that left the whole

family reeling. His phone now defiantly silent... A coup that Sluts carried out the day his Aunts were to marry. Sluts was so brazen, and sneaky. Nicholas had to hand it to her if she were alive she would have made an excellent Postmaster.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

## The Coup

Now that no phone rang, Nicholas reading, on his Mac, how Sluts didn't run off with the grooms, the Park Rangers, or the Prime Minister, not even with the Store Clerk – 'the Leg Puller'. Read how on his Aunts' wedding day, Sluts ran off with Pater Thomas and with the church's money. And no one found out until Shirts and Biscuits arrived at church, in their wedding gowns, wondering why the church was shut. Eyes, asking,

'Do you know Nickie?'

Nickie, just shaking his head, because at that point no one knew that Sluts had carried Pater Thomas off without dressing Spanish, but by showing him what Nicholas's Mum now says,

'Was more than just a little leg.'

....

Nicholas reading,

....

*Eleison imas. Eleison*, mercy, what Pater Thomas never got, because the church never forgave him, having him defrocked soon after he and Sluts arrived in Athens where they married. But defrocking Pater Thomas was a waste of time though, because Sluts had already done that. Was way ahead of the game if not already on it.

On the church steps his Mum saying,

'And where do you think Pater is?' After a few long moments adding, 'Where the hell is he?' And, 'Where is Tassia, Soula, Tassia ...where...' – when his Mum had an epiphany, saying, 'No, it couldn't be.' His mother turning to Shirts and Biscuits who stood embarrassed on the steps in gowns and veils, while the men tried to prise open the door. But this was silly because even if they did open it, they wouldn't have been able to



conduct the service. And Nickie didn't want to offer his services, despite knowing the service backwards.

All of them, standing on the church steps until his Dad called the Archbishop from a phone box.

And everyone was quiet when they returned home, as if they'd been to a funeral, Biscuits and Shirts in the living room talking softly to the grooms from behind their veils.

Nickie's Mum, saying,

'And we haven't seen Soula Tassia anywhere,' although no one was that fussed about ever seeing her when they found out what she'd done. Biscuits and Shirts eventually taking off their veils, feeling as if it wasn't just Pater Thomas who had rejected them, but life.

....

Nicholas reading that,

....

...And while they waited to find out the awful truth...

....

...Nicholas taking a side-glance at the phone, wondering if it would ring again, or if there was some awful truth, or news the heavy breather or stutterer had wanted to impart. And there was.

....

...Nickie tried to cheer them up, putting on a record, one of Sluts' favourite *Hasapika*. Everyone looking at Nickie astonished, as he jumped up on one leg as soon as he heard the bouzouki's first bars going,

‘*Oppa, Oppa,*’ holding a handkerchief in the air just like Pater Thomas taught him, repeating, ‘*Oppa, Oppa,*’ but when they glared at him, Nickie froze, letting out a softer, ‘No *Oppa?*’ His Dad saying,

‘Stop that. There won’t be any *Oppa,* today.’

Worse, the cancellation of the weddings meant the reception was ruined. The trestle tables set up with food in the back garden, the fairy lights, the bags of oysters, would all have to be—much like his spare set of Samurai cards once was—put in the garbage. Nickie saying,

‘Really? No, *Oppa?*’

‘No.’

‘Well then, Hai ya,’ trying to change the pace, launching into his war cry. ‘Why not?’

But no one answered him, they just left the room one by one – the way in more recent years each of them left the disappointing pantomime called life.

Then Nickie was alone in that room, only the floral arrangement keeping him company. And not the floral arrangement ordered for the wedding, but the whorls and spirals of roses trapped in the lino—putting on another record, *Que Sera Sera*, which, this time, even in Greek seemed appropriate.

....

*All of which all sounds very sad... having nice women stood up at their weddings,* Nicholas thought, reading...

....

...But it wasn’t a tragic time all round, because for most Australians it was a golden age despite Sluts’ coup. Golden, because industrial opportunity and wealth had come to sit on Australia’s doorstep, particularly

for firms like *Weston's* and *Pelaco* whose share prices went ballistic. These companies prospering because their products were no longer pilfered after Shirts and Biscuits quit. Quitting because they couldn't cope with the glare of publicity they were subjected to on the runways of fashion called the assembly line. Weren't able to endure glares of pity from co-workers manning the conveyor belts.

....

Nicholas quite conscious that the memories he put down weren't meant as some sad narrative about the tribulations of immigrant life. Enough bad literature had already been written about that, some, even by him. Wondering who had been on the phone heavy breathing, or struggling to say something. Thinking, *time to ring people myself*, wondering if the manuscript he was reading was an elongated apology to Celia.

**CHAPTER TWENTY****The Magic Mirrors**

Reading how after the cancellation of the weddings, the grooms abandoned his Aunts almost as if the flight of Sluts and Pater Thomas had inspired them. Saying, as they took their leave,

‘Maybe it’s for the best,’ Curly and Eyes, leaving for Greece, leaving Shirts and Biscuits heartbroken.

And how Nickie back then thought his Aunts needed therapy because he was influenced by an afternoon interview he saw on Channel 9, featuring Doctor Joyce Brothers, a popular agony aunt of the time. And how he tried to cheer them up also with his own amateur psychology, going to their room, saying,

‘Come on, cheer up, Aunties,’ because they spent most of their days splayed on their beds, saying,

‘We’ve been cursed.’ The worst part not just their embarrassment, but because the church’s money had eloped with Sluts.

These events just about ringing the death knell of the Wedding Factory, almost bankrupting that noble institution, its shares in free fall, unlike the shares of companies dealing in manufactures and commodities. But it wasn’t that bad really because Nickie got what he wanted, a house full of Aunts – but back then Nickie was unfamiliar with Pyrrhic victories.

....

Nicholas more familiar with Pyrrhic victories now, knowing how to start wars that led to them, with accusations and ultimatums. The phone ringing again—three times this time. Enough time for Nicholas to say, ‘Hello? Hello? Hello?’ To silence, before the caller hung up. But there was no heavy breathing this time, or stutter, just the dial tone.

....

Back then, Nickie trying other things to cheer his Aunts up, buying them treats like sweets in a strange sort-of role reversal. But this of course required money, prompting Nickie to demand a raise from the Bottle Collector. Nickie, saying,

‘I need more.’ And with no, *please* or *Sir* about it. The Bottle Collector, that Fagan of recycling saying,

‘More? Then bring more bottles.’ Nickie saying,

‘I can’t, they’re not drinking as much,’ which was true, because the Salvation Army had been on temperance drive, something they did in Newtown from time to time. Rattling tambourines and money boxes in the faces of drunks to drive out the spirits afflicting them spiritually and physically.

....

Actually, it made Nicholas wonder if he himself was heading for A.A., and why anyone would bother calling if they wouldn’t, or couldn’t speak. Reading how the Bottle Collector said to Nickie...

....

‘...Okay, I’ll give you an extra ten pence.’ To which Nickie said, ‘Twenty,’ remembering Sluts’ *modus operandi*. The Bottle Collector saying,

‘Get out of here.’

....

...And how during this unbearably sad time, the Store Clerk came round to ask,

‘You sure your cousin’s gone?’ To which Nickie used to say,

‘Yeah, so she can’t pull your leg.’

But at least Nickie’s own share price was going up. Daily. Particularly at school when the kids found out that he had tickets to Shintaro’s sold-out performance. His popularity soaring, because he let slip that he had two tickets. The other one being his Dad’s, a ticket that some of these desperados wanted, saying things like,

‘If you give us his ticket I’ll be your friend forever.’

....

A statement that now sounds to Nicholas so much like what he hears in Thailand,

‘Mister, love you long time.’ Not that Celia ever said that or would say it, certainly not with bad grammar. A statement that suggests in sex, or romance, brevity won’t be an issue, while covertly promising a permanent relationship. And in that overture of ‘love you long time,’ the concept of time is beautifully ambiguous, Nicholas aware though, time means different things to different people.

....

Reading how some kids tried to bribe Nickie with their own cards, but this wasn’t tempting, since theirs had foxed corners, and water glass marks. The cost of their restoration, prohibitive compared to replacement. Read how during this long wait for the Samurai’s arrival, the excitement was building, because they had begun screening the new series. And it was a knock out.

....

Although, it was only years later that Nicholas found out that Channel 9 sometimes screened the episodes in the wrong order. Maybe re-ordering the narrative the way Nickie did back then with his cards. And maybe that was exactly what the Postmaster or telephone caller, or sender of stuff, was doing now.

The series was a beauty, because the comings and goings of the Koga Ninja were replaced with the master of evil, Fuma Kotaro. And it was no longer about Samurai and Ninja, or the defence of the Shogun, but about a quest more important than that of *Lord of the Rings*.

....

*And that's certainly saying something,* Nicholas thought. *Considering all quests are equal, a search for ultimate treasure. A treasure that almost slips from your grasp, for which you get no thanks, whose search—philosophically speaking—you should be grateful for.*

Nicholas's reduction of quests in his mind to a few sentences, something he had gleaned by wading through mires of literary criticism that these days he considered dull and out of fashion – like so many things no longer treasured or shiny. And the phone in his hotel room now looked sheepish, almost embarrassed as if it had never rung or wanted to. Reading how...

....

...The new Samurai series was a quest to find the Three Magic Mirrors that controlled the fate of the planet. Mirrors that went by the name of the Thunder Wind, the Water Tiger, and the Fire Dragon, and Shintaro had to find them ahead of Fuma Kotaro.

....

Nicholas thinking, not without melodrama, *maybe my cards, notes and maps, and the lipstick are now the mirrors...* taking a break from his book... looking at the trains gliding silently outside his hotel window with the double glazing. Remembering how the mood of his Aunts and the change in the series gave Nickie's house an atmosphere of foreboding.



**CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE      No Place for Old People**

...An atmosphere of foreboding that Nickie tried to dispel by studying not just Harrier Jump Jets but whatever else was in his *How and Why* books, particularly the chapter devoted to Japanese Zeros, in the one on *Aviation*. At school asking Miss Mobbs,

‘Know much about Zeros Miss?’

‘You needn’t worry Nickie. You’re a good student.’ Nickie saying,

‘No, the planes,’ stretching his arms out like wings while he made the noise of a mechanical mosquito, ‘Kamikazes.’ Miss Mobbs saying,

‘Kami...? You mean those dreadful weapons of the Japanese?’ Nickie saying,

‘Yeah, they used them to smash into aircraft carriers.’ At which point Nickie made a pratfall towards the floor, ‘Kapow,’ imitating a fireball. Miss Mobbs saying,

‘Nickie, Get up. They ...were weapons of death.’ Nickie adding,

‘I know, and Messerschmitt were no match for Spitfires,’ because he knew he had to refer to a British plane to remain her favourite. Miss Mobbs saying,

‘Correct. And you know what? I think maybe you’re one yourself.’

....

The greatest compliment Nicholas has ever had. Not that whoever was calling him was ringing to give him one now. That was certain.

....

Nickie saying to Miss Mobbs,

‘And maybe you’re a Lancaster Bomber Miss.’ Miss Mobbs saying,

‘But I’m not from Lancaster, Nickie, I’m from Yorkshire.’ To which Nickie responded,

‘I know, the Green and Pleasant Land.’

‘But my father was from the Isle of Wight.’

‘No kidding? Not black?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Miss Mobbs looking at Nickie the way Pater Thomas sometimes did, as well as Sluts, thinking he’d already mastered irony. Miss Mobbs asking, ‘One day... would you like to go there, Nickie?’

‘To the Isle of Wight?’ Miss Mobbs saying,

‘England. It’s not like here. There’s so much history there,’ unaware that she and he were making it. Nickie saying,

‘Definitely, and it doesn’t even have to be green or black and white, as long as I ... go via Japan.’ Miss Mobbs saying,

‘You will,’ as if she were an oracle. She knew so much.

....

But not a particularly good one... Nicholas read,

....

...Because Miss Mobbs didn’t foresee that she’d never return to England, never sailing to her Byzantium, dying a few months after her retirement, England being no country for old men or women.

....

Nicholas having used that image from Yeats because Miss Mobbs loved Yeats and had taught him about *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* – a place that is non-existent. And Nicholas loved Yeats too. Because when he

studied him, he found out Yeats wanted to conjure the dead. The way Nicholas did now with his manuscript, wondering if this was what Postmasters, card, and map givers, lipstick owners, and heavy breathers had steered him to.

....

And Nickie loved Miss Mobbs because Miss Mobbs was special, speaking ‘proper English’ as she called it, since she came from the place that invented it, that ‘other Eden,’ from which she’d been expelled for economic reasons.

And Nickie sometimes helped Miss Mobbs carry things back to her office, textbooks and dusters, as a prelude to him and Miss Mobbs performing duets together. Not musical ones but of poetry. And it sure was fun, Nickie always starting it, by saying,

‘...*The love of field and coppice.*’ To which Miss Mobbs would say,

‘Very good Nickie... *Of green and shaded lanes,*’ as he stumbled with heavy textbooks up the stairs. To which he’d respond,

‘...*Of ordered woods and gardens.*’ Miss Mobbs saying,

‘*Is running in your veins.*’ Nickie answering because his memory was photographic,

‘*Of soft dim skies.*’ To which Miss Mobbs would say,

‘*I know but cannot share it.*’ To which he’d say,

‘*My love is otherwise.*’

And the effect of it was sort-of spooky. Almost like an incantation. Because they had raised not so much the dead Yeats didn’t succeed with, but that more powerful creature called yearning, the feeling that is resistant to cremation and burial.

Reading how Miss Mobbs said,

‘Nickie, you have an excellent memory.’ Nickie saying,

‘Maybe one day it’ll be useful.’

....

Which it sort-of was and wasn’t, hadn’t been helpful, so far.

Then Nicholas unplugged the phone from the wall, so it wouldn’t disturb him, even though he wanted it to. And this was foolish... even dangerous.

But to Nicholas, these written digressions were important to get through, being less an investigation, and more to relive the times. Perhaps to paint the background colours of the time, the *intonaco*, the plaster that precedes the fresco, in suburban vernacular what is called the undercoat.

Also, to show that there were other things going on in Australia at the time. It wasn’t all to do with *The Samurai*. And important things too, that no Postmaster had picked up on either with cards, drink coasters, maps, apologies, lipsticks, or with breathy, or silent phone calls.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The *Intonaco*

For instance there were other influential TV shows like, *Peyton Place*, which always began, ‘*The continuing story of Peyton Place...*’ whose up and downs mirrored those of Nickie’s house.

....

But Nicholas couldn’t remember that much about it because it was broadcast at night, and afternoon television was more Nickie’s purlieu. Perhaps even his kingdom, since it featured *Wild Kingdom*, a nature program set in Africa that had lions as its stars and villains.

And there were other treasures too; panel shows like, *It Could Be You*, a show where Opportunity got to present herself on television. Opportunity no longer confined to Australia’s industrial capacity – or holed up in that cavern, called the Department of State Lotteries. There, on television hidden behind one of three curtains, which—when contestants guessed correctly—was drawn back to reveal, a car, or a polishing kit, or some other desired object.

....

Nicholas aware such shows were part of an age of things gone forever, like travelling salesmen. Their job in Newtown being particularly hard since not many in Newtown spoke English. Most salesmen who came to Nickie’s house having to impress him before he’d usher them to the inner sanctum of the dining room, or backyard where his Mum and Dad dried bed sheets or fired up the barbecue.

Salesmen who flipped open their suitcase to take out their samples. One salesman saying to Nickie,

‘So, you like television do you?’ Nickie saying,

‘No, I love it.’ The Salesman saying,

‘Well kid, would you like your TV in colour?’ Nickie saying,

‘That’d be great,’ though Nickie knew Australia didn’t have colour transmission and that the salesman was ‘pulling his leg’ in the real sense. The Salesman saying,

‘Well, I’m going to transform your life, and that of your television.’

....

Nicholas wondering for a second if the Salesman was the Postmaster or heavy breather, or the sender of lipstick, which was less ridiculous than his other theories.

....

The Salesman taking out of his suitcase a piece of coloured Perspex that had translucent rainbow colours striated through it, which he then held over the TV obscuring its picture, saying,

‘Well? What do you think of your new colour television set?’ Nickie saying,

‘I can’t see. You’re holding a plastic sheet in front of it.’ The Salesman saying,

‘This isn’t plastic. It’s treated glass, developed by scientists. After a while, your eyes become acclimatised, and you start to see TV in colour.’ Nickie saying,

‘Don’t believe you.’ The Salesman saying,

‘Some people...’ putting the plastic sheet back in his case, ‘...have no imagination. Can I talk to your parents kid?’ Nickie saying,

‘No, you should leave,’ since Nickie was the gatekeeper guarding against Emperors with New Clothes. The Salesman, as he snapped his bag shut, saying,

‘Hey kid, do the people next door speak English?’ Nickie answering,

‘No. They speak Russian.’ The Salesman saying,

‘Damnation,’ Which to Nickie’s ears sounded like *damn nation*, like swearing or worse, that he was insulting their country. Nickie thinking it also sounded like *dam nation* something to do with irrigation, or the lack of it, or its excessive supply, since both remain big Australian problems.

....

Nicholas reading that,

....

...Not that Nickie had seen many dams except when he went with his family to Warragamba—the dam closest to Sydney, which had a lion park adjacent to it, its own *Wild Kingdom*. Seeing what had been remote and on television in front of him.

....

Nicholas in his hotel room beginning to think the Postmaster was a bit of a lion himself (or perhaps, *herself*) remote and arrogant, someone trying to rip apart, if not his flesh, his sanity. Thinking that the phone calls might be the soft roar of warning, which was correct.

....

Nickie’s family back then getting to places like Warragamba in cars provided by Driving Academies – a popular cottage industry for immigrants. His family often going with the Driving Academy run by *Kirios* (Mister) Leftheri, a family friend who was also called Lefty, because he was left-handed, Lefty’s Driving Academy, consisting of just one car. But it did have two steering wheels and two sets of pedals. Lefty being someone who also courted his Aunts after their disappointment, saying he’d be happy with

either of them. A man they rejected not because his passions were ambiguous, or like his car, too balanced, but cruelly, because he was left-handed and only left-handed. His right arm had been lost to a lathe—lathes and building sites jealous of immigrants in those days. Because back then...

....

Nicholas read,

....

...The blades and lathes of factories were deadlier than Samurai swords. They often attacked immigrants. Didn't like seeing them intact. Didn't want their mechanisms, or inner cores touched by foreigners. Workplace safety then, not a priority, particularly if you didn't speak English.

....

Nicholas continuing to read, even though it was now the middle of the night, how despite the unbearable tension in his house or ...

....

...Or tension perhaps now in his hotel...

....

...Nickie managed to immerse himself in wider subjects, like world politics.

Nickie's knowledge of such things at the age of seven becoming so extensive he believed he could take a seat at the Security Council, whose own Holy Grail is world peace, or something equally fictional.



Nickie studying current affairs through learned journals like, *The Plain Truth*, a magazine whose title Nicholas now knew to be a misnomer since truth was a stranger to it. *The Plain Truth* being a magazine that shared Nickie's passion for the Speed of Light, probably because its founder, Herbert T. Armstrong, wanted to harness it, to get faster and closer to God, his employer and ultimate publisher. Armstrong's magazine and ministry—from what Nicholas knew these days—being a bit of a millenarian cult that believed in things more mysterious, and dangerous, than Postmasters. Things like – the Number of the Beast, Antichrists and such. Stuff that is now mainly the focus of comic books called graphic novels, the illustrated treatments of Hollywood that precede production.

A magazine that Nickie wrote to occasionally when he thought more significant events had escaped its notice, like Shintaro's arrival.

But, like with Channel 9, Nickie didn't get any reply. And when Nickie asked the mailman of that era,

'Any letters for me?' The mailman said,

'Still waiting for letters from Japan, kid?'

'Nah, Pasadena,' which was where Herbert T. Armstrong preached and cranked up his printing press and crankiness.

....

Seemed to Nicholas now he was somehow still waiting for mailmen or Postmasters, lipstick wearers, or heavy breathers. Wondering if he should plug the phone back in...but he didn't want to. Not just yet. Then again... maybe he did.

Anyway, for Nicholas the memories he wrote about were just as he thought earlier, the *intonaco*, the undercoat to his young life in a city full of Xs. And Nicholas's *intonaco* was now dry, allowing the fresco, the actual memory of Shintaro's arrival to appear.

But then, he recalled one other event that preceded it, which was the most significant of all, because it changed life forever...

**CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE     The Man of Learning**

...All because the Greek community was given a new priest, called Pater Jacob, straight from the monasteries of Mount Athos, who said to Nickie, when they met,

‘I am a man of learning.’ To which Nickie said,

‘What are you learning?’

‘Men’s souls,’ as if men’s souls were a language. To which Nickie said,

‘Not women’s?’ Pater Jacob saying,

‘They must trust the Virgin,’ which Nickie didn’t understand.

....

Although Nicholas did now.

....

Pater Jacob saying,

‘Child, I understand there were problems with the last priest.’ Nickie saying,

‘Not really. He did what he wanted.’ Pater Jacob asking,

‘And what was that?’ Nickie saying,

‘*Oppa*,’ jumping into the air to see if this new Pater Jacob also liked to dance. Pater Jacob saying,

‘Stop that. There will be no dancing in church.’ Nickie, just like he said after the cancellation of the weddings, saying,

‘No *Oppa*?’

‘Definitely not.’ Nickie saying,

‘Okay,’ but any ambivalence he had, as to where Pater Jacob stood in relation to the length of skirts, evaporated.

Nickie telling his Mum that Pater Jacob was, ‘A monster,’ baring his fangs, scowling with his hands in the air like claws, looking like an irritated vampire. His Mum saying,

‘Don’t do that. Anyway we need someone more sober,’ when in fact Nickie thought Pater Jacob could do with a drink.

....

Nicholas thinking, *well, would have helped Pater Jacob get more into the swing of the wildly sensual experience that was Newtown, and Redfern in the 1960s dominated by Samurais and their acolytes, and all the characters it seems someone wants to talk to me about.*

....

Back then his Mum saying,

‘Anyway I’m sure he’s human.’ Nickie thinking, *you’ll find out.*

And she did, because when she went to see Pater Jacob about a marriage she’d arranged, Pater Jacob laughed like a parrot when she proposed the resurrection of the exit clause. Nickie’s Mum saying,

‘But Pater Thomas used to do it for us.’ To which Pater Jacob said,

‘Pater Thomas only did things for himself,’ despite Nickie’s Mum explaining to Pater Jacob such trial runs were necessary since most of the couples barely knew each other. Pater Jacob, adding, ‘The very idea...’

This, despite Nickie’s Mum saying all Pater Jacob had to do was hand over the ‘paper work’ to the nation’s great divorce lawyer, Nickie. And, ‘Nickie will do the rest,’ explaining this wasn’t a sin because an innocent was doing it. But even this theological argument that Pater Jacob conceded had merit, failed to sway him.

Nickie back then giving Pater Jacob a second chance, taking him a bottle of sherry to liven things up a bit. Pater Jacob saying,

‘What’s this?’ Nickie saying,

‘A bottle of sherry for you.’

‘For me? Or the church?’ Nickie saying,

‘Same thing, try some,’ going to the cupboard at the back of his office. Pater Jacob saying,

‘What are you doing?’

‘Getting a couple of glasses.’

Pater Jacob looking at Nickie as if he were what *The Plain Truth* feared, the Number of the Beast.

....

In the meantime, Nicholas wondering if there was some new envelope at reception, containing an apology for silent phone calls, or perhaps some new trap or enticement.... Reading how, Pater Jacob said,

....

‘Put the glasses back right now,’ mumbling, ‘Lord what have I come to?’ Pater Jacob repeating, ‘Now!’ Nickie saying,

‘Heard you the first time,’ Nickie thinking, *maybe I should have started him on spoons rather than glasses*. ‘No need to shout,’ but Pater Jacob sure was deaf to everyone’s frailties.

....

Nicholas wondering—for the hell of it—if it was Pater Jacob who was trying to contact him. And the idea was not entirely absurd because Pater Jacob did turn out to be homicidal, and certifiable. Nicholas thinking this...

....

...Because Pater Jacob turned that church into something more like the monastery he'd left behind. Saw parishioners as a nuisance, ignoring them, saying he was too busy praying; keeping the hours of Mount Athos, because he missed it. Who would mutter under his breath that Newtown and Redfern were twins, and not like Nickie's Aunts either, but, 'Sodom and Gomorrah.'

....

This suggesting to Nicholas now that Pater Jacob would have been more comfortable in Pasadena.

....

Nickie telling Des Riley about the priest problem, saying,

'He's a creep. Creepy at any rate,' confiding in him because Des was special. And his. And there were so few Jewish kids in Newtown Nickie could compare him with. And Nickie back then was almost as jealous of Des's company, as Des was of his, because jealousy is not the strict province of adults, or of lovers, current or abandoned. But then Nickie spoilt all this, by presenting Des with a rival, who wasn't even a boy, but a girl.

....

A girl who Nicholas now thought for the first time could very well be the silent caller, and wearer of lipstick, a real suspect, if it wasn't Pater Jacob. Nicholas plugging back in the phone then dialling reception,

'Messages for me?'

'No sir.'

‘Thank you,’ actually disappointed, because he was sure there would be – had talked himself into it. Returning to his manuscript, thinking it might very well be *her* and that *her* wasn’t Celia.

....

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## Shanghai Lil

...A girl called Rachel, whose Mum ran a Newtown delicatessen, where she often sang to herself while her Mum guillotined salami,

‘Tra la la,’ sitting on a high stool at the counter like some junior Madame Defarge, where Rachel laid out not her knitting, but Samurai cards, one by one. Nickie saying to her,

‘You must like Shintaro.’ Rachel saying,

‘Who’s asking Mister?’

‘Nickie. And you?’

‘Rachel.’

‘Bet you don’t like him as much as I do.’

‘Do too Mister and I’d love to see him, but I didn’t get a ticket.’

Nickie saying,

‘That’s too bad,’ taking the guillotined salami from her and leaving.

Telling Des Riley though,

‘I’ve met a girl who likes Shintaro.’

‘Big deal. She’s a girl, stupid.’ Nickie saying,

‘Doesn’t mean we have to shoot her, does it?’

‘Who is she anyway?’

‘Her name’s Rachel, she works in the deli down the road from me.’ Des saying,

‘The brat who works with her Mum? She’s Jewish. You’ve got enough Jews on your hands.’ Adding ‘And she’s not even German,’ what he and his parents were. ‘She’s... Hungarian,’ since Des considered Hungarian Jews a bit like how Miss Mobbs found most things, common, Des considering German ones superior.

....



*Odd, Nicholas thought, when you consider at one time what non-Jewish Germans wanted to do to Des's family.*

....

Nickie saying,

'She's nice.'

'Yeah, but they always want *something*,' this more a comment on womanhood, than Hungarians. 'She's trouble.' Des Riley jealous, wanting to march over her like armies did in *The March of Time* but at least he didn't want to gas her. Nickie saying,

'You know...' staring up at the stalactites on Des's ceiling, not realising that they were about to pierce their friendship, metaphorically at any rate. '...I might ask Dad again if he really wants to go because...' Des saying,

'Did that bitch ask for a ticket?' But maybe Des said, 'witch.'

....

So hard for Nicholas to remember... wondering if Rachel, that 'bitch' or 'witch' really was the card and map giver, Postmaster, heavy breather, or owner of lipstick. Would be just her style.

....

Back then Des saying,

'She's a floozy,' which was milder than 'bitch' or 'witch.'

'What's a floozy?'

'What your cousin was, that's what Dad says.' Nickie jumping to Sluts' defence, saying,

‘She wasn’t a floozy, she was an actress, a friend of Maria Callas,’ keeping it brief not wanting to get into the complicated matter of Sluts being Callas’s rival.

But it did make Des burst into tears, and run to his room, slamming the door behind him. Suggesting to Nickie that inviting Rachel was essential.

Nickie going straight to the deli, where Rachel sat at the counter playing with the cards,

‘Tra la la,’ re-arranging them in even stranger sequences than he did. Nickie saying,

‘Hey Rachel, really want to see Shintaro?’

‘Why Mister? Got a ticket?’

‘Not sure.’

‘Well when you’re sure, get back to me,’ Rachel yelling out, ‘Mum, Customer,’ when Nickie was more of a suitor, having learnt charm in the Wedding Factory.

....

*...A suitor whose courtship was successful, Nicholas thought, because years later when we grew up, we did get married. Well, not actually married, but we did form a partnership, setting up a small film company that became bigger than MGM and RKO.*

....

By which Nicholas meant they went bankrupt, having produced just one documentary about tropical fish, *Carp, Fish of Many Colours*, a topic he suggested would be popular—unsure why... A company that may have thrived, if Nicholas had listened to Rachel’s suggestion that they should make the documentary not on Carp, but Piranhas.

....

Nickie saying to young Rachel,

‘I thought you’d be grateful.’ Rachel saying,

‘When the ticket is definite, then I’ll be grateful Mister,’ Rachel walking out to the back of her shop, past the plastic ribbon curtains, like Shanghai Lil, withdrawing to the opium den they kept back there filled with cheese barrels, and kegs of olives.

....

Read how the next day, Des Riley saw Nickie was rather quiet. Quiet even though they’d just seen a brilliant episode of *The Samurai* in which the villain, Fuma Kotaro, had managed to get hold of at least one of the mirrors that controlled destiny, mocking,

‘Moo ha, hah, ha,’ at Shintaro, for having bettered him.

Des saying to fill in the silence, maybe even the disquiet,

‘Did she ask about the ticket?’

‘No.’ Des saying,

‘I know when you’re lying.’

....

*Which would have been a first, Nicholas thought. People never know. Not even in fiction, wondering what he would do with his manuscript, or if it was the very thing Rachel, or the telephone callers were seeking...*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE The Gravity of the Task

Nickie saying to Des,

‘All right she did ask.’ Des saying,

‘You’re leading yourself into a trap,’ suggesting that the inner workings of Grace Metalius’s mind weren’t just confined to *Peyton Place*, or to the Wedding Factory, but extended to all of Newtown, and childhood.

....

Nicholas reading,

....

...But these shenanigans for the spare ticket were eclipsed by plans for the baptism of Paulie, Nickie’s younger brother. An event Nickie liked to think was Paulie’s investiture as Shogun and heir. If not quite to the Chrysanthemum Throne, to the one they had made of Hydrangeas. An event so spectacularly bungled by Pater Jacob, it required the intervention of the police and the consul, since it almost led to murder.

Pater Jacob bungling this ritual, first by insisting that they all attend a ‘special’ session of scripture...

....

...When there was an insistent knock at Nicholas’s hotel room door, Nicholas saying,

‘Who is it?’ To no answer, then another insistent rap, Nicholas hesitating ... ‘Who’s there?’ But then, picking up courage...he opened the door to...no one, looking down an empty hallway, saying, ‘Hello? Someone there?’ But there was only silence, although the elevator light showed someone was going down.

Going back to his room, shutting the door, chain-locking it, looking out his window, staring at New South Head Road for five minutes, seeing nothing. No figures departing, only cars zipping past in the darkness – returning to his manuscript, where it said...

....

And during this time, Nickie became aware of an even bigger problem when Des said,

‘Guess what?’ As he and Nickie propped themselves up on the edge of Des’s swimming pool, both of them looking like Hollywood publicity agents dishing the dirt on clients even though they didn’t wear sunglasses. Des saying, ‘Shintaro is arriving Christmas Day.’

....

Nicholas wondering who had been at the door...or what they wanted... continuing to read because at least reading wasn’t a mystery, and a comfort.

....

... But this news that Shintaro was arriving Christmas Day for Nickie was a major blow, because Nickie’s Mum and Dad would never let him go to the airport since he had to be home for lunch. The news so disastrous it ranked high with all the other famous announcements of disaster Nickie studied at school, like Winston Churchill’s speech, ‘*I speak to you in the shadow of a major defeat,*’ the speech about the fall of Singapore, one of Miss Mobbs’ favourites. Maybe it even surpassed it. Although Miss Mobbs liked some of Churchill’s other speeches too, ones that she and Nickie recited in private because she’d guessed Nickie had a thing for language. Speeches like the one Churchill made at the beginning

of World War II, when he said, *'We must not underrate the gravity of the task...'*

A speech that Miss Mobbs sometimes echoed saying,

*'...Which lies before us or the temerity of the ordeal...'* Nickie answering,

*'...To which we shall not be found unequal,'* feeling like Winston himself.

....

Nicholas wondering if there were things he was unequal to now, or if he was on the eve of a defeat himself.

....

...To which Miss Mobbs would say,

*'Very good Nickie,'* continuing, *'We must expect many disappointments...'* Nickie never disappointing her, knowing what comes next,

*'...And many unpleasant surprises...'* Miss Mobbs emphasising,

*'...But we may be sure...that the task which we have freely accepted...'* Nickie finishing with the best bit,

*'Is one not beyond us.'*

And sometimes he and Miss Mobbs would even reprise Churchill's speech about fighting on the beaches, which Nickie thought in Australia would have been a terrible affair if it came to that, since Australia has so many. Blood and bodies everywhere, ready to be picked at by seagulls.

....

Nicholas suspecting there was someone now, who wanted him added to such carnage.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**      **Pomp and Vanity**

...And the conflict between Christmas and Shintaro's arrival, made Nickie again consider running away but not to save anyone or execute plagues or pestilences. It was more to save himself, wanting to give himself, that Christmas, the great present called freedom.

....

What Nicholas gave Celia, well, that she took herself.

....

Nickie going down to the train station, past the semis which Sluts considered stables, to listen to trains called red rattlers, in case they had advice. But that day they just went *kachunk, kachunk*, just made mechanical noises, hardly the arias Nickie was used to, and they didn't even say,

'Nickie you're in trouble,' the lazy wretches. Nickie saying,

'Well, what would you do?' But they didn't know either, since they were too busy taking away people from the factories to the suburbs where factories had yet to be established. And for a moment, Nickie thought if they wouldn't answer, he would throw himself under their wheels, thinking that might make them speak. But second thoughts said this was not befitting a Samurai...

....

*Not even a second rate one from Newtown*, Nicholas thought.

....



...But it didn't come to that. No. Rescue came like a Ninja in the dark. All because of the homicidal skills Pater Jacob gave no hint of at the special scripture lesson he forced Nickie's family to attend. A lesson in which Pater Jacob warned Nickie's family he didn't want any repetition of the *incident* that led to the church being held in disrepute because of *wayward* members of family. Pater Jacob saying, female family members should be more closely supervised, glaring at Shirts and at Biscuits as if somehow Sluts had contaminated them. And in Pater Jacob's version of the debacle, Pater Thomas was the innocent party.

Pater Jacob going on and on about the sanctity of marriage, saying marriages should have nothing to do with immigration. Saying, that *exit clauses*, be they by one day or one week—his own prayers for guidance had suggested—were *Anathema*.

Which was all rather old-fashioned of Pater Jacob, and melodramatic.

....

Nicholas thinking, *well it was certainly unfashionable in our freewheeling Newtown that in its small immigrant way anticipated the free love and flower power of San Francisco.*

But maybe Nicholas was kidding himself a bit, because Newtown wasn't that exciting. *Then again*, Nicholas thought, *maybe it was, and still is. Maybe even I am, since I seem of paramount interest to strangers.* Which was true.

....

Pater Jacob's lecture going down with Nickie's family like a Japanese Zero particularly when Pater Jacob said that at the baptism of

Paulie, he would take, ‘extra measures,’ to relieve Paulie of the ‘stain,’ left on the family.

Nickie’s Mum reporting that she’d said to Pater Jacob,

‘Stains are what you take to the Dry Cleaners. Who do you think you are?’ But Nickie’s mother was unaware that Pater was much less bothered by murder than baptisms, since Pater Jacob wanted Paulie dead. Truly. The way Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son, but without the last minute pardon. Nicholas suspecting whoever had been at the door wanted him dead too, finally believing it was possible.

....

Nicholas thinking, *honest to God, Pater Jacob wanted Paulie dead, there is no other way to explain it.* Reading,

....

...And this attempted homicide came about as they gathered around the baptismal font where they watched Pater Jacob dip Paulie—the naked Shogun—into the oiled water three times. Pater Jacob saying,

‘Do you renounce Satan and all his pomp and vanity?’ while the Godfather, Leftie, murmured assent. Paulie’s bubbles becoming more profuse the longer Pater Jacob held him under. Pater Jacob holding Paulie under the first time longer than was usual. The second time definitely longer, and the third, no question, he didn’t even take him out, just kept repeating, ‘Do you renounce Satan and all his pomp and vanity?’ Pater Jacob holding Paulie under the water, as if he was in a trance, ‘Do you renounce...’ Nickie’s Mum saying,

‘Take him out!’ Which Pater Jacob didn’t hear, Paulie making,

‘Glub, glub, glub,’ noises, as the twins said,

‘What’s going on?’ Nickie’s Dad shouting,

‘Take him out.’

But this made Pater Jacob hold Paulie firmer, as he repeated,

‘Do you renounce all his pomp and vanity?’ as if asking the question not of Paulie, but of all of them. The twins starting to scream, Leftie leaping forward, trying to wrest Paulie out of the font, out of Pater Jacob’s grasp. But Pater Jacob having two arms was more the victor, continuing to hold Paulie under water with his free arm as he fought off Leftie.

Nickie’s Mum rushing to the font, saying,

‘Release him you mad monk.’ The situation requiring the intervention of Nickie’s Dad, who pushed Pater Jacob to the ground, imitating one of the church’s icons, Saint George killing the dragon. His Mum scooping Paulie out of the Baptismal font, holding him upside down in all his nakedness to expel the water from his lungs.

....

Nicholas remembering how this attempted infanticide—regicide to be more accurate—caused a scandal bigger than that of Sluts and Pater Thomas.

....

Pater Jacob, once he picked himself up off the floor, glaring at them saying,

‘God damn you all,’ before tearing down the nave to his office, shutting it against people he considered devils.

Nickie’s Dad calling the police, the Archbishop, and even the consul; the Archbishop, once he had arrived and consulted his employee in private, saying,

‘Gather round everyone. I’m sorry, but having spoken to Pater Jacob it is clear he has merely been over enthusiastic.’

The police coming soon after, saying, once their questions were answered, that no crime had been committed since Paulie had survived. And the consul? Well, he said there was no political crisis.

And Pater Jacob's own version—when he came out of the sulk he had retreated to in his office—was much like the Archbishop's. That he hadn't tried to kill Paulie, and had only been trying to cleanse the child and the church of the 'stain,' caused by members of the family.

But it was clear even to the apologists that Pater Jacob had lost it, and that he should have stayed at that Orthodox Olympus called Mount Athos since he found humanity so shocking.

....

The way some people were shocked by Nicholas one other time... later in life, Nicholas possibly not forgiven.

....

...And Pater Jacob was packed off to Greece within a month, to avoid gossip.

....

The way Nicholas once packed himself off to London, Yerevan, Bangkok, and elsewhere...

**CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN      Blackmail and Slander**

...Because it was clear Pater Jacob had gone mad. This, evident to the Archbishop at the end of the week, who visited him again, to give him his ticket, where he found the church turned into a barnyard with seed scattered everywhere – Pater Jacob having purchased twenty roosters. Wanting to tend to them like a shepherd, the way he did on Mount Athos, where hens, in fact anything female is forbidden.

....

*...A place where ladies' legs are not welcome covered or uncovered,* Nicholas thought.

....

Pater Jacob having lost it to such a degree he was heard even at embarkation as he was ushered up the gangplank of the cruise ship *Orchides* saying,

‘Do you renounce Satan, and all his pomp and vanity?’ But by Satan, Nickie thought—much like Nicholas now—Pater Jacob meant Australia. Pater Jacob nodding to himself in the affirmative while with one hand he clutched his luggage, the other his favourite rooster who also seemed to nod, as if it too, was glad to leave the country.

Nickie, saying, much like a priest himself, and not for the last time,

‘*Eleison imas,* mercy on us,’ as the *Orchides* let off its foghorn anticipating rough seas as it set sail through Scylla and Charibdes, the heads of Sydney’s Harbour.

....

Nicholas saying,

‘*Eleison imas,*’ in his hotel room at the Vibe, to himself. Maybe seeking mercy from memory, or the Postmaster, or heavy breather, stutterer, owner of lipstick, or doorknocker who all seemed entwined. *Eleison imas,* much the same way Nicholas did that first day back in Sydney when he went to see his father at the cemetery, but softer now, *Eleison imas,* not wanting to be overheard...

....

...Nickie going down to the deli where Rachel worked to say,  
‘Sorry, I couldn’t get you a ticket.’ Rachel saying,  
‘Then Mister I’m going to tell everyone you tried to drown your brother.’

‘Did not.’

‘Did too Nickie. Everyone knows.’

‘It was the priest. Believe me.’

At which point Rachel’s attention reverted to her cards, saying,

‘I believe you Mister, but once I tell the story nobody else will,’ giggling, looking thrilled she had mastered the adult practices of blackmail and slander.

....

Nicholas thinking, *libel was still ahead of her.* Thinking... *but is perhaps not that much ahead of me now.*

....

And it was true; it wouldn’t be, if he ever finished his book... Nicholas thinking maybe his ‘callers’, or ‘visitors’, didn’t so much want to read it but prevent him finishing it.

....

Nickie saying, to Rachel,

‘You wouldn’t say I tried to drown him.’

‘Oh, wouldn’t I? At school your name’s not going to be Nickie or Mister, but mud. And I think your father is horrible keeping that ticket for himself.’

Nickie thinking at this point that Des had been right. Rachel was both a witch and a bitch.

....

Nicholas thinking *and maybe still is*, wondering how Rachel could have tracked him down to the Vibe, or if one of her ‘agents,’ Ninja or henchmen was seeking him, because he’d heard she was now a bit of a gangster.

....

Nickie back then saying to Des,

‘It’s over, her and me. We’ve broken up.’ Des saying,

‘Glad to hear it. Anyway, ready for Saturday?’ Nickie saying,

‘Yep.’ Both of them saying,

‘Era shy mess.’

Amidst this wild anticipation, Nickie again feeling a sense of foreboding that he couldn’t explain. Maybe because he feared that Shintaro’s arrival and performance might be an anti-climax. But this foreboding evaporated once he had his coffee that special Christmas morning, because, *Era shy mess*, the day had come. And his parents had been surprisingly unfussed about him missing lunch, his anxiety having been for nothing.

Then there was a bang, bang, bang at Nickie's door...

....

Nicholas again wondering if it really had been Rachel, or one of her 'agents' knocking on his, when his ceiling light began to flicker, as if life was going out of something or someone. And it was.

....

...The bang, bang, bang, a signal from Des that the getaway car waited to take them to the airport. Nickie, expecting to see when he opened the door another apprentice Samurai like himself, not Des Riley, and Mister Des Riley, dressed like boy scouts. Nickie saying,

'Des?' Standing there in his gown, thongs, and socks. Frowning at them because Nickie just couldn't believe that they would show up like scouts on this important day. Des saying,

'We should go or we'll be late.' Nickie looking at them, thinking, *we're too late already*. And how strange that ride from Newtown to the airport was and so hot...

....

Much like the ride Nicholas had done recently but in reverse, arriving from Bangkok, a trip through industrial suburbs now lacking industry.

....

...Nickie feeling silly seated next to a boy scout. Feeling even stranger being driven by a German scoutmaster in shorts, who, rather than



being a survivor of the Holocaust, looked like Goering, one of its lieutenants.

And Nickie quickly lost his bearings as the car left Newtown, extending its reach beyond its warehouses and factories. To Zetland and Waterloo, whose chimneys and factories lay silenced that day not by the Duke of Wellington, but a national holiday.

Down a highway to a vast field that looked like *the Outback* flattened by a meteor but was in fact the airport. Mister Des Riley pulling up the hand break, looking at his watch, saying,

‘Dis ist good. Ve ist early.’

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT     The Samurai's Arrival

To make sure of his safety, maybe to appease his paranoia, Nicholas ringing reception saying,

‘Did you send someone to my room earlier?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘Sure?’

Not mentioning that his room lights had been flickering—they weren't now. Nicholas in a brief moment of optimism thinking the doorknocks and calls may have been room service and they'd simply picked the wrong guest. Which was preposterous. Continuing to read...

....

...Then they moved as a pack into the Arrivals Hall, only to find disaster had struck for Shintaro and themselves.

Because waiting for Nickie's hero, wasn't the Prime Minister, or even the head of Channel 9—grateful for the ratings—but thousands of Ninjas, black, grey, and red ones – an army that had set a trap.

Nickie saying,

‘Oh, no. Trouble.’ Des Riley, also horrified, saying,

‘What's going on?’ Because this army of Ninjas was shouting, ‘Shintaro, Tombei!’ And some had even stolen lines from the series that Nickie felt were copyright to the program and himself. Lines like, ‘Why you...’ and worse—at least for Shintaro—‘Shintaro, you die,’ when he was meant to be an honoured visitor. Nickie saying,

‘What are we going to do?’ Because it seemed clear they had no chance to meet their hero or save him. Seemed all their practice and rehearsal, their bows and *era shy messes* were for nothing. And anyone giving them a mark for their endeavours would've been justified in giving

them a big fat Zero. Maybe even a Japanese one, because they had failed and crashed.

And some kids were sitting on the floor playing cards as if the Samurai deck—that holy deck of images—was just a game like poker. And these kids, ‘fans,’ as they called themselves, were dressed worse than boy scouts, in a shameful mixture of sheets by *Bradmill*, and blankets by *Onkaparinga* made in the Manchester factories on Newtown’s periphery. Some even had star knives made out of cardboard instead of metal.

The only thing interesting about this army of dwarves...was the fact that they were of every race and colour. Irish-Australian kids and New Australian kids, Greeks, Italians and *Yugos*. In fact a whole United Nations that was the youth of nineteen-sixties Sydney. All there to pledge loyalty to a man from a country their fathers went to war with.

....

Nicholas’s research on this event, the five minutes he spent on the Internet, suggested that this greeting party was bigger than anything that had ever assembled in Australia at any airport. Bigger than the crowds greeting minor dignitaries like the Queen and *The Beatles*. But Nicholas could have told the Internet himself that, back then, *The Beatles*, and the Queen as far as he was concerned—compared to Shintaro—were crude English upstarts...

....

Nicholas again to be cautious looking down at the road from his window, but still saw no figures or pedestrians, just cars in the dark, some fast some slow, just like at the cemetery.

....

...And even Miss Mobbs would have backed him on this, certainly about *The Beatles* because Miss Mobbs used to say they were ‘unsavoury’ in an uncharacteristic criticism of her compatriots. Although to be honest, Nickie had never heard Miss Mobbs say anything bad about the Queen, probably because Miss Mobbs looked like her. Spoke like the Queen anyway, had the same manners.

....

Nicholas thinking, *maybe I should stop reading this*. Thinking, *maybe I should just go collect my cards*. He knew where they were kept. That part wasn’t a secret. And Nicholas was now less worried about door knocks, heavy breathers, and flickering lights since it was almost morning, thinking, *that was my mission, wasn’t it?* But he was now unsure. *Or was it to finish this?* He didn’t know. But Nicholas couldn’t leave it at that high point.

Continuing to read, how the kids at the airport screamed,

....

‘Hai ya!’ And, ‘Shintaro, you die.’

Nickie saying, to Des Riley amidst the tawdry collection of bed sheets, impervious to his own ‘gown’,

‘Let’s go home.’ Des saying,

‘We can’t. He hasn’t arrived yet.’

Nickie, tugging at the sleeve of aka Goering, Mister Des, saying to him,

‘I want to go home.’ Des’s father saying,

‘Nickie, you must needs to relax,’ which was impossible. Nickie thinking he might bolt for it... when all of a sudden, Shintaro was there... in person, in the heat of Sydney airport.

And you could tell by the look on his face—even though it was painted white—that he too was scared by the army of Ninja dwarves, when he would much rather have been greeted by a polite young man like Nickie, saying, ‘*Era shy mess. Welcome.*’

And that would have been more dignified, instead of this, the *hoi polloi* of childhood, kids crushed by the juggernaut of advertising. Seething towards the Master Swordsman, the crowd saying,

‘Hai ya. Shintaro, you die!’ The rabble tearing at Shintaro’s clothes, and there was not a *tzentlemin* among them, the only gentleman present being Nickie...

....

When suddenly there was not a knock, at Nicholas’s door, but a kick so violent, it seemed unsafe to answer it.

....

... And airport officials fearing a riot, or that Shintaro might be crushed, called in security.

....

Nicholas thinking maybe he should call security himself...  
Reading...

....

...And after a few signatures, to cards, Shintaro managed to escape to his hotel.

And the generation that had come to greet him, that for a short while, threatened to transform Australia’s culture into something closer to Japan’s, returned to its Anglo traditions. And the opportunity to transform Australians from bored beach lovers, into ones that respected flower arrangement and tea ceremonies, who could live in perfect harmony

alongside a powerful automotive and electronics industry—had Shintaro but taken the trouble to speak to each of them—vanished.

....

Nicholas's door kicked at again, Nicholas saying,

'Who is it?' Which silenced it, trying to ignore it... which was difficult, reading how when he saw Rachel at the deli, she said,

....

'How was he at the airport?'

'Okay.'

'Was not.'

'Heard that it was a *free asco* Mister.' Nickie correcting her,

'Fiasco.' Rachel saying,

'Anyway it's a ticket to his performance that I want.' Nickie saying,

'Know what? You can have my ticket,' because he meant it.

Rachel, flummoxed, dropping the cards onto the counter, saying,

'You'd really give it to me?'

'Yes.'

'And what's that supposed to do Nickie...make me like you?'

Saying as she returned to her cards, 'Keep your lousy ticket,' sounding like, a smoky American jazz singer, or the gangster she evolved into.

....

Nicholas thinking, *which is true...*

....

Rachel back then saying,

‘I want my own ticket.’ But Nickie didn’t know what he had expected from Rachel, being too young.

....

Nicholas thinking, *probably because the synthesis of our talents in the documentary film about Carp, was still ahead of us... before she went to the dark side.*

....

When there was another kick at his door, Nicholas this time shouting,

‘Who the hell is that?’ In a moment of courage running to the door, yanking it open... to again, a silent corridor, clear he hadn’t been fast enough. But this time, the elevator light indicated someone was going up.

**CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE            The Thundering Geisha**

Nicholas returning to his manuscript that read...

....

...But fortunately on the day of Shintaro's actual performance Nickie wasn't confronted by scouts, but by Des and Mister Des, dressed as Ninja. And Mister Des Riley had a fake moustache and chequered smock coat just like Fuma Kotaro. Mister Des Riley saying,

'I figures Nickie, if you can not beats them, you must then joins them, tells your father we ist waiting.' Nickie yelling down their hallway,

'Dad. They ist here.' Not to be rude but because like his Mum, Nickie, was a good mimic.

When suddenly, up the street, Nickie heard what sounded like horses hooves...

....

...Just as Nicholas heard a more forceful kick at his door that could've been made by a jackboot. But this time he refused to open the door, simply shouting,

'Don't care who the fuck you are. Piss off,' which made the kicker stop... Reading...

....

...And Nickie thought, *maybe the clip clops were from police horses escorting Shintaro to the Sydney Stadium*, but they weren't.

It was a lone figure in a fluttering gown, running down the street in wooden thongs, and a kabuki wig with chopsticks in it. A figure that went by the name of... Rachel. Rachel thundering down



the street, till breathless, she stood behind Des and Mister Des on Nickie's doorstep. Her face painted ghost white.

....

Nicholas's door now blessedly silent...

....

...And Rachel's lips were redder than the red of Australia's dead centre, or *Outback*.

....

...*All of which*, Nicholas thought, *supports the idea Rachel sent the cards, map and lipstick.*

....

...Rachel looking like a geisha in her robe. All of them turning to Rachel as she bowed real polite, Japanese fashion, flapping a fan, saying,

'I am your servant, sirs. Please take me with you.' Which was so unlike her since Rachel was Nickie's tormentor...

....

And maybe was Nicholas's tormentor now...Nicholas trying to remember if the heavy breather had been male or female, but there was no way of telling since all breaths sound the same, except from the dying.

Nicholas listening out for any more kicks or knocks at his door but none came, although his ceiling light again began to flicker. But that could have been a simple power outage.

....

...Nickie back then saying,

‘Rachel? We don’t have a ticket for you.’ Rachel maintaining her contrite position, saying,

‘Please, sirs. I beg you.’

....

Probably the first and last time Nicholas ever heard Rachel begging in her life. Nicholas thinking, *maybe she wants me to beg for my life now*, wondering when he finished, if he should sleep with a knife under his pillow. Which was ridiculous, but then again...

....

Mister Des Riley saying,

‘Hello dere young Rachels.’ Young Des less forgiving, saying,

‘You’re not coming with us. Scram.’ Pushing Rachel out of the cattle truck of hope she clung onto. Nickie’s Dad coming to the door startled by the assembly of oriental freaks in front of him.

When suddenly, Rachel, that Lady Murasaki, grabbed his Dad’s ankles, saying,

‘Ohio,’ over and over. Nickie’s Dad saying to Nickie in Greek,

‘Why is she saying Ohio? Is she from Cleveland? Isn’t she the little Hungarian girl?’ Although that was hard to tell because of her kabuki make-up. Nickie saying,

‘Rachel, are you American?’ Rachel repeating,

‘Ohio. *Go say a mass,*’ from her prone position, turning her head slightly to Nickie, whispering in a stage aside, ‘means *good morning* in Japanese, Mister.’ Nickie saying to his Dad,

‘She’s speaking Japanese.’ His Dad saying,

‘What does she want?’ Young Des saying,

‘You’re not going to get away with this Rachel.’ Nickie saying, to his Dad,

‘Your ticket.’ Mister Des Riley saying, ‘Rachel, this is not zo nice.’ His Dad saying,

‘Is that why she’s crying?’ Nickie, as if he was just the interpreter, saying to Rachel,

‘...Says, is that why you are crying?’ But Rachel just raised her head, nodding ‘yes’, continuing to blubber.

Then his Dad bent down and picked her up, the way he once held Nickie, his Dad saying,

‘Then it’s yours.’

....

**CHAPTER THIRTY****A Task Not Beyond Us**

And they were off, to a date with destiny...

....

Nicholas wondering if he was on a date with destiny now, looking through the spy hole of his door at the still empty corridor, jackboot or no jackboot.

....

...Rachel sitting in the front seat with Mister Des —as was only fitting for a geisha—taking a tiny lipstick out of her sleeve, re-applying her lipstick, which made her seem quite adult. Mister Des Riley seeing her doing this saying,

‘My Got, Rachel, you prepares for every think.’ Rachel saying.

‘Mum taught me.’

....

But thinking about this Nicholas didn’t think that was true, like Sluts, he thought Rachel was taught by Hollywood, Rachel did it so expertly. But it did point to her being behind all this – the empty brass coloured cylinder, in his shirt pocket feeling hot against his chest.

....

...Nickie sitting on the left in the back seat and Des Junior on the right, Des glaring at him furious.

But Nickie was glad Rachel was coming, because his Dad really hadn’t been that interested.

And this time Mister Des Riley's car didn't go through industrial suburbs like, Zetland, and Waterloo but into the city, down William Street.

....

Not lost on Nicholas that he had walked down it earlier where he had his coffee in Ten Buck Alley listening to memories Tin Pan Alley, now clear he'd again been followed.

....

...Plunging down that same steep boulevard. Bypassing Kings Cross though...down New South Head Road, till they arrived at Rushcutters' Bay and the Sydney Stadium...

....

A place it seemed Nicholas couldn't get away from. Nor could others.

....

...Parking and walking in the hundred-degree heat—it was Fahrenheit then—towards where Mister Des Riley said was,

'De big stadium. Over dere,' pointing out not a Japanese temple, but a monstrous barn with a tin roof. A place normally used for vicious Australian entertainments like boxing rather than tea ceremonies.

And the Sydney Stadium was so enormous and ugly, Nickie felt embarrassed that Shintaro had to appear in it. Thinking, *surely they could have hurried and built for him the Sydney Opera House*, but the building of that temple of culture had barely started, despite Nickie's family being

involved in its financing. Nickie steeling himself against any repugnance he might feel if he was again confronted by that army of dwarves disguised—unlike he and Des—as badly dressed Ninjas. Because in educational terms this ‘performance,’ was the final test, or event that was going to drag Nickie out of childhood and innocence.

....

Although Nicholas wasn’t sure if it succeeded, or if now, others ever wanted him to graduate.

....

...In a stadium where seats were filled with ugly dwarves, some even standing, ready not to see Shintaro, but to once again mob him.

Mister Des saying,

‘Our seatz ist over dere, down the front,’ shooin off usurpers who’d occupied them, by saying, ‘Excuse us kids, moo ha, ha, ha,’ Nickie, Des, Rachel and Mister Des taking their rightful place. In a barn that was so hot, they were all panting. Nickie thinking, *the gas chamber their families escaped from, couldn’t have been worse than this.*

Then, amidst the screams and cries of all those badly dressed Ninja, the lights went out and spotlights transformed the boxing ring into a Japanese temple, with a brook and small arched bridge. In the centre of which, on the mat was a girl, a princess, being held captive by evil Ninja that Shintaro had come to Australia to dispatch with his good Ninja troupe. The troupe coming out of trapdoors, and then running down catwalks, not with supernatural skill but like ordinary humans. Which was disappointing. Some were just sauntering.

Worse, was the fact that the evil Ninja imprisoning the princess didn’t seem able to jump very high either.

Nickie thought he could jump higher. And none of the bad Ninja were actually being killed for real, because as soon as they were dead and the lights somewhat dimmed, they sprang up and repeated their actions.

Nickie finding it humiliating having to watch Ninjas both good, and bad, coming down fly wire, pullies, and flying foxes rather than flying through the air as they did on television. It seemed like cheating. Nickie thinking, *what's going on here?* It was so unlike the series. This disappointing start only briefly improved when Shintaro came on stage to dispatch bad Ninjas before vanishing.

But Shintaro barely did anything more than Nickie used to do to the sofa, or once did to Jessie's step dad, when Shintaro was supposed to be both sensei and master. Nickie thinking, *that's it?*

Shintaro only appearing two more times while in his absence this pathetic oriental cabaret went on and on, lacking any verisimilitude to the life lived by Samurais let alone the charm of the series.

....

Nicholas staring out the window of his hotel room again in case he could see some dark figure lurking below, but there wasn't. Actually Nicholas tried to remember, without his manuscript, if Nickie was the only one who felt asphyxiated by the heat while he watched the tepid performance. Wondered if he was the only one who felt misled by his hero, or if anyone else felt their investment of perfection in Japanese culture and in the way of the Samurai had been a mistake...

....

Or if there was someone from that historic night, out there in the dark, now becoming light...

....

...Back then, Nickie thinking as he watched the performance, what Miss Mobbs had taught him, *We must expect many disappointments.*

....

And Nicholas could see why Miss Mobbs made him remember that speech since it was useful in adulthood.

....

...*And many unpleasant surprises...* Remembering how Nickie muttered under his breath,

*'...But we may be sure that the task which we have freely accepted, is one not beyond us.'*

Although back then, it seemed the task of maintaining belief not only in Shintaro and Ninja, but the culture of Japan, was beyond Nickie. And maybe it was beyond Shintaro himself, because he was barely on stage twenty minutes.

And Nickie thought, *maybe Shintaro doesn't like us.*

But at the end of the performance when Shintaro bowed to tumultuous applause... Nickie tried his best to forgive his tawdry performance. But Shintaro didn't even look his way, or at Des or Rachel. Perhaps because he was worried about his own survival, Shintaro just beat a hasty retreat from his fans, to get off his kimono and make-up, before he fainted in the heat.

....

Nicholas now certain his own survival was equally in doubt.



**CARDS FOR THE SAMURAI**

**—PART 3 – THE LOST CARDS—**

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**CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE**

**The Oriental Traitor**

Outside the Sydney Stadium, Mister Des Riley taking off his moustache and his smock coat, wiping perspiration from his face as they headed to the car, saying,

‘He was fantastic. Yes?’ Des Riley Junior saying,

‘The best.’ Rachel saying to Nickie,

‘Thank your father for me.’ And, ‘this is for you,’ giving Nickie the fan that had kept her cool during the performance.

Nickie back home, feeling strange about it, sort-of empty. His Dad saying

‘Did you have a good time?’ To which Nickie said,

‘Yes.’ But his heart wasn’t in it. His father asking,

‘Was he really good?’ To which Nickie said,

‘He was better,’ probably because Shintaro had been able to effect change in him. Some sort of transformation because when Nickie took off his robe it really did look like a dressing gown more than a kimono, and his thongs and socks looked just like thongs and socks. Saying to his Dad, ‘Dad? Any methylated spirits left?’ His Dad saying,

‘What for?’

‘To clean up something.’

Nickie going to the kitchen, taking the bottle, emptying it over his gown, socks, and thongs that he then he placed in the garbage on the landing. Going back to his Dad who had nodded off, where for the last time as a Ninja, Nickie stole his matches. Nickie taking the matches back to the garbage bin that held his outfit, doing what his Dad once did to teach him a

lesson. He ignited it in a private ritual of cleansing, watching the flames go higher and higher, and how beautiful they were – the grey-blue smoke too.

....

Almost as beautiful as the bodies wrapped in saris Nicholas saw many years later being cremated on the shores of the Ganges, any of which could have been people's wives, husbands, lovers or children. Nicholas seeing them at the Ganges not as ghoulish but beautiful, seeing the flames more like angels or *Cavalieros*, the escorts of eternity.

....

Saying over the flames—not as Nicholas at Varanasi—but as Nickie, to the flames climbing out of the garbage,

....

'Shintaro, you die.' Not because he wished Shintaro's physical death, but because the death of his obsession needed some spell to keep it company.

....

Nicholas thinking, *maybe as Pater Jacob would say, 'to kill its pomp and vanity.'*

....

Nickie not going so far as to burn all his Samurai cards, because even then, Nickie wanted to retain a memento of the time when he was happy. Burning just a couple of them, burning, card seven, card nineteen, card sixty-five, and fifty...

....

Cards that the Postmaster in Bangkok, apologised for not being able to find...

....

... But he didn't burn the cricket stump, because he knew from experience that would only char. He simply took it and placed it in the backyard, next to the other two stumps where it belonged, in case someone wanted to come and play with him – not Ninja leaps, but a game of cricket. Which was English and by default Australian.

He just poured more methylated spirits on the flames, using Rachel's fan to fan the flames because he just wanted it finished, throwing in the fan as well, before going to his room to tear down his Japanese posters.

Down came Kyoto in winter, with its trees so perfect covered in snow. Down came the moss garden in Kyoto too, and the one featuring a waterfall next to perfectly shaped trees. As well as the big one of Mount Fuji that looked like any old mountain if you were objective about it. Nickie ripping them up into pieces, as if killing something that had been living and breathing, looking at his handiwork on the ground now reduced to confetti for the Wedding Factory.

Until finally all the walls looked *de-orientalised*. White and stark, as if waiting for another obsession, some other picture or culture to become attached to them, perhaps for other idols with feet of clay, since each generation has them.

Nickie feeling scared. Thinking *maybe that he'd been rash and that maybe he should've only done such things in the morning after he'd slept on it*. But then he thought, '*nah, had to do it now,*' because Nickie, was waking from a nightmare.

....

Nicholas thinking, *perhaps just from the snooze and trance of innocence, where people want me trapped.*

....

...At school when the bell rang, Nickie lingering as the class dispersed because he needed to have a word with Miss Mobbs, saying,

‘Miss, need anything carried to the staffroom?’

‘Something on your mind Nickie?’

‘No Miss, something I’ve wiped from it.’ Telling Miss Mobbs that it was now clear to him that Japanese Zeros were evil weapons of destruction, and that with what he’d read lately it was just as well the Americans dropped atomic bombs on Japan otherwise the war wouldn’t have ended. ‘They might’ve even come here. And then we really would have had to fight them on the beaches,’ Nickie now a traitor.

....

Hindsight suggesting to Nicholas maybe this was because he’d never been fit to be a Samurai. It suggested that he’d always been a Ninja. And the bad sort too, duplicitous, calculating—much like Sluts. Wondered if it had all started then and had just waited to emerge in the final battle with Celia. Or for some bloody battle now...

....

Miss Mobbs saying,

‘What’s brought all this about? Nickie you normally like oriental things.’ Nickie saying,

‘Miss, do you think there just might be some things... to which we are unequal?’

‘Not in your case Nickie.’

‘Thank you Miss.’ Nickie saying to Miss Mobbs just to change the subject, ‘*The love of field and coppice,*’ as she piled textbooks into his arms. To which she said,

‘*Of green and shaded lanes.*’ Nickie saying,

‘...*Of ordered woods and gardens.*’ Miss Mobbs saying,

‘...*And soft dim skies.*’ Nickie answering,

‘I know and want to share it.’

‘No, Nickie, the line is ... *but cannot share it.*’ Nickie saying,

‘No it isn’t,’ because Nickie had become a revisionist, ‘my love is not otherwise.’ Maybe changing the words of the poem because he was forsaking the Orient, becoming what he always was, European, if not Australian. Miss Mobbs saying,

‘I don’t believe you’ve forgotten the lines. You’re pulling my leg.’

‘Yeah,’ Nickie said, now that he understood the idiom. ‘But also, you know what Miss?’

‘What? Put the books down there Nickie.’

‘I think F1-11s are also excellent,’ indicating he was ready to become a fan not only of Europe, and Australia, but America. But this seemed to puzzle her, maybe even disappoint her. Miss Mobbs saying,

‘That’ll do, Nickie, run off home.’

**CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO            The Arrival of Brooms**

Back home, Nickie putting on the record player the Greek version of *Que Sera Sera* that sang, *Whatever will be will be, the future's not ours to see*, which was a lie because now to Nickie it was obvious.

....

Well, more obvious than to Nicholas now... that is if he had one.

....

While it played, Nickie jumping into the air, saying, not 'Hai, Ya,' but,

'*Oppa, Oppa,*' because he felt it was time to celebrate.

Shirts, Biscuits and Handbags, coming down to see what the ruckus was about saying,

'What's got into you?' A question Nickie couldn't answer because nothing had got into him, but the reverse, something had come out.

After he put on another of Sluts' Greek records the Aunts joining him. Dancing in a line as if they were performing not in their living room but in public. And there was honesty to it, perhaps even integrity. It sure lacked the artifice of what Nickie had witnessed at the Stadium.

....

When suddenly there was another kick at his door, one made by an even stronger jackboot, Nicholas saying,

'Who the fuck is it?' Thinking he should've called security, saying, 'Piss off.' Deciding he wasn't going to open the door...concerned about his safety. But then it again stopped...maybe because he spoke to it with such authority.

Nicholas feeling relieved, feeling it wouldn't start again...surely. Continuing to read because he had to...

....

...How Nickie's family hadn't had weddings for a while. Their Wedding Factory in a slump compared to Australia's economy.

And how Nickie over the next few weeks of that hot summer became more interested in other items in his encyclopaedia, not just stuff under the letter, 'J.' For instance he became entranced with the volume starting with, 'F,' learning about the French Revolution. The guillotine a much more sophisticated tool of death than Samurai swords or star knives. Nickie thinking—now that he no longer considered Paulie a Shogun—that it was only right to elevate him to the role of Dauphin.

But Nickie's elation at the private revolution he'd carried out on his obsession—much like all revolutions—peaked quickly, and was followed not so much by the Great Terror, but the Great Gloom.

Gloom now coming to play with Nickie more often than Des Riley, wanting to see what he was up to.

She—She was a She of course—not just coming to Nickie, but dropping in on everybody, on Shirts and Biscuits, even on Handbags, and his Mum, Soda, who had gone kind-of flat. Gloom having arrived because now there was so little to look forward to. Nickie couldn't think of much, and summer was getting hotter. The twins saying that they too were bored, although this was an improvement since it suggested Nickie's therapy was working, and that Doctor Joyce Brothers was not a false prophet. His Aunt Handbags saying she too was tired of the handbag factory. To which unhelpfully Nickie said,

'Maybe, you should move on to suitcases.' His Mum also saying,

'I'm not sure I can take the soft drink factory anymore.' Nickie being self-serving, saying,

‘Maybe you should try the beer factory.’

And his Dad was sort-of visited by Gloom too, because now, with no weddings, and the priest yet to be replaced—with less and less immigrants on their doorstep, to be hid and wed—he was losing his Ringmaster skills. His whip was ready to snap more than crack.

So, Nickie wasn’t alone in the change sweeping through their house. And sometimes Nickie felt he just couldn’t breathe because of the scent of Gloom around them.

But though Gloom had swept through their house, fortunately She didn’t stay long. She was swept out by the arrival of someone called, Brooms, or the Headmistress, another of his Mum’s sisters. The oldest and most severe who came down that same gangplank at Circular Quay, saying nothing nice or disparaging about the harbour, or about Sydney. And it was such a nice day. Brooms only saying,

‘Answer me. You are the child they call Nickie?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Because child Nickie, I hear we have a lot to do.’ Brooms not even commenting on their house, street, or its trees, neither admiring the shade of the trees nor wanting them turned into woodchip. Almost as if Brooms expected it all to be as it was. Maybe knowing in advance what Newtown or Australia was like, because Brooms was one of his Mum’s most dedicated correspondents. Brooms with authority taking over the house, its mood and its activities, saying, ‘Why’s everyone so gloomy? Did someone die?’ But it was only one of Nickie’s idols, maybe just his idolatry. Adding ‘we have work to do,’ because Brooms was pretty industrious, taking sweeping jobs, sweeping out the cobwebs not just of their house and city offices but of high schools which is why they sometimes called her, ‘the Headmistress.’ Brooms saying to Nickie’s Mum, Soda, ‘What’s wrong with the *Schweppes* factory anyway? I think you’re all spoiled. And I can’t believe you’ve all let the house go empty.’

Nickie’s Mum and Dad, saying,



‘What are we supposed to do?’ Brooms saying,

‘Advertise!’ And after that, the house filled up, and once again they were getting too many candidates.

Nickie’s Mum resigning from the Gestapo, appointing Brooms in her place, although because of Broom’s inexperience, Nickie stayed on as Goebbels, showing her how to make the neat piles that still sealed people’s fate, on the left and the right,

‘Like this Auntie,’ also showing her how the left pile should be kept low. ‘This one not too high,’ a pile in which two rather surprising letters got mixed up. One written by Curly and the other, Eyes, saying that the last year they had spent back in ‘the old country’ made them realise that they were still in love with Shirts and Biscuits, and that they wanted to come back; gold rings attached to the letter with a pin showing commitment.

Brooms... alias the Headmistress saying,

‘Isn’t that sweet? These young men... realise they’re still in love. I will write and say we will sponsor them again. I’m sure the girls will be delighted.’ Nickie saying,

‘I don’t think they’ll have them back. Anyway, they’re still in therapy.’

Brooms moving the letters of Curly and Eyes to the pile on the right, saying,

‘That...has now finished. Do the girls want to wind up spinsters?’ because if the twins didn’t do what Brooms wanted, Nickie feared she might well and truly ‘bind their faces in the dust.’ Brooms saying, ‘Tell them, I want to see them right now, and that I don’t tolerate excuses.’ Clear that Brooms didn’t need training in how to be a Nazi. She was a natural. Brooms saying, ‘Besides this one here,’ looking at the photos, ‘has the most adorable hair. And this one the most adorable blue eyes,’ suggesting Brooms was into eugenics.

....

Which made Nicholas remember Celia's eyes, because they were blue with flecks of emerald whose greenness reflected his jealousy.

....

...Nickie, a few months later, meeting Eyes and Curly at Central, the same station indicated on the map, with the same clock, helping them once again with their bags, the way he had escorted others down the gangplank. Curly saying,

'Yiassou Nickie.' Eyes saying the same,

'Yiassou Nickie,' getting his name right. Curly saying,

'Know what Nickie?'

'What?'

'We know how fast the speed of light is,' remembering Nickie's interest in it. Curly saying, pointing to Eyes, and himself, 'but we two are faster. It only took us one earth year to come back.'

....

Nicholas with the benefit of hindsight, thinking, *maybe they returned because while away, Australia remained a distant star, attractive and shiny. Like some people were to me, people like Celia, and much farther back, Jessie.*

....

Nickie wanting to ask Eyes and Curly how Sluts was getting on in Greece, and whether she was happy with ex-Pater Thomas. Or if Pater Thomas still had the same liberal view about hems, or if Sluts still swam out to ships to compete with opera singers. Also wanting to ask, how Pater

Jacob fared on Mount Athos, and whether the rooster had survived the passage. But didn't want to appear a gossip.

....

*Although these days, Nicholas thought, that's the least of what people call me....* Nicholas hearing at the door, neither a rap nor a kick, but a scratching sound, and a faint whimpering that could have been made by a cat or a dog, or some *infinitely suffering thing*, as Eliot called it. Ignoring it, a sound that started to fade when Nicholas said,

'Fido or whoever, please not now,' which was at least polite.

....

...Upstairs Nickie saying to Shirts and Biscuits,

'Your grooms are waiting.' Aunt Shirts saying,

'Is Curly's hair still too curly?'

'Actually, sort of wavy. I think he puts wax in it.' Aunt Shirts saying,

'Yuk.' Nickie saying,

'Pretty sticky.' Aunt Biscuits saying,

'And I suppose Eyes still has eyes too close?'

'Auntie Brooms says they're blue. Anyway, they're different now. Wears glasses all the time.' Change having taken place all round, not just in Australia, but also internationally. 'And hurry. You know how cross Brooms gets.'

Auntie Biscuits, saying,

'She is so harsh. Sometimes it's hard to believe she's our sister. Sometimes I think she's German,' because when Brooms said 'jump' there was a *schnell* about it.

But Brooms was right, the house did need discipline since its occupants had let themselves go. Particularly Nickie, who was now not

interested in the restraint and self-abnegation of the Japanese, lazing about drinking too much, fortunately not alcohol, despite his early exposure to it, but soft drinks. Guzzling bottles the way drunks in the parks drained beer – putting on weight.

....

So, Nicholas thought, *the little bit of discipline Brooms introduced wasn't so bad...* when he again heard a faint scratch and whimpering at the door... that just as quickly ceased...

....

Brooms always saying,

'You've had quite enough lemonade for today Nickie. Put it back.'

Much the same way Pater Jacob had asked him to replace the glasses.

But the double wedding of Shirts and Biscuits was spectacular, a beauty, because Biscuits and Shirts shone with the sheen of happiness...

....

A sheen that evaded Nicholas now, and had for some time, Nicholas again thinking about *infinitely suffering things...* despite the scratching having stopped.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE – The Wedding of Shirts and Biscuits

And at the service as the altar boy, Nickie outdid himself. And the reception was great too. All of Newtown came to it. And this time the oysters, and the meats, and the cakes set up on the trestle tables in their back yard, didn't go to waste.

Nickie's Dad in his element giving the brides away, almost as if they'd been his daughters, real princesses wanting release from their own emotional boxing rings built for self-protection. His Dad so proud of them that day, he cried, and he really did look for a moment like Don Ameche from *The Greatest Show on Earth*—which it was in their backyard. The guests going,

'*Oppa, Oppa,*' at the reception, all through the night. It wasn't just Nickie.

And there was a band playing *bouzoukis* and accordions, so he didn't have to put on Slut's tired forty-fives, not even, *Que Sera Sera*, since Fate was now on their side.

And even the Store Clerk, Mister Pulling My Leg, was invited, the one who still mooned about Sluts. The Store Clerk sitting around enjoying the festivities, rolling up his shirtsleeves, drinking beer, saying to Nickie,

'Say kid, any news from your cousin?' To which Nickie said,

'Maybe you should give up on her.' The Store Clerk saying,

'You know what? I think you're right. Now be a good mate and point out some of the single sheilas.' And Nickie knew in that instant, the Wedding Factory had another candidate. Nickie saying,

'I can even show you doubles.' The Store Clerk saying,

'No, single Sheilas.'

'And Roula, Toula and Boulas. Come with me, and just smile. Most of them don't speak English.' The Store Clerk saying,

'It's not a language lesson I want.' Nickie saying,

‘No, just someone to tug your leg,’ the Store Clerk giving Nickie a sharp look before bursting out laughing.

Even the Salesman trying to sell them the colour-striated Perspex screen for the television was invited saying,

‘Gee, thanks for asking me kid,’ looking around the garden at the guests, tables and lights, listening to the foreign music, saying, ‘gee this is colourful,’ his mind still on the job.

Even Miss Mobbs came to congratulate them, but she didn’t stay long, perhaps alarmed at the sight of so many men leaping about like Jump Jets, perhaps fearing a mid-air fatality. Saying, to Nickie’s Aunts,

‘I hope you two will be happy,’ and Shirts and Biscuits thanked her. And almost curtsied to her as if Miss Mobbs was the Queen, which she sort-of was, at least the closest thing to her, being English. Miss Mobbs saying, ‘Very happy,’ as she shook their hands and then left, what Miss Mobbs never was, only when alone with Nickie.

And even the drunks from the park were invited. Nickie, made sure of that. Well, not exactly to the backyard, but to just outside the fence, where Nickie set up trestle tables for them with free beer. The food they didn’t really go for much. Said it was too *Greecy*. And the Bottle Collector was invited too, but he declined, saying,

‘No, thanks mate, I hardly know them.’

‘Then come after eleven round the back and bring your barrow, you’ll make a killing.’ The Bottle Collector, saying,

‘Thanks for the tip kid.’

Des Riley came, naturally, along with Mister Des Riley, yet again in Scout suits, which this time didn’t seem to embarrass them, or Nickie. Mister Des Riley explaining that Scout suits were formal-wear, a bit like kilts worn by Scotsmen. Mister Des Riley saying,

‘We wears dis only vor spezial occasions.’ Nickie saying,

‘I guess you do.’

Rachel sitting next to them, making a grimace, saying,

‘Oh brother,’ even though they weren’t related.

And last but not least, that era’s mailman, who said, as he watched the guests carouse,

‘Sorry kid, you never got anything from Japan,’ as if it was his fault, when it wasn’t. Nickie saying,

‘Don’t worry. I got a lot out of it.’

‘Or anything from Pasadena.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Nickie said. ‘Their loss, and that’s the plain truth.’

....

Well, Nicholas likes to think he said that, since that’s what he wrote, but to be truthful, he doubted at that age he would have been so witty.

Then, going to his silent door Nicholas opened it despite his reservations and caution, curiosity getting the better of him...again onto nothing.

No cat, no dog, Fido, or Hound of the Baskervilles, let alone any *infinitely suffering thing*, although the door did have scratch marks and a boot mark. But the elevator light this time, was stationary...

Nicholas returning to his manuscript, reading how Des said above the bouzouki music,

....

‘You don’t like *The Samurai* much anymore do you?’  
Meaning both the man and the series. Nickie saying,

‘He’s okay,’ meaning, *just* okay, not as before, magnificent. Because Nickie still kept an eye on the series, which was turning out to be a quest within a quest, since once Shintaro got all the mirrors, all they did was point to more maps leading to treasure hidden in caves,

and behind waterfalls. So it seemed repetitive, and Fuma Kotaro was still a step ahead.

....

Nicholas well aware that whoever had been knocking, scratching, calling, or sending cards, maps, or lipstick was just as repetitive. Aware that...

....

...No one ever saw if Shintaro or Fuma got the treasure, because Fuma blew it, and himself up, like a suicide bomber, which was sort-of, modern...

....

*And, that was never broadcast,* Nicholas thought.

....

...Because Channel 9 thought it more exciting to broadcast the arrival of the new US President, thinking him much more important than Shintaro. Probably because Australia—though visited by a Samurai—had never been visited by a President. The American President a bit like Fuma himself, maybe even like the Postmaster, in that he too was in Australia for darker reasons, mainly to get Australia's Official Ninjas, its soldiers, to go to Vietnam.

....

Nicholas reading,

....



'*Oppa, Oppa,*' sang the guests that night as they leapt into the air.

....

In a dance that Nicholas can no longer perform.

....

'*Oppa, Oppa.*'

....

Something Nicholas now says with a different tone and only in private, '*Oppa,*' in his hotel room. To an absence, wondering if there would be any more phone calls, knock, kicks, scratches, whimpers, or whatever, or if all distractions were now over. Thinking when his tormentor, or tormentors find him, all he'll say is, '*Ole,*' to congratulate them for having confounded him. Reading...

....

...'*Oppa, Oppa,*' went the guests...

....

Continuing to read, even though dawn had broken...

....

...How the double barrel whammy of the marriage of Shirts and Biscuits broke the run of bad luck of the Wedding Factory, because for a couple of years after that, demand outstripped capacity. Nickie finding the ceremonies after the apogee of the marriage of Shirts and Biscuits, slightly unoriginal, even a little bit factory-made. The quality declined, the sheer

volume of weddings sometimes taking on the unattractive finish of the assembly line.

....

Sad for Nicholas now, nothing remains of those days. Except his manuscript and the nudging and teasing of whoever. Wondering why he bothered to read all this considering he no longer lived in the Wedding Factory or in what it became after his family vacated, an ordinary terrace without staff or machinery. A terrace that seeks for itself '*some tender loving care*' as the vendors say who sell it every few years, qualities his family once dispensed to strangers — qualities Nicholas still needed.

....

Beginning to think what he'd written was no background briefing, or even quest novel, more the reminiscences of a tourist.

Thinking, *and we're all tourists anyway, visitors to life much like foreign celebrities who visit foreign continents. Just glad to board our plane and return to where we came from, even if it means extinction.*

Wondered if that was what he was building up to, wondered whether he was building up to the last rites of a dishonoured Japanese warrior, totally bereft of honour and *timi*. And that someone, or something wanted to save him from this, or perhaps just help him get it over with— which was likely.

From his hotel room, again looking at trains speeding over the flat expanse of what was once the Stadium, now just a concrete bridge. And they weren't red rattlers that could speak or sing, but silent silver things, thanks to what the Vibe Hotel had installed – double-glazing.

But no trains sang for Nicholas now, neither an aria of support nor of admonition. Nicholas thinking perhaps he'd come back this last time to Sydney, not just for his cards, or to find anyone, or whoever was looking for

him, but for memories left behind. That much was clear to him now. Maybe just to read about them, if he couldn't complete the quest or job of writing, or living to the finish, particularly since some didn't want him to.

**CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR            The Fountain of Youth**

But that morning, Nicholas found no boot marks on his door, or evidence of a scratch, the door looking intact as if no one had come to visit.

That morning Nicholas leaving the safety of his hotel, which wasn't so safe, to visit his storage cage at Zetland. Didn't even know why he kept it so many years, it was just full of old clothes. And some books, a biography of Yeats, and some verse by Blake, *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*, as well as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* – what he and Celia once lived through. As well as some *How and Why* books, and an old jar of *Pond's Cold Cream*, and a little phial of *Maja* cologne, objects that Sluts abandoned that he kept for sentimental reasons. Hardly treasure.

But Nicholas actually knew why he'd maintained this storage cage, as a sort of temple to house his Samurai cards. All sixty-eight of them, the set incomplete, because Nickie burnt card seven, card nineteen, card sixty-five, and card fifty with the same spite Fuma blew himself, and the treasure up with.

And it had been over forty years since he'd looked at them. It seemed like two generations—shutting the door of his storage cage for the last time, stowing his cards in his shirt pocket next to the lipstick, till he returned to his hotel. There he could shuffle them as if playing another game of episodes and destiny, much like they once played with him.

At his hotel shuffling them like a Tarot deck as he looked out again through the double-glazed windows, at the same silent trains running over the ghosts of the brick and tin that was once the Stadium.

Thinking, *now, it is time to go find, the missing ones; card seven, card nineteen, and card sixty-five, and card fifty*. So that his memory, just like his cards, would be complete. Thinking, *what happened to Des? Even Rachel? Where is she?* Even wanting to see his brother Paul, whom he hadn't spoken to in years, deciding to visit them, to see if they had the lost cards, or remembered any of what was in his manuscript.

Wondered not just about Rachel, but if any of them were the doorknockers, kickers, heavy breathers, scratchers or whimperers from last night, and about who had erased the scratches, or boot mark, the evidence.

....

Nicholas first going to see Des, and Des wasn't hard to find. Just asked for him at the synagogue. Des living in a suburb called Dover Heights, which has high cliffs, like the white English ones Miss Mobbs sailed from, and so much wanted to go back to, but didn't.

Actually he dropped in rather rudely one Saturday afternoon, which was as hot as that afternoon of the performance in the Sydney Stadium. Nicholas not calling ahead because he still enjoyed the element of stealth, since he still had some trace of the Ninja about him.

Knocking on Des's door, the knocker echoing the way it used to at the Wedding Factory when it announced Des's arrival, as well as that of *exploded ones*, illegal immigrants. The way it had at his hotel last night, but Nicholas knocked softer...

Knock, knock, knock... fearing that maybe he had the wrong address, and that Des didn't live there. But when the door finally opened, Des was there. And he hadn't aged a bit. He was of all things, still seven. Nicholas saying,

'Des? You look fantastic. You haven't aged at all,' which he hadn't, Nicholas didn't need to flatter him – didn't need to use the skills they once honed in Des's pool like Hollywood agents, because Des looked exactly like he did when he was a kid. It was as if Des had swallowed some magic potion that allowed him to circumvent time. Nicholas saying, 'How did you do it mate?' Because when it came to ageing, Nicholas hadn't been so lucky.

'Mister,' Des said, just like Rachel used to.

'Mister? Come off it,' Nicholas said. 'Let's not be formal.'

‘Are you looking for Granddad?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Des?’ But all this Des said is,

‘I’m Noah. His Grandson.’

In the background, someone shouting,

‘Noah? What the devil’s taking you so long?’ The real Des coming up to the door, looking at Nicholas as if he’d seen a phantom. Then Des and Nicholas fell into an embrace that suggested they’d survived mortal combat. Which they had, the one called life, others not so lucky. Des saying, ‘Era shy mess.’ Nicholas responding,

‘Era shy mess,’ and then, ‘Hai ya,’ and they both leapt into the air, coming down to earth, blubbering like idiots.

But their little leap wasn’t as elastic as it used to be, perhaps more arthritic because they were no longer dream boys or future boys, but approaching the nightmare of senescence. Little Noah, looking at them, saying,

‘Oh brother,’ just like Rachel once did, because for a brief moment they were younger than even him, having for an instant annihilated the march of time and its parade of cruelty. Des saying,

‘Nickie!’

Once they disengaged, Nicholas saying,

‘They call me Nick, these days, Des. Bit old for Nickie. Thought I’d see what you were up to, and why you’re sending me cards and letters, and coming round in the middle of the night. Let’s not worry about the lipstick.’

‘Letters? Cards? Middle of the night? Lipstick? Me?’ Des looking perplexed, choosing to ignore it saying, ‘Well, anyway you can see this here is little Noah,’ tousling Noah’s hair, ‘he’s Joshua, my son’s boy.’ Then, to Nicholas, ‘God, Nickie, how long has it been? Come in.’

Nicholas saying as they moved down Des’s hallway to the sunroom that was ablaze with summer light,

‘Dunno. Maybe forty years.’

‘Actually been forty-one years.’ Des said. ‘And two months. But who’s counting?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Hear you’re a statistician.’ Des saying,

‘I’m an accountant. And yourself, you made some films, I read, somewhere...before you...’

‘A couple,’ Nicholas said. ‘They weren’t that interesting. Documentaries, mostly.’ Des saying,

‘Nickie, I’m so sorry...’ as if referring to something else.

‘Don’t be,’ Nicholas said. ‘I’m not.’

Then Des looked at Nicholas with what appeared to be pity, saying,

‘How can I help you Nick?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Oh, it’s nothing. Was just wondering if you had any cards.’

‘Credit cards?’

‘Samurai Cards, dopey.’

‘Are you kidding me? Course.’

‘Do you have card seven, or card sixty-five or fifty, for instance?’

‘Why do you ask? And what’s this about sending... lipsticks in the middle of the night? Noah!’ He yelled out, Noah, coming at once to his side almost as if he too were a faithful Ninja—this perhaps genetic. ‘Go down to the garage. Get the old biscuit box and bring it to your Granddad. And hurry, your Uncle Nick hasn’t got all day.’ Then to Nicholas, ‘And you know what Nickie? Not many days left in me. Am getting on, medical stuff...the old ticker isn’t so good.’ Nicholas saying,

‘I’m sorry.’ Des saying,

‘Nah, been a good life. At least we didn’t wind up in the ovens,’ Des’s humour still bleak.

‘Now, Des.’

‘You know what I mean, like my Granddad and my...’ starting to cry, history now taking on meaning, rather than what they liked back when

they were kids, spectacle in *The March of Time*, the thrill of which is better to watch than experience. Nicholas saying,

‘Your Dad not around?’ Des wiping away a tear, saying,

‘Nah, Died twenty years ago, went to the... big...Jamboree, up there, as they say.’ The way Nicholas’s Dad went to the Big Top, the one at Botany. ‘What’s special about the missing cards anyway?’

‘They’re missing in my set. And someone each year keeps sending me some.’

‘Really? Who? And lipstick? Ain’t me.’

Although Nicholas did notice a pair of jackboots in the corner of the room, deciding not to mention them, saying,

‘Wish I knew. But I also want them for a friend,’ actually Nicholas couldn’t take his eyes off them.

Des looking at him for a second, before saying,

‘Well of course for... a friend... Was afraid for a minute you were going to say for... Rachel, that...’

‘...Witch.’ Nicholas finished for him as Noah, breathless, handed Des a tin box covered in dust. Noah, saying,

‘Can I watch you open it?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Course. But before we do... Des? Do you have any...gloves?’

Des slapping his forehead, saying,

‘What was I thinking?’ Then to Noah, ‘Go to your Mum’s room and get her gloves. Two pairs. One for me, and one for your Uncle Nick.’ Noah, saying,

‘Are you going to dress up as women?’ Des laughing at this, Nicholas too, Des saying,

‘No, although your Uncle and I did dress up once...upon a time. Didn’t we Nickie? Boy, how we did.’

‘Hai ya.’ Nicholas said, averting his eyes from the boots, to be subtle.

‘Hai ya,’ Des said, but softer, tears welling up in him.



Nicholas saying,

‘Know what Des? We don’t need gloves. Let’s dispense with formality.’ Nicholas deciding not to say anything about boots as Des and he tried to open the tin with their fingers, but without success. Des saying,

‘Here let me do it,’ Nicholas saying,

‘No, let me.’ Des saying,

‘No, me,’ competing with each other almost as if the tin contained Fuma’s treasure.

‘And you know what?’ Des said. Nicholas saying,

‘What?’ Hoping Des might confess, but he didn’t.

‘Inside here, Nickie, there’s also a... star knife. You made it for me with tin snips.’ Noah saying,

‘Gramps are star knives made in the stars?’ Nicholas answering,

‘Yes.’

Des and Nicholas carefully jimmying around the edges of the tin, with a coin, not wanting to damage it, maybe fearing it contained something more explosive than memory or lethal than jackboots. Once they’d done the jimmying, Des saying,

‘Now, on the count of three,’ all of them putting their hands on the tin, ‘and a one and a two and a...’

When all of a sudden a man in a dark suit came in, possibly a Koga Ninja, saying,

‘Dad,’ the sound of which made Des freeze. ‘What are you doing? You’re not supposed to get excited.’ Then to Nicholas, ‘he’s not allowed to. Heart problems.’ And the fun went out of them. And they hadn’t even opened the tin.

Des after a sigh, saying,

‘Nick, this is my son Joshua. Noah’s father, Josh this is Nickie, I’ve told you so much about.’

‘Pleased to meet you...’ Joshua said, extending his hand. ‘...Read a lot about you, Mister Nick.’

‘Read?’ Nicholas said.

‘Well, hard not to. Dad’s talked a lot about you anyway.’ Then to Des, ‘Dad...’ Des saying,

‘Yes, Josh, I hear you. Your Dad is just having fun. I’m not a child you know.’ But at least to Nicholas, Des was.

‘Okay.’ Josh said. ‘But don’t overdo it. Anyway, have you seen my ski boots anywhere?’ Des saying,

‘They’re in the corner where you left them.’ Josh leaving to go to his room with what Nicholas had thought of as jackboots, clear Nicholas had been mistaken. Des saying to Nicholas, ‘Love that boy. But boy he can be a Nazi.’ What Nicholas once was – a pretend one anyway. Des saying, ‘on the count of three. And a one, and a two, and a...’ But he didn’t get to three, the lid of the tin flying open, the cards scattering, into the air, and onto the floor. ‘God,’ Des said, looking at them scattered about in an impossible oriental mosaic. Some face up with scenes from the series. Some face down showing pink and purple bits, Shintaro’s face and kimono. ‘Now we have to pick them up.’ Noah saying,

‘I’ll do it Gramps. You and Uncle Nick get a drink.’ Des saying,

‘Thanks angel,’ then to Nicholas, ‘Come Nick, I can offer the hard stuff.’ Nicholas saying,

‘No, just soft drink,’ because, having mistaken ski boots for jackboots, he was worried about his mind, and eyesight.

....

In the kitchen, Des asking Nicholas questions about everyone they knew, about Nicholas’s Dad, his Mum, and Aunts. Even about Sluts. About everyone that is, except Nicholas.

So Nicholas told him while they sipped *Schwepes* lemonade, the bottle from a shop though, not directly from the factory, saying,

‘Oh, Mum’s in a nursing home. She’s fine. Just a little forgetful.’

‘And your Dad?’

‘Like yours, was a while ago.’

‘Sorry...Your Aunts?’

‘Pretty good. Saw them in Greece a couple of years ago, Biscuits is diabetic now, and Shirts opened a dress shop.’

‘You’re pulling my leg.’

‘Guess I am.’

‘Still with Eyes and Curly?’

‘Yeah, although Curly is bald now.’

‘Excited to see you?’

‘Over the moon.’ Nicholas said. ‘Sort-of called in on them unexpected’

‘Good, always important to keep the element of surprise. Did they say anything about...?’

After a pause Nicholas saying,

‘Des, they don’t read the papers. Not Australian ones anyway.’ Surely he didn’t mean Nicholas’s reviews. And he didn’t.

Before Nicholas’s lemonade went flat, Des saying,

‘Let’s see how Noah’s getting on?’ And they did. Noah getting on very well, had already stacked them in a neat pile. All of them sitting down for the inspection and since they were his, Des picked up the deck first, saying, ‘Here we go. Oh, how I remember this.’ Holding up card one, which had a blurry picture of Shintaro swinging his sword, the blur making it look a bit like a painting by Francis Bacon. Des reading, ‘*No one in all Japan can match the violence and skill...*’

Nicholas finishing with him,

‘...*Of master swordsman Shintaro.*’ Noah saying, ‘Is he a friend of yours?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Could say that.’

‘Yeah,’ Des said, picking up card number two, which showed a girl black Ninja, Des reading out the caption, ‘*A girl black Ninja leading*

*Tombei and Shintaro into a trap.* Des saying, ‘No prizes who she reminds me of.’

‘But she didn’t,’ Nicholas said. ‘Rachel came dressed as a geisha.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Des said. And then reluctantly, ‘and how is that... I mean... *dear* Rachel these days? Didn’t you two work together?’

‘Briefly.’ Nicholas said, and that was all he wanted to say. Des changing the topic,

‘Now... which cards were you looking for Nick?’

‘Card seven, card nineteen, fifty, and sixty-five.’

Des fanning out the cards like a Japanese fan, saying,

‘Here’s card six, eight, nine... but no seven. Noah? Did you put them in order?’

‘Yes Gramps, but some were missing.’

‘They on the floor? Check.’

‘I’ve checked.’

‘What were the other ones Nickie?’

‘Card nineteen, and card sixty-five.’

Des rifling through the rest of the deck,

‘Here are sixteen, seventeen, eighteen; *Shintaro throws his dagger through the crack in the ceiling at the Ninja*, and card... No, no, card nineteen. There’s twenty, twenty-one. That missing too Noah?’

‘Yes Gramps.’ Des saying,

‘Well I’ll be damned. I always, but always, had a complete set.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Don’t worry about it. Not as if the world has come to a stop.’ And it hadn’t. But it was now clear that Nicholas’s tormentor was neither Des nor his son, Joshua. Des saying,

‘But it has,’ looking at the horizon to see if the world had stopped spinning on its axis, ‘damned if I remember what I did with them.’

‘Know what Des? Maybe it was the Postmaster.’

‘Who? What are you on about Nickie?’

‘Someone who gave me the excuse to see you.’

‘Don’t need excuses Nickie. Or apologies.’

‘Apologies?’ Des saying,

‘You know what I mean... personally... I didn’t believe a word.’

‘Of the series?’ Des saying,

‘Come on...of what they said, and wrote about you.’

‘That...’ Nicholas said, ‘...Was a while ago.’ Then in a display of Japanese efficiency, ‘Have to go. Have people to visit.’ Little Noah saying,

‘Will you come again Uncle Nick?’ Nicholas saying,

‘I hope so...’ picking him up, and twirling him through the air, the way his Dad used to do with him, then, ‘...if you need me,’ sounding like a Samurai, promising the return of a hero when he was more a villain.

As Nicholas went down the street, Des shouting after him,

‘Know what Nickie? It’s actually, *Irashayimasu*. Not *Era shy mess* you know.’

‘I know.’

‘But I like our version better.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Me too,’ because it was a shy and messy era, trampled by time’s boots.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

## The Shogun and Emperor

Nicholas back at his hotel, thinking that maybe he shouldn't have, unannounced, just dropped in on Des like a Ninja dropped from the ceiling. Not that the reception had been frosty, but not what he'd expected.

And though the cards helped them bond with the past, Des clearly had no knowledge about any Postmaster, let alone scratchers, breathers, middle of the night doorknockers, maps, boots, bullets, or bloody lipsticks.

Nicholas deciding that maybe he shouldn't see people without warning. Might scare them, or alert them, the way that night at the hotel someone had perhaps tried to scare, or alert him. Thinking, *might be best to finish writing my story and present it like a Postmaster myself, and not to the imperial household, or the editors of magazines in Pasadena either, but to the people that mattered.*

And his manuscript didn't take long to finish, probably because over the next week there were no more interruptions or threats—depending how you looked at them. And Nicholas had already written most of it anyway. Writing the final bit about Celia—the one he'd been avoiding. Measuring out the days it took not in the coffee spoons of T.S. Eliot, but in whisky bottles, not worrying much about *infinitely suffering things...*

And the manuscript sort-of came out all right, although by the end of it, having both written and drunk too much, Nicholas was just as blurry as the picture of Shintaro on card one. Came out more as a sentimental prose poem about Newtown, about him and immigrants, maybe more about a nation than a detective quest—maybe about the things to which he was unequal. And that included *her*.

Sending copies, first to his brother, who it has to be said, and with due respect, had matured from Dauphin, into something of a French King. Well if, not a French King, a King at any rate, someone who has made a lot of money, and that is much the same thing. Wondered whether his brother Paul would even read it.

But he also sent a copy to Rachel—dangerous as that was—for a second opinion, waiting a week or two, before he paid them a visit. To give them time to read it, to see if they agreed with its conclusion.

....

Calling in on his brother one sunny Sunday afternoon in March, but it wasn't that easy to see his brother, since being important, he lived on the harbour behind gates and booted guards. Nicholas having to press the bell, then he had to persuade security to let him in to his presence.

'Who is it?'

Well, maybe it wasn't that hard, all Nicholas said was,

'Tell Paul, it's Nickie, his brother,' which the guard did over a videophone. But there was a delay, perhaps even a debate about whether to let him in, but maybe Nicholas was just being paranoid.

The guard saying,

'Come in, and go down to the conservatory, where Mister Paul said he'll wait.' Nicholas thinking, *my goodness, conservatories are where they study music, or glass rooms where murders occur in games of Cluedo, not real rooms.* And conservatories, as far as Nicholas was concerned only existed where Miss Mobbs came from, Lancashire, and the Isle of Wight, maybe just England. But Nicholas thought, *then again, that's no big deal. I've got one of my own,* by which he meant his hothouse of memory.

And what a grand house it was. His brother's that is, not memory – much bigger than they had in Newtown. Enormous actually, fitting for Paul's status. Different wings containing bedrooms and dining rooms and ballrooms everywhere. Antiques. French largely. Not Greek, or Australian. All the rooms looking at the harbour, that blue veldt that once welcomed immigrant ships, on whose gangplanks Nickie was welcome wagon and pirate.

And there was Paul, with his back to Nicholas, looking at the harbour, almost as if he too could remember the ships himself, which he couldn't, having been too young for that.

Paul holding his hands behind his back as if deep in thought, actually, Nicholas almost didn't recognise him because Paul was backlit against the sun. Its halo effect marking Paul out as a good Ninja, one devoted to the light and not the dark. Nicholas saying,

'Your majesty?' Just to be funny.

On hearing his voice Paul turning and saying,

'Nickie. You're back.' Nicholas saying,

'Yes, but I'm not sure if I ever went.'

And Paul came up and briefly embraced Nicholas. Maybe it was just a pat on the back, saying, 'Why didn't you write?' Nicholas saying,

'I did, sent you a long letter.' Paul saying,

'Oh, yes...that... er...book.'

'You read it?'

'Course I read it.'

'Well?'

But Paul just changed the subject,

'Nickie, where have you been? Was it as bad as all that? And what's all the bullshit about cards, Postmasters, door knockers, scratchers, heavy breathers, boots and bloody lipstick?' To which Nicholas didn't answer. 'Won't say will you?' Then, after a pause, 'Well, can I at least ask, did you really put spaghetti tins on my head when I was a tot?' Nicholas saying,

'Sometimes it was a *Heinz Three Bean Mix*.' Paul saying,

'Don't believe that.' Nicholas saying,

'Yeah, was always spaghetti. With meatballs, I might add. Anyway, that's just a trivial detail.' Paul saying,



‘I know. All part of the *intonaco* as you put it... of your quest.’  
But the way Paul said *intonaco* sounded sarcastic, and bitter. Nicholas  
saying,

‘Gives a flavour of the times.’ Paul saying,

‘You know these days, I don’t eat spaghetti Nickie.’

Nicholas wondering why they were talking about diets, saying,

‘You didn’t like it?’ Paul saying,

‘Like...has nothing to do with it...Did you mean it as a memoir or  
a detective novel?’

‘Neither.’

‘Glad to hear it. Shall we *just* call it a novel then?’ The sarcasm in  
Paul’s voice rising.

‘Isn’t it?’ Paul saying,

‘Yes. But I wasn’t sure if an adult wrote it, or a child.’ Nicholas  
saying,

‘Me neither.’ Paul echoing,

‘Me neither,’ and it sounded mocking. ‘But even in novels...  
don’t you think...there’s a responsibility to be accurate to the times? And I  
don’t dare mention the personalities, or the identity of the...’ Nicholas  
saying,

‘If there are any mistakes about the series, or some of the other  
stuff, they’re all mine. I just shuffled bits.’

‘Who *else’s* mistakes *would* they be?’ And Nicholas felt strange,  
having come for personal praise rather than literary criticism, wondering if  
he was facing the Postmaster now. Paul saying, ‘You know, the Greek  
community won’t be happy with you.’

‘They were once?’

‘No priest tried to drown me.’ Nicholas saying,

‘It’s a novel, I know no one did.’

‘And Sluts didn’t run off with Pater Thomas.’

‘She did run off.’

‘Yes, but with Leftie.’ Nicholas saying,

‘I know.’

‘And he didn’t have one arm, he had one...’

‘Leg,’ Nicholas said. ‘I know,’ now that he wasn’t pulling any.

‘And you should be careful... about identifying churches... neighbourhoods...periods, and personalities because some people might take it as ...’

‘Scripture?’

‘Gospel.’

‘I’m flattered.’ Paul saying,

‘Nick,’ as he pressed the bridge of his nose where his glasses had made an indent. ‘Need money?’ Nicholas saying,

‘That’s not why I came.’

‘Then?’

‘Maybe for missing cards...to find the...’

‘The Postmaster... Yeah, right...I forgot. Anyway I wasn’t the one who collected them Nickie. Remember? I was too young. At least you got *that* right. If anyone knows where *they* are, or *who* it is, it’s *you*.’

‘I know.’ Nicholas said. ‘But I burnt some of mine.’

‘So you say.’ Then Paul turned and looked at the sky, maybe at the sun, which was only fitting, being the Sun King and all that, adding, ‘...hot today isn’t it?’ Just like Sluts. Nicholas saying,

‘Yeah. It’s always hot,’ but actually inside his brother’s house it wasn’t, because Paul had learnt to tame pestilences, such as Fire, Flood, and Drought. He had brought them to heel not with Samurai swords, and star knives, but ducted air conditioning. Paul saying,

‘Seems in your book there is an awful lot of what you say *The Plain Truth* suffers from, because in yours, fact and fiction are also strangers to each other. Was original, I’ll give you that.’

‘A re-creation of the past.’

‘I think you’ve re-created your past perfect. Better than

it was. Certainly let yourself off lightly.’ Nicholas saying,

‘I don’t get it.’ Paul saying,

‘You know what I mean. By the way, the guard didn’t believe you were my brother, thought you were... a bum.’

‘A what?’

‘A tramp.’

‘Like Sluts?’

‘A hobo. Look at how you’re dressed, like one of the drunks from Newtown’s Parks.’

‘You wouldn’t remember them anyway.’ Paul saying,

‘Don’t need to. *You’ve* done the job for us.’ Then after a deeper sigh, ‘know what Nickie? Maybe you should get out more.’

‘Been overseas, a lot. London, Yerevan, Bangkok.’ Paul saying,

‘But sort-of *had* to, didn’t you? Chased by Postmasters, or *whoever*, I mean more ... out of Newtown, because the Newtown you write about doesn’t exist. And maybe never did’ – which was uncharitable.

‘Did too.’ Paul saying,

‘Maybe...it...did...*not*. Why not get yourself, like I did, a home on the harbour?’ By which he meant, Nicholas should try to become rich like him, maybe by destroying, or developing semis, or levelling and burning factories – property development his brother’s main line of business. ‘Get away from the factory belt. All that nastiness.’

‘Nastiness?’

‘Open your eyes. See sun and light. Forget about bloody Postmasters, door knockers, heavy breathers, boots, scratchers and bloody Newtown.’ At which point the harbour shimmered and glimmered, as if obedient to Paul. Then as a hydrofoil cut across it, Paul turned his back on Nicholas to face it, making himself again into a shadow figure. Paul asking, ‘Anyway... has Rachel read it? She at least uses lipstick.’

‘Dunno.’

‘Now *that* would be an interesting opinion.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Didn’t mean to make you angry Paul. Hey, I really should go,’ which seemed to pacify him. Paul saying,

‘Nickie,’ calmer, maybe because Nicholas was leaving, ‘stay as long as you like...but as long as it’s in the present. Not in the past. Who needs cards and fucking Postmasters?’ Closing off wings and rooms, throwing sheets over furniture stored in Nicholas’s palace of memory, obvious that Paul didn’t think Nicholas had exclusive access. And he didn’t. ‘Shall I call you a cab Nick?’ Nicholas saying,

‘It’s okay. I like to walk these days. Gets the blood flowing.’ Paul saying,

‘Come again.’ But Nicholas didn’t think he wanted Nicholas to repeat it, certainly not a return visit. ‘Don’t need to write a book as an excuse to visit, or invent ludicrous Postmasters. All this in an age of emails, Twitter, and attachments.’ Clear he didn’t believe any of it, or that Nicholas was in danger. Nicholas repeating,

‘Attachments,’ but he didn’t mean files.

And Nicholas left Paul standing looking at the harbour, Nicholas, walking out backwards, dismissed from his presence.

Leaving that compound, on that guarded street, walking past leafy plane trees they call not Moreton Bay figs but ‘long established,’ planted before Southern European immigrants, in a suburb called Vaucluse, or was it Recluse? What Nicholas was, or at least had been....

Clear to Nicholas how more influenced and wounded we are by peashooters rather than aerial bombardments.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

## The Event Horizon

Nicholas thinking, maybe he should go see Karen before Rachel, the Karen who'd been with him in the park that first fateful night, which is why he also sent her a copy. But this time he did call ahead, because his sudden appearance seemed to shock people. Nicholas saying,

'Karen? It's Nickie.'

'Nickie who?' The cheek.

'I sent you a book.' Karen saying,

'Yeah...oh... right... yeah.' But it was a long drawn out, 'yeah...'

'Is it okay if I see you?' Karen saying,

'Nick, I'd been trying to remember who you are, and then finally it came to me halfway through.'

'Can I?' Karen saying,

'Pretty busy right now Nick. I have two kids, and two jobs, two shifts, but thanks for the book, so...'

So, Karen was now doing shift work, carrying on the family tradition. Nicholas begging,

'Please.' Karen saying,

'Okay, Monday, we'll have lunch. I work in the city, in Martin Place.'

'Near the Sydney office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet?'

'The what?'

'Meet you outside the Reserve Bank.'

'Fine.'

Nicholas thrilled Karen had said, 'yes', also because they were meeting outside the building he once had as a moneybox. The auspices were good. Not that she was any Postmaster, or sender of maps and lipstick, not by a long shot. Certainly didn't wear jackboots. Knew that much.

....

Next morning, having a close shave, and a long shower, then he put on a fresh pair of shorts, not wanting to shock Karen the way he shocked his brother. Nicholas even considered wearing a drop of *Maja*. Once he was clean and dapper, shouting to the mirror,

‘*Ole,*’ because now he was near conquest.

....

At the coffee shop near the Reserve Bank, as he approached, Karen saying,

‘Nickie?’ But she was just taking a punt. Not that he recognised her either. She could have been any middle-aged lady. And she looked very conservative. Nicholas saying,

‘Yes.’

‘You look ... different. Come. Sit. I’ve only time for a cappuccino. Let’s get this over with. What are you having?’ As he sat, Nicholas saying,

‘Is it licensed?’ But the look on her face suggested Karen might have joined the Salvation Army.

‘A bit early for that isn’t it?’ And in Karen’s tone he almost heard a tambourine rattle. Nicholas saying,

‘And too late.’

‘Nickie, I can’t stay long.’ Nicholas asking,

‘Did you like it?’ Karen saying,

‘I just skimmed it,’ and then to the waiter, ‘I’ll have a skim cap.’

Nicholas saying,

‘Me too. Skimmed?’

‘Not a great reader, with two...’ Nicholas saying,

‘Jobs, kids, and shifts.’

‘Yes. And it’s all about primary school and Japs, Postmasters, and weird stuff I don’t know much about and...’

‘And?’

‘We didn’t meet till high school, remember? And I wasn’t the latchkey girl in the park, and I was never into Ninjas. Don’t you recall how we met? You and I met because we liked David Bowie. Not Japan.’

‘I know,’ Nicholas said.

‘Well then, what?’

‘*A God awful small affair,*’ Nicholas said to her.

‘*To the girl with the mousy hair,*’ Karen sang back. Nicholas, thinking not of Karen’s hair, but Jessie’s, because hers was mousy too. ‘Yeah we used to sing that together on the train, going to and coming...’

‘...From school.’

‘Yeah,’ Karen said. ‘From *Life on Mars.*’

‘Is there?’ Nicholas asked.

‘Don’t know.’ Karen said. ‘Maybe one day they’ll find some.’

Nicholas saying,

‘We also sang, *Starman.*’

‘Yes,’ Karen said, singing, ‘*He’d like to come and meet us...*’

Nicholas finishing,

‘...*But he thinks he’ll blow our minds,*’ both of them laughing. And it was fun, although not very useful. Pleasant enough though, being taken back to adolescence as a substitute, since getting back to childhood, and finding the cards, or meeting ‘whoever’ was proving difficult. Karen saying,

‘And remember I used to have spiky hair just like Bowie?’

Nicholas saying,

‘Yeah,’ because Karen did, David Bowie and his *Starman* phase, maybe her own version of *The Samurai*. Nicholas saying, ‘Don’t know what phase he’s into now, maybe just senility.’ Karen saying,

‘Don’t say that. That’s not nice. Bowie’s married to that top model and living in New York.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Are there bottom models?’ But this just perplexed her, because it sounded rude.

‘Nickie... you’re a bit weird. What happened?’ Nicholas saying,

‘The book...’ Karen saying,

‘Forget the book and the bloody cards...and bloody Postmaster, and lipstick on maps. This coffee is terrible,’ spitting some of it out, maybe all of them. ‘What happened to you?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Nothing, just life.’ But she wasn’t listening, the coffee too much of a disappointment, its lack of punch, its bitterness.

She looked at her watch,

‘I have to go. Let’s meet up again sometime.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Course.’ But like her, or *Starman* he meant in another dimension.

And off Karen went, to her two kids, her two jobs and shifts, to the duality of her existence, rather than to the Singularity Nicholas was now facing, in the Event Horizon he had crossed into. Karen having treated Nicholas how her parents treated her, with indifference.

....



**CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN      The Revenge of the Geisha**

Back at his hotel, Nicholas thinking, *maybe I'll wait another week before seeing Rachel*, thinking, *I need to build up to it*. Nicholas's meetings so far unsuccessful, they certainly hadn't exposed any culprits.

Opening the window onto the night, to hear what small rattle the new trains gave off, even though they had none of the music of red rattlers. No arias...falling into what he thought, was a well-deserved sleep.

....

But Nicholas didn't have to go see Rachel. Because suddenly there wasn't any knock, or scratch, but a crash bang, and his hotel door was kicked wide open. A Japanese Geisha rushing in, who, from her sleeve produced a stiletto, not like *Madama Butterfly*, to stab herself, but him. And he didn't have time to reach for any knife under his pillow. A woman in white make-up who rushed up to the bed where he lay, shoving the knife to his throat saying,

'One false move Mister, and you're done,' one of her long-sleeved arms around his head and throat, the other holding the pointy bit at his jugular. Nicholas saying,

'What the hell...?' To which she said,

'It's me, Nickie. Ohio, or *Ohio Gozaimasu*, or, 'go say a mass,' as you say. Japanese for, 'good morning.' Nicholas saying,

'But it's not morning. It's evening.' Rachel saying,

'Well then, *konban wa* to you,' because despite her appearance and being older, it was her. And all he could think of saying was,

'Why you...' Rachel, this Ninja disguised as a Japanese courtesan saying, 'Nickie you die.' Nicholas saying breathlessly,

'Rachel, it really is ... you.'

Rachel saying,

‘Who else would it be, dummy? One of my ‘agents’ or Ninjas?’  
Nicholas saying,

‘Rachel, what are you doing here in the middle of the night?’

‘Did you really think I’d let you get away with those lies? The slander? And Postmaster bullshit?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Didn’t lie. It’s a novel. Wasn’t slander.’ Rachel saying,

‘No, being in print I guess makes it libel.’ And a small drop of blood came out of his neck, as she pressed her threat hard. Nicholas saying,

‘Rachel, I can explain.’ Rachel saying,

‘And how will you do that exactly?’

‘Was going to come see you next week.’

‘I should count myself lucky.’

‘To talk in a civilised fashion.’

‘How very Japanese of you, still.’

‘Rachel, please put down the knife.’

‘No!’ God, she was still stubborn.

‘And let go of my throat. You’re strangling me.’ Rachel saying,

‘No, Nickie, you’ve...well and truly strangled yourself,’ which was sort-of true.

‘Rachel. Can’t talk to you when you’re this angry.’ Rachel saying,

‘Try, because...I don’t know how you’re going to get out of this.’

Nicholas saying,

‘Been in spots just as lousy,’ echoing what she used to say in childhood, but at least that made her laugh. Rachel saying,

‘Know what? When you’re not cruel, you’re a laugh riot. You kill me,’ still using her Americanisms, even though that was exactly what she was trying to do to him.

‘Will you let me explain?’ Rachel saying,

‘Okay, Mister, but make it snappy.’ Her Americanisms at odds with the flowing kimono she wore, the geisha wig with the pearls attached, and her white make-up. Nicholas saying,

‘How did you get in?’ Rachel saying,

‘I kicked the door in, and not with a bloody jackboot. What did you expect me to do, keep knocking, scratching, calling, or drop from the ceiling like a Ninja?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Would’ve been more elegant.’ Rachel saying,

‘Well? Why did you paint me out as a little witch, gangster, or Postmaster bitch?’

‘I didn’t paint you a witch. Des used to call you a...’

‘Never mind him. At least he had the decency not to write it down. And, *Carp, Fish of Many Colours*, what was all that about? Making a fool of me.’ Nicholas saying,

‘We did make a film about Carp.’

‘Crap. It was a documentary dummy, about the depleted oceans of the world. Ecology. And it did very well, called, *The Vanishing Sea*, and we didn’t go bankrupt. Went on to do one on *Drougths*, then on *Deserts*.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Desertification,’ but he really meant desertion.

‘And there was the other one about fires deliberately lit in the Amazon. They were all good.’

‘The fires?’

‘The documentaries.’ Nicholas saying,

‘So I used a bit of license.’

‘We made lots. Why are you putting me down, putting yourself down?’

‘Not a put down.’

‘And they were popular. Well received. Unlike what you just writ.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Wrote,’ just to be pedantic. But he shouldn’t have, because it elicited from the point of her dagger another drop of blood.

‘And what was all that Newtown rot?’

‘Where I lived.’

‘Where we *all* lived, wasn’t just *you*, and all that Jewish stuff, might as well have called it, Jewtown. Did you think of that?’

‘Can I use it?’

‘No. Stop it!’

‘But Newtown did have Jews as well as Greeks.’

‘And Italians, and *Yugos*, and everyone else, but you seem to claim ownership.’

‘I was drawing parallels.’ Rachel saying,

‘You were drawing shit.’ And to think Nicholas had never heard her swear till now, a sign of her anger, maybe danger.

‘Do you want me to just take you out?’

‘Out of what?’

‘The book, or I can leave you in...and try to make you, more... likeable.’ Rachel shouting,

‘Dare you! People... do... actually... like me! And I’m not the freaking Postmaster, gangster, witch or bitch with maps, bullets and lipsticks. Don’t need *you*.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Rachel, please put down the knife.’ Rachel saying, ‘Stiletto,’ being pedantic herself.

‘Stiletto then.’

‘Promise you won’t try and run?’

‘Nowhere to go anyway.’

‘Won’t try and wrest it from me?’

‘No, don’t want us cut, winding up salami.’ Rachel saying,

‘Okay,’ and she released her grip, ‘Now sing like a bird,’ what Nicholas thought he’d done in his manuscript. Nicholas saying,

‘Fine, I will. But can I have a drink? I sort-of need it.’

And Rachel turned to the night table and grabbed his *Johnny Walker* bottle, handing it to him, saying,

‘Drink from this.’

‘I need a glass.’

Rachel saying,

‘Drink from the bottle. The way you said the drunks did.’ Nicholas here in possibly his final moments being denied common courtesies he once exercised with Pater Thomas, and less successfully with Pater Jacob. Nicholas swigging from the bottle, then saying,

‘... Need to ask one more thing.’ Rachel saying,

‘You’re in no position to ask anything, Mister,’ her hand, again tightening around the dagger. Nicholas saying,

‘Don’t get excited, Rachel, just need to know...’

‘Spit it out.’

‘If you...have the missing cards, or were really sending me stuff?’

The trains outside without explanation now noisy, there was even a thunderclap, more thunder and wind. And there was fire in the distance. Not a bushfire, or a fire dragon, but Sydney factories possibly fallen victim to arson, maybe even to his brother, since to Paul they were just satanic mills that his ‘developments’, needed to burn and silence. The Fire Next Time, now actually present, the fulfilment of prophesy burning as bright as any tiger in the night. Rachel saying,

‘Course I have the cards. Even if I’m no Postmistress, only an idiot would burn them.’ And it sounded almost as if the cards weren’t cards at all, but what Shintaro and Fuma sought, the mirrors.

But Rachel having said she had some, made Nicholas feel relief, made him ready to ‘sing’. At last he felt some comfort, Nicholas saying,

‘What do you want to know?’ Rachel saying,

‘Everything, but I haven’t got all night. And this bloody make-up is murder.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Want some *Cold Cream* to wipe it off?’ Rachel astonished, saying,

‘You have *Cold Cream*?’ The element of threat in her voice receding... Nicholas saying,

‘Let me look,’ getting up off the bed, as if they had just been having a chat, Nicholas going to his tiny bathroom, where strangely he did have some. And face powder too called, *Maja*, in packets and jars as old as he was. Souvenirs from Sluts’ room, left like his cards, in his storage case. Taking the *Cold Cream* out to Rachel, who, sitting on his bed, sort-of glimmered in the moonlight in white make-up. Saying to her, ‘Use this,’ handing her the jar of *Pond’s Cold Cream*—not that she ever needed creams to be beautiful—and some tissues. Rachel saying,

‘Thanks,’ removing her wig, slowly dabbing at her face removing the make-up. ‘Now while I do this, let it all hang-out,’ which to Nicholas’s ears sounded a bit too modern, more from the late sixties than the early sixties he wrote about. Nicholas saying,

‘Well, it’s like this.’ Rachel saying,

‘And this time, Mister, put in all the predicates.’

‘The what?’

‘You know what I mean. The stuff you deliberately left out.’ Nicholas sighing, saying,

‘You went to a lot of trouble, dressing up just to see me.’ Rachel saying,

‘Gal’s gotta look her best even if it’s too late.’ Nicholas saying,

‘It’s not too late.’ Rachel saying,

‘Speak, Nickie, just get on with it. Anyway, this *Cold Cream* stinks. How long have you had this?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Forty-three years.’ Rachel saying,

‘Forty-three years? That’s disgusting.’ Nicholas saying,

‘I know,’ but he didn’t mean the *Cold Cream* or its shelf life, but the years and their passing.

‘Well?’ She said.

‘Well...’ Nicholas said, trying to be heard over the wailing of sirens heading to the fires and the noise of the trains, and their carriages,

now as insistent as the rhythm of the thunderclaps – Nicholas getting up to close the window against them. Rachel saying,

‘Leave it open!’ Which was an order, ‘we can do with the air. Hot in here.’ Maybe she was thinking about the Sydney Stadium.

And Nicholas sat down again, after another bolt of lightning, a beauty, saying,

‘Well, it’s like this...’

But on hearing the thunder that accompanied it, almost as if it was calling her, Rachel stood up and stared at Nicholas, then out the window as if unsure where she was. Her eyes round like moons, saying,

‘What the hell am I doing here?’ as if Nicholas had kidnapped her when she was the intruder. Rachel looking around, scared for the first time in her life saying, ‘What the hell am I doing here?’ Still looking all about the room and out the window to the trains, and at the lightning, and at all the fires ablaze over Sydney, then down at her red kimono that was as red as her lipstick. Nicholas saying,

‘You came...demanding explanations.’

‘About?’

‘Me, what I’d been up to. Why I wrote about you ... as if you were the Postmaster.’ Rachel saying,

‘Nickie, you’re crazy.’

‘Am not crazy.’

‘I wouldn’t have come here for all the tea in China.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Mean Japan, surely,’ to maintain the theme. Rachel saying,

‘I don’t need any explanations.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Predicates.’

‘None of them either. I know all about you.’

‘Guess you do.’

‘Why would I come to find out what I already know?’ Nicholas saying,

‘It stands to reason.’

And with that, hearing another thunderclap Rachel spread her arms out, draping her long sleeves to the left and to the right, as if she were in some opera like *Madama Butterfly*, or maybe some other opera sung by Maria Callas, before like a Ninja of extraordinary strength, and power she said, ‘*Sayonara* Mister. See you later Nickie boy,’ not stabbing herself with her stiletto, but vanishing with the next thunderclap, in a mist thicker than any that ever swallowed Edo.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

## The Ringmaster

Nicholas waking up in his hotel room, looking at his clock, next to his empty bottle, where his clock said, 3.30am. The Ninja of the past now not confined to twilight, or fiction, but dreams.

Waking up hot and sweaty, his body trying to expel the alcohol fumes that cling to alcoholics tighter than memory.

Thinking, *this is ridiculous... don't need to see Rachel in a dream, not dressed like that anyway, certainly not with any knife. It's too frightening.* Thinking, *better see Rachel now,* not wanting to risk another oppressive night with phantoms. Thinking though, before he went to see her, that it was only right, according to the feudal way that he thought and lived by, to again see the Master first, by which he meant the Ringmaster, his father. At the Big Top, where, interred and inured, rest immigrations' heroes, ones braver than Warragamba's lions. A cemetery whose gates are not marked by Xs or asterisks as if on a map, or with corny exhortations like *Arbeit Mach Frei*, put there as comedy, and to mock people, examples of German irony – the belief that still maintains their nation, but the words, *Cemetery of Botany.*

Strange place Botany, since it's the site where white Australians first landed, and where most of them actually finish, if they are denizens of Sydney.

A graveyard and desolate field overlooking a port that brings in no more immigrants, or even '*exploded ones.*' A port that exports containers no longer filled with products once manufactured around Newtown, but the flesh and skin of the land now feeding the hunger of developing economies. Japan certainly, China, mainly.

Where uninterrupted a wind blows night and day because, there, there is no one to oppose it.

A place where it's hotter than the Gobi in summer and colder than glaciers in winter, almost as if those seeking rest are being punished.

Strange place, because as Nicholas once more walked amidst its tombs, he again saw the real Ninjas of the faith, Pater Thomas and Pater Jacob's replacements, Orthodox priests, the last remnants of an era, the ones he had thought of on his first visit as a small garrison. Their black garments not as tight as those of Ninjas but loose, fluttering under in the wind, as they swing not Samurai swords but braziers full of incense.

Every hillock and hillside in Botany taken up by these strange black creatures – the intermediaries and proxy of the living and the dead.

Nicholas hearing the sound of lamentations, sometimes just the sound of sobs coming from the mobs that follow them, as more and more the first wave of immigration gets buried.

Nicholas waiting until most of these funeral parties departed, maybe because he wanted the whole cemetery to himself, his own ringside seat so to speak. Not wanting to be interrupted by people who wouldn't understand his interview with the Ringmaster, despite it being in neither Japanese nor Greek, but English, the language of Miss Mobbs and the world's feudal masters.

Walking around that graveyard looking at names on tombstones, chiselled names now the only evidence that such people existed, Nicholas looking at the tombstones as teeth separating heaven from the earth.

Again finding his Dad's grave is not near the Greek section, but near the Italian vaults, near those houses and mausoleums as large as semis—the houses that Sluts despised, that his brother continued to level and develop. Mausoleums with corners and cornices guarded by stone angels, stone gorgons and plaster members of the Trinity, his friends and companions, the ones he called Guilt and Gloom, the darkest of the Muses.

And much like the priests, the winged statues themselves seemed just frozen Ninjas, ready to spit forth and descend like Harrier Jump Jets, on anyone desecrating what they guard. Nicholas saying, 'Hello ladies,' as he looked up at the stone statues with wings, just to be polite. 'Glad you could come,' even though they'd always lived there.

But they didn't acknowledge him, maybe because they found his formality false, and sarcastic. And they needed no introduction, probably because over the years they'd become more like family.

When suddenly Nicholas heard all of them say at once in a ghastly choir, in a voice hollow and half-throttled, what everyone else said to him,

'Hello Nickie.' Nicholas responding,

'Hello girlfriends. How goes the Post Office?' The statues echoing,

'What took you so long?' Nicholas shouting back,

'Can't rush these things,' just to be funny.

But they just kept repeating,

'Nickie, Nickie, Nickie...' spinning round him, not like yo-yos, but the Andromeda Galaxy. Nicholas saying,

'Shut up. I'm here already,' sounding almost Jewish.

But maybe there were no voices, or mistresses of the Post. Just sounds made by the wind, row after row of tombstones acting like bullroarers. Then again, maybe it wasn't the wind making the noise, but vampires that feed not on blood but memory, which is much the same thing. And they have no satiety, let alone manners. Always ready to strike and bite whomever they please, in unguarded moments, particularly in dreams.

And his Dad's grave was no different to last time, or to the others, despite his status as Ringmaster. There was nothing special marking him out here, in what is really The Greatest Show on Earth. Just granite that had his Dad's name and his years etched on it defining much as Nicholas had tried to do, a period, by investigating Postmasters and others, setting them up as quest and quarry.

Also, the names of those who'd survived him, Nicholas's mother, and his brother certainly, even Nicholas, although in his case, survival is debatable. Nicholas saying,

'Hello, Dad,' much the same way the statues said to him, 'Hello Nickie.' Nicholas adding, 'Era shy mess,' even though his Dad never spoke

Japanese. Not able to think of more to say, conversations between the living and the dead being unilateral, even on second opportunity. Kneeling down and cleaning the grave, eradicating the weeds, washing and polishing the stone with some cotton balls he'd brought with him. Saying, over and over, 'Hello Dad, Era shy mess.' Remembering how proudly his Dad presided over weddings, and how proudly Nickie once presided over divorce, or to be more accurate, annulments. Although perhaps not his own, but then again, maybe yes...

Remembering how his Dad used to pick Nickie up, and twirl him round and round, almost as if Nickie were a sphere dancing around the stars. Nicholas thinking the only thing he could now say, even at the risk of blasphemy, was,

'Dad?' To silence, 'Dad?' continuing, '...in my father's house are many mansions...' maybe meaning brides, maybe meaning, less their house in Newtown and more the graves of Botany, finishing, 'in you I am well pleased.' Reversing their roles, usurping what was in every manger and tableaux of the Peanut Butter factory, Nicholas, still cheeky.

Committing sacrilege and blasphemy, which it certainly was, because no sooner had he finished the last syllable, than with a thunderclap, a bolt of lightning knocked him to his knees.

Nicholas knocked down for his daring and insolence, where amidst what was now rain and hail, closer to the gravestone he read... not his surname, but maybe what he'd really come to see – a name tattooed on his arm, in Roman 12pt Italics.

*Jessica...* with dates after it saying, 1958–2000... Survived by... someone... whose name was defaced much like his life and map. And there in the wind and hail, Nicholas was like some suburban Lear. Didn't even notice how cold it was, inured to it. Knowing that now was the right time to see Rachel. As thunder and lightning escorted him out of Botany, that other Eden lacking any Eve, any live one anyway, much like the Ninja gorgons that guarded it, the furies seeing off someone full of pomp and vanity.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

## The Postmaster Arrives

Nicholas saying,

‘Hello Rachel,’ when he found her home, not that far from the railway overpass near his hotel, where in her living room, Rachel was biting a plate that had no salami on it. Which was odd. Maybe this was in Paddington, maybe Double Bay. Doesn’t matter, would only be important if it was Newtown. And it hadn’t been marked with a red X on his map. The rainstorm under whose cover he’d left the cemetery, now worse. Nicholas thinking, *but at least it might put out the fires sweeping through the factories.* Nicholas again saying, ‘Hello.’

Which made Rachel stop biting her plate, putting it down, saying,

‘Nickie? How did you get in?’ What he said to her, that time she arrived like Madama Butterfly in his dream. Nicholas saying,

‘I knocked, but no one heard me over the storm.’ At which point there was another thunderclap, and veined lightning underscoring what he said. Nicholas saying, ‘at least I didn’t kick the door in,’ which was silly, Rachel wasn’t to know what she did in a dream.

Rachel saying, ‘Kick...? You’re wet as dog. You’ll catch your death.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Can’t catch me yet.’ Rachel saying,

‘Nickie,’ coming up and giving him a hug. Nicholas saying,

‘Now, now, you’ll get wet too,’ pulling her off him, after a decent interval.

‘Let me get you a towel.’ Nicholas saying,

‘And some *Cold Cream,*’

‘Some what?’

‘Kidding, you alone?’ But Rachel hesitated before answering.

‘You alone or not?’ More thunder and lightning.

‘Does it matter?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Good. We need to talk,’ as Rachel went off to the bathroom.

‘Here,’ she said returning. ‘Use this,’ throwing a towel at him.  
And how warm it was and soft.

‘This a good time for you?’ Rachel saying,

‘It’s... as good as any. But tell me Nickie, why come in a storm?’

Nicholas saying,

‘I couldn’t bear another night of phantoms.’

‘You mean Postmasters and Ninjas?’ Which had a hint of derision.

‘No. Not them.’ Rachel saying,

‘Dry now?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Almost,’ as he wiped his hair with the towel.

‘Can I get you tea? Sorry, forgot, I’ve also got whisky. Even *Sake*.

Someone brought it back for me from Japan.’

‘Someone?’

‘My husband.’

‘You call him, ‘someone’?’ Rachel saying,

‘Wasn’t sure you wanted to know.’

‘I don’t. Where’s he now?’ Which was contradictory.

‘You came to talk about ...yourself... not him.’

‘Makes me sound selfish.’

‘Defence rests.’ Nicholas saying,

‘...Came to ask you about the book,’ and there was another  
thunderclap.

‘What of it?’

‘Your thoughts.’ Rachel saying,

‘Tra, la, la,’ shrugging, just the way she used to when they first  
met at the delicatessen.

‘You didn’t take offence?’

‘Offence? Tra la la. Why should I? I’m not the Postmaster, door  
knocking heavy breather, gangster, or Fido with lipstick.’

‘Everyone else did.’ Rachel saying,

‘You flatter yourself. Always did. Besides, it’s a novel isn’t it? Even if no one comes out of it in *‘mint condition’*...as you say,’ dripping with irony on those words, maybe even with menace.

‘Do you have the cards?’ Rachel angrier now, saying,

‘Of *course* I have the cards,’ to more lightning.

‘Do you have card nineteen and...’

‘Have all of them dummy. And I’m not the one sending them. Nickie, stop it. Jessie’s dead.’ Nicholas saying,

‘I know, died a long time ago.’

‘Not that long ago. Six years ago. Sort-of sweet the way you made her die as a kid, and you the one who tried to save her when in fact...’

‘In fact?’

‘Let me get you that drink. I need one too,’ which Rachel did, giving him a generous portion.

‘Cheers.’

‘*Salut.*’

‘*Kampai.*’ Rachel saying,

‘And *Yiassou,*’ he and she being such multicultural polyglots and linguists, adding ‘you know the only bit I didn’t like...’

‘Only one?’

‘I didn’t like you mentioning Piranhas. Makes me sound sort of evil and commercial. Our films were about...’

‘I know, ecology, the depleted oceans. Investigative journalism.’ Rachel saying,

‘Yes. Investigative. We did quite a few.’

‘Did we?’

‘Not interested, are you?’ At which point Nicholas drank some more, because he wasn’t. There was no disguising it. ‘And they were good,’ she said, ‘Till you stuffed it up with that ridiculous travelogue, *In Search of Maria Callas*. You don’t even like Opera.’

‘Wasn’t that bad.’

‘And it was nothing of the sort, but about your cousin, and the Greek Islands, and...’

‘Was colourful.’

‘No one bought it or screened it.’

‘Their loss.’

‘Then capping it all off with that observational piece about Jessie.’

‘What about it?’

‘Nick, she was dying anyway.’

‘So?’

‘Did we need to see you helping her?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Youth in Asia,’ making light of it, as if he was just talking about Asia’s younger generation rather than anything of consequence, maybe just the place where he now resided. Rachel saying,

‘Euthanasia...’ giving it its correct spelling. ‘Then filming yourself giving her the pills, emotional as it was, made you accessory to...’

‘That’s what Jessie wanted. I couldn’t watch her suffer any more.’

‘They charged you.’

‘They couldn’t prove it.’

‘You were seen on camera giving...’

‘Maybe not the wisest decision.’

‘No. But did you have to go on the chat shows about it?’ Nicholas saying,

‘*Opera.*’

‘*Oprah, 60 Minutes, A Current Affair,* sure made an opera out of it, like you were its advocate. But you always loved her didn’t you? Not me.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Sort-of sweet the way you made her die as a kid, then as an adult...’

‘Enough.’



‘And the blue marks on her arms and stuff were sort-of clever when Jessie really had leukaemia.’

‘Enough.’

‘Pretending all the time this is about some unknown Celia.’

‘Enough.’

‘...And you married Jessie. Not that I was jealous.’

‘Rachel, have you the cards?’ And at this point, the thunder really clapped, but not in applause.

‘But it was why you left the country.’

‘I’m back.’

‘Papers pursued you for a while.’

‘They got bored eventually.’ To change the subject, Nicholas saying, ‘Rachel, tell me. Why are you biting a plate?’

‘I’m not biting a plate.’

‘Saw you.’ Rachel saying,

‘Oh that. It’s...’ Nicholas saying, ‘What do you do now? If you don’t mind me asking.’

‘Not documentary, that’s for sure. These days they give me the creeps, all about people’s misery. Antiques, I buy and sell antiques. Porcelain mostly. Plate... Sometimes to tell if it’s authentic, you need to slightly bite it between your teeth. And you can tell from that.’

‘No joke?’ So, what Nicholas had said about Piranhas was accurate.

‘Don’t be rude Nick.’

‘What sort of plates?’

‘Japanese if you must know. Sometimes it’s *Ming*. Trade them on the net. Do quite well.’

‘Like cards?’

‘But it’s more lucrative, so many collectors about,’ obviously the influences of childhood, residual. Nicholas saying,

‘Rachel do you have the cards?’ Not because he was desperate to see lost cards, but so she wouldn’t start again about Jessie or the ‘Celia’ invented as her replacement.

But Rachel did, saying,

‘Nickie, I’m sorry Jessie died and the way it was handled...’

‘How I handled it.’

‘Yes.’

But Nicholas had had enough of this conversation. ‘The cards Rachel, do you have them?’

‘Course I have the missing bloody cards. Said so,’ outside the weather now a cyclone.

‘Can I...’

‘Nickie, think me an idiot, some sort of dummy? What sort of patsy do you take me for Mister?’ Her Americanisms still evident, her anger rising. You don’t need to see the cards, no one does. Card seven, card nineteen, card sixty-five, oh brother, doesn’t matter what’s on them, does it? And there’s no sender of maps, bullets, lipstick or Postmasters...except *you*. Not rocket science is it?’ Nicholas agreeing,

‘No,’ because rocket science for him wasn’t difficult, since once upon a time he had been string theory’s earliest advocate.

‘Seven... is how old you were,’

‘We.’

‘Nineteen, and sixty-five. The year, if you put them together... when you first met *her*. And fifty is what you are now. There is no God damn Postmaster, or God damn heavy breather, boots or scratcher.’

‘No?’

‘No. Only a Past Master and that Past Master is *you*. At least have the courtesy to spell it correctly.’ Nicholas saying,

‘I’d better go.’

Rachel saying,

‘Better. My, *somebody*’s, coming home soon,’ to a clap of thunder louder than any they’d heard. As he stood up, Rachel giving him the whisky bottle, saying, ‘Here take it with you.’ Nicholas saying,

‘Thanks.’ Rachel saying,

‘And these,’ giving him the complete Samurai deck, beautifully wrapped, almost as if it’d come directly from Japan, untouched by human hands, or gloves, let alone placed on the counter of a delicatessen. Nicholas saying,

‘*Arigato*,’ adding, to be still multicultural, ‘*efharisto*.’ Rachel whispering,

‘Don’t mention it...’ Anyway, it had been mentioned now. Clear who was alive and who was dead. It was Jessie the adult, and not her stand-in, the Celia he pretended was his lost lover. Clear he was no Postmaster but Past Master. Then Rachel led him out, saying, ‘...bye’, or maybe ‘*sayonara*,’ giving him a final hug, then saying, ‘Nickie? Why didn’t you marry me?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Was always Jessie. You were obsessed with that *shiksa*.’

‘That what?’ Nicholas thinking *shiksa* was akin to floozy. Rachel saying,

‘Australian girl. The only Anglo in your book, other than imaginary Celia, Jessie, Miss Mobbs, Salesmen, and a bunch of drunks... Real sweet though, the way you re-arranged the past.’

‘Into episodes.’ Rachel saying,

‘Will you come again?’ Nicholas saying,

‘Dunno. Not big on repeats.’ Rachel saying,

‘It was cancer, Nickie. Nothing else. Why did they make such a fuss, she would’ve died anyway.’

‘I tried to help.’

‘But did you have to be so public? Now you beat yourself up about it, as if it was your fault.’ Nicholas repeating,

‘Cancer... Well... See ya.’ Rachel saying,

‘Nickie. Come back.’

But he’d already left. The word, ‘cancer’ ringing in his ears probably because it’s the same as memory being just as benign, and malignant, but less curable.

Where, outside in the street, the storm suddenly ceased, almost as if instructed to do so at a pre-arranged signal. Where nearby, he found not a post box, but a garbage bin, into which he threw the cards, emptying the *Suntory* bottle on top of them. The clink it made, like the clink of Kabuki sticks struck to indicate a climax – throwing a match onto the lot, igniting all of it, the *Suntory* now his methylated spirits. Thinking, *don’t need it any more*. The booze he meant, *and maybe never did*, felt he no longer wanted to shuffle cards, or receive anything from any Postmaster either as email, or attachments, no longer needing to be the Past Master since now he faced the future.

....

**CHAPTER FORTY      The Departure of the Samurai**

Once he'd packed ready to go back to Bangkok, going to see his Mum in the nursing home, just to say, *sayonara*, since he wasn't planning to return. Not finding her in her room, but in the cafeteria, holding court the way she used to in the Wedding Factory. Where, Nicholas heard her saying to the other inmates—more usually called patients—as he approached,

'In all, thirteen brides came out of our house.' At which some of the other inmates whistled. Hearing his mother adding for emphasis, 'Thirteen,' even though Nicholas disputes that number. A cafeteria whose walls gleamed white with just an occasional poster for decoration, not of snow in Japan, or clouds skimming across Mount Fuji but of Greece and its islands. Posters that were little reminders of the places—like the England of Miss Mobbs—no longer possible for them to visit. When his mother repeated again for emphasis to her companions, maybe because she forgot she'd already said it, 'thirteen brides,' at which they whistled again, perhaps because they'd forgotten they'd heard it.

Nicholas saying,

'Hello Mum.' His Mum saying,

'Is it time for my pills already?' What he once filmed himself giving to Jessie, now it was clear Jessie hadn't died in childhood but at his hands, as an adult, Celia a stand-in, and literary sidekick, in repressed, repressive memory which for all people is selective. Nicholas saying, 'Mum. It's Nickie.'

'Nickie? That's such a beautiful name. My son was called Nickie. You remind me of him. You could be brothers.' Nicholas saying,

'Where's he now?' His Mum saying,

'He's a busy man. He works in television. He always liked television. Now be a dear, and do an old lady a favour. Go to the kitchen and get me some lemonade. They don't give me any here. Keep talking about my 'sugar levels.' If you do that honey, I have a surprise for you.' As

Nicholas went off on his errand, hearing in the background, ‘and that was my niece for you, that “theatre.” She sure had all the moves. Practically invented them,’ to wild guffaws from her audience. And Nicholas knew each time she told the story, for them it was fresh and original. Much like his. Nicholas saying,

‘Here Mum,’ giving her the glass in which bubbles jumped around, much like he did when he was young. His Mum saying,

‘Mum?’ looking at him perplexed, ‘did I tell you, you look like...?’

‘Mum it’s me.’ His Mum saying,

‘Nickie, it is you,’ as she brought her hands up as a signal for him to bend down and give her a kiss, which he did. ‘How long has it been?’ Nicholas saying,

‘A long time,’ estimating about six years, years that for her were now more like days. Whispering to him,

‘You know your evil brother brought me here. I don’t know why. I think he wants to hold me prisoner.’ But now it wasn’t possible for any Samurai to save her, let alone Nicholas. ‘And to think I brought him up like a prince.’ Which was true. His Mum adding, ‘Nickie? Did you meet the lady in the kitchen I wanted to introduce you to?’

‘Why?’

‘I think you two should marry. She’s perfect for you. And being Russian, I mean, illegal, it would be a big help to her, because we don’t want her thrown out of the country do we?’

‘No we don’t,’ the other inmates emphasised. Clear his Mum had trained them in how to maintain the traditions of the Wedding Factory. His Mum saying,

‘And that would make wedding fourteen. Wouldn’t that be lovely? Doesn’t matter that she’s Japanese.’

‘Russian,’ he corrected.

‘No, Japanese, I’m sure of it. Anyway, they have such exquisite manners.’ Then, ‘...imagine,’ she said to her friends, the other prisoners, ‘wedding fourteen,’ showing that at least she could still count. Turning to Nicholas saying, ‘Now remember young man,’ which he wasn’t, no longer young anyway, even though he’d mastered the past. ‘And I’m only telling you this because you seem nice, I don’t want my son to know, apparently he’s coming later,’ Nicholas once again, becoming a stranger. Nicholas saying,

‘You can tell me anything.’

‘I’ve never told him this because Nickie is conservative, working in television. Promise you won’t tell.’

‘Promise.’

‘Of the thirteen brides that left our house...I was never one of them.’ The other inmates saying,

‘Shame, dreadful.’ His mother saying,

‘No, I wasn’t, at least when the first one was born. But I don’t want them to know. Their father, Lord forgive him, wouldn’t marry me.’

‘Why?’

‘I think he wanted to go to sea again. See places he saw as a sailor, but please don’t tell them.’ Nicholas saying,

‘I won’t.’

‘Because you know what that makes the older one? And I certainly wouldn’t want anyone calling Nickie this...’ Nicholas saying,

‘A bastard?’ His Mum saying,

‘No need to swear.’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘Glad to hear it.’

And Nicholas took his leave, not just of his Mum and the nursing home, and damaged memory, but also of Sydney.

Returning to where he now lives, Thailand, on the beach, with his new wife, not with Guilt or that arch bitch Gloom, but a simple Thai woman

who thinks Nicholas once lived in Japan, she's no rocket scientist herself, who often says to him,

‘Mister, love you long time,’ what he as Nickie once said not just to someone he loved, and buried, but nations, and their representatives.

All the cards are now in place perhaps just waiting for someone else to shuffle them, perhaps just for another interpretation of a life, or a period, maybe for new Past Masters and new sets of predicates.