

'The Broken Hold'

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Abstract

Major Creative Work: 'The Broken Hold' – a novel

The major creative work explores the power that narcissism has to define and capture others and it depicts this force from a number of points of view. In doing so, the novel attempts to draw parallels between personal and cultural manifestations of narcissism. It explores the lengths that the narcissistic subject will go to in order to maintain his or her world-view, and the often violent consequences that come from these assertions. The novel's two main characters, Katherine and her daughter Alice, struggle against the confines of narcissism, which are represented through both the actions of other characters and an overarching cultural depiction of post-colonial Australia. Katherine is part of a team that recovers a shipwreck from South Australian waters. The remains of an Aboriginal woman are discovered during the excavation and Katherine is faced with a difficult question. Should she conserve the remains for the shipping company that funded the recovery or should she return them to the rightful descendants? The more that Katherine is drawn into her work, the further away Alice becomes. The separation of mother and daughter is equally important to the narrative, relating retrospectively to the effect of narcissist capture and the possibility of recovering from such capture. The bigger story of the novel is concerned with the possibility of cultural change.

Exegesis: 'Becoming: from capture to recovery'

The exegesis considers the relationship between my research and the major creative work. Framed by Luce Irigaray's concept of 'becoming', which looks beyond the narcissism of western cultural tradition, the exegesis questions whether recovery from private and public forms of narcissistic capture is possible and, if so, to what extent. It illustrates my process, explaining how I came to apply an understanding of narcissistic capture, and its effects on others, to the form and content of my novel. Reflecting my areas of research, the exegesis draws from psychoanalytic theory, in conjunction with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the nature of violets, as well as from maritime object conservation and Critical Whiteness Studies, in order to map the development of the project as a whole. Three short experimental films work as an appendix. Each film explores a particular chapter of my exegesis as a way of visually representing the overlap between theory, research and the creative work.

Declaration

For a Thesis that does not contain work already in the public domain

NAME: Jessica Wallace

PROGRAM: Creative Writing

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'The Broken Hold'

One

From above, the wreck appeared as a small pointed reef, sitting proud from a sandy blow-out in the middle of a seagrass meadow. Sponges, corals and acidians replaced the wooden planking of the bow tip years ago, colonizing a section of the ship's oak frame with dense concretions. If the figurehead was attached to the prow as the *Violet* went down, there was no sign of it now. Whatever else was left of the ship lay buried under tonnes of sand.

Katherine kneels on the seabed between the wrecksite and the seagrass. In the past months, whilst excavating artefacts from the remaining body of the ship, the meadow had intrigued her. It was surprising how vigorous it was. Perhaps over the years it would have reconfigured its mass, died back and slowly re-grown, over and again. Had it always been so neatly edged away from the site, or were there times when it threatened to take hold? Each day it revealed different qualities, moving en masse as an ocean unto itself. This morning it appears golden tinged, and Katherine wonders if what she sees is prompted by a kind of nostalgia for the place, now the expedition is nearly over.

During the first few weeks they carefully dredged the site. Only ten centimetres under the surface large quantities of sulphide had turned the sand black and it was predicted that over the years the remains of the *Violet* would have taken on this colouring. They excavated several metres around the reef, until they were able to establish that most of the ship's bow and several yards of the midships structure had been preserved.

In one of his diaries, Captain McGregor described the storm that wrecked the *Violet*. Foul weather came down upon them unexpectedly, just after setting sail from Port Elliot. The high seas rapidly pushed the *Violet* off course. Instead of a clean passage, hugging the mainland, they were forced south. According to McGregor, the ship's bow hit rocks at the Pages Islands, about ten nautical miles away from the bay where she sank. But Katherine and her team found no evidence of a rupture in either the port or starboard side. Instead, the absence of the aft of the ship suggested that the vessel split in two, most likely due to hogging or sagging of the hull during the storm.

Once broken open, the bow must have tipped upward, nose to the stars, so that it sank in a similar position, planting itself at a forty-five degree angle from the gradual descent of the seabed. There, the remaining contents of the ship, not swept away on her descent, were layered in between the broken planks of the deck and cabins, creating an internal midden. As the tide ran, sand would have entered the ship through the cracks in its

timber panelling, covering its contents. A still body of water would have formed in whatever space was left inside, but only briefly, before the tides caused the movement of sand to almost bury her completely.

It was rightly assumed that everything on board was stained by the sulphide. A porcelain cup, still in one piece had turned completely black and most of the other objects were anywhere between grey and a dark, bloody charcoal. Scatterings of wreckage were found in the area close to the boundary of the wreck, some heavily concreted iron braces, a number of ballast stones, but despite a thorough search, they had not recovered the gold they were sent to claim.

Before her now is a vast hole. At its base is the final piece earmarked for recovery, a starboard section of the hull still connected to part of an internal wall. As expected, it is waterlogged and cumbersome, but the team has decided to try and bring both pieces up together. It takes nearly an hour to attach the lifting harness. They inflate its air bags. Six bags lift, one from each corner of the structure and two from the centre. They sway in the swell, as if caught by the wind. More air is pumped into the bags and slowly they begin to rise. Hauling the structure upwards sucks up the surface of the seabed. Sand lifts until the water that surrounds Katherine is clouded with fine particles. She makes her way clear of the sandy fog and adjusts her buoyancy so that she floats a few metres above the sea floor. From there she observes her colleagues, Drew and Snap, as they ascend alongside the hull. The whole thing moves through blue, like part of a roof being lifted into the sky. It is attached to the side of the work boat where it hangs, still submerged in the sea. The two men make their way to the stern and tread water at the ladder. From below they appear as two bodies missing their upper halves. They remove their gear, weight belts and air tanks. They heave themselves onto the duckboard and pull off their fins. Once they have hauled their feet completely out of the water the surface of the sea returns to a solid rolling form. Above her there are only the dark silhouettes of the work boat and the hull structure, both tugging away at the anchor line. The sand settles around her and she looks away, past shafts of sunlight and into the deep. For a moment, she is suspended in a quiet, private world.

Fifty metres below, at the floor of the drop off, several remnants of the *Violet* have also been recovered: domestic pieces buried under a few lengths of corroding iron. A pair of leather shoes, the silver head of a comb. But unlike the more stable environment where the bow and midship structure were buried, the fast currents beyond the drop off had

worked to strip away and disintegrate the rest of the ship, approximately six hundred tonnes of wood and iron. Gone.

Sounds of activity come from the work boat, a series of dull thumps. Perhaps they are pumping extra seawater into the holding baths. Knowing that they won't leave without her, Katherine decides to check the site and take some photographs to prove that everything of interest has been removed. She fins toward it. A series of objects protrude from the cavity in the sand. She adjusts her buoyancy again, so that she can hover over the scene. From there she gains the impression that a skeleton might be buried. She thinks she can see the profile of a skull. Despite a sudden rush of excitement, she resists inspecting it straight away. Instead she unwinds the camera cord from her wrist and photographs the find. She knows she should be on board by now, assisting the others, but she is drawn to the skeleton. Pressing her fingers into the dense sediment, she carefully works her way around the contour of the skull to discover that it is human. The bone is waterlogged; it feels dense and spongy, but as she continues to excavate she finds that it is otherwise well persevered. The jaw appears to have most of its teeth. Katherine digs around the neck and follows the spine, one vertebra at a time. Soon it becomes clear that the whole skeleton is curved in on itself, almost huddled.

Someone starts up the work boat engine; a clear signal to bring Katherine up, but she has her hands on the pelvis and as she burrows her fingers into the cavity she is able to confirm that this is the skeleton of a woman. What's unusual is an embossed, thick layer of growth that Katherine can feel on the outer side of the hip bone, in the area that has been buried the deepest. She works her fingers around the unfamiliar textures until she can sense that it is a separate object to the pelvis. She gently extracts it. It is two pieces of circular weaving connected up to form a basket. Although the basket seems whole it is very fragile. Katherine places it on the sand in front of her, wipes residual sulphide from her hands before slipping the camera cord from her wrist and taking up her camera. When she is done photographing the weaving, she places it back under the protection of the pelvis. She reburies both objects in the sediment and firmly pats down the surface in the hope that they will not drift away. Then she makes her way to the boat.

At three and a half metres from the surface she checks her watch and waits out her safety stop. The next five minutes are unpleasantly chilly, despite her thick wetsuit and hood. She folds her arms against her chest for extra warmth and gazes below. The area where she has buried the remains looks small and vulnerable inside the wider breadth of

the recovery site. Now that the protective layer of the hull has been removed and the equilibrium of the burial environment has been disturbed, there is little chance that the bones, or the weaving, will survive. The team will either have to recover the skeleton this afternoon or rebury it totally in several metres of sand.

* * *

Wetsuits and booties, heavy with seawater, are stowed in garbage bags under the seats of the mini bus. The windows are fogged and dribble with condensation. The bones are sealed in polyethylene bags and fixed in foam boxes on the back seat. Katherine sits beside them, keeping her hands on the lids. She is used to Drew's driving and doesn't want to risk them shifting unexpectedly.

The mini bus hurtles through the gap in a steep valley; huge barren hills, ribbed with sheep tracks rise on either side. Drew makes sure the bus hugs the road as it veers around a corner, revealing the flat shallows of Lady Bay. The sun melts the horizon red.

'Sailor's delight,' says Snap, who is up front in the passenger seat. From where Katherine is sitting she can see the edges of his worn hat. She can see Drew's big hand resting on the gear stick. The two PhD students, Tracy and Jim, perch in the row directly behind, eager to be included in Drew and Snap's conversation.

'We had to bring her up,' says Drew.

'No doubt,' Snap agrees. 'She could have been lost forever.'

'She won't be on the passenger list,' says Drew. 'I'll bet you that.'

'She must have been a stowaway,' Tracy suggests.

'Possible,' says Drew. 'On the other hand she could have been abducted and locked up inside the hull.'

'Seriously?' Tracy asks.

'You never heard of whalers pinching women?' Snap asks.

'Sure. But Captain McGregor wasn't a whaler. He sailed a number of ships after the *Violet*.'

'The *Diane*,' says Drew. 'Lost by spontaneous combustion in 1862. I believe she was his last ship.'

'He couldn't hide that fuck up,' says Snap, 'too many witnesses on shore.'

'You think he lied about the *Violet*?'

‘Obviously,’ says Drew. ‘He gave the wrong coordinates at the investigative hearing.’

‘What coordinates did he give?’

‘Oh, out in the Passage, somewhere near the Pages Islands. There’s a depth of eighty metres out there. Not much chance of a recovery mission back in those days. Not at that depth.’

‘You think he lied because the woman was on board?’

‘I’m not so sure about that. But he got his ship close enough to shore to offload something, or retrieve it later. Maybe he took off with the stolen gold. Who knows.’

‘Is that why it took so long to locate the ship?’ Tracy asks. ‘Did you think it was somewhere else?’

‘They reckon only twenty percent of ships known to have been wrecked in Australia have been found,’ says Drew. ‘I was certainly up against it.’

‘*You* didn’t actually find her,’ Snap reminds him.

‘The locals might have helped.’

‘Talking to every Tom and fishing-Dick in the state paid off.’

‘Barton was up for all those reccies.’

‘Yeah,’ Snap agrees. ‘The luxury of all that fucking money.’

‘Now, now,’ says Drew, ‘no museum would have put up his kind of cash.’

‘Do you think museum employees would have taken the bones?’ Tracy asks.

‘Of course,’ says Snap, ‘they couldn’t help themselves.’

‘They’d have called the police, though,’ Drew adds. ‘You’re supposed to involve forensics when you find a body, or the remains of one.’

‘Well, shouldn’t we?’ Tracy sounds affronted.

‘Direct orders not to bother. It looks like the Boss wants it all.’

‘It’ll bite him on the arse,’ says Snap. ‘Bones have got more than one way of surfacing.’ He takes off his hat, rests it on his lap, so that he can roll the back of his head against the seat, stretching out some ache in his neck.

‘What’ll we call her?’ Jim pipes up.

‘Something beautiful,’ says Snap, his eyes closed.

‘Truganini?’ Jim smirks. ‘She’s got to be a darkie, with that bit of weaving.’

‘You don’t know that,’ says Tracy.

‘Maybe she was some kind of sex slave, you know, for the captain,’ says Jim, impressed by his own imagination.

‘Whoever she is,’ says Drew crunching the gears, ‘she’s exceeded everybody’s expectations. Barton’s lawyer has already reported that he’s very pleased.’

Snap flicks open his eyes. ‘Thought she’d become Barton’s prize,’ he says. ‘Considering there’s no treasure.’

A sense of indignation swells in Katherine. She holds firmly onto the boxes. She has already started to feel proprietorial, a position she is not sure she is entitled to have. She imagines the weaving, now separate from the bones, wrapped into a polyethylene parcel and secured in a box of its own. With one hand she wipes condensation from the back window of the bus. The trailer is towing steadily along behind. The panels of its white metal cover are lit up from the tail lights of the bus: an orb, full of floating cargo. The trucks transporting the bulkier items, the concreted bow and sections of the hull, are about a hundred metres behind, appearing and disappearing with each turn through the hilly country.

It is ten pm by the time they pull into the car park at the back of an old bluestone building. Drew leaves the van running, lights on, so that he can access the security code to one of the roller doors. A metal curtain lurches up from the bitumen, creaking and groaning as it rolls into itself. Soon the transport trucks arrive, headlights beaming, and the inside of the shed is brilliantly lit. Rows of tubs and buckets line the shelves. A long stainless steel table flanks one side, troughs and basins stand opposite and a large tubular freeze drier occupies the back wall, its stainless steel body glinting with the promise of industry. Everyone piles out of the vehicles. Tracy and Jim linger by the van and await instructions that no one gives.

Katherine begins to unload, starting with her most precious cargo: the bones and the weaving. Earlier, on the road, a sense of disquiet had spread through her. As she collects the weaving from the trailer the discomfort continues to gnaw. She is unsure if the feeling has been brought on by a return to the city, or if raising the bones has shifted something within her. One by one she carries the polyethylene boxes into the shed, placing them on the ground near the sink benches.

The first thing Drew does is grab a beer from the bar fridge. He cracks it open and guzzles; has it emptied in a few seconds.

‘Tough drive,’ says Snap doing the same.

The two men stand by the fridge as if they have a stationary job to do, like watch sausages cook on a barbeque.

Not knowing where to begin, Tracy and Jim have followed Drew inside. They hover close by.

‘Mind if I join you?’ Jim asks.

‘Help yourself.’ Drew ambles away from the fridge door.

‘I’ll have one of those,’ says Tracy, stepping into the circle of men.

‘Who’ll drive the fork lift then?’ teases Snap.

They all look toward Katherine who is labelling several large plastic tubs with a thick permanent marker.

‘You ever rest?’ Drew says loudly.

‘I’d like to get the bones back into water as soon as possible,’ Katherine explains, ‘to keep them stable.’

‘To stability,’ says Drew and raises his beer in Katherine’s direction. ‘Hope you’re up to the forklift, Katie. You’re the only steady one among us.’ He turns back to the group. ‘She’s a bloody workaholic,’ he adds.

‘You’re not far behind,’ says Snap. ‘I take it we’re unloading tonight.’

‘Correct. Just taking the edge off and then we’ll get into it. Hey Tracy, how about you order us some pizza. It’s going to be a long night.’

Tap water rushes into the plastic tubs that Katherine has prepared. She mixes in sea water from the holding baths, nothing too pure just yet. It will take a few months before the bones are desalinated and can be treated with distilled water. She is undecided if they will need consolidation. She is aware that treatment options have been changing, but she is not so familiar with the technique of slow drying waterlogged bones over consolidating them with an emulsion, such as Rhoplex polyvinyl acetate. At this stage she has no way of knowing if the bones will shrink once they are dry, or if they will be prone to flaking or splitting, and she won’t be able to determine any of these facts until she has desalinated and dried a sample for testing. She may have no other choice than to impregnate them with some kind of hardener. But it is early days and she is rushing ahead.

Once the tubs are ready Katherine unwraps the remains, takes each bone carefully out of plastic wrap and places them, one at a time, back underwater. It is a relief to see them submerged again, and as much as possible, formally ordered in the way that she had found them. As Katherine works something settles inside her. Several hours later, when she has finished, Katherine secures the lids on the plastic tubs and cautiously pushes them up against the shelf wall, where they sit in shadow. Faint waterlines, nearly imperceptible from the outside, gently shift back and forth. They soon rest calm, just above the black registration numbers: B&C – *Violet* (bones) Items#1-193 and B&C – *Violet* (weaving) item#194.

Katherine drives home in an exhausted stupor. The streetlights rhythmically swathe the windscreen, revealing her hands on the steering wheel in patches of light. In the moments when the light moves across her skin she is aware of the skeleton that works underneath. But it is a detached kind of observation, for as she operates the indicator, or changes gears, her hands seem to belong to someone else. Twenty minutes later she is surprised to find herself standing at her own front door, pressing her key into the lock.

Alphie is there to greet her, standing close to the wall, as he always does, so that his wagging tail thuds up against it. His wide jaw hangs freely, in what Katherine likes to think of as a welcoming smile. She dumps her bags and Alphie lollops over.

‘Good boy,’ she says ruffling up the hair behind his ears. ‘It’s lovely to see you too.’

There is a scattering of small branches up the hallway, chewed sticks that Alphie must have brought in through the dog door, and she gathers them together and tosses them out onto the garden. She stands on the verandah for a moment. It is good to be home. The expedition has taken the best part of a year and in this last stint she has been away for five weeks.

She drags her bag up the hall and stops outside her daughter’s bedroom. She turns the knob and swings the door open gently, to avoid it creaking. There is enough light from the hall to show her the way in. She steps over the clothes and books on the floor until she is at Alice’s bedside. With her whole body stretched out and one arm flung behind her on the pillow, Alice appears completely at ease. Katherine cannot help comparing how her daughter lies, so peacefully, with the state in which she found the bones. The configuration of them reminds her now of the body casts of Pompeii. The woman on board the *Violet* must have known what was coming. She was braced against the inevitable, almost closed in on herself. Katherine leans down and places a hand on her daughter’s ribcage, in the same way she did when Alice was a small girl, to confirm the rise and fall of her diaphragm. The regularity of her daughter’s breathing and the warmth of her body are reassuring. Soon enough Alice turns, sighing as if she might wake, and Katherine lets go.

She backtracks out, takes hold of her bag and drags it further along the corridor. Without thinking she switches on the light to her own room. Of course her mother is asleep in there, snoring slightly so that the air is filled with a soft whizzing. Katherine quickly turns out the light. She takes her bag to the laundry and leaves it there, to sort in the morning. She gathers sheets and a pillow from the laundry cupboard and makes a bed on the pull-out sofa in the lounge.

Two

Spat out of the sea, desperately she gulps in air, before the waves drive her under, again. Suddenly the nose of her upturned dinghy splits through the water. With the power of the next swell, both are forced back to the surface, where the boat bucks before her. Its wooden cladding tears off. Thick planks turn over with the movement of waves; twig like, before disappearing into the depths. Now merely a frame, the boat is hit by oncoming water, until it breaks open entirely and there is nothing left. She too feels as if her body will rupture. She is carried, twisted, and dumped. Rolling, over and over. For a moment she is free, her head clear of the ocean, but the freezing gale burns the skin of her face. A wall of water grows before her, its crest lathered in white foam. It hesitates before gathering speed and in a thunderous moment it drops down, swamping her in its force. Everything slows; she is descending. Several metres below and the sound of the storm is drowned out. It almost feels safer. Then the shape of a body emerges from below, head slumped, legs and arms hanging limp.

For some moments the cawing of crows permeates Katherine's dream, echoing the strangled moan she has been making in her sleep. As she wakes the noise of the birds relocates outside. She slips off the sofa-bed and wanders over to the glass doors to take a look. A number of crows patrol the back yard, vying for a perch on Alphonse's dog bowl to peck at his left over biscuits. Some turn to gaze at her with small dark eyes. Are they trying to tell her something? She dismisses the idea, they are merely birds, and yet her stomach moves uneasily.

She sets a pot of coffee on the stove to percolate, expecting that a return to some kind of normal routine will help her settle. She showers and by the time she is back in the kitchen the pot has come to the boil. She turns it off and waits for it to finish brewing. From the kitchen she can see through the glass doors of the lounge room and out into the backyard where her mum sits at the table in her dressing gown, smoking a cigarette and reading the morning's paper.

Katherine slides the glass door open with her hip, the sound of which causes Queenie to look up.

‘Coffee?’ Katherine asks, placing a tray with the pot and cups on the table.

‘You’ve got time for coffee,’ says Queenie. ‘That’s nice.’

‘Can’t stay for long though,’ says Katherine. ‘We’re meeting with the project’s lawyer today and I’ve got a lot of artefacts to finish cataloguing.’

‘Sounds like a successful trip.’

‘Yes, and challenging.’

‘Would you do it if it were otherwise?’

‘I suppose not.’

Queenie pours herself a coffee, blows on its surface to cool it down.

‘And how have you been?’ Katherine asks. ‘How’s Alice?’

‘Fine. We’ve both been fine.’

‘No news?’

‘Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing too challenging.’

Queenie thumbs through the newspaper without seeming to take much in.

‘Think your shipwreck will get a mention in here?’ she asks.

‘I hope not. At present it’s confidential.’

‘Even from your mother?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Well, I guess we’ve all got our secrets.’

‘It’s not *my* secret,’ says Katherine.

‘I know that darling. It’s your work.’

‘I’m not hiding anything on purpose. I’ve signed an agreement. It was a condition of the job.’

‘You’ve always had your priorities.’ Queenie closes the paper. ‘Just ask Alice.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I thought you of all people would have noticed.’

‘Noticed what?’

‘She’s not been herself. Rather depressed I’d say.’

‘We’ve been talking on the phone. She always sounded fine.’

‘I suppose a few phone calls are better than nothing.’ Queenie sighs.

‘I didn’t know anything was wrong. I’ll follow it up,’ Katherine says, and is immediately disturbed by her response. Her remarks sound like something she would say

at work, rather than in conversation about her daughter. But she feels on guard and is wary to go into details.

Queenie turns her coffee cup on its saucer. The scratch of china being scraped against itself causes Katherine to grit her teeth.

‘I’m home now,’ she explains. ‘The field work is over.’

‘Good,’ Queenie says. ‘Alice needs you.’

As if you’d know anything about that, Katherine thinks childishly, and then marvels at her mother’s ability to destabilize her. She feels weak for being caught up so easily in her familiar ways and wishes she had thicker skin: she’s nearly forty-three for God’s sake. She looks skyward, tries to recognize a shape in the clouds, anything: an animal, or a face, but there is only the odd wisp of white, too light and ethereal to represent something of real substance. She settles her cup back onto the tray in a controlled move, placing it so precisely that it makes no sound at all.

‘Think I better head to work,’ she says. She is about to lift the coffeepot onto the tray, when Queenie says:

‘Don’t worry about that. I’ll clean things up in a bit.’

‘Thanks,’ Katherine mutters.

Katherine is on her way out when Alice emerges from her bedroom and loiters in the doorway. The sight of her daughter, her sleep wrinkled face and her bedraggled pyjamas are a surprise. She wasn’t expecting Alice to appear so forlorn.

‘Morning honey,’ she says and moves to stroke Alice’s cheek, but Alice retreats slightly so that Katherine misses and her fingers sweep the air.

‘Are you going again?’

‘I’ve got to go to work. But I’ll be home tonight.’ Her words sound like a pathetic excuse and she attempts to touch Alice again. This time Alice lets Katherine embrace her, but she stays slack, barely lifts her arms to return the gesture.

‘Why didn’t you come and say hello?’ she asks, her face pressed against her mother’s body.

‘I didn’t want to wake you.’

Alice pulls away and she smiles glumly.

‘OK,’ she says.

‘I’ll see you tonight then?’

‘Yeah,’ says Alice. ‘See you then.’ She turns and pads away, toward the back of the house. Katherine hears the glass doors slide open, and then Queenie’s warm greeting before the doors close again and she is left standing in the hall. Alphie slinks out of Alice’s room and follows Katherine to the front of the house. Shutting the door on the dog, with his nose so close to its heavy wooden edge, makes the whole act of leaving feel brutal. Is she no better than Alice’s father had been, hightailing it for more urgent things? She crosses the verandah to the carport and unlocks her car. Once inside she adjusts the seat, Queenie has been driving and the space between Katherine and the steering wheel is cramped. With the motor running she takes a moment to refocus herself. No, she decides, she is not like Alice’s father. Unlike Gerard, who no one has heard from in years, she is coming back.

Three

Katherine parks behind the filthy back end of Drew's old dual cab. Alongside is a sparkling BMW and she is instantly suspicious. One of the roller doors is up and she can see into the shed, where Drew stands with a well-dressed man. Drew seems the more comfortable of the pair, his tall, thick frame is stooped just enough to give the impression he is accommodating the shorter man's size. The two men are talking intently, but that doesn't stop Drew from noticing her as soon as she enters the shed.

'Morning, Katie,' he calls.

'Hi,' she says.

'This is Alistair,' explains Drew. 'Barton's lawyer.'

'You must be Katherine,' Alistair says. 'I'm pleased to finally meet you.' Alistair extends his hand. His grip is stronger than Katherine is expecting and she decides it must be the suit he's wearing that makes him look out of place.

'Have you been here long?' Katherine asks.

'Enough time for tea,' says Drew, mug in hand. 'You want one?'

'I thought we weren't meeting until midmorning,' she says.

'Oh, really?' Alistair sounds genuinely set back. 'I flew in from Sydney first thing. Maybe we had our wires crossed...'

'Thought you needed the sleep,' Drew butts in.

'It wasn't the best, actually. A little disturbed.'

'Thought it might be,' says Drew.

'All this excitement,' Alistair suggests. 'I barely got a wink.'

'Maybe it's the bones,' says Katherine.

'We were just discussing them, weren't we Drew?'

Drew drinks his tea.

'What were you saying?' Katherine enquires.

'Do you *really* suppose they're Aboriginal?' asks Alistair.

'I think so,' says Katherine, 'but we need a forensic anthropologist to do a proper examination.'

'Or a physical anthropologist, an independent,' Drew says. 'If you don't want to get the authorities involved.'

‘We do need to determine the facts,’ says Alistair. ‘It would be an awful let down if we got her to England and found out later that the bones were actually those of a white woman.’

‘Why does being white make a difference? Perhaps it would make the situation easier to handle,’ Katherine says.

‘It is part of the situation, integral now to the *whole* fascinating story, the lost treasure, the sunken ship, *and* the bones of a native. Extraordinary, don’t you think?’

‘I’m not sure sending them away from Australia is the right thing to do,’ Katherine thinks out loud. ‘What if she were murdered? What if she has been missed by a certain group of people, you know, over time? Shouldn’t we wait until we know more, before deciding that the bones will go to England with the wreck?’

‘What’s the Australian coroner going to do?’ Alistair says. ‘Request we bring them back? Who is going to bother checking up on foul play from an event that occurred over one hundred and forty years ago? The police? Of course we’ll determine the race of the remains and then the rest will add to the intrigue. A story that remains unsolved, we can put all kinds of spin on this sort of thing.’

‘What about repatriation?’ Katherine asks.

‘I’ve double, actually quadruple checked the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act. It refers only to bones that are discovered in burial grounds, *in accordance with Aboriginal tradition*. There is absolutely nothing that refers to bones found at sea, in the sediment of the ocean, underneath shipwrecks.’

‘So you’re saying that if the bones turn out to be Aboriginal it’s likely that they won’t be protected anyway?’

‘You’d almost wish it could go to trial,’ says Alistair. ‘This kind of case is unprecedented in Australia. I’d say unprecedented *anywhere*. We could well be the first.’

Alistair appears to have grown two inches taller. He flashes a smile at Drew who receives it agreeably. Drew gulps from his mug of tea and Alistair follows suit, his little finger protruding from the handle in a rigid curve.

‘You don’t think it’s getting a little macabre?’ Katherine enquires, disappointed that the decision has already been made.

‘Not at all! It’s exciting. And after discussing this with Barton, I think he’d be greatly disappointed *not* to have the skeleton and the weaving on show as part of his *Violet Collection*.’

‘What if it gets out, that we’ve withheld this information?’

‘It’ll be good publicity,’ says Alistair. ‘But it won’t get out. How could it?’

Drew pats Katherine on the shoulder. It is gentler than his usual thud, but still, it shifts her off balance.

‘Chin up, Katie. You should be proud. Your name will be attached to this project as one of its significant discoverers. After mine, that is.’

Alistair pops his empty mug on top of the bar fridge. He looks around the shed admiringly. ‘The conditions you work in are so *raw*! I wonder if I could get used to this kind of thing?’

Katherine has her reservations.

‘Perhaps I could take a look at her,’ Alistair suggests.

Katherine leads him to the shelves. She pulls out one of the tubs and pries off the lid, the new plastic snaps from its base. Alistair peers in.

‘Not very romantic, is it? The storage I mean.’

‘It’s practical.’

‘Does that redness leach out?’

‘Some,’ says Katherine, ‘but it’s a by-product of the ship’s corroding metal. And with the additional effect of the sulphide the bones will probably remain quite dark.’

‘That dull-ochre colouring is quite fitting,’ he says.

‘She probably wasn’t from the desert,’ Katherine says, annoyed.

‘Ah, but it’s the association that makes things important. You know there was a kind of folklore that surrounded *HMS Victory*. They say that Nelson painted the floors on the orlop deck red to disguise the colour of blood. It was actually painted that way by the Victorians, not by Nelson, but it’s the conviction with which the story is told that makes it poignant.’

‘But it has nothing to do with fact?’

‘Indeed. Faith often brings with it an air of verisimilitude. I see it in court every day.’

‘I find that kind of disturbing,’ says Katherine.

‘It sounds as if this project is beginning to disturb you as well.’

‘Not on the whole. But I am in two minds about the remains.’

‘Yes, I gathered.’

‘I guess Barton wants something exotic to show for all the cash he’s spent. I have to admit that makes me uncomfortable.’

‘It’s not about the money,’ says Alistair, confusing Katherine’s point.

‘But it is about value,’ she says.

‘Naturally.’

‘In this situation I don’t know how you can possibly quantify it.’

‘At present the exact value is difficult to assess,’ Alistair agrees. ‘So let’s wait and see what the physical anthropologist has to say.’

‘And in the meantime?’

‘I’ve hired a security company to keep watch, 24/7. The sheds will be safe as houses.’

Katherine can’t help thinking it is a game to Alistair. A *Choose your own Adventure*. She is eager for him to leave so that she can get on with her work.

‘When do you head back to Sydney?’ she asks.

‘I’ve got some legal issues to sort out here. That might take a couple of days, and I’m keen to take a spin along the Coorong. I hear that’s quite a spectacular piece of country.’

‘Yes it is,’ she says, wondering if Alistair has any notion that the Aboriginal woman on board the *Violet* might just have come from there.

Four

Normally big cities aren't for him, but despite his usual misgivings, Drew has come to decide that Sydney's not half bad. Alistair has called him over, without explanation. He declined at first, never keen on the place, but he was given a flight number and told not to miss the plane. He supposes that his hotel's close proximity to the water is what makes the density of the city seem manageable this time round. This morning there is a breeze blowing off the harbour, provoking in him an unusual lightness of being. There is also the smell of salt on the air, something he missed last night, cooped up in his room. Until he worked out how to pick the lock on the window and shove it open so that the smell of the sea billowed around him, sheer like the curtains.

He's been sitting on a bench outside the Museum of Contemporary Art for some time, watching the ferries move in and out of the Quay, before he clocks Alistair's furtive shuffle. In one hand Alistair has his briefcase, in the other he holds a coffee in a trendy-red take away cup.

Drew shifts his McDonalds wrappers so that Alistair can sit down.

'Healthy breakfast,' says Alistair.

Drew pats his gut. 'Body's a temple,' he says.

'Clearly.'

'What's with the coffee?' Drew asks. 'Thought you were a tea man?'

'It's Sydney,' says Alistair. 'Everyone drinks coffee in the morning.'

'If you say so,' says Drew. He watches Alistair sip from the small hole in the cup's plastic lid, amazed by how clean he keeps his fingernails. He rubs his own hands together, thick skinned, calloused.

'So,' he says. 'What's with the trip?'

Alistair is about to pass his coffee to Drew and thinks twice, as if Drew might pollute the liquid through the cardboard. He places it on the bench beside him. He props his brief case on his lap, punches a code into the brass panel alongside its handle and clicks open the lock.

'Clandestine?' Drew offers with a smile.

'Indeed.' Alistair opens a plastic slip, flips through a few pages. 'She's definitely Aboriginal,' he continues seriously, 'from that tribe around the Coorong.'

'Ngarrindjeri?'

‘That’s it.’ Alistair attempts to pronounce the name and gives in. ‘We decided to get a full report.’

‘Truly?’ says Drew, a little stunned. ‘And how did you get a DNA match?’

‘It’s not DNA. A bio-archaeologist named Scott and some of his associates have been developing signatures of those Coorong people from remains in the South Australian Museum. By measuring the stable carbon and nitrogen in their bones and teeth they have been able to determine where they lived. I managed to get hold of Scott’s data and employed our own people to do the testing.’

‘Why do the testing here? Couldn’t the museum in South Australia have come up with the same result?’

‘Oh, I think that would complicate things. Since we’re meant to be working under the Historic Shipwreck’s Act I’d say it’s advisable we keep things quiet from Government agencies.’

‘Is that why you’re handing the results to me in person? You can’t trust Australia Post either.’

‘I wanted to make sure the sample went back directly.’ Alistair removes a plastic container from his briefcase, much like a large lunch box. Drew is expecting a second breakfast, but he recognizes the label on the lid, numbered from the desalination box that the sample has been taken from.

‘I didn’t want there to be any possibility of losing this. She’d be incomplete without her mandible, no?’ Alistair hands the box and the report to Drew. Drew takes them in his large hands, sits them on the stained fabric of his jeans.

‘No bag?’ asks Alistair.

‘Left my duffle at the hotel’s reception.’

‘That won’t do.’ Alistair empties his brief case of a diary and three pens, takes back the box and the report. He places them inside, locks down the lid and hands the briefcase to Drew.

‘Can you remember the code?’

Alistair rattles off the number and Drew taps the side of his head with his finger. ‘Consider it etched.’

On the train to the airport Drew keeps the briefcase close, on the floor, wedged between his legs and the sidewall of the carriage. His duffle is slumped on the seat beside him, no

longer army green, but a dull brown. He prefers it that way, this kind of bag, the grot. Not having to worry too much about his appearance takes the pressure off. It means he can concentrate on other things.

He is absolutely positive Katherine will be working away in the lab. She's probably been awake as long as he has and hard at it. She'll already have sampled and recorded the saline levels in her tubs, and tested for bacterial growth. She does both with ridiculous regularity, as if constant monitoring will hurry the process. In this morning's rounds had she noticed that the lower jaw was missing? Alistair must have needed that specific piece for testing; he'd mentioned that the teeth were important in the process. Clearly the man had done his research, enough to know how to pack and carry the bone. It is securely wrapped in a polyethylene film and nestled inside cotton padding. And yet Drew can't help imagining Alistair plunging his hand into the depths of the desal tubs, stealthily dragging out bits and pieces until he was able to locate the correct bone.

After lunch Drew hands his wrappers and unused cutlery to the flight attendant and then thinks nothing of them. There is something to be said for air travel; this kind of space is nowhere land. While others around him catch up on work, he takes the time to settle back. He expects that Katherine will not have taken a break yet. Perhaps there'll be a half eaten salad on the desk beside her. He can see her searching through her research books, taking notes, anxious to discover the origin of the weaving and consequently that of the bones. Should he tell her of Alistair's latest report? There is a chance she won't take the new information well. Six months into the conservation and she's more reserved than usual, and more industrious. As if the outcome of the project is her sole responsibility. It's not that he whole-heartedly agrees with what Barton is doing. Taking the bones to England is hardly moral, but hey, neither is digging up burial grounds, or rock art, for the sake of progress. He has often thought this age should be remembered as *The Dig*; if it's not for science, or property development you can bet it's for some kind of spiritual enlightenment. He expects that in some sick way there are those who dig in order to find out something about themselves, as if objects from the past can fill the emptiness of their modern lives.

At any rate, he is intrigued by Barton's audacity. He is keen to wait it out, see if the tycoon will actually get away with what he is proposing to do. Drew spent most of his childhood getting away with things, first out of necessity, and then, for the hell of it. He wonders whether Barton is obtaining the remains because of the chase, or if it is simply a matter of greed. In time, will the man come to feel that what he has done is wrong, when

he's old and grey, and perhaps had to bury some of his own? It's more likely that he'll get through life unaffected. Really, there's not much point in worrying. It's not like Drew has been hired to protect Barton's soul. He's not even sure he can look after his own. And if he can't do that what hope does a collection of bones have? Sure the mob down at the Coorong is having a hard time, but their situation has nothing to do with him. Right now he is just doing his job. He decides to use his discretion. Perhaps this new evidence is something he'll hold on to for a while, see how things pan out with Katherine.

He ponders whether his curiosity about the project's outcome is the only thing keeping him from giving her the report? If he's being truthful, the payout that's coming at the end of the job is some motivation. He's already done pretty well out of it, enough to buy some land on the West coast. It is a beautiful spot, charged by the energy of the desert and the sea. Yes, he will keep this latest information to himself. In his experience these kinds of dilemmas get under women's skin. If Katherine reads the report she may not be able to resist some kind of do-gooder action that might seriously undermine his retirement plan.

In her effort to research the basket's original shape a number of books lie open on Katherine's desk. There is a black and white photograph from 1915. Two elderly women stand together. Their heads are covered by scarves and their cape-clad backs are harnessed with weaving. Their long skirts hang only a few centimetres above the dirt. One woman has her hands in front of her, clasping the handle of a large basket. Both are backlit, their faces shadowed against an all-white sky. They appear to be smiling, as though they know something that the photographer is unaware of. There are other images from the Tindale Collection; a black and white shot of two sister baskets taken in 1939. Contemporary shots of the same style of weaving are in full colour, the baskets a sandy fawn. Some are edged with soft-olive green. From the photographs it appears that the fresh reed will slowly dry out until eventually the greenish tinge disappears. Katherine is convinced that the object she discovered is a sister basket. It is made with rushes consistent with those found in the south, in Ngarrindjeri country, where similar baskets are still being made. She had driven down there, asked around and was directed to an area where she could find the right rushes: sturdy sedge that grows where there are good supplies of fresh water. She'd picked

a bunch and done her own testing. Then to double check she had ordered a sister basket from one of the weavers and paid for it to be posted to town. It took several weeks to arrive, but once she had it, in hand, she was without doubt that the baskets were identical. She is at a loss to understand why Barton won't allow them to outsource proper testing. At the beginning of the project he had decided against involving forensics. He directed the team (through Alistair) to enlist the services of an independent physical anthropologist. And while the physical anthropologist was able to confirm that the Aboriginal woman's diet was consistent with peoples of the south-east coast, he could not say definitively if she came from one clan group or another. That was where Barton's investigation had stopped. Confirmation that the remains were Aboriginal was enough for him. Katherine suspects that he prefers the ambiguity; perhaps it makes it easier for him to take her from her country.

She looks for a picture of the wreck site weaving, taken in its early stages of desalination, and places it next to her research pictures. Her weaving is much darker than the other baskets, and one of its handles has split. Other than that, they match: two oval spirals connected together.

It's good to be back down south. Drew can hardly believe he thinks so, but the sharp hot sky feels akin to the work he's doing, potentially dangerous. He left his ute in the short term parking at the airport, and so after he lands, he makes his way directly to the sheds. There is not much left of the day, it's just about peak hour, but he is determined to get the sample back into its proper place. There's no accounting for where it might end up if he leaves it overnight in the mess that's breeding on his back seat.

The roller door is open. He sneaks into the storage shed, glad to find it empty. It takes him only a few moments to locate the right tub; Katherine's coding is impeccable. He drops the bone under the water's surface and watches it sink. The lovely weight of gravity, of objects moving under water. The sight of its slow descent is somehow restful. Shit, he even feels at peace. He carries the briefcase into his small office on the ground floor, enjoying the tight leather handle and the swing of it in his hands. Inside his office he locks the door and secures the report inside his filing cabinet. He'll take a copy of it soon enough, keep one at home just in case. He chuckles to himself; Alistair's secretive ways

must have had an effect. Next stop, upstairs, where it comes as no surprise to find Katherine huddled over her books and the magnifying lamp.

‘What’s news?’ he says.

Katherine looks up, startled. She reminds him more of a rodent than a woman in her prime. Those sharp features aren’t doing her any favours. She really needs to eat more. He glances across her work space. Sure enough there are the remnants of rabbit food, half a tomato in an otherwise barren Tupperware container, an apple core in the bin.

‘How was your trip?’ she asks.

‘Don’t know why Alistair couldn’t fill me in over the phone. He’s a finicky bugger.’

‘What did he want?’

‘Oh, to let me know that Barton is pleased with progress. He loved the photos we sent, wants to know if we need any more equipment, or hands on deck. Excuse the pun.’

‘What about the bones?’

‘Yeah, happy with how that’s going too.’

‘You know the weaving is definitely Ngarrindjeri.’

What Drew knows is that Katherine’s question is rhetorical.

‘And?’ he asks.

‘And, maybe the woman who died along with it was also Ngarrindjeri. The stuff I’ve been reading, newspaper articles and such, make it seem like those people have been through enough in the last few years. You know they’ve been trying to stop the building of a bridge from the mainland to Hindmarsh Island? Well the developers have already started building it.’

‘That bridge is being built because there’s nothing sacred about the waters there. From what I know the case is closed.’

‘That doesn’t mean we should stop our investigations. Surely we have a professional responsibility?’

‘Inspector Rebus over here!’ Drew laughs, stunned by his capacity to make his amusement sound kind of believable. The situation isn’t funny. But he maintains a jovial tone, knowing how important it is to keep the mood light. ‘Look mate, the stuff we’re doing isn’t even linked to the bridge. We’re not employed to dig further than our brief. And Alistair seems to think there’s no problem with the bones. More importantly, you and me aren’t liable for any of it. So let’s just get on with the job.’

Now she hangs her head. She is taking this way too personally. When she looks up it is clear that she's not going to take him on. She's biting her lip though, holding something back. Her retreat is almost disappointing. Maybe if she put up a fight he'd discuss things with Alistair. He is about to see if he can niggle a debate out of her and quickly changes his mind. In the long run it will be easier for everyone if they do not veer away from their basic requirements.

'What a day!' he says, changing the subject. 'I'm totally knackered.'

She looks him up and down. 'Yeah,' she teases. 'You could certainly do with a shower.'

Drew appreciates the comment. It makes him think he's defused the situation. Normally it's harder to get some kind of banter out of Katherine.

'I'm off,' he says. 'You heading home, too?'

'Soon.'

'Good! And if you need a roadie, there's plenty in my shed next door. Just help yourself.' He's positive Katherine won't grab a beer on her way out, but there's no doubt he's heading straight there. He can already taste it. Downstairs he takes a six pack from the bar fridge, wolfs down a full stubbie once he's in his ute, then backs out of the car park with the radio blaring.

By the time her discussion with Drew is over it is well past six o'clock and she is shocked to realize that she has not picked Alice up from after-school care. She telephones reception, but it is too late and no one answers. She hurries to her car and drives over the speed limit, uncharacteristically swearing at the red lights, as if they are what make her late. When she pulls up outside the school there are a few teenage boys skating on the concrete entrance to the main building, but no Alice. She rejects the idea of asking if they have seen her. They seem completely unapproachable, their faces shadowed under hoods. As she heads away from the school grounds she prays for the safety of home. She imagines that by now Alice will have raided the fridge and she and Alphie will be lounging in front of the TV.

When Katherine opens the front door the house is eerily quiet. She calls out to an echoing hall. She drops her bag and rushes to Alice's room. The door is closed, but she can

hear Alpie's claws scratching across the floorboards. She knocks before going in. Alpie scampers over to her and sits at her side, but Alice does not look up from her position on the bed.

'I'm sorry,' Katherine says. 'Did you wait long?'

Alice fiddles with the fabric of her bedspread.

'Are you OK?'

Alice nods. Katherine makes a move towards her, but it only motivates Alice to shift from the bed and slip by.

'I'm going to have a shower,' she says.

'I'll cook tea, then.' Katherine loiters in the room for a while and breathes in the smell of her daughter's space. It has always been so unlike her own. After the earthy quality of being new born Alice developed a creamy scent, slightly sour like buttermilk. Standing amongst it years later, it still feels foreign. Not distasteful or overwhelming. Just different. Katherine ponders whose pheromones her daughter will attract in the future. Is that a strange thing to think about? Shouldn't she be more concerned with the state of her daughter's room and her school bag, the contents of which spill out across the floor? She rifles through the pockets of the bag to retrieve a dirty lunchbox and finds half a banana wrapped up in its peeled down skin. She ferries them to the kitchen where she begins to cut pumpkin and potatoes for soup.

It is not until after Alice goes to bed that Katherine begins to think about her work. She pictures the remains, housed in pieces, in the storage sheds. The physical anthropologist had confirmed that the remains were those of a nineteen year old female. It is completely within reason to believe that the captain took her from the mainland. That undue force was used against her. She must have been terrified down in the hold, while above her the world tore apart. And what must it have been like for her family to lose all trace?

When Katherine's father drowned his body was eventually found. Not that there was much left apparently, but enough, as the police sergeant said, to give some form of closure. Katherine was never reassured by those kinds of statements. 'Time heals all wounds' seemed to sweep over the top of what she was actually experiencing. Yet now she can see some truth in it. At least she has a place to visit: somewhere definite, where she knows her father lies. The Aboriginal woman's remains have not had that luxury, or, she corrects herself, that right. She can imagine them laid out in Barton's exhibition foyer.

Encased in glass. The thought that she will be responsible for shifting them for a third time, and to his new headquarters, unnerves her. In fact it is more than unnerving. Lately, her gut is constantly burning, as if she has drunk too much coffee. Cutting back to one cup a day has been no remedy. Could the state of her stomach simply be related to her concerns about work? What did Drew say earlier? Not to take the job so personally. Maybe he is right: she must not let it consume her like this.

The next day Katherine settles into work without the fervent energy that has been driving her these past ten months. She decides to focus on the weaving, hauling the desalination tub from the shelves and with some effort, placing it on one of the stainless steel benches nearby. She waits for the water inside to settle. Not that waiting is necessary; it is just that all around her the space is still. Everyone is in the other shed, completely occupied with measuring and testing the pieces of the hull. They might call on her to assist, a few months down the track, but for now she has this room to herself.

She works on the weaving underwater, to avoid any chance of the object drying out, gently brushing the soft head of a toothbrush between its fibrous knots. At present there is only the thinnest coating of rust. The fine particles come off easily. However, removal of the residual iron will be a measured process; over the coming months she will need to repeat the cleaning numerous times. She washes the bristles in deionized water and rinses the weaving. She should be wearing gloves, but the plastic skin interrupts her intimacy with the object. She wipes deep-red residue from her fingertips onto a cotton towel and begins again, from the centre of a coil.

Five

During the school holidays Alice agrees to go on a trip to Port Willunga. She has hardly spent any time with her mum this year. Mostly she's been hanging out with Queenie. She is happy for the invitation to reconnect, and at the same time it feels a little nauseating, like in order to be close they have to try this hard. As they drive south Katherine tunes into Triple-J. It's not the radio station Alice would choose, but she doesn't say anything. She's finding it difficult to make out the music anyhow, because the window in the back is down and Alphie has his head right out. The most constant sound around her is that of the wind rushing into the car from behind. She has her feet up, her toes curled around the top of the dash. Her toenail polish is chipped, little bits of electric blue that she picks at.

'I'll do your nails before school starts.'

'Sure,' says Alice, knowing they'll never get round to it.

The suburbs sprawl by: Hallett Cove, Moana. House blocks press up against one another, hundreds of Colorbond fences. A new development is underway. No houses yet, but a complete suburb is mapped out by light posts, cross roads and cul-de-sacs.

'This all used to be farming country when I was growing up.'

'I know, Mum, you're always telling me. It makes you sound really old.'

'I guess so. But it's hard not to feel down about how much everything's changed. There used to be so much space. It made me feel special, like I was the only one here.'

'Sounds lonely.'

'I spent lots of time on my own.'

Alice can't imagine being left to fend for herself, not on the brown hills of this country. Not back then, not ever. She can sense what it would have been like. From inside the car she can see there are still plenty of dried up ranges waiting for development. At the moment there are no bus stops. No deli. Still miles of eroding paddocks and a bunch of dead trees.

'Did dad like it out here?'

'Who, Gerard? I can't really remember.'

Alice doesn't believe her, but she decides against asking anything further. They've come on this trip to 'connect' and questions about her dad are bound to have the opposite effect.

Katherine turns onto the esplanade and parks on the cliff top, facing the car to the sea.

‘Tide’s out,’ she says.

Before them a great blue skin edges away from the sand.

‘See that buoy to the north,’ Katherine points, ‘it marks the *Star of Greece*. We’ll snorkel out there; it should be shallow enough for you to duck dive to the wreck and check out all the fish.’

They’d been snorkelling before, numerous times, around the Noarlunga jetty pylons and out to the reef that formed a T-junction at the pier’s end. They’d scoped the marine life at the rocks of Second Valley and even paddled above the sand formations of this very beach, but they had never snorkelled a wreck. Well, Alice had never snorkelled a wreck. It isn’t that shipwrecks are unfamiliar to her. She knows enough about the *Star of Greece* to imagine the mountains of water that broke it, while the sailors got cut up in the wreckage. But that doesn’t mean she knows what to expect. What other things are left once the ship has sunk? Were the souls of the dead still lurking?

Katherine has her fins on and is walking backwards into the sea. She secures her snorkel, spits in her mask and washes it out, slips them over her head and is under before Alice has zipped up her booties. From her spot on the beach Alice sees water spurt from her mother’s snorkel. Already she seems at quite a distance. At this rate Alice may never catch up. Maybe she should stay on the shore and just watch instead. She isn’t really feeling up to it anyway, all that cold water. Except they’ve come all this way and she knows she is expected to make the effort.

Alphie hauls himself out of his nest of towels and heads across the sand with Alice. She sits in the shallows to put on her fins. The chill is immediate; it soaks straight through her bathers and into the warm folds of her bottom. When she stands up cold water trickles down her thighs. An imperceptible breeze makes it worse; everything is icy. She moves backwards with her head over her shoulder, so that she can keep an eye on the whereabouts of the buoy, which now seems a terribly long way out. By the time the water is deep enough to swim in Alice is completely numb. She straps on her mask and dives under. Her breath sucking in and out through the snorkel is horrifying. It sounds like she is suffocating. She blows hard, dislodging some of the excess water from the base of the snorkel and the rasping lessens. Alphie stays close by. His grand paws drag through the

water and bubbles stream from his fur. Once they reach the edge of the wreck and Katherine is in sight, Alpie paddles back to shore.

Alice treads water for some time. Every now and then she puts her masked-up-face into the water to see what lies beneath. There are only a couple of metres of water between her and the wreck. It feels like fathoms. She keeps her legs moving, the action of her fins lifting the sand from the bottom so that it swirls upwards and then slowly falls onto what Alice assumes are crusty sections of the ship.

The wrecksite is longer than Alice had thought it would be. Katherine is in the distance, skin-diving under and lurking at the bottom before shooting back to the surface. In the sea she is more fish than human. She may have been as illusionary as a mermaid, or a siren. One moment Alice can see her, and the next she merges with her surroundings. Alice supposes she should swim on further, to join her. But the distance looks impossible and she is not sure she can move from her current position.

To top it off, her mask is fogging up and she no longer has a clear vision of either the horizon or the shore. She begins to feel disorientated. Seaweed brushes her arm. It is, once she holds it in her hand, just a strand, but the way it had skated over her skin makes Alice start to fret. Soon everything is brushing past. Elongated figures shift underneath her, arms stretch up from the seabed. She thinks she hears someone crying. Could it be the sound of lost souls, or is the noise coming from her own mouth?

Another pool of water gathers in the bend of her snorkel, gurgling and crackling every time she breathes. The salt in the water is strong. Her eyes sting and the visibility through her mask is now completely obscured, opaque with condensation. She will have to clean it if she is to see her way back to shore. She pulls off the mask and the skin around her eyes burns. She treads water rapidly, keeping herself as far above the surface as she can. She spits into her mask and then swivels it in the sea. As she straps it over her head the rubber catches on her hair. She pulls at it despite the discomfort, blows hard through her snorkel, blasting out the seawater, and makes a straight line for Alpie, who is standing in the shallows.

Several hours later they sit on the cliff. Katherine stares into the distance. It is not necessarily a cloud she sees, nor the flight of a bird. It is not even the sea. She is focused on an image or a story from the past. Her whole body changes when she disappears like this. And the outward effect is a kind of indifference. Not to the experience she is having,

in the moments and minutes that pass, but to her daughter as she sits quietly and waits for her mother's return.

Alice would like to break her mother's silence. Instead she concentrates on discovering the sounds around her. She can hear insects scuttling in the dry grass nearby. She listens to the waves below, taking over from the smaller-world noises where they sit, and dissipating in regular intervals so as to let back in the scurry of ants and beetles. She practises breathing in time, but the gap between each breaking wave is too slow and she finds she is lost for air.

Eventually her mother comes back. Alice can sense it in her body before she can actually see a change. Then there is movement, the deeper rise and fall of her chest, as if previously she was barely breathing, and then the small nod of acknowledgement she gives to the view before turning to Alice and saying;

'Your grandpa died out there. You can't believe it on a day like this, just how inclement the weather can be.'

Her mum places an arm around her shoulders and Alice decides not to worry about what inclement means. It must be something bad if it has to do with the day of the accident. She gazes out, hoping to understand a little more. The only thing moving on the horizon is a tanker, a squat black line, impossibly small against the colours of dusk.

Six

Gerard returns home for his mother's funeral. There are only a handful of others present: an ancient friend of his father's who does not remember him, three or four from the congregation, two elderly women that belong to the bridge club and someone his mother befriended from the corner shop. The wake is dismal; morning tea at the funeral home that consists of boiled egg sandwiches and Arnott's biscuits. The whole thing is over quickly and while the brevity of it saddens Gerard, he is also relieved. He supposes, now that both of his parents are gone, he is the only one who can put their things in order. He decides to stay on and pack up the house.

After a week or so of paralysis, during which he spends his time overwhelmed by the cluttered surrounds, he sets into action, working uninterruptedly for several days until the entire contents of his family home are stored, dumped or sent to the Salvation Army. By the time the place is clear, he too is gutted. On the last night he does not go to a hotel like he planned. He wanders from one empty room to another, bleary eyed and devastated by the way his home, that once loomed so large in his imagination, has shrunk to this. Unable to settle in any of the rooms he sleeps on the carpeted floor of the hallway. His leather satchel makes for a decent pillow and a couple of shirts arranged over his legs and chest are enough to keep the draught at bay.

When he wakes the sun is only just coming up. Lost in the darkness of the hall it takes him a few moments to remember where he is. His back aches. As he turns he acknowledges, begrudgingly, that he is too old for this. It's been fourteen years since he was last in Australia, another fifteen before that working back and forth. He feels tired. And yet the restlessness that plagued him as a young man still motivates him. He drags himself off the floor, packs up his belongings and steps outside. He pulls the front door closed and locks it, knowing that it will be for the last time. He retrieves the newspaper from the lawn and heaves himself up onto the painted concrete surrounds of the porch to wait for the land agent.

Immediately he is taken by the content on page one; a dispute over the ownership of Aboriginal remains found during the recovery of a local shipwreck. As he reads his interest deepens. Then, in the final paragraph, Gerard discovers mention of his ex-wife. She is described as Mrs. Katherine Sloan, the main conservator of the bones. It hadn't occurred to him that she would keep his name and he is almost flattered. And what about

Alice? He wonders if they are living in the old house, and at the same time he finds it strange that they should still be here. After all of the work Katherine has done overseas he expected her to be long gone.

He rereads the article, partly out of fascination for what Katherine has been up to and partly so that he can reengage with the outside world. According to the story the bones have been submerged, almost intact, since 1856. That in itself is intriguing. The survival of human remains in shipwrecks is unusual, mostly because the nature of the sea is active and ever changing. To find a whole skeleton is rare indeed. Of course it's happened, but most are preserved in mud and clay. Clearly a unique set of conditions was in place to make preservation possible. He'd heard about a find in the bay of Port Fairy, where a ship had been wrecked on a surf beach. What with the pounding waves and considerable tides one would have expected the entire boat to deteriorate quickly. Not in this case. When the ship was stranded in the shallows, a layer of sand, about fifteen centimetres thick, was deposited into the broken hull. The dynamic environment meant that the movement of sand was considerable, but while the sand levels in the hull were constantly changing, the first fifteen centimetres remained stable, establishing an anaerobic environment perfect for the preservation of the wattle bark leaves that were eventually found in there. One maritime archaeologist reported that he could take a leaf from the hull, walk up the beach and identify it from the very trees growing along the dunes. So most things were not impossible, only improbable. It's why you went looking. Recovering what you already know to be there is satisfying, but discovering the unexpected is where the excitement really lies.

He is contemplating how to get in touch with Katherine when he hears the front gate open. Soon after he is handing the key to the land agent. He finds the exchange surprisingly emotional, as if the distance he has travelled from his childhood retracts, leaving him anxious to step back inside the house. Thankfully the moment is brief, the land agent has another early meeting, and the two men walk the garden path to the roadside where they bid each other goodbye. Gerard hesitates outside the gate, but he does not turn to take a final look. As he walks down the street he deposits the newspaper into a neighbour's bin, reminding himself that he must cancel the delivery.

During the early hours of morning Katherine feels the presence of something odd. Not a ghost, she does not believe in ghosts. But there is the shape of a face nonetheless. Rising from the foot of her bed to the ceiling. It has no clear features. No skin colour. And there are holes where the eyes might be. She has a weird sense that she should be doing, or understanding something that is beyond her. She is certain that if she could just separate herself from this nagging eeriness she would find a logical explanation. But her mind spools around familiar topics. Clearly the unease she experienced once the bones were brought to the surface has not gone. It is not any worse, but it is constant. Shouldn't she be used to it by now? The team has spent well over three years cleaning and conserving everything from the wreck, and still she is ruminating over whether or not she should have reburied the bones on the day she found them.

She knows Alice is staying with a friend, but she checks her bedroom anyway. She hasn't seen her for a couple of days and her absence leaves the house feeling un-lived in. It has been strange to come home from work these past few evenings and find nothing changed. No empty glass to pick up, no piles of homework to sort, or shoes to put away. From the hall she can see the usual mounds of clothes, the unmade bed. She contemplates cleaning it up, but once inside she thinks she can smell cigarette smoke lurking under the sweeter fragrance of incense, and she decides not to interfere. Perhaps there will be other things Alice does not want her to discover hidden in all the mess.

Alphie knows there is someone approaching the front door well before Katherine hears the knock. The dog has his hackles up and his bark is sharp and loud.

'Quiet now,' Katherine says. There is another knock and she tells herself that it is too early for one of those young sales people she feels sorry for, but cannot bear to speak with. She is grateful when she sees Drew on the other side of the fly screen. Except that he's propped against a verandah post with his head down. Something's wrong.

'You're up early,' she says opening the screen.

'Haven't been to bed.'

'Big night?'

'If only. That I can handle. There's been a problem on the docks.' Drew holds up the newspaper he has collected from Katherine's yard. 'Spose you haven't seen the news?'

'Not yet.'

Drew steps into the hall, bringing with him a sweet yeasty waft. Alphie rushes to sniff at his legs.

‘Hey, boy.’ Drew bends down to pat Alphonse’s head and groans. ‘Off you go now mate, I gotta keep upright.’

‘I’ll make some coffee.’

‘Could do with that,’ says Drew. ‘And maybe some water.’ He and Alphonse follow Katherine up the corridor and into the kitchen.

Drew supports himself against the bench and slurps large handfuls of water from the tap.

‘You can have a glass.’ Katherine points to a cupboard.

‘Oh yeah,’ he says dabbing water from the tap onto his cheeks and eyelids. ‘I didn’t realize I was this thirsty.’

Drew finds a glass, an old etched tumbler. His hand swallows it whole. He looks out the kitchen window, drinks slowly from the glass.

‘Nice place,’ he says.

He moves out the way for Katherine, who cleans the coffee pot, fills it with fresh grounds and water and sets it on the stove.

They stand quietly in the kitchen and an ease settles between them, an all but domestic kind of familiarity. Katherine suddenly feels close to him, in need. His pitted skin and the rough way he dresses, untucked shirts and unruly hair, remind her of old-time fishermen: burly, practical men. In the soft light from the window he appears less beastly than usual. Perhaps it is the hangover that gives him this restful plane. He places the fragile glass in the sink and she wonders if he’ll break it.

‘A group of blackfellas were kicking up last night about the bones we’ve got.’

‘Really?’ Katherine sighs. ‘It had to happen.’

‘Well I was hoping it wouldn’t.’

‘It’s almost a relief.’

‘It’s a pain in the arse.’ Drew taps the rolled up paper on the bench. ‘Apart from the fact we’ve got a leak in the crew, there’s front page pics, outside parliament house.’

‘What’s Alistair got to say?’

‘Surprisingly confident. He says there isn’t a problem, but I think he’s enjoying the gamble. He wants her shipped off though, a.s.a.p. I’ve got everything right to go in a week or so, will you?’

‘It’s possible.’

‘I don’t think there’s time for deliberating, Katie.’

Drew is one of the only other people besides Katherine's father to call her Katie. She'd hated it at first, the imposed intimacy. This morning it causes her to drop her guard.

'I'm just not sure. I need to check on the bones. It's just...I haven't been sleeping well, I keep dreaming of bodies surfacing from the sea. Generally I'm down there with them. It's not like I'm going to die. I'm not actually drowning. I'm just completely helpless. And all these things, these bodies, feel as if they need something from me. Something I can't provide.'

'You're saying the bones are trying to tell you something?' Drew's cynicism is probably to be expected, but it stings.

'I think sending them to England will make things worse,' she says.

'For you?'

'I feel like we are all doing something wrong.'

'It's just work.'

'It's the past.'

'Not mine,' says Drew. 'Emotion, guilt, whatever...it's not my thing. It just holds you back.'

'You don't feel unsettled?'

'I feel crook, sure, but it's not the job. And anyway, Alistair called from London; he says the new Barton & Co offices are about ready to open. They'll need all the stuff we've been working on soon, for the foyer.'

'They're still putting the bones on show, right up front?'

'Everything from the *Violet* is going in. You should see the photos. The whole place is designed around the ship as the feature.'

'Sounds over the top.'

'Yeah, well,' says Drew, as if that counts for an answer.

Katherine pours the coffee and Drew shudders a spoonful of sugar into his cup.

They drink standing up.

'Alistair is on his way back,' he says. 'Likes to think he'll be overseeing transportation.'

'When's he due?'

'Couple of days.'

'So soon?'

'So, you'll get her packed up?'

‘I don’t know. Maybe we should approach the state museum? Surely someone from anthropology will have a connection to the people who are making a claim on the remains.’

‘Look, I know it’s bugging you, but you’ve really got to get over it.’

‘It just doesn’t feel right.’

‘We signed contracts, remember?’

Drew hits the tumbler in the sink with his empty coffee cup by mistake.

‘Sorry,’ he says. ‘Nothing broken.’

‘That’s alright then.’

‘So, we’re all good?’

‘Yes,’ she replies, getting the gist. ‘You heading to work?’

‘Yeah. So much for the weekend, hey.’

‘Well, thanks for the heads up. I guess.’

Drew laughs. ‘Been a pleasure.’

Katherine walks him to his ute. It takes him a little while to settle in, get the seatbelt done up. He wrestles with the winder, slowly unrolling the glass in jerky fits until it is down. As the old truck pitches forward he drops a wave outside the window. The exhaust spews dark plumes of diesel smoke into the bright morning.

Back in the kitchen Katherine pulls at the plastic film that clings around the newspaper. A few dribbles of dew, caught under the wrap, roll out with the news, melting the text grey. She flattens the arching paper down and looks into the face of an Aboriginal woman, an older woman, maybe in her late fifties. Her mouth is wide open, yelling something. There is a ferocity to her focus, a strength that Katherine finds frightening. She cringes at the thought of her own demeanour. Was her conversation just now the best she can do? Was that a frisson, if she could call it that, she just experienced over Drew? Is that what amounts to passion in her life? Their coffee cups sit side by side in the sink, an anomaly. The kitchen feels dark and cold. She decides to join Alphonse outside, see if she can come to terms with the article while warming herself in the sun.

Since Drew left she has read the paper, exhausted the sunshine, fed the dog, washed up the coffee dishes and paced around the house. Now the walls are closing in. There is nothing else to do except work.

‘Can’t stay, Alpie. I’m sorry. We’ll walk a little later.’ She gently closes the front door. The guilt of leaving him, especially on the weekend, stays with her until she reaches the sheds. Once inside the car park though, thoughts of the world outside dissolve. She unlocks and opens the small metal door adjacent to the roller, enjoying the dim smell of sea water and faded chemicals. She switches on the lights and goes straight to the bones. In all honesty they have probably been sufficiently dry for months. Katherine opens one of the humidity chambers and lifts out the pelvis. Due to the impregnation of polyvinyl acetate it is denser than it would otherwise be and it appears waxy. Apart from two raised markings that ring the pubic symphysis, it is smooth. The physical anthropologist reported that those markings indicated the birth of two children. Katherine runs her hand over them. Were they twins, this woman’s children, or were they born at different times? Had they survived to create families of their own? Could the woman in today’s newspaper be a direct descendant? She returns the pelvis to its position in the chamber, compelled to find out more about Daphne Ellis. She is too impatient to wait for the lift and so she takes the stairs. There is a draught inside the stairwell and the smell of cold, dusty concrete. She hurries, taking two steps at a time, and is glad for the physical action that making it to the second floor requires.

She is puffed out by the time she reaches the lab, but inside it is serene. The blinds are partially drawn so that a line of sunlight stripes one wall. Katherine decides not to switch on the overheads, she can see her way to her desk. She sits in the diffused surroundings catching her breath. She flicks on her computer and listens to the whirring of its hard drive awakening. Soon there is only the sound of her hands typing on the keyboard and the occasional click of the mouse.

She trawls the net until she comes across an article about Daphne Ellis in the online magazine, *Aboriginal Way*. The article is part interview, part essay and it reveals that Mrs Ellis has worked as an activist for a number of years, during which she sought protection of several significant burial sites as well as advocated for the repatriation of remains from Britain. She speaks personally about her childhood experience as one of the Stolen Generations and proudly of her grandchildren, one of whom is studying law. Further in, there is a section of a speech Mrs Ellis made to government:

Silence is often what keeps things safe, not secrets. Not everything can be told. What we need to share, us black and white Australians, is respect, a respect for each other's different kinds of knowledge. These places, the ones up for development, are the burial grounds of my ancestors. Their spirits are not to be unsettled. You disturb their place of rest, you're disturbing much more than bones. I'm not going to go into details about why that is. I should not have to explain.

Preventing desecration makes sense. No one is going to support the building of high-rises on the city's cemeteries. But the idea that some knowledge is kept silent, that questions are not permitted and therefore answers are not discovered, is not how science works. Katherine finds the approach confounding. What she understands, what she knows to be real, because she holds them in her hands, are the objects that speak of history, of events that can be traced and researched and determined. The objects are what evoke personal stories; they are what lead to an understanding of the human experience.

But what of the things that can never be traced? What happens when you have no control over a particular outcome? Or unexpected things occur that change the course of your discoveries? She remembers a story from a few years back. Ten kilometres south of Haifa Bay, off the coast of Israel, two almost perfectly preserved skeletons were found in the submerged site of an ancient city. They were over eight thousand years old and had survived rising sea levels because they were buried in clay. On the day scheduled to recover the skeletons an unexpected storm blew in and the expedition had to be delayed. Two days later, when the weather had passed and maritime archaeologists returned to the site, most of one skeleton had been swept away. The other skeleton was brought to the surface. Does the disturbance of that site mean the individuals buried there are no longer at rest? Unlike the Israeli bodies, that were buried in the style and culture of the time in which they lived, the woman on board the *Violet* was never properly dealt with. Katherine questions whether the timeframe between the burial and the discovery of remains makes a difference, or if it is the nature of the burial that is the main concern.

Either way she cannot leave the remains in a state of limbo.

She returns downstairs to test the relative humidity of the drying chambers, as a first step in completing the conservation. But when she stands in front of them she hesitates. She can visualize the placement of the whole skeleton, each bone separated and supported on a sheet of flat wire mesh. They are dormant now, but during the past few years a quiet transfusion has taken place. Once leached of salt, the bones rested in water

mixed 4:1 parts with Rhoplex. It was a slow process; gradually increasing the amount of emulsion in the solution so that eventually it replaced the cellular structure that was damaged by waterlogging. Now that the bones are dried the replacement polyvinyl acetate will keep them from shrinking, making them resilient to an environment in which they might otherwise perish. Usually the successful completion of a conservation step gives Katherine a sense of satisfaction. Right now, the prospect of inspecting the bones, to see if they require any surface consolidation, feels finite. It is as if bringing them out into the air they will undergo another kind of death.

Katherine sighs; she is not ready to complete the bones. Instead she promises herself that she will attend to them as soon as she's finished the weaving.

For months the basket has been immersed with a consolidant. Usually by the time an object is desalinated enough for the addition of something like polyethylene glycol it has also been cleansed of other undesirable elements. But the weaving has continued to expel tiny amounts of iron. She is positive that it is infused with enough PEG and so she will give it one last clean, then place it in the freezer, in preparation for freeze drying tomorrow.

She is gently working a soft cloth around the internal surface of the weaving when she is interrupted. She is expecting it to be Drew, clattering through the side door and is shocked to find Gerard walking towards her. He radiates a kind of charm that has always disarmed her. Without even realizing it she lets go of the weaving and a small splash of liquid rises from the tub that she works over. All of a sudden Gerard is at her side, standing much closer than the years between them should allow. She shifts backwards to make some space.

'Katherine,' he says. His mouth opens into a grin and Katherine is certain he has had his teeth whitened.

'Gerard,' she says. 'It's been a long time.' She struggles to unroll the pair of plastic gloves from her hands; they cling and stick, making her feel foolish.

He pulls a stool out from under the work bench and sits on it. He inspects the contents of the tub resting on the bench before him.

'May I?' he says, but he's already slipped his hand in and is holding the weaving in his palm, just under the surface of the water.

'You reckon it's Ngarrindjeri?'

‘I gather you’ve been reading the paper.’ She bins the gloves, dries her hands on a cloth.

‘I thought it would be smaller,’ he muses. ‘And perhaps more vulnerable. It looks like it’ll survive.’

‘I’m expecting it to,’ says Katherine. ‘After desalination it’s been stabilized with PEG.’

‘Should work. What’s the molecular weight you started with?’

‘400, in a 5% solution that I’ve gradually increased over several months.’

‘And ended up with say a solution of 40% and a PEG molecular weight of 3750.’

‘That’s exactly what I’ve done.’

‘Good going.’

‘I know what I’m doing, Gerard.’

‘Never in question,’ he says. He leaps from the stool, still fit and agile despite the wrinkle lines and greying hair, and washes his hands at the sink. He takes in the rest of the storage shed. ‘Spared no expense, hey, this Barton?’

‘More money than sense.’

‘It’s given you a job.’ He sidles up to a bank of humidity chambers, somehow sensing the contents. ‘I take it you’ve got the remains of a woman in here.’

‘Yes.’

‘You think she’s Ngarrindjeri too?’

‘It’s not confirmed, we’ve nothing concrete.’

‘Except the weaving must give you a fair idea.’

‘The thing is,’ Katherine explains, ‘our employer doesn’t want the facts. Maybe he prefers the mystery that surrounds the find. I expect he likes to think of her as unspecified. That way he can justify his decision to take her to England.’

‘That must be upsetting,’ says Gerard. ‘Professionally speaking.’

Of course it is, but that is not something she is about to admit. Not to Gerard. Last night she dreamt the bones rose out of the hull. Once outside the wreck they began to disperse. She tried to gather them together, hopelessly reaching out, but they floated away in the current before she could grasp them. She was left hanging onto the pelvis and the femur, drawing in air like a diver who is scared her tank will run out, but can’t help herself from sucking it dry.

‘I’m not really able to discuss any of this,’ Katherine says eventually. ‘Not outside of my colleagues.’

‘It’s a shame you don’t feel that you can talk to me,’ he says. ‘But I understand, it’s been a long time.’

Katherine cannot argue with that.

‘So why are you here?’ she asks.

‘Actually, I came home for Mum’s funeral. She passed away last month.’

‘Oh, I am sorry.’

‘I’ve been packing up her house.’

‘That must have been hard.’

‘It was. Harder than I thought it would be. Maybe I should have tried to get in touch, to let you and Alice know, but considering we all lost contact...’

‘And you’d like to reconnect now?’

‘It’d be nice. I’d love to see Alice.’ He is smiling at her in the same old way he used to, edged with a kind of sadness that makes him seem as if he’s asking to be saved.

‘I guess things have been difficult for you,’ she says, ‘but I don’t know. Alice isn’t expecting you.’

‘You didn’t know I was coming and we’re getting on OK. Aren’t we?’

‘It might be different with Alice.’

‘Or not,’ he says. ‘We could all go out for something to eat?’

‘I can’t promise anything.’

‘But you could accept the offer, no?’

There is a long silence in which Katherine deliberates. She is reluctant to broach Alice with this. And yet things might be worse if Alice finds out he came looking for her and was never told. Katherine supposes she should leave it up to their daughter to decide.

‘OK,’ she says. ‘If Alice agrees.’

‘You’ll let me know then.’ Gerard scribbles his mobile number on Katherine’s notebook with a unexpected air of certainty and Katherine cannot believe that she has just made it so easy for him. Where has all her fury gone? She should be yelling at him. It’s been fourteen years! But she is struck dumb. She does not know quite what to do next. Now that she has agreed to his offer there is nothing more to say.

On cue, Drew strides into the shed.

‘Don Giovanni!’ he shouts. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Jesus!’ says Gerard, ‘I’ve only been back five minutes.’

‘Small world!’ Drew scoffs.

‘It’s Adelaide.’

‘It’s not so bad,’ says Drew.

‘I’m beginning to remember that.’ Gerard winks at Katherine and she smiles despite herself.

‘Mind if I take him on a tour?’

‘Please,’ says Katherine, embarrassed that Drew has just witnessed something of the old business between them. She busies herself as they leave, but can’t help overhearing their conversation. ‘Almost on the move,’ Drew says. ‘Just got to put some fire back into your old flame... How’s your work going? Got any time on your hands?’ Katherine strains to hear Gerard’s response, but catches nothing except the sound of the door closing. What the hell is he doing here, indeed?

It is late in the afternoon when she hears Drew’s old ute start up outside. Its motor reverberates through the metal roller door before spluttering into the distance. She half expects Gerard to make another appearance, come in and say goodbye. Several minutes pass before she admits that she’s been left to her own devices. Drew must have taken Gerard with him. Where, God only knows. They have spent the entire afternoon together, no doubt talking about the project. Was there really that much for them to discuss? It would be more helpful if they spoke openly about it with her. She looks around the shed, her shed. Over the past couple of years she has managed to complete the conservation of most of the objects found onboard the *Violet*. Six empty wooden rum barrels and nearly a dozen bottles of wine, most of them full. She has even managed to preserve a handful of corks that survived under the first layer of sand. She and Snap have finished and already packed the ballast stones and a number of tools, two clay pipes, as well as a dozen small railings from the weatherdeck. Alone she cleaned each piece of a porcelain crockery set; all but one saucer and two butter plates were found. There are perhaps three or four other items she needs to freeze dry and create storage containers for. That is, apart from the weaving and the bones. These items she has not been able to finish. She tries to rein in the sense that Drew and Gerard now conspire against her. Is that why Gerard has really turned

up? It had taken him no time at all to track her down, not if he'd only seen the paper this morning. Is there any chance he can weasel in? She takes a deep breath: surely she is being paranoid. She decides to get in another hour's work before she has to meet up with Alice and Queenie. She peers into the tub, where the weaving rests on the bottom. Instead of considering her next conservation step, she thinks that perhaps she could crawl in there too, curl up, and see if the solution might extract some toxic waste from under her own skin.

Seven

That night Katherine orders drinks at the bar, a bottle of white wine to share with Queenie and lemonade for Alice. She watches the young bar attendant gather together the glasses and the ice bucket, then fumble with the soda dispenser. It has run out of syrup and she will need to change it. Katherine settles onto a stool to wait, turning her attention to the bank of TVs that hang high on the wall behind the bar. An AFL match plays on one, Video Hits on another and commercial news on the third. No channel has the sound on; instead the unrelated images turn to the pop-hum of a Madonna CD and the rise and fall of bistro noise. Distorted conversations overlap, there is the chink of glasses and the clatter of plates on tables, the clomping of footsteps on wooden floorboards. While people tuck into their Steak Diane and fish of the day, a montage of the Twin Towers attack plays. One after the other, the planes crash into both buildings, huge clouds of smoke billow out from shattered windows, there is mayhem on the streets. Then the iconic shot of the falling man, dropping down the side of the building, already a dead weight.

She is appalled by how desensitized she has become to the images of the towers, so unlike her continued shock at the photograph of the napalmed girl during the Vietnam War. She supposes it is the personal connection that affects, the fact that her father was a soldier in one of the earliest troops deployed. Had he witnessed anything like that? Had he been involved? Surely the things he experienced changed him, for there was definitely something missing when he returned. As a child she didn't understand that his silences were a form of protection, a way to keep his feelings hidden, and for many nights she worried about what she must have done to cause his distance. Eventually they spent time together again. Except that looking back, their occasional fishing trips now seem too much like premonitions that they did not heed.

Tonight she must tell Alice of Gerard's return. In some ways his homecoming feels as uncertain as her father's. They will have no way of knowing how long he will stay and what he'll be like while he's here.

Back at the table Katherine sets the drinks down. She is followed by the bar attendant who assists her with the ice bucket and the wine.

'Just pour,' says Queenie. 'I'm sure it's right.'

Once they have their glasses full Queenie lifts hers. 'To us,' she says.

The first mouthful is acidic, it burns Katherine's empty stomach and she pours herself a glass of water.

'I've read the news,' says Queenie. 'Did you really find an Aboriginal skeleton on that shipwreck?'

'Yes.'

'That must be creepy,' says Alice.

'It's complicated.'

'Why was she on board?'

'She's not mentioned in any maritime records. But we know enough about the ship, and her captain in particular, to suggest that she was taken from the mainland, probably in the region of the Coorong.'

'And what was the ship doing out there?' Queenie probes. 'Besides dragging women from the beaches?'

'The *Violet* was a clipper ship, taking immigrants from England to Australia from about 1850. She was refitted as a hulking ship in 1855 and spent the next year transporting goods and export wool back and forth from Port Adelaide to Port Elliott. She sank on a return trip.'

'And your lot are keeping those bones?' Queenie asks. 'Isn't that what all the fuss is about?'

'The owner of the shipping company wants to include them in an exhibition.'

'How is that possible?' Alice asks.

'Barton paid for all of the conservation work on a ship that belongs to him, to his family business. The age of the bones and the manner in which they were buried means that they are not protected. Legally, it would seem that he can.'

'But it sounds really wrong,' says Alice. 'Why would he want to?'

'Because they were found on *his* ship,' says Queenie. 'Isn't it obvious?'

'What if it were your mother in that hull?' Alice asks.

'My mother? She never stepped on a boat in her life.'

'What if it was you then?' Katherine suggests. 'Wouldn't you expect a proper burial?'

'Always so serious.' Queenie says, jokingly. 'Who's to say that the woman stuck under the ship wasn't boring, or an idiot, maybe everyone around her was pleased she'd disappeared. Anyone thought of that?'

‘Is that the point, though?’ Katherine asks.

Queenie takes a large sip from her glass. ‘Look,’ she says, ‘this Boston, whatever his name is, the point for him, and rightly so, is that all of this is his property. You just said so yourself. No one else is paying for the exhumation. If he hadn’t put up the cash in the first place this woman would have remained completely irrelevant. No one ever would have known she was there.’

‘But she’s been found,’ says Katherine. ‘Surely that changes things. Can you imagine if we never found out about Dad?’

‘Is that all you can do, dwell in the past?’

‘This shipwreck is as much about our present,’ says Katherine.

‘Ha,’ says Queenie. ‘It’s got nothing to do with me.’

On one level she’s right, thinks Katherine. There is always the argument that too much time has passed for the general public to feel any real sense of responsibility. There might be some left wing outrage, if all of the details come to light, but any controversy will probably be short lived.

Their meals arrive and the conversation lulls as everyone lifts their cutlery and begins to eat. Ever the conversationalist Queenie breaks the silence.

‘So what else has been happening?’

In a moment that Katherine will later describe to herself as poor judgment (she should really have waited until she and Alice were alone) she announces that Gerard is back.

‘Now that’s some headline!’ says Queenie, tearing the head off a strawberry garnish. ‘Has he remarried?’

‘No, Mum.’

‘Got a girlfriend?’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘Fascinating,’ says Queenie. ‘I wonder what brings him *home*?’ She drags out the word home, enjoying the irony.

Katherine glances over to Alice, who sits rigidly, poking her fork at the mound of salad on her plate.

‘He’d like to see Alice.’ Katherine waits for a response, but Alice just stabs a chunk of anaemic tomato.

‘Honey?’ Katherine says, ‘would you like to see him?’

‘I wouldn’t mind catching up,’ says Queenie.

‘Have some more wine,’ Katherine says and she pours a generous amount into Queenie’s glass. ‘And please, give it a rest.’

Queenie giggles and Katherine pushes away the thought that her mother is perversely immature, incapable of stepping aside from the centre of attention.

‘He’s really keen to see you,’ Katherine continues. And finding herself in the familiar territory of acting on Gerard’s behalf, she says, ‘Perhaps we can go out for tea?’

Alice lets her fork fall onto the plate. ‘Maybe,’ she says.

After the meal Katherine drops Alice at her friend’s place. Staying over at Frankie’s was not planned, but over dinner Alice became increasingly distant, removing herself from the conversation and then eventually from the table, so that when she finally spoke, Katherine immediately agreed. She could stay another night away from home on the proviso that she went to school tomorrow. Alice reassured her that she would. She explained that she already had a spare uniform at Frankie’s and that she was old enough to look after herself. Opting to trust that Alice can indeed get herself organized for school, Katherine decided not to ask about the other things Alice thought she was old enough to be doing. She promised herself years ago to give Alice room for self-discovery and swallows the fact that she has been a disappointment to her mother. She is sure Queenie wished it were she who died in the boating accident instead of her father. It is a melodramatic thought, a cliché, but it suits Queenie’s way of thinking. Uncomfortable as the idea is, it feels right.

Katherine swings the car into her driveway and there, under the verandah’s circle of security light, is Gerard, snoozing on her wooden armchair. As she steps out of the car he rises up. In his hand is a bunch of flowers. Not the kind he has purchased earlier from a florist, but an array of branches and stems that he has pilfered from nearby gardens. There is a spray of daisies. And in its centre there is a lily, still attached to its bulb.

‘For you.’

‘Thanks,’ she says.

He brushes a number of leaves from his clothes and Katherine notices a single white petal stuck to his cheek.

‘Alice isn’t here,’ she says.

‘Can I come in anyway?’ he asks. ‘The flowers are for you.’

‘It’s late.’

‘It’s a chance to catch up.’

Katherine doesn’t know why she holds the door open so that Gerard can follow her inside. Maybe she’s tired. Maybe she’s lonely. Or maybe she’s hoping that since he’s been briefed she can at least discuss the project with him.

As they enter the hall Alphie comes to check them out, sniffs at Gerard warily and retreats. Instead of traipsing after them to the back of the house, he peels off at Katherine’s room and hops onto her bed.

‘Coffee?’ she asks.

‘Got anything stronger?’

‘I think there’s a bottle of vodka in the freezer.’

Gerard pops open the freezer door, moves a loaf of bread and some Tupperware containers, soup, Bolognese sauce, unearthing the vodka from beneath a bag of peas. He drags it out, crusted with ice and steaming.

‘Would you like one?’

‘No thanks,’ she says.

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

He slips his feet out from his soft leather trainers, holds her gaze as he walks barefoot towards her. Even though she doesn’t move she feels herself gravitate to him, as if he is drawing her in, until she can feel the heat of his breath on her face. He comes closer still, slips his hand under her arm and around her, so that his palm rests in the centre of her back. In his other hand he has the bottle of vodka and as he presses up against her the sudden coldness of it on her thigh is a shock, causing her to step backward, into a corner of the kitchen. Gerard walks towards her again, places the bottle on the bench behind. With both hands free he works her underpants down to her knees, then forces them the rest of the way to the floor with his foot. She steps out of them, one foot at a time, surprised by the ease with which Gerard removes items from her body at the same time as his own. With his hands exploring her skin she loses sense of whether she is in the present, or experiencing again the first time they made love. He is deliciously warm and everything about the way he smells and tastes has a visceral familiarity. As he enters her she is unable to stop him, she hasn’t asked about recent partners or sexually transmitted diseases, they are not even using a condom. He nuzzles into her neck, moving his whole body slowly against her, and her mind races, counting back the days to her last period, convincing

herself that she is not ovulating, before losing herself in the moment. Once there, she is as enthusiastic as him and somehow they manage to orgasm at the same time. It is exhilarating and immediately after she feels a kind of embarrassed shame at the way in which she just let herself go.

‘Wow,’ he says taking hold of the vodka bottle. With his back to her he busies himself at the freezer, dragging out the ice-cube tray. The sun has tarnished the skin across his shoulders pigskin-pink, and she sees that it droops a little from his shoulder blades. His hips are a little softer too, his buttocks sag slightly. Yet he holds his body with the confidence that he is still in good shape. Although when he turns to open cabinet doors, in search of glasses, she wonders if he is holding his stomach in. No need, she thinks, despite the ten years he has on her. She is conscious of the way she must look these days. She finds her underpants, drags them on, then lifts her shirt from the floor and slips her arms through, quickly buttons it up. Still naked, he leans back against the fridge and sips his vodka.

‘So, how does it feel?’ he asks.

For a moment Katherine thinks he’s referring to the sex, but then realizes he’s asking about work.

‘Working on the bones?’

‘Yes, sorry,’ he smiles. ‘That was a little vague.’

‘It’s unlike other times,’ she offers.

‘How so?’

‘I’m not shocked by the actual bones themselves. They don’t remind me of my own mortality if you know what I mean.

‘What do they make you think of?’

‘Our profession, I suppose. Normally we work to a code of conduct.’

‘You don’t think you’re doing that now?’

‘I’m treating things properly. It’s more about Barton’s right to keep the bones that grates.’

‘Does that mean none of us has a right to keep things?’

‘Surely it depends on the context.’

‘These issues are nothing new.’

‘I know, it’s just this job is different.’

‘How so, I’m sure you’ve thought about ethics before.’

‘Of course. Although back in the early days I suppose it wasn’t a main concern. When I was working in the Solomons I was fairly inexperienced. We discovered a skull under the wreck of a steamboat in estuary mud. I found it hard not to imagine things like the size of the brain that was once inside it, but I wasn’t accountable for anything. I just expected the skull would remain part of the collection we were working on and be housed in the local museum.’

‘What happened to it?’

‘It was determined to be somewhat older than the other objects from the wreck and so it was transferred to a university in Australia for further testing. At the time no one looked into whether it was important to an indigenous group of people. I’m ashamed to say I never bothered to find out its provenance or where it eventually ended up.’

‘Not really your responsibility,’ he says.

‘Officially, the legalities of the *Violet* aren’t my responsibility either.’

‘With all due respect,’ says Gerard. ‘They’re not your responsibility unofficially.’

‘Maybe,’ she says. ‘It just feels so bloody complicated.’

‘Drew mentioned you were deliberating, but you’re really unsettled. Aren’t you?’

‘I am. I thought the disquiet would go away, but it has only got worse.’

‘Well it’ll be over soon.’

Somehow Gerard’s words don’t seem as comforting as they should and she begins to worry whether she has said too much. Maybe she shouldn’t have mentioned the *Violet*. But it doesn’t make sense to keep everything locked up, to never share anything with anyone.

‘How long do you think you’ll stay in town for?’ she asks.

‘Oh it depends a bit on how things pan out.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘The sale of Mum’s house, work opportunities...you.’

‘Me?’

‘Is that so strange?’

His question makes her smile. It has been a long time since someone has shown her this kind of attention. Even longer since she has been interested, unless she equates her momentary feelings towards Drew as a kind of attraction. The thought of which now seems irrational.

‘Would you like to stay the night?’ she asks.

‘That’s a tempting offer, but I should let you get some sleep. I imagine you’ve got another big day tomorrow.’

‘I suppose so,’ she says, embarrassed by his rebuff. She refrains from asking what he is doing the next day. She has already made herself appear needy enough and he never really responded well to questions of that kind, often mistaking interest for some sort of interrogation. She watches him dress. He does it in the same order as she remembers, always the shirt first, then the underpants, then the jeans. When he buttons up the fly he looks to her, as if to punctuate the finish. At last he sets himself on the ground, where he loosens the laces on his trainers and slides them back onto his feet.

‘Help me,’ he says holding out his hands. She circles his wrists and drags him forward so that he can spring up from the floor.

‘Just like old times.’

‘Old times,’ she says, noticing that he has left the ice-cube tray on the bench to melt.

It is not a small dinghy that Katherine dreams of. It is a great ship, the *Clan Ranald*. She is there, off the coast of Yorke Peninsula, as the ship wrecks in reverse. The hull lies upside down in twenty metres of water, a substrate for new colonies. Gorgonian corals and clusters of ascidians grow between door frames. Structural beams are coated with colourful sponges. Intricate patterns, like porous Venetian glass, make up the bodies of sea squirts. All these creatures hold fast to the hull. The reef they create begins to creak and separate beneath her. Small particles drift upwards, luminous beads like spawning coral. They expand into huge bubbles that burst near the surface. Large sections of corroded iron break away from the seabed. Tonnes of coal and wheat begin to whirl, cyclonically as they are sucked into the ship’s hull while the whole thing draws itself back together. As the ship ascends she too is forced upward, until she finds herself aboard its listing deck. The ship rolls so drastically that its starboard side is underwater. The starboard anchor is dropped and the ship’s bow turns into the wind, lifting her slightly. But the wind tears off the hatches and the ship begins to fill with water. In the distance another vessel passes, does not see the signals of distress that Katherine fires into the black sky. Then the *Clan Ranald* capsizes, sucking her crew down with her and Katherine is left on the surface of the ocean,

suddenly alone. There is nothing but darkness, no ship, no other humans, not even a piece of wreckage to hang onto.

She wakes feeling that some part of her existed before she was born. Not something cellular, but still, something fundamental, like the history of ancestors in another country. Or photo albums found in the debris of a burned down house. Are the missing parts of her yet to be recovered? Or is there nothing to salvage from her past?

The *Clan Ranald's* anchor was brought up and restored. It stands as a monument, on a cliff overlooking the wreck site. Records show that prior to her departure, the *Clan Ranald* had been stowed twice; the second time to make up for a five degree list to her port side. Fifty tonnes of coal were packed starboard to compensate and it is thought that the wake from a passing steamer, pushed the *Clan Ranald* once again off ballast. On the day the ship left anchorage it was low tide and a four degree list to starboard went undetected. Early into the voyage she lurched starboard by another forty degrees. The weather turned and her lifeboats were smashed by the rough seas. Entangled in their own tackle, the pulleys and the weights were rendered useless. Instead of assisting the crew to safety, the little boats went down with the main ship. Those that survived were mostly Filipino and Indian crew, apprehended by the Commonwealth as illegals. Katherine has seen a photograph of them from 1909, huddled together on the rocky coast. While they appear serious and bedraggled the picture is irrefutable. They have made it.

She wishes she could inhabit a world of stills: a photographic collection of memories that would allow her to take her time, to recreate the link between moments and events, to make them her own. She imagines a seamless heritage that consists of a concentric pattern of smooth looping circles, instead of tangled ropes.

Eight

Katherine removes the basket from the freezer. A thin skin of ice covers the fibres. Underneath, the weaving appears the colour of old beef. She places the basket inside the freeze drier, secures the large metal door and locks the heavy bolts into place. Through the glass panel the weaving appears tiny, an open cockleshell, shelved in an immense steel tube. It reminds her of seeing the bones on the sea floor, the way they appeared vulnerable against the greater breadth of the ocean. She turns the freeze drier to vaporization mode. There is a frightening sense that the process won't work, that instead of drying, the weaving will dissolve into a soggy mush. But ice begins to form in the tanks under the tube and so far everything is proceeding as it should.

She returns to the lab so that she can begin making the storage box for the weaving. Soon after, Tracy bounces in. Katherine has only ever seen her in a good mood. Her optimism seems unnatural, painted on at times, like her lip gloss. Katherine supposes it makes her more approachable. She has often heard Tracy leaving with the others at the end of a day. She has even watched them from the window, all of them laughing and pestering each other as they make their way to the pub across the road. Once Tracy turned to look up and Katherine slunk back into the shadows, hoping she hadn't been seen.

'I don't mean to bother you,' Tracy says, 'but Drew asked me to give you today's paper. And there's one more thing.' Tracy unsticks a post-it note from her hand. 'A message from Friday, I must have forgotten to give it you before I left. It's from a Daphne Ellis. She said it was urgent.'

Tracy hands over the newspaper and makes no move to leave. She must get bored, thinks Katherine, part time in the office instead of full time in the lab. But Tracy says she's happy doing both. There is not much work in town and this is the best there is, unless she goes interstate. Jim had done that. They'd had something going, Tracy and Jim, just after the *Violet* expedition. Then Jim got Alistair to recommend him for work at the Maritime Museum in Sydney. He didn't invite Tracy to follow. And apparently she didn't ask.

Tracy passes the note to Katherine. 'You want coffee?' she asks.

'Probably had enough already,' says Katherine. 'But thanks.' She places the newspaper on the bench and Alistair Hastings smiles cordially from a full colour spread. His pastel tie matches the colour of the stripe in his shirt. Next to him is a photograph of

Mrs Daphne Ellis. Mrs Ellis is not smiling. She is a powerful looking woman. Decisive. And her anger is palpable.

Who owns the bones? Private collector or Aboriginal elder?

Mr Alistair Hastings, Sydney based lawyer for English business tycoon Mr James Barton, states that the remains of an Aboriginal woman found buried in the sediment, under the wreck of the Violet, belong to Barton & Co. Transport and Shipping Lines. Mr Hastings argues the historic importance of the find saying that 'The discovery of the bones is part of our colonial history and the inclusion of them in Barton & Co.'s newly developed headquarters, in London, is crucial for the success of a permanent exhibition that will be housed there.' Hasting states that the exhibition 'sheds light, not only on the extraordinary journeys of the ship, but the practices of one of our settler captains.' He adds that 'It also showcases the remarkable work of our maritime archaeologists and conservators.' The Aboriginal elder and activist, Daphne Ellis, says that the bones do not belong to the shipping line and that they should not be on display. 'It's disrespectful, like putting the remains of Mr Hastings' great grandmother out there for everyone to see. This woman was obviously taken from her country. She deserves a proper burial. She deserves to be brought home.'

The coroner has expressed his displeasure at the way in which the bones have been dealt with, but states that 'since the remains have already left for the UK it will be something for the English coroner to follow up. If there is no problem in Britain, the issue as it relates to Australian law will need no further investigation.'

While Mr Hastings mentions that the concerns of Mrs Ellis have been taken into consideration, he has confirmed that the remains will be on display, along with a number of other objects discovered on the wreck and the entire bow of the ship. The exhibition opens in London in two months.

Katherine is well aware that the bones have gone nowhere. She can't believe that this is something Barton and Alistair will actually get away with, but what can she do? She sticks the post-it note to the article. It has Daphne's number on it.

Before long, the lab phone rings. It's Tracy with a call on line three.

'Daphne Ellis,' Tracy whispers, as if Daphne can hear her while she's on hold.

'Thanks, put her through...Hello Mrs Ellis, this is Katherine.'

'Wasn't sure if you got my message.'

'Yes I did, but I haven't had time to call. Sorry about that,' says Katherine.

'Mmm,' says Daphne. 'Spose you've had time to read the paper?'

'Yes.'

'It's why I'm ringing. I think we should talk.'

'I'm listening.'

'Not on the phone,' says Daphne. 'I need to see you.'

'You're welcome to come in, Mrs Ellis. I can make time after lunch.'

'I've got no transport; you'll have to come to me. Got nothing planned this arvo, so you can take the trip out here. You'll probably need to skip lunch, though. It's a bit of a drive.'

'I'm not sure today is any good.'

'What day would be then?'

Katherine flicks through the pages of her diary. The rest of her week is full, what with the latest transport deadline.

'I could make some time next week, or the one after.'

'That won't do.'

'I'm sorry?'

'It won't do. We're planning to take a public stand on this. We're not keeping quiet. If you won't see me in person soon, you'll be catching me on the news. I've got an interview with the ABC tomorrow. There's a lot I can say about the way you lot are *not* communicating properly with us.'

You lot? What's that supposed to mean. It is not as if Katherine has ever belonged to any group.

'I'm not sure I understand what you mean by "you lot"?' she says.

'Interesting how some of us are expected to reveal all while others are allowed to keep secrets.'

'I'm not keeping any secrets.'

'The paper says that the remains of one of our Old People have already left the country. I've heard differently. Don't suppose you'd like to come and discuss that?'

Katherine doesn't understand why she feels reluctant. She's wanted to get word to Daphne, to sort this situation out. Now Daphne is making it sound like the situation is Katherine's fault.

'This is a difficult state of affairs. It's not something I'm dealing with. It's Alistair Hastings you need to talk to.'

'You reckon I haven't tried?'

'Can't you try again?'

'I don't have time to chase down Hastings. He's never going to listen. Do you understand that?'

'Yes, he is hard to catch. I've been worried about what's going on...'

'You come and talk to me.' Daphne's voice is suddenly softer, coaxing.

'I was planning to speak with the anthropologists at the museum,' Katherine explains, 'but now that you've called...'

'My granddaughter found a picture of you on the net, and we reckon you're the one I need to be dealing with.'

'OK,' says Katherine. 'I'll come this afternoon.'

When she hangs up the phone she rests her head in her hands. How come she feels so alone in all this? And how had Daphne known to look her up? She should just head next door and talk again with Drew. Maybe he knows more about what is going on.

Alice makes it to school just in time for double English. She takes a seat at the back of the class and scrabbles around in her bag for her text book. On the front cover a line of soldiers march along the crest of a hill. Silhouettes against an orange sky. What she likes about the picture is its foreboding; it is as if they are surrounded by doom, and she cannot tell if they are walking towards it or away.

Apart from Art, English is the only other class Alice doesn't want to skip. The teacher, Ms Wilder, is not like other teachers. She wants to know what you're thinking. Most kids reckon she's off her rocker. But that's not it. She's odd because she's passionate. When she's talking about a poem or a writer's life, when she's talking about the past, none of it seems remote. Today green gas and rifle fire are here, in the class room.

'The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall; / Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds, / And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds. What does Owen mean?

No one knows what Ms Wilder is talking about.

The blinds remind Alice of her mum, the way she pulls them down to hide from the outside world. Is that what Owen means? That people retreat from things that are too painful to see? Alice isn't sure. She keeps quiet, in case she has it wrong, and waits in the prolonged and disengaged silence, for Ms Wilder's explanation.

Drew's shed is double the size of the one Katherine works in. Inside things are on the move. It is full of people and full of noise. Huge pine storage boxes, containing sections of the hull, are being stacked for transport and she is reminded of the size of the operation. She has spent so much time next door, where the scale of things is reasonably small, that she'd forgotten how huge the bow section is and just how impressive it will be when it is assembled in the exhibition hall. There are a number of people Katherine hasn't met, volunteers who have been locked inside this shed, industriously working for the man.

Tracy is making tea at what Drew calls his 'smoko bar'. Drew works a forklift between transportable hydraulic shelves and transport pallets. His manoeuvres are all jolts and jerks, willing the machine to work faster than it is designed to. As if he can sense the teabag being squeezed into his mug, Drew pulls up alongside them, high above in the rattling cab of the forklift. He doesn't bother to turn off the engine before dragging himself from the seat and lurching down the ladder. He takes the tea from Tracy while instructing one of the volunteers where to place the load he's in the middle of shifting.

'Thought this stuff was already in England,' says Katherine, gesturing to the boxed up sections of the collection stacked around them.

'Hey?' Drew teases, pretending not to hear her.

'*The Collection*. I heard it had already gone to the UK.'

'Oh that. He's a cunning bastard, our Alistair.'

'Outdone by a lawyer,' says Tracy. 'That's not like you.'

'Who said I had nothing to do with it?'

'And did you?' asks Katherine.

Drew doesn't bother answering.

'This is a hell of a project,' he says instead, 'feels like we're working on some kind of heist.'

'I've read the paper,' says Katherine. 'Clearly someone's been lying.'

'I'll blame Snap,' says Drew. 'Seeing as he's not here to defend himself.'

'Where is he?'

'Out West. Had to go home for a funeral.'

'Oh,' she says. 'I didn't know.'

'Hard to keep track of everything that goes on round here.' Drew takes a large gulp of hot tea and Katherine thinks, My God he's got an iron gut.

'Daphne Ellis has been in touch,' she says. 'She wants to tell me something'

‘Secret women’s business, hey?’

‘It sounded personal. She asked me to visit her.’

‘She never heard of the phone?’

‘I’ve already promised I’d come.’

‘This is not a crusade to cleanse your conscience.’

‘Maybe you should be worrying about your own.’

‘Clean as a whistle,’ Drew says and his grin shows he believes it.

‘I’ll be discreet.’

‘Be safe,’ he says. ‘It’s a dangerous drive into the middle of nowhere.’

Half way through class Alice receives a text, followed quickly by a second. She's got her phone on silent, but she can feel the vibrations though her skirt pocket. The first is from her mum, which she ignores. The other is from Frankie. Alice reads the message with the phone under the table. *meet 4 lunch 1pm @ com hall? am all alone.* Her earlier resolve, to stay at school for the rest of the day, dissolves. When the bell goes, and Ms Wilder's voice rises in an attempt to finish outlining the evening's homework, Alice slips past the other students and is out the door. Within less than a minute she has walked through the main school gates and is on the footpath. Her get-away is always as easy as that. If she didn't hate the loneliness of lunchtime so much she might even be disappointed. However, her comings and goings from school have become ordinary. So much so, that any thrill at being caught bludging has completely passed. Alice shoves her schoolbag on her shoulder and sets a comfortable stride into town.

Frankie and two of her actors rest on the steps of the community hall. Alice is down-hearted to see Frankie still has company. It always means that she is the odd one out. Although, and this is all the more confusing, it is one of the things Alice admires about her, the fact that she has heaps of friends. Frankie gives Alice a wave and beckons her over. The two actors are leaning on each other, more than that, thinks Alice, they're entwined, as if they share the same skin. When Frankie introduces them, the actors say 'Hey' in unison.

'Hi,' says Alice, wishing she'd changed out of her school uniform.

'You wanna join us in the market?' asks the boy with thick lips and long curled up eyelashes. 'We're having noodles.'

'You go,' Frankie says, as if she's giving them permission.

'OK,' the girl pouts. 'But we'll miss you.' She loosens herself from her other half and gives Frankie a kiss on the lips. Alice stands back, awkwardly. She is thankful that they don't try to kiss her, just hug Frankie goodbye instead.

'Are they lovers?' Alice asks when the actors are a few metres away.

'In the play,' explains Frankie. 'I suppose the need for dramatic intimacy has made them close.'

'Is it real then, how they're stuck together like that?'

'Of course it's real.'

'They're not just acting?'

'It's theatre,' Frankie says, 'don't you get it?'

No. She probably doesn't get it. Maybe she's jealous of their ability to seem unselfconscious. But she's not jealous of their affection. If anything, the public nature of it unnerves her.

The two girls wander down the street, smoking. Once they reach the café Alice orders and pays for two coffees, then brings them outside, where Frankie is sitting at a table under the shade of grapevines. Frankie doesn't say much and Alice worries about the silence.

'What are you doing tonight?' she asks.

'Probably head out somewhere.' Frankie sucks cappuccino froth into her mouth.

'You wanna come?'

'I'm meeting my dad.'

'Really? That's fucking weird.'

'I know. I've been wishing for this to happen, but I guess I'm a little worried.'

'Why?'

'What if he doesn't like me?'

'You should be more worried about whether you like him!'

'Why wouldn't I?'

'I don't know, he might be a disappointment.'

'You think I should go?'

'Sure! You can't miss something like this. I'd love to see my dad again, not that there's any chance. Mum reckons he wiped us all, just after she had Shaun.'

'What would you say to him?'

'I'd approach the whole thing very seriously,' says Frankie. 'Possibly take the opportunity to call him an arse-hole.'

They both laugh and Frankie wipes the last bits of chocolate froth from her cup, licks her fingers.

'Let's get stoned,' she says. 'I don't feel like being on my own.'

'OK,' says Alice.

'We can go to the Botanic Gardens and watch the grass grow.'

Alice finishes her coffee and they head off to Frankie's secret spot by the river, a stretch of lawn hidden behind an ancient Morton Bay Fig.

Daphne's place is a couple of hours drive south-east of the city. She's living near one of the lakes that connects up to the Coorong. It is a small community on the site of an old mission. There is no road sign to the area, it is not even marked on the map, but Daphne's directions were succinct. Katherine slows down as she turns off the bitumen and onto a dirt road. It is riddled with potholes and deep corrugations. She remembers these kinds of roads from her childhood, although the colours are different here. Pink salt lakes and sections of grey crusted over mud, break up a landscape that is otherwise covered in bristly saltbush. Low sand dunes rise in the distance. Today the blue of the sky is startling, as if light from the open ocean reflects out to touch the land, miles beyond the shore.

There is a dead fox on the roadside, its head busted open. As she passes crows fly up from the carcass and there is a flurry of dark feathers. She follows a bend in the road, which leads straight into town. A stone church crumbles at the centre of a treeless square. The streets on either side are lined with fibro houses. They all appear derelict, of no use at all, except for the fact that people are sitting outside them on arm chairs and ruined couches. Rubbish blows across the streets. Scrawny dogs bark and a pack of kids runs across the road in front of Katherine's car, giggling and pointing at her. A little boy waves from the footpath. His cheeks are caked in dry snot, his smile wide and mischievous. Katherine waves back and the boy runs along the footpath, keeping pace with the car, his bare feet slapping against the broken concrete. When Katherine turns down Daphne's street the boy stops, stands at the corner for a moment and then walks back the way he came. The houses on Lightning Road are even more dilapidated than the ones on the entrance to town. Katherine pulls up outside number fifteen. The house is in need of a paint job and some of the fly screens are missing from its windows. And yet, it seems the only place on the street with a patch of green lawn and a garden. Across the road a young man slumps on a camp chair in the sunshine. Katherine locks her car.

She makes her way to the verandah where several petunias hang from plastic pots. Hot pink flowers stud the flesh of a tall cactus just outside the front door. She knocks and waits. No one answers. She checks her watch, right on time. Maybe she has the wrong house. She looks back at her car, as if a glance toward her diary on the passenger seat might remind her. For a moment she is disturbed by how luxurious her Corolla appears. Here, it looks spotless, a brilliant shimmering white. She resists the urge to check whether it really is locked. If she did, she might just slip back into the driver's seat and head straight to the highway. Katherine knocks again and the neighbours' dog starts barking.

‘Who you looking for?’ It’s the man from across the road.

‘Mrs Ellis.’

‘Auntie Daphne? Try knocking round the back.’

‘OK,’ Katherine calls back. ‘Thank you.’

The young man closes his eyes, turns his face toward the sun.

Katherine unhooks a chain from a short metal gate and follows a concrete path around the fibro building. She knocks on the fly screen.

‘Door’s open!’

Katherine pushes the door, stands at the entrance.

‘Mrs Ellis?’

‘That’s me.’

‘Hello, I’m Katherine.’

‘Thought so. You coming in?’

Katherine edges into the room. It takes a while for her eyes to adjust to the dimness. Daphne sits in a rocking chair. It creaks, gently, as she leans back and forth.

‘I can’t stay long,’ says Katherine.

‘None of you ever do.’

‘It’s just that I’ve got to be back in town in a few hours.’

‘Of course you do,’ says Daphne. ‘You want a drink?’

‘No thanks, I’m driving.’

Daphne swivels the drink around in her glass.

‘Well, take a seat then. I’m too tired to get up and bite.’

Katherine rests on the edge of a cane two-seater.

Daphne pulls at the crochet rug covering her knees.

‘Always cold,’ she says. ‘They say it’s the joints.’

‘Arthritis?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Does it make you uncomfortable?’

‘Not as much as you. You always sit like that?’

Katherine places her handbag on the floor near her feet, shuffles herself back into the couch and folds her hands on her lap. She tries to relax, but Daphne stares straight through her.

‘Tell me your story,’ says Daphne.

‘Oh,’ says Katherine taken aback. ‘I thought you wanted to tell me something. Isn’t that why you called?’

‘I’d like to know a bit about you first.’

‘I don’t really have a story, nothing of any interest.’

‘We’ve all got a story.’

‘I wouldn’t know where to start.’

‘Where you from?’

‘South of the city. I grew up at Port Willunga.’

‘Kaurna country.’ Daphne relights her rollie. ‘What about your family?’

‘My mother and I catch up fairly regularly, but really we’re not very close.’

‘That’s a shame.’

Katherine unfolds her hands, runs them along her trouser legs. She is conscious of her agitation, tries to rest her hands on the couch, but ends up sticking a cushion on her lap and fiddling with the corner of its cover.

‘What about your dad?’

‘He died at sea. In a boating accident. Actually it was a storm while we were fishing. I don’t remember much, I was young.’ She does not want to say any more. She feels exposed enough as it is. She squeezes the cushion against her belly.

‘You still dreaming about your dad?’

‘Yes, I suppose I am.’

‘Hard when people pass away, especially like that. It feels unfinished. It’s important to find some peace.’

‘Yes,’ Katherine’s voice is soft, ‘I can see that it is.’

Daphne chews at the inside of her lip for a few moments. She holds her smoke close to her mouth, slips the rollie inside and draws. The thin paper burns quickly. She rests her head on the hand she holds her rollie in. The tip of the smoke almost touches her face.

‘I know the bones are still here, but I heard you’re shipping them off soon. To the Empire.’

‘In about a week,’ says Katherine. So much for being discreet.

‘So the funny bastard was right.’ Daphne smiles to herself. ‘Snap warned me it was now or never.’

‘Snap told you?’ Katherine sits forward and the cushion rolls to the floor. ‘I find that hard to believe.’ Except that of course she does believe it. Who else could it have been? Tracy? Katherine picks up the cushion, tries to quell the alarm she feels. It is not like she’s been personally betrayed. She’s not responsible for Snap’s actions. Besides, she’s been worrying about this for ages. Isn’t it good that the story of the bones is out? She doesn’t know what to think. And she can’t read Daphne at all. Her face reveals nothing.

‘It’s just that Snap is so close to the project,’ she says. ‘Why would he tell you?’

‘He understands what’s at stake. His people are from up Broome way.’

‘He never said.’

Daphne’s eyes light up. ‘We come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes even white ones.’

Katherine drops her eyes to the floor, shocked again by her own lack of perception.

‘You might have heard, I’ve done a bit of work in the area of repatriation. It’s taken us a long time to bring back some of the Old People from her Majesty. A baby too, that had been in a museum for more than a hundred years, all that way over there. No country. No kin. No place to rest.’

‘Terrible,’ says Katherine.

‘I’d like to avoid that now.’

‘As far as I know,’ says Katherine, ‘there are a number of implications in regard to ownership.’

‘True,’ says Daphne.

‘Alistair is scrupulous. He’s dotted all the i’s, crossed all the t’s. He’s certain that legally, we’re in a good position. Apparently The Act does not include the protection of Aboriginal bones buried at sea. That is, unless the bones are buried according to Aboriginal tradition, which in this case they obviously are not. So he has it covered. The shipping company has no real lawful obligation. Where the remains end up is actually out of my hands.’

‘You have clean hands, then,’ says Daphne, ‘well scrubbed?’

‘I’m not saying I’m absolved,’ Katherine starts. Absolved of what? Is she seeking forgiveness? She is unsure if she is representing Barton’s *Violet Collection* or whether she feels the opposite. She continues: ‘It’s just that I don’t have the answer. I can try talking to my boss again...’

‘You have any children?’

Please, Katherine thinks, don't make me talk about Alice.

Daphne waits for a response.

'I have a daughter,' Katherine says.

'I've got five children. See those photos?'

There are several pin-boards on the walls, covered with faces of family: parents, children, babies. There must two hundred individual photos, painstakingly cut out and arranged so that the boards are full to the edges.

'...And sixteen grannies. Got a couple of foster kids, too.'

'A big family,' Katherine says.

'You reckon your daughter'd let some fella take your bones to another country?'

'I'd hope not.'

'Let me tell you something, Katherine. We don't own the bones. *I* don't own those bones.'

'I don't understand.'

'It's about guardianship. It's my job to look out for them. Do you get the difference?'

In a round about way she's asking for them back. Daphne wants Katherine to deliver her the remains. Katherine can't imagine a way to do that without breaking her contract, without stealing. She'd be risking prosecution.

'I can't promise anything.'

'I'm not asking you to.'

Daphne's response relieves Katherine considerably. She doesn't actually have to do anything. Daphne can see that her hands are tied.

'It's a very complex issue,' says Katherine. 'I appreciate that you understand my position.'

'This is not about *your* position. It's not about you. And I'm not asking. I'm telling. Work out a way to give those bones back. And the weaving. They don't belong to you.'

Another painful insight. The whole time Katherine has been working on the collection she has believed she's wanted the best outcome for the remains. Now it seems that she has not been able to take herself out of the equation. It feels personal. And what does that make her? Another one of Barton's flunkies? She knows that Daphne is right, not that it's even about right and wrong. The whole situation goes beyond a matter of ethics.

Except that she can't help feeling backed into a corner. She looks to Daphne for reassurance. There is none.

Daphne pours herself a rum and fills up the glass with coke. She relights her rollie and twists it around with her bony thumb and forefinger. She takes a number of small puffs, then tilts her head.

'Spose you'd better be off,' she says. 'You got a long drive ahead.'

Nine

On her way back into town Katherine receives a call. She pulls over so that she can talk properly, parks abruptly on the roadside, dirt billowing up in a cloud behind her. She misses the name of the caller, only catching the request to be interviewed on Radio National the following morning. The caller's manner is charming and warm: 'Mrs Daphne Ellis will be speaking in an interview first and then we'd love to hear your side of the story. We feel that our listeners would be very interested in the position that private conservators take on such matters.' Immediately after she agrees, she rings Drew. 'Shit's gunna hit the fan,' he says and laughs.

She looks out at the pale blue sky and the low scrubby country that surrounds her. It is tempting to spin the car round, make a direct course for one of the fences, bust through the rusted wire and the weathered posts. Travel away from everything that she has agreed to do: dinner with Gerard, a radio interview, this whole damn project. What used to be a safe occupation, the kind she could hide herself in, is now forcing her to surface in ways she does not feel prepared for. Daphne's words 'I don't own the bones' play over in Katherine's head. Why hadn't Snap warned her this was coming? She has spent the past few years feeling uneasy, but never enough to act against the expectations of her job. Was the element of surprise meant to entice her into action?

She realizes now that during the exhumation she was unable to stop herself from uncovering the remains. Once she had sighted the bones, protruding from the sediment, it was impossible not to dig, to find out exactly what was there. She had not really thought it was something she should *not* do. On the contrary, she was there to discover the artefacts, to bring lost objects back into the known world. She has always prided herself on doing the right thing. Now she is unsure what that is. Without knowing exactly what the provenance of the remains is, how can she ready them for Daphne? Or, for Barton? Really she has only two choices and is unable to make either.

They are talking, her 'mum' and 'dad', she can see their mouths move, she can hear noise coming out. So how come she can't understand a word they are saying? She expects that a synapse in her brain has switched off. Or maybe the smoke she had with Frankie was

stronger than she thought. She did not feel weird on the bus down to Henley Square, although maybe she should have. Maybe you're not meant to rock up stoned when you meet your dad for the first time since you were two. Would it really be any better if she were straight? She had imagined meeting him so many times. She expected that immediately they would be close. Strange, all she feels now is remote.

'Alice, are you alright?' It's her mum.

'Sure.'

'It's just you're very quiet.'

'We've got a lot to catch up on, haven't we,' says Gerard. He is looking at Katherine when he says this and Alice is glad he's not focused on her. Only an hour ago he was full on gawking. She had to look away a number of times because he was staring into her eyes so keenly. He was telling her about packing up his mother's house, making it sound like he was a really dependable guy. Alice is not so sure. It's not like she's seen any other evidence. Once he finished she asked a few questions. At first he responded willingly, but he soon began to lose interest. She tried to tell him about Alphie, and Frankie, even the stuff she did and didn't like about school. While he nodded every now and then she noticed his eyes started wandering: across the square, into the distance, or to the ladies sitting at the nearby table. Why doesn't her mother notice? After everything, is she still in love with him?

Alice's napkin lies in a heap on her plate, torn into strips that a gust of wind lifts up and scatters across the square. Pleased, she excuses herself from the table to collect them. She imagines, now that she has left the conversation, a silence might fall between her parents; that without her they have nothing in common. But when she turns around her mother is flushed and smiling and Gerard is reaching out for her hand. Completely revolted, Alice looks away.

Sea gulls fuss over a spray of hot chips that have been tossed onto the grass. To the side of the main flock a single gull with one leg staggers to keep its balance while another, full of bravado, pushes past it screeching. The stropy bird's feathers stand up, reminding Alice of the hackles on a dog. A faster, smarter gull swoops in from the air between them and in no time is flying off with a chip secured in its beak. Suddenly unsettled, all of the other birds rise, several metres into the air. Survival of the fittest, thinks Alice. How could anyone else think otherwise? The other night, when her mum was persuading her to come, she said that Gerard really wanted to see her. Alice is positive that isn't true. Years ago she

found an article about him in a journal in her mum's study. It mentioned the research station he was based at and she sent him a card. Now that she has met him she understands why he never replied. She is certain he isn't really interested in her and suspects that he is after something else. Maybe he's here to capture her mother? He probably has a cage back at his place, and a bunch of carrots to lure her in.

When they leave the restaurant Gerard gives Alice a wide berth. He and Katherine walk together to the car while she dawdles behind them. He has the inclination to take Katherine's hand; she has it so close to him he can feel her urging him to do so. But with Alice in the background it might not be the best idea. Besides, the anticipation of another sexual encounter is thrilling. Experience tells him that these things are always more satisfying when the lead up is drawn out. One could argue he's waited years for this. He should mention that to Katherine, the business of his longing. For a moment he is lost in thought, remembering the first time. It was the end of a long day in which he had lectured to a hall of archaeology students, her included. She caught his attention when unlike the others in the group, who thought it a shame to rebury a wreck, she had asked a specific question about the artefacts from the *San Juan*. Had everything been reburied with the wreck or were some of the objects exhumed for conservation? After his lecture he caught up with her and invited her to his hotel. Outside his room he took her hand and held it, along with the keycard, so that they could swipe open the lock together. He pushed the door open further with his knee and led her inside. The room was pale pink and blue; it matched the colours of her silk shirt. He sat her on the bed and started to undress her, the shirt first, slowly thumbing open one buttonhole at a time, watching the fabric tremble against her skin. Without her orderly layer of clothing she was near perfect, honey skinned. Unblemished. Except for the line around her hips, where her underpants had been, and the indents on her back from the clasp of her bra. It did not matter that she was inexperienced. In many ways it was part of the fun.

Somehow Alice has made it to the car before them and is leaning on the boot. She looks more contemptuous than at the dinner table. Insolent and impenetrable. Who would have thought? He was expecting someone completely different. Someone friendlier. Her rapid judgment of his character has thrown him and he considers whether she might be

jealous. After all, Katherine is getting most of his attention. In the rear-vision mirror he sees Alice's face, round with the puppy fat of youth, and it puzzles him that it can be set so hard.

Alice does not say goodbye. The car has stopped, but is still running as she flings herself out, strides the footpath and slams through the front yard gate, letting it bang shut. They both watch her storm across the grass and disappear down the side of the house.

'Sorry about that,' Katherine says. 'Maybe it'll take her a while.'

Gerard settles a hand on Katherine's shoulder.

'In the meantime,' he leans closely in, brushes his lips against her face.

She turns towards him and the smell of him overwhelms her. Just as he kisses her she thinks, maybe this is all wrong, and then she has the taste of his mouth. Several minutes later and they are still completely engrossed in each other, until a loud thump on the windscreen interrupts them. It is Alice, turning from their view and striding down the street.

'Fucking hell!' Gerard spits and Katherine pulls away.

'My turn to apologize,' he says. 'It's just that I was enjoying that.'

'So was I...' She unbuckles her seatbelt and gathers her handbag from the floor in front of her. 'Maybe there are more pressing things to think about.'

'Like work?'

'Yes, I suppose. Part of me thinks I need to thrash things out with Drew and Alistair but they're not listening.'

'I'm listening.'

'I expect that if I told them what Daphne asked me to do they'd lock me out of the lab.'

'And what was she asking?'

'She wants the remains, and the weaving. I can't possibly give them back to her, not without being absolutely positive the bones are Ngarrindjeri. And I can't move forward with the conservation, knowing they'll end up in England.'

'Maybe Daphne knows something you don't,' he suggests. 'I mean, how did she get hold of you in the first place? How did she know any of this was going on?'

‘I’m not sure,’ she says, suddenly reluctant to mention Snap until she’s spoken with him in person.

Gerard places a hand on Katherine’s knee. It is a paternal gesture that makes her feel oddly young.

‘I could help,’ he says.

‘Thanks, but I can manage.’

Gerard removes his hand, rests it on the edge of her seat.

‘Are you sure?’ he asks. ‘It seems as if you’re struggling with the last mile.’

‘Am I?’

‘I’m just suggesting that I could take over the bones, you know, so you’d have space to finish the other pieces.’

‘Why not offer to finish those pieces? Why go after the bones?’

‘Because they’re what’s holding you back. And I’ve got more experience. It’d be faster if I do it.’

‘I’ve still got enough time.’

‘But you spent most of the day at the Coorong. How has that helped?’

‘And what have you been doing, plotting with Drew?’

‘We’ve talked.’

‘Obviously,’ says Katherine, unable to hide her irritation.

Gerard takes Katherine’s hand and kisses it.

‘Don’t ruin this,’ he says. ‘Not with work.’

She does not pull her hand away. She knows she should have a different response. A proper one, where she stands up for herself, but there is some truth to what he says. It is not as if he’s the first to notice that work dominates her life. He enfolds her hand inside his own, draws her closer. He kisses her lips, softly, then her cheeks and her forehead and she feels hopelessly possessed by him, by the intimacy of his touch. He loops his fingers through her hair, holds tightly onto the back of her neck. His kissing becomes more intense. A little too forceful. Soon, his whole body seems to bear down on her, so that instead of being swept away she begins to feel dominated. She stops him when he starts to unbutton her shirt. Is he really expecting to do this in the car?

‘It’s too much,’ she says.

‘Relax. You’ve always over analysed things.’

‘All of this is very confusing.’

‘It’s lovely.’

‘Not altogether. Not when you’re after my job.’

He sits back, obviously offended. ‘That’s taking it a little too far, don’t you think?’

‘I don’t know.’ She pauses, opens the car door. ‘Look, I’ve got a radio interview in the morning,’ she says and steps out of the car onto the footpath.

‘You’re not going to ask me in, then?’

‘Not tonight.’

‘Let’s talk tomorrow,’ says Gerard. ‘When you feel better.’

Alice’s schoolbag blocks the entrance to the kitchen and Katherine has to push it aside with her foot in order to pass. She places her handbag on the bench, next to Alice’s sketchbook, which lies open. Even in her fury Alice has taken the time to write a note. Nothing loving, but at least it lets Katherine know what she’s up to. *Meeting Frankie. Talk later.* On second thoughts, it could be Alice’s way of telling her to back off. Maybe what she’s really saying is, *I’m going out, there’s no need to worry, so do not contact me!*

Katherine supposes that from Alice’s point of view, the meeting with Gerard did not go well. She had anticipated some clunky moments between them, but she is confused by the way Alice turned normal caution, around getting to know her father, into something so hostile. She wonders if she is responsible in some way. Is it possible she let her own needs railroad those of her daughter’s? Or would it be fair to say that Gerard and Alice also had something to do with how things went?

Katherine picks up the sketchbook. She feels as if she’s prying, but she leaves through the pages. It is full of work. There are the obvious set exercises: an Impressionist vase of flowers, a Pop Art kettle, a portrait in the style of Andy Warhol. While they are all good, none of them speaks of how Alice sees the world. A little further in the class pieces are interrupted. Biro drawings, mostly of landscapes, sprawl across the paper. They are beautiful, lightly done and tonally correct. And they leave out the detail, so there is plenty of space for the viewer to imagine the texture of a city wall or what might be growing in the beds of the Botanic Gardens. She flips to the back and is shocked by the image on the last page. In a few places it has been so aggressively expressed that the pen has ripped through the cartridge. A ship, busting up in a storm is set at the centre. Large waves crowd the vessel. Near its hull Alice has drawn masts, hunks of wood and barrels bobbing out of the water. She has written *flotsam and jetsam* in the shape of a wave. In the foreground

there are the bodies of sailors floating in the sea and the word, *mortalities*. She has left one mast standing on deck and to that she has drawn a tumbling down sail. There is a lone figure standing by the sail and next to it Alice has written, *mum*, but that is crossed out and she has replaced the caption with, *lost at sea*.

Katherine searches back through the pages to find Alice's note. She returns the sketchbook to the bench, leaving it open at the original page, and pours herself a vodka. Is that really what Alice thinks of her? Well, at least she hadn't put her at the bottom of the sea, which is where Katherine is starting to feel she would rather be. It has been months since her last dive. Months since she has even been to the ocean for a walk. She drinks the vodka and pours another. Completely out of practise she quickly begins to feel wobbly. She takes her glass to the sink, leans against the bench for support, and looks out the window into the garden. The moon is not quite full, its sides slightly flattened, but its light falls across the entire yard so that everything appears soaked in silver and black. She can see to the back fence where the quince trees grow, choked with summer leaves. Established enough to have flowered and fruited during the last winter, they are not yet gnarly like the ones of her childhood home. She can't help but think of her father sitting on his chair in their old back yard. Out there, afternoons would turn into evening and he could sit and drink well into the night, flicking his cigarettes like dying stars into the darkness beyond the porch.

Katherine gazes into the otherworld that is her own garden and quietly, she begins to cry. Somehow the dog senses her change in mood and he comes to lie at her feet. Soon the tears blur her vision so much that she needs to wipe her eyes. Her shift in focus literally takes her away from the scene outside and with drier eyes she looks at herself, reflected in the glass. No matter how hard she tries to see beyond it, she can only see her face: the bags under her eyes, her pathetic quivering lip. She throws the last of her drink down the sink. She rinses her mouth out with water and washes her face. Is this what alcohol brings on? Wasn't Drew the same, desperate for water from the tap? She supposes it doesn't mean anything at all, apart from the obvious fact that she is dehydrated and exhausted, but she feels as if she's replicating him in some way. It's not that he's a bad man, she certainly doesn't think that. It's just that he is a pro at sidestepping the issues. He treats her concerns as if they are private worries and not something that he should have to deal with professionally.

She wonders if she has left it too late to reassess her approach. In the beginning, it had all seemed straightforward. It had been about bringing up the ship, about the desire to find gold. The expedition had never included the discovery of Aboriginal human remains. Not once had the possibility crossed her mind. The insular way in which she has been working finally dawns on her. Up until now her research for this project has only been local and she begins to ask herself why she hasn't looked into the possibility of similar cases elsewhere. Has she avoided it as a way of shirking responsibility, just as she did in the Solomons? The thought worries her, as if she is admitting to being both unprofessional and apathetic. Apart from the fact she has not really tapped into the most current conservation techniques, preferring to rely on what she is familiar with, she has also stayed away from investigating the same kind of ethical issues in a global context. At the beginning of the project she criticized Barton for refusing to seek further evidence. In her mind it meant he could hide his actions behind 'not knowing' all of the facts. Has she been doing a similar thing?

She heads to her study, switches on the desk lamp. It takes only a minute or so to fire up her computer. She types *discovery of human remains* into the computer's search engine and then adds an extra term: *contested*.

When Alice steps into the pub Frankie is at the bar. She is chatting to a couple of men and there is another man at a table nearby, who watches her closely. As if Frankie has a sixth sense of Alice's arrival, she turns to face her.

'Grab a beer,' she says. 'And come and meet Dale.'

Alice waits while the barman pours.

'Nice friend you got there,' he says. 'You two the same age?'

'Yeah.' Alice lies.

As soon as the beer is ready she shifts over to where Frankie and Dale are sitting. Dale leans his chair back so that he can reach behind and get hold of another seat. He drags it across the carpet.

'Chivalry,' says Frankie.

Dale gives Frankie a hungry smile. 'It ain't dead,' he says.

Alice sits down.

'Hey Alice,' says Frankie, 'you got any cigarettes? We're out.'

'Sure.' She pulls a pack from her bag and hands them round. Dale takes two, rests one behind his ear. Frankie rolls the filter tip of her cigarette along the edge of her bottom lip before placing her mouth fully around it. The filter shines with saliva. She lights up, hands the flaming match to Dale. Dale lights his cigarette, drags on it long and hard.

'Frankie's been telling me about her career,' he says eventually, smoke spilling from his mouth. 'Says she's a theatre director. Seems she'd like to get inside my head. You think that's all she wants?'

'I'd say most people want something more.'

'I'd say your right. Hey, Frankie, what's it you're really chasing?' he asks.

'Everything,' Frankie says. 'It's all out there.' She lifts her arms and waves them to the jukebox music. Her cigarette dangles from her stretched out hand.

'What about you, Alice?' asks Dale.

'Yeah, Alice?' Frankie croons from behind her swirls of smoke. 'What about you?'

Alice can't think of anything in particular. She poses the question to herself again, inside her head. Nothing comes. It scares her, the way she can never find much of a self to hold on to. She shrugs.

'Secretive, hey?'

'A clean slate,' Frankie suggests.

‘No shit,’ says Dale. ‘Like a virgin?’ He gazes at Alice who shifts awkwardly on her seat.

‘Tell me more,’ he continues, ‘I’m all ears.’

‘That’s disappointing.’ Frankie lifts one eyebrow into a question mark.

‘I’ve got to go to the toilet,’ says Alice, excusing herself.

The girls’ toilets are tucked in behind the main bar like an afterthought. There’s a brown chipboard door with Dames written on it in pink. Inside, the floor and cubicle walls are made of concrete. Alice shuts herself in a cubicle and sits on the lid. Frankie has been there. *Be afraid or act in spite of fear* crosses the door in bold black text. Probably water based, thinks Alice. Frankie is always talking about the environment. She only uses her mobile to text, never makes calls. Too much mobile talk clogs up the ether. She says if we’re not careful mobiles and computers will separate the human race from face to face contact. Frankie reckons that real communication is about being close to people. Alice would like to think so too. She wants to be more like Frankie, to be open to what comes. To take some risks. That’s why she has come to the pub. Isn’t it?

And to get away from whatever is happening with her mum and dad. She has seen old photographs of them together, one taken at their wedding and some at the beach. There is even one of the three of them, when Alice was a baby. In all of them they seem happy. Regardless, she never expected them to be close. The pictures are faded, yellowy round the edges. In them, her parents look nothing like they do now. Although there is something similar about Gerard, just like on paper, he appears in person as if he is not quite real.

What Katherine discovers is by no way reassuring. Unfolding at almost the same time as the *Violet* project has been the controversial proceedings around the discovery of the Kennewick Man. Scrolling through the articles that surround this find she is embarrassed to realize that she had no idea it was even happening. The skeleton was discovered in Washington State in 1996 and early on, radiocarbon dating aged it between seven and nine thousand years old. Initially the remains were to be repatriated to local tribes for reburial. However, a lawsuit from eight anthropologists meant that the remains were not repatriated, but handed over to scientists for further study. It took four years to determine that the Kennewick Man was Paleo-Indian. During this time several court cases denied Native American access to the remains, finding, despite the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, that the tribes involved were unable to prove their cultural affiliations. From what Katherine can make out the situation is ongoing with the Kennewick Man still undergoing tests at the Burke Museum under the auspices of the Army Corps of Engineers, as the landowners of the property on which the remains were found. Unlike her approach, the conservators of the Kennewick Man have taken the path of least intervention. On board to ensure that the bones remain stable, and so as to accommodate scientific testing, they have not relied on consolidants like the emulsion Katherine has used. While reading Katherine becomes disturbed. Not because of the way the conservators of the Kennewick Man have proceeded, but because their treatment choices illuminate the mistake she has probably made.

When the Aboriginal woman's remains were desalinated enough to undergo their next stage of treatment, she decided to impregnate them with the polyvinyl acetate. The bones were going to have to travel a long way; their stability needed to be guaranteed. But she can no longer avoid the idea that conserving them in this way will be detrimental. Now that the bones are dried and their structure is cross-linked with the emulsion it will be near impossible to reverse the treatment. Her actions may well have limited the kinds of bio-archaeological tests that could determine the Aboriginal woman's provenance. For the first time in her career she questions whether treating objects, purely under the banner of conservation, aims to tell us of human experience or if it speaks of intervention. She wonders what Daphne Ellis would think.

Alice leans casually against the bar, envisaging that a laid-back stance might make her look older.

‘Sambucas!’ Frankie calls out. ‘All round.’

The barman pours the first shot and tosses it down his neck. Then he runs the bottle over the top of each glass, letting Sambuca spill onto the bar. Alice clusters the sticky shot glasses and takes them back to the table where two other men have joined Frankie and Dale.

‘Brothers,’ says Dale. ‘This is Alice.’

‘I was just telling Chris and Matt about my play,’ says Frankie, taking a cigarette from Alice’s pack, then offering them round.

Alice shuffles back into her spot at the table.

‘Kinda disrespectful,’ says Matt, ‘taking the piss out of the Anzacs.’

‘It’s not taking the piss, it’s questioning the mythology,’ Frankie explains.

‘It’s not Australian.’

‘It’s an Australian play.’

‘Put Khe Sanh on the jukebox,’ Dale interrupts. ‘We’re gonna be there soon.’

‘Dumb cunt,’ says Matt. ‘That’s Vietnam.’

‘No difference!’ Dale kicks back his Sambuca. ‘They’re all Charlie.’

The brothers laugh and Dale seems pleased.

Frankie leans over the shot glasses, towards Dale. ‘You won’t go to Iraq,’ she says. ‘You’d never join up.’

‘How do you know?’ Dale says, his grin fading.

‘Bet you’ve lived here all your life.’

‘I’ve seen enough.’

‘You’re scared.’

‘I fucking ain’t!’

‘But you’ve been hurt by someone,’ Frankie muses.

‘I like it.’ Matt gestures for more.

‘I’d say it was your father.’

‘Nothing wrong with my old man.’

‘Does he have a job?’ Frankie asks.

‘Sometimes.’

‘But he left your mum.’

‘So?’

‘Did he beat you?’

‘What the fuck kinda question is that?’

Frankie makes sure her Sambuca slides down slow, holding the moment. Finally, she says:

‘But there’s something worse. Someone close to you died.’

Dale’s face hardens and he grabs hold of his bicep. When he finally drops his hand Alice sees the tattoo, R.I.P. She feels sorry for him, but she can’t help admiring her friend’s skills at observation.

‘Thought we were getting on,’ says Dale.

‘We are.’

‘That’s fucked up.’

‘No,’ Frankie says softly. ‘I think you are. Sounds like your brothers might agree.’

‘Bitch!’

‘Don’t be rude to Doctor Phil,’ says Matt. ‘She’s here to help.’

Dale slams his chair back and tries to hide a stagger as he makes his way to the bar.

When Dale returns to the table his hands are full.

‘More beers,’ he says, his face expectant.

Frankie pushes back her chair, all of a sudden, and stretches. ‘I reckon I’ll get going.’

‘Something wrong?’ Alice asks.

‘New moon’s out. Think I’ll go clubbing.’

‘You want company?’

Frankie leans down to Alice and kisses her on the mouth. ‘Nah, that’s OK. You stay here. Have some fun.’

‘You leaving?’ says Dale. ‘I got you a beer.’

‘Thanks, Dale. You have it.’ Frankie turns to the others. ‘I’ll see ya.’

Alice watches Frankie stride through the front doors of the pub, fierce, like she’s going into battle. She moves swiftly past the windows, doesn’t look in.

Dale stares at the beers, dully. Alice can empathize. In some ways Frankie has dumped her tonight too. It is a miserable feeling, being second best, but Alice supposes

that somehow she must be to blame. It is a feeling she has come to expect and she imagines it might be the same for Dale.

She takes up one of the pints. ‘Thanks,’ she says and touches his arm. His bicep tenses and the perfectly formed letters RIP spread out. She imagines them fading over time, seeping around the definition of his muscle.

‘Where’d you get that tattoo?’ she asks softly.

‘Khe Sanh!’ says Matt and they all laugh.

Dale knocks back his pint. ‘Let’s get out of here.’ His brothers follow suit, lay their empty glasses on the table and are up, lighting smokes and heading outside.

Alice points to her glass. ‘You want it? I’m gunna burst.’

‘Better skol,’ says Dale.

Alice starts to drink, a slow continuous swallowing. Dale settles his hand under the bottom of the glass and tilts the angle up sharp so that the beer floods into her mouth. She gulps, fighting back the urge to gag. He applies a little more pressure and a dribble of beer runs out from the side of her mouth.

‘Don’t waste any,’ he says.

When she finishes, Dale releases his hand. She thumps the pint onto the table, triumphant, and uses her forearm to wipe off the excess froth from above her lips.

‘That’s exhausting!’ She laughs.

‘Night’s still young.’ Dale gets up, drags Alice’s chair back out from under the table and looks down at her.

‘You’re really beautiful, you know.’

She stares up at him, beaming. Is she drunk or is this really real? He cradles a hand under her elbow and guides her to standing. He loops his arm through hers and she leans into him, lets him steer her onto the street. Chris stands on the curb flicking his cigarette ash into the gutter. There is a quietness about him, or a containment, that keeps him distant from the others. He seems untouchable, caught in time like a tough guy from an old movie.

‘Where to now?’ Dale asks.

‘I’m off,’ says Matt. He swings his car keys in his hand as he crosses the road to an old Holden.

‘Me too,’ says Chris. ‘We got beers at our place.’

‘Coming back?’ Dale asks Alice. ‘It’s just round the corner.’

There's no way she's going home. Not as drunk as this. Alice contemplates looking for Frankie, but she could be anywhere, and besides it was clear she wanted to go out on her own. She puts her arm around Dale's waist.

'Sure,' she says. 'If you'll look after me.'

'Tell us how old you are first,' says Chris. 'I'm not buying eighteen.'

'I'll be sixteen in a couple of months.'

'Whoa!' says Dale. 'A fucking school girl.'

Ten

It is five am and he is already wide awake. Since arriving in Australia, every morning has been the same and he is no longer hopeful that he will get back to sleep. He drags the bed sheet with him to the armchair by the window, sits and looks out of his hotel room. Across the way is one of the main city squares. Apart from a few cars, circumnavigating the area, the place is dead. For the first time since leaving London, he longs for the view from his apartment window. He calculates the time difference; at home it is half past six in the evening. In all likelihood he would be locked in his office at the back of the maritime museum, perhaps revising one of the articles he is editing for a new publication on British wrecks. He should have brought some of that with him, but he had packed in haste and left it all behind. Now he feels impatient to be working. It is way too early to check in with Drew. He will have to wait until a decent hour before he can confirm that the job offer here has been approved. He supposes he could head out for a walk, and yet he sees no point in exploring a city he knows like the back of his hand. He rings room service and orders croissants and coffee. Half an hour passes before an attendant knocks on the door, an exhausted look on his face. He hands Gerard the breakfast tray without so much as a good morning.

‘Thanks,’ says Gerard.

‘No sweat,’ says the attendant and shuffles off down the hall.

So much for the luxury of expensive hotels, thinks Gerard. The coffee is good though and he drinks it at the tiny excuse for a desk, wondering if Katherine is also up and preparing for her interview. He’s looking forward to listening in. He is curious to see how she handles herself and whether, considering the circumstances, she will toe the line. She has always been conscientious. Straight. Even as a student she didn’t play up, or nick things, or party with the other wilder post grads. During her Masters Degree he convinced her to come to Red Bay and work with him on the *San Juan*. He arranged to be an external supervisor, arguing that the experience she would gain in Canada would kick start her career. In retrospect, he wonders if he was trying to undo her in some way, unravel her goodness in the hope of discovering something darker. In one small experiment he gave her a terracotta tile. The Basque Whalers had brought acres of the stuff to Red Bay to use as roofing for whaling stations and housing. Mounds of them could still be found along the coast. When he suggested she should use it on her desk, as weight to hold down some of

her paperwork, she told him that she would not. He had left it there anyway and when he returned the following day it was nowhere to be seen.

He tunes into the radio just in time to hear Daphne Ellis. Her interview comes across as more speech than anything else and in her closing comments she calls for the shipping company to show some integrity. *What is the point of taking the bones, she asks, when all you'll have to do is fight with us to keep them?* Her words are passionate but they do not move him, not in the way he expects they should. It is not that he disagrees with Daphne, or thinks that she doesn't have a point. Of course she does, they all do. It is just that shit happens all the time, to everyone. If it's not happening to Daphne, it'll be happening to someone else. At least the remains are undergoing proper treatment. They are being looked after. He wonders if anyone has thought of framing the conservation process as an act of reconciliation.

The radio announcer interrupts his thoughts:

'Local maritime object conservator joins us to talk about the conservation of the wreck of the *Violet*,' and Gerard finds himself suddenly nervous, as if it were he about to be interviewed.

Hello Katherine, I'm Damien Carrick. Welcome to the Law Report.

Thank you, I'm pleased to be here.

I'd like to talk about the legal issues around the wreck of the Violet, but first, could you tell us how you got involved in this project?

You mentioned that I was a local, I think I was approached partly for that reason. On any expedition it makes sourcing materials and so forth much easier when there's someone local on board.

Were you headhunted?

She laughs. In a manner of speaking.

I understand that your father died in a boating accident when you were young; that must make the work you're doing on the Violet very important. Especially, in this case, dealing with the remains of the dead.

Well, thinks Gerard, that was a little personal. A little below the belt. In the silence that follows he imagines Katherine trying to collect herself.

It's important to be respectful, she says eventually, to treat the bones with dignity.

And you think that sending the remains to England is treating them carefully, with dignity?

I have been as careful as I can and the bones are all intact, in a stable condition. They have been treated according to very prudent conservation techniques.

You say they've been conserved...But are they not of great cultural significance to a particular group of Aboriginal people?

Yes, I accept that is a genuine possibility...

We also have Alistair Hastings online. Alastair is a Sydney based lawyer with 'Mellor and Hastings'. Alistair is in charge of this project on behalf of the Barton and Co. Shipping Line. Thank you for being with us today.

Hello Damien and hello Katherine.

Alistair, we understand that the bones have left Australia without authorization from the coroner's office. In fact, is it true that the remains were not even reported to a police officer or the state coroner?

The shipping of the bones to the UK does not breach 'Reporting deaths' under Section 28 of The Act. The timeframe of the death in question sits way outside what The Act and therefore what the coroner deals with. We need to remember that the shipwreck occurred in 1856 and a death from that long ago is not subject to any inquests.

But at no point were the bones declared?

Under the Historic Shipwrecks Act the Minister may grant a permit for the recovery of an historic shipwreck and its associated articles. Under the Act, associated articles are clearly described as historic relics and considering there is no clause to separate bones from that classification, the remains in question must also be classified as historic relics. Our permit, for example, established Barton & Co.'s ownership of the Violet, entitling us to recover it, and its historic relics, at our expense. It's a very costly affair; the recovery of the Batavia in Western Australia is a perfect example of how much a project like this costs. So it is very rare these days to even contemplate spending so much on the conservation and on-going treatments that a ship like that requires. However, there was an unspecified amount of gold stowed on the Violet, some pay off we think that the Captain made mention of in one of his diaries, but was never listed on the manifest. There was a great deal of interest in finding the ship and bringing up her cargo, and Barton and

Co. were willing to put up the finance. So you can see that the recovery was done with authorization of the State Minister for Environment and Heritage.

As far as I am aware you did not inform the Minister of this find.

We may well incur a small fine because of that oversight, but in the end we are free from further liability.

Well, can you explain to our listeners how you see this case as operating outside of The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act?

Repatriation is currently very important. Museums have developed codes of conduct. Just recently it has been confirmed that the Royal College of Surgeons will be returning sixty Aboriginal human remains to Australia's National Museum in April of this year. These things are codes of conduct, agreements between organizations. It is important to note that repatriation is not legislation.

So it's a matter of ethics?

And a matter of our shared colonial history...

Alistair takes up the rest of the interview, except right at the end when Damien Carrick asks Katherine if she is comfortable with what has transpired.

As a matter of fact, she starts, then pauses. For a moment Gerard thinks she might blow the whistle. In her silence he can almost hear the beginnings of a confession. As a matter of fact, she continues, the eventual outcome is not up to me. None of the objects belong to me and I am therefore unable to make decisions about where they might go.

And in this case you're at ease with that?

Come on Damien, Alistair butts in, sometimes the best work we do causes discomfort. It's what makes life interesting.

What makes life interesting is not discomfort, thinks Gerard, it's adrenaline. Something he expects Alistair knows all too well. In all honesty he knows about it too. Sure he loves the quieter work, researching and editing stories from his colleagues, as well as the actual process of conservation. But there is nothing like bringing up the body of a ship, watching from underwater as magnificent lengths of timber are floated to the surface. He'd cut his teeth on the *Batavia*. Only twenty and he was diving with the best to bring up the port side of her stern, and other artefacts, the stone archway and parts of her cannon. It was hands on work, physically demanding. He understands that in the current financial

climate the cost of out-of-water maintenance for conserved wrecks is not feasible. These days, with in-situ preservation, the recovery of full shipwrecks is pretty much over. That is why the *Violet* is so appealing. It means he can share in the excitement of her being brought to the surface, and more importantly he can be part of the team that has done it. He is about to call Drew when the hotel phone rings.

‘You’re in,’ says Drew. ‘Might as well get your arse in and start work.’

‘Fantastic, mate,’ says Gerard. ‘I’m on my way.’

Katherine walks out of the ABC building relieved to feel fresh, cool air on her face. The morning has turned surprisingly cool and she senses the imminence of rain. Finishing up in the studio took longer than she imagined. All she wanted to do was get out of there, but the producer came to thank her and then she was caught at the door by an interested researcher whom she had to deflect.

Since her arrival, early this morning, the car park is full. It takes her a few minutes to locate her Corolla amongst the rows of other white vehicles. Once inside she rests her head on the steering wheel. She is well aware that she bungled her contribution to the interview. She hadn’t been able to talk about her professional perspective as a conservator, let alone her thoughts on the ethics of this project. Apart from the fact that the issues are clouded, the legalities beyond her area of expertise, her experience inside the studio had been claustrophobic. She was on her own in a kind of cubicle, linked to Damien Carrick and Alistair via headphones. Confined like that it had been difficult to predict what was coming. There was no way of reading anyone’s body language. She hadn’t thought about it before, but she gauges a lot from the way in which people move before her. Not being able to see had put her off guard. Instead of exposing the intentions of the shipping company she covered for them, half believing that her words only reached as far as the padding of the booth. What she remembers now is some of Daphne’s interview, which she had heard prior to her own. Daphne was talking via a telephone link; she had not been coerced into driving all the way into the city. Katherine questions why she too couldn’t have spoken from the privacy of her house. Maybe in the comfort of her own home she might have responded differently. Unlike the company position that she offered up, Daphne’s urgency had hit hard. Her strong statements were not bound by jargon, or sentiment and her

distinctions between lore and law were clear and confronting. For Daphne the outcome was straightforward. The return of one of her Old People was all that mattered and she was gracious enough to say that receiving them would be restorative. An act towards healing.

Alistair was not interested in healing. He said that if transporting the bones overseas continued to be a problem here, the Australian Coroner might contact the British office and request that the UK Coroner act as an agent. Barton would probably get off lightly. He might get charged with one offense: failure to report the finding of the remains; but that would be all. Alistair made it clear that the recent public attention had been an advantage. He restated how excited he was about the exhibition and ridiculously, invited Damien Carrick to join them for the opening.

Daphne must have anticipated Alistair's legal justifications. And yet, she hadn't revealed that the bones were still in the country. Why had she kept that quiet? Was she reaching out, addressing people outside of the project, or was she giving Katherine time to act?

Katherine breathes deeply, tries to settle the swirling in her mind. The truth is, even if Daphne had mentioned that the remains were still here, and supposing anyone was to act, by the time they got an injunction the collection would be on its way. She pulls her head up from the steering wheel. Clouds roll high above the station building, moving fast, making it seem as if the whole thing might topple over towards her. People bustle in and out through the foyer, carrying space age shoulder bags and backpacks, so many of them wearing black. It is a different uniform, she thinks, from the maritime archaeology crowd. It is impossible to imagine Drew in such an outfit, or Alistair with a shoulder bag. Maybe Gerard could get away with it; he always succeeded in separating himself from the crowds he worked with. Even though his behaviour last night was distasteful she cannot help thinking of him warmly. Perhaps with him comes the kind of ache that belongs to unfinished business. Perhaps she is longing to rediscover something, to begin again and try for a better time. Had she been too quick, jumping to conclusions about his offer to assist her? Was it just the hit to her ego that she responded to, the effect of thinking that others had decided she wasn't up to the job? It sickens her, all of this self-doubt, but maybe she had not read the situation correctly. Clearly everyone wants the project finished and Gerard might genuinely have been offering to assist her. She considers calling him later in the day, to see if he's still open to lending a hand.

He arrives energized and after a brief discussion with Drew he begins work. He lays a length of cotton on one of the stainless steel work benches. He removes each bone from the humidity chamber, one at a time, gently ordering them in accordance with Katherine's system. Each bone is numbered with the frontal bone of the skull starting at one. There are one hundred and ninety three bones in total, the skeleton missing only a few of the small bones from the hands and feet.

As he works he contemplates Katherine's process. Up until now she has managed, rather slowly, to desalinate and clean the bones. She may even have rinsed them in warm sodium hydrosulphite baths, to ease out the iron stains. But he doubts that she would have resorted to hydrogen peroxide, deciding that perhaps it was too harsh. He would have contemplated it though, in order to remove more of the iron stains. It is too late for that now and the overall look, dark and tarnished seems somehow more authentic. Really though, she should not have bothered with the emulsion. As a treatment it has become old fashioned and its use has made the bones far too heavy for his liking.

Once they are ordered, he examines each bone for signs of surface flaking. While doing so, he finds a fracture in the long bone of the forearm, suggesting some kind of defence injury. He takes it up now, turns it in his hand like a baton. It is not much bigger than the forearm bone of a contemporary teenager. He muses over what caused the injury. Was she defending herself against her own people or did the fracture occur when she was taken onto the ship?

It strikes him, in comparison, that Alice has it easy. He is suddenly annoyed to think how unapproachable she is, especially when there are other, more important issues to address. It is not as if she is the only one to have had a disappointing childhood. He remembers some of his with warmth, but in the end his mother was an overbearing force of religiosity and gossip and his father was merely one of her compliant shadows. He has often wondered why the old man never left, preferring to suffocate in the cloisters of suburbia. If only Alice could understand that marriage should not have to last. Although he has to admit her rejection hurts. How could she have judged him so quickly?

Several years ago she had tried to get in touch. Somehow she discovered his whereabouts and sent a card. He should have written back and he has worried about that since, but by the time he received her mail, well after the postage date, he was about to move on. He remembers it was a hand-made card, full of love. She had drawn pink hearts

and balloons, sketched a cake with candles. Was all of that over with? Had he already missed the best years?

Alice lies next to Dale's slumped body, staring up, at the naked light bulb above. A delicate length of spider web waves in the no-air atmosphere of his room. It is attached from the cord of the light bulb to one corner of the ceiling, a delicate concave ribbon. Alice drinks stale water from a fingerprinted glass and then lights a smoke, the ashtray balancing between her breasts. The cigarette is kind of gross, but sunlight really does make the smoke, curling towards the web, beautiful. Caught in the moment, she thinks, and promises to remember this moment forever.

When Dale wakes he stretches out, thumping Alice in the chest.

'Shit. Sorry. Forgot you were there.'

He attempts to turn towards Alice, but slumps back, defeated.

'Fucking thirsty.'

Alice passes the glass of water, now half empty.

'Shall I fill it up?' she asks.

Dale gulps at the drink. He empties the glass and lets it fall to the floor. He closes his eyes and his head rolls to one side, his mouth half open.

'Crazy night,' says Alice.

'I feel like shit.'

'Yeah? Me too.'

Dale grabs one of Alice's breasts and squeezes.

'Feels *all right* to me.' He pushes himself into a sit up position and the veins on his forearms pulse under the strain of blood suddenly pumped through his body. He swings his legs over the side of the bed.

'Need a piss.' He staggers to his feet and into the hallway singing to himself, *got a whole lot a love*.

Some people's presence can genuinely affect the feeling of a space. Alice gauges that without Dale, the room feels bigger. But it is still lethargic. She stretches out, rolls onto her stomach, and hangs her face over the mattress. Snakes of elastic droop from the old fitted sheet. Nearby a blonde looks out from the cover of a porno. Alice picks up the

magazine and settles back onto the bed. One woman sucks a banana; another lies draped over a motorbike. None of them has any pubic hair. They arch their backs like bridges. Their breasts are big. And all of their faces are tilted slightly so that their teeth glow from behind glossy parted lips. Alice separates her bottom lip away from her top one. She imagines her eyes, doey, half closed and watery. She arches her back and finds it totally uncomfortable.

It was uncomfortable last night too, after Dale collapsed on top of her. He'd been energetic enough at the start, flipping her over, going down on her. But she didn't like the way that he sucked at her, as if she had a cock. She was too drunk for that kind of action. She couldn't concentrate. She imagined her ovaries disappearing down his gullet, then all the beer she had drunk followed by the toasted sandwich she had at lunch. She knew better than to admit to him she wasn't into it, she figured he'd been generous enough to be down there in the first place, so she feigned a need for him to be inside her instead. He was quick to get back on top, relieved that he could concentrate on his own pleasure. While he ground away she deceived herself into thinking that next time she'd make a few suggestions.

Afterwards, he rolled off and in his groggy state he had reached for a pillow, which he clung to, reminding her of a child with a teddy. She curled in behind him after that, traced the thin strips of streetlight that fell through the bamboo blind across his body. She wrapped an arm over his back, laid her hand on his chest. Every now and then, with the passing of cars, the whole room was striped with light, the ceiling awash with creamy-blue. She saw them both as children, floating in a little boat at night, as if drawn on the pages of a picture book.

Alice hoists herself up from the bed. She drags on her jeans and t-shirt and wanders into the kitchen. Her bare feet stick to the linoleum. The floor is specked and flecked with hairs and ash, bits of spaghetti. Used teaspoons stick to the table in dried circles of milk. A stack of cracked open, empty shells congeals by the sink and a rubbish bag hunkers in the corner, one handle tied to the top of a drawer.

Alice opens the fridge. A container of margarine, the lid half open, sits on the otherwise empty shelves. There is a carton of milk in the door, still within its use by. She pushes aside several plates in the sink so that she can get the kettle underneath the tap nozzle. The water smells rusty, but runs out clean enough. She puts the kettle on and looks out the kitchen window. A corrugated fence blocks the view.

Dale wanders in yawning.

‘Tea?’ she asks.

‘Nah, couldn’t stomach it.’

He drives his hand across his abdomen into his jeans. ‘I gotta lie down. You coming?’

‘Yeah,’ she says, thinking that there is nowhere else to be.

The first blow comes when she sees Gerard working in her shed. He stands in front of the dock of humidity chambers, his body a block of shadow against a row of low open lids. She enters the space cautiously, sensing a major change. Even the quality of the air has altered, as if it is no longer hers to breathe. Had she really thought she had some agency here?

She edges over to where he is busily working. Before him the entire skeleton is laid out. It is painful to see the remains like this, having inspected them intimately, recorded the complex patterns of their remaining structure, tested which emulsion to use and at what percentage, they now seem exposed and out of reach.

Gerard looks up from his work, sure of himself.

‘Hi,’ he says. ‘Interesting interview.’

For a moment she is speechless. How did he settle in so fast?

‘It certainly raised some questions,’ she says defensively.

‘It sounded like Alistair had the answers.’

‘That’s his job,’ she says. ‘He’s a lawyer.’

‘I heard that,’ says Alistair, stepping out of Drew’s office. ‘But bully for you, keeping them off the scent.’

If Alistair notices Katherine’s discomfort he mentions nothing. He sets his briefcase on a bench and snaps it open. He takes a slim black folder from a stack of well-ordered paperwork. ‘I’m glad you’re here,’ he says as he passes it to her. ‘I wasn’t expecting I’d get the chance to give you this in person.’

‘What is it?’ she asks, leaving the folder unopened.

‘A legality. Nothing to worry about,’ he replies. ‘Although I think you’ll agree, it’s the best way to proceed.’

She opens the document. Inside lies a single page, adorned with Barton’s letterhead. The pretentious acorn. Underneath is a short paragraph outlining that she, Mrs Katherine Sloan, agrees to adjust the terms of her contract, immediately handing over responsibilities for the conservation of the bones (solely), to Mr Gerard Sloan, in the interest of successfully completing the *Violet Collection*. As per the instruction of Mr Alistair Hastings, on behalf of Mr James Barton, etcetera, etcetera.

Alistair’s and Gerard’s signatures are already scrawled across the bottom. There is an empty line above theirs for her to fill.

Right about now, everything feels out of her control. The request is completely unexpected. How can the course of the project have shifted so dramatically, and in such a short time? Burrowing away, in what used to be her den, has sheltered her from the bigger picture. She has been ambushed.

‘What do you say?’ asks Alistair. His tone is so chirpy it causes Katherine’s stomach to rise.

She says nothing.

‘Look,’ says Alistair, ‘we’ve all noticed you’ve been having problems completing the job.’

‘No one thinks badly of you for it,’ says Gerard.

‘That’s big of you,’ she blurts out, horrified at her tone.

‘Maybe your emotions have got the better of you,’ Alistair suggests.

‘I’m fine!’

‘I think you’ll find, once you’ve calmed down, the rest of the offer is more than reasonable. No one wants to take away from the work that you’ve done. Or the work that you have left to do. But we *are* in a hurry.’

Alistair isn’t expecting a reply. He is already checking the time on his BlackBerry, then he announces that he has a taxi waiting to take him to a meeting.

The second blow comes only a few moments later, once Alistair has made his exit.

‘Suppose I should have been expecting it,’ says Snap, as he too comes out of the office.

‘He wouldn’t have enjoyed letting you go,’ says Drew, right behind him.

‘Yeah? Well, he took his time telling me.’ Snap heaves a rucksack onto his shoulder.

‘He was just trying to be gentle.’

‘You reckon?’

‘Why don’t you stay for smoko?’ Drew suggests. ‘Before you head off?’

‘Think I’ll pass.’

‘No hard feelings?’

‘Definitely some feelings, but hard’s not one of them.’ Snap has to bend down to fit himself through the side door, adjacent to the roller. He is backlit; it is a melancholy sight with all the grey-white drizzle behind him.

‘Why is he leaving?’ Katherine asks. ‘Because of Daphne?’

‘Hate to say it,’ says Drew, ‘but, he’s lucky Alistair decided not to press charges.’

‘I take it no one wants *that kind* of media attention.’

‘That’s right, Katie, that’s right.’ Drew ambles over to the kettle. ‘Smoko you two?’

‘You’ve got to be joking!’ she explodes.

‘There’s no point getting fired up on Snap’s behalf,’ says Drew. ‘He broke the rules. He knew what he was doing.’

‘Don’t either of you have any empathy?’ She sweeps her glance past Drew, stares at Gerard. He shrugs at her, smiles wryly. She cannot believe it, but he is wearing a black shirt and jeans. She is disgusted with herself; firstly for even noticing what clothes Gerard has on and then for standing here attempting to rationalize with either of them. All the while she has been waiting for some kind of approval from the boss, a touch of humanity that would allow her to proceed as she knows she must. It is not Gerard and Drew she needs to be working with, it is Snap.

She practically kicks open the side door as she rushes out of the shed. Outside everything is coated in soft rain. Snap is nowhere to be seen. She can hear the side door open and close behind her and then the sound of footsteps following her to her car. She doesn’t turn to look, knowing full well it will be Gerard trying to make things right. It is as if the man can’t handle the fact that someone might not like him. At the car she fumbles with her keys. Bloody typical; can’t separate the car key from all the others. Behind her, Gerard’s footsteps close in. She pries her key into the lock, twists. Just as she’s about to slide into the driver’s seat Gerard catches the door, blocking her way. The document is in his hand.

‘Katherine,’ he coaxes, ‘just think about it.’

She swipes his arm away and tries to push past.

Gerard steps away from the car. Just as Katherine makes a move to get inside he hops forward with the document in mid air. Katherine turns to him, perhaps finally, after all these years, to tell him what she thinks. But before she has the chance, the document flies at her face catching the surface of her left eye. She lets out a tight groan and brings both hands to her face, covering both eyes. She slumps against the body of the car.

‘What’s up?’ says Gerard, seizing the opportunity to reach out and touch her.

Katherine keeps her eyes shielded. ‘I think it’s cut,’ she says.

‘Let me see.’ He tries to pry Katherine’s hand away from her left eye. Reluctantly, she unfurls her fingers and Gerard peers in.

‘I can’t see a thing,’ he says moving backwards. ‘There’s nothing there.’

‘It feels as if it’s actually cut.’

‘No, it can’t be. There isn’t any blood.’

‘Well it feels awful. Like it’s grazed or scraped or something.’

‘Maybe you should go home.’ Gerard pats her shoulder. He folds the document, wriggles it into her hand. She stands in the rain astonished, as Gerard escapes back inside the shed.

The stinging in her eye is incredible, but she manages her way into the car with her left eye closed. Her car tyres skid on gravel as she accelerates onto the main road. She corrects her steering, swerves to miss the curb and is soon back driving in a straight line, breathing rapidly. She is alert, her skin pulses. She can almost hear the blood rushing past her ears. It feels good to be out of control, to be forced to act this way, as if her flight response has finally kicked in and quickened her. Accelerating through a red light, in her search to find Snap, she almost misses sight of him trudging along the footpath. If it weren’t for the distinctive shape of his old hat, slouching on his head, she may not have noticed him at all. She pulls up beside him and the brakes screech. Without word he gets in.

Snap removes his hat. ‘Bout time for a new one,’ he says, his eyes on the tattered rim. He hangs it over his knee, sits quietly. He leans an elbow on the window sill. When he looks up he seems at ease, peaceful.

‘Aren’t you going to blow? After all the work you’ve done.’

‘I’ve done what needs doing.’

‘But what about the timing, you’ve just come back from a funeral. That couldn’t have been easy.’

‘You asking about me, the work...or the funeral?’

‘I’m sorry.’ Katherine catches her breath. ‘How was it, the funeral that is? I mean they’re all awful, but some are better than others. You know?’

‘It was one of the better ones.’

‘That’s good,’ she says.

‘Yeah. He was an old man. Where I’m from, that’s quite an achievement.’

They drive for a while in silence, just hearing the changing sounds of the city as they move through it: other cars, bursts of music, the rubbish truck yanking bins from the pavement. The windscreen wipers occasionally squeak across glass and every now and then Katherine is forced to wipe tears away from her weeping eye. The bloody thing hurts like hell, but she will not let it get the better of her.

They pass through the city and are on one of the terraces that square it in, heading west. After rambling on Katherine decides to wait for Snap to speak. When he finally does it is not what she is expecting.

‘Reckon we should head the other way,’ he says. ‘Over to Goolwa.’

‘What for?’

‘It’ll give some perspective.’

‘I don’t know if we’ve got time.’

‘Right now I got all the time in the world.’

Katherine supposes he’s right; the transport ship isn’t leaving for a number of days and there is no use barging in on Drew and Gerard. She will have little hope of regaining access to the bones, especially today. She swings the car around, drives up and over the median strip, and makes south-east for the freeway.

The day crawls by, anesthetized. Dale is laid-up on the couch, Alice next to him. Chris sits cross-legged on the floor, his acoustic guitar propped on his lap. He’s strumming a familiar melody. A Neil Young song? Alice finds it hard to make out with the TV on. Dale packs a cone, smokes it, packs another and hands it to her. Dissatisfied with the western on Ten he reaches for the remote. He chops through the stations until an ad break on Nine cuts to Doctor Phil. A woman grips a large microphone. She is sputtering words: *transsexual*, *bastard*, *liar*. The hollering of Dr Phil’s audience swamps the desperate sound of a man in tears.

‘Weirdos.’ Dale switches the TV to DVD. Chopper sits in a prison yard, poised for interview. Dale presses play and pre-empts Chopper’s dialogue, word for word.

Alice smokes the pot, sinks into the beaten softness of fake suede. Perhaps she could descend further. Fall asleep between the cushions, in amongst the smell of rancid oil that seems to coat everything in the house. She tucks her feet in under the cushions, rests

her head back. From there she watches Chris. He seems lost in a world of his own, not watching the DVD, but running his thumb over the strings of his guitar. She probably shouldn't be so interested in him, not after spending the night with Dale. But he has this peaceful quality that she can't help being drawn to.

Katherine glimpses the bridge well before they reach the river. It rises up high enough so that travelling on the main road from town, toward the island, she can see cars moving over the top, the safety rails black against the washed out sky and the walkway; a skinny path on its southern side. Katherine is surprised by the physical reaction she has to seeing it. The bridge is an enormous structure that conquers the environment. Over such short a distance of water it stands its ground, as if daring the weather to give it her best. Blow winds; just try to take me down. Broil waves! Let's see if your river bed can rise in the swell and swallow me up. There is no chance. Not against such powerful engineering. What was she expecting, a rickety thing made of sticks?

There is a car park nearby and Katherine pulls up. Rain comes down gently on the windscreen. In front of them a mist shifts across the waters, partially shielding the island from the mainland. They watch a couple of cars cross the bridge, dragging speed boats and jet skies behind them.

'Not the best weather for it,' Snap sighs.

There is a break in the rain and they both get out of the car. The breeze is cold, it causes her stinging eye to weep. She wipes away the tears, follows Snap to the dock. Closer to the river the air is briny and there is the smell of algae and something else, fat from the nearby café's deep fryers. They stand at the edge of the wharf and Katherine listens to the movement of water, its own force, slipping and shifting against the concrete walls of the dock. Today it flows as a wide stained ribbon, full of sediment.

'There's a park close by. Shall we walk there?' Snap has already set off and Katherine follows, pulling up the collar of her jacket against the wind. The whole wharf seems to be under some kind of development, but the remains of an old railway lie embedded in the bitumen like a partially exhumed dig. She knows that this is not the original horse drawn rail that carried the Murray River trade to Port Elliot and later, to Victor Harbour. But it hints of that time and she imagines the *Violet's* cargo sitting here,

perhaps under the same kind of drizzle. How would this place have looked back then? The wider surroundings fade away as she focuses on the flight of three pelicans. One after the other they hit some current that takes them higher into the grey air and she watches them as they ascend into cloud.

They stand on a lawn that meets the edge of the river. There, in the reeds along the shore, a plastic water bottle laps against the rocks.

‘The marina’s not far from here.’ Snap points across the river with his bottom lip. A small yacht, anchored on the other side, dips casually up and down. A suggestion of what lies beyond the flat edge of the island. ‘Tonnes of dirt were shifted to the mainland to create waterways so that people could moor their boats right outside their houses.’

‘Personal jetties are a must.’

Snap grunts in agreement. ‘There was a rumour going round that they found bones in all that dirt, transported them off the island at night. Some said that a taxi driver was raffling them off in the pub.’

The bridge looms to their right.

‘Have you walked over it?’ Katherine asks.

‘It’s not my place to do so.’

‘But Aboriginal people use the bridge?’

‘Some do, yes. Others go by boat. People have got to get access to the island somehow. It’s a fine line, you know, between being able to get onto your land and being controlled to stay off it.’

‘But doesn’t the structure go against people’s beliefs?’

‘Auntie Daphne told me there’s been a long battle with local government to try and get a ferry back here. Apparently the Old People used to pull structures down, fishermen’s jetties and the barrages. From way back they said permanent structures here will make folks sick. The women who gave evidence, the ones that know, they faced terrible times.’

Over the past few years she did not need to be a keen follower of the story to be aware of how it was unfolding. It played out brutally in the public eye. According to Ngarrindjeri tradition, and for reasons particularly important to Ngarrindjeri women, the waters between the island and the mainland should not be permanently covered. Information, to be read by women only, was included in a Heritage application to protect the area from the building of the bridge. That information was tabled in parliament and there was a Royal Commission into the validity of what was being claimed. Reporters

barked out the Commission's findings to confirm that women's business was not linked to the place. Local and national newspapers, television news and tabloids repeatedly reported on the fabrication tale. A couple of journalists tried to tell the story of those who opposed the bridge, but their reports were preaching to the converted. Katherine remembers a photograph of one of the demonstrations, tens of women walking the streets with their mouths covered in white cloth. Before now she hadn't connected that up with something Daphne had said, that sometimes silence is the only way to keep knowledge safe.

In the early days of this project, when Katherine was researching the weaving, she discovered other information. After the Royal Commission the developers took everyone to court, eventually suing those who originally banned the bridge: the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and those he was advised by; the anthropologist and the report writer. The developers were seeking over twenty five million as compensation for the financial damage they claimed to have suffered due to the delays that the ban caused. The case was federal. After lengthy hearings and deliberation that involved the ins and outs of commercial law, as much as matters of truth, the judge found against them. Most importantly, he was not convinced that the women's connection to the island was fabricated. Of course by that time the bridge had already been built.

From where Katherine stands she can see that a mural spans the length of it, painted on its I-beam, just under the surface of the road. It depicts birdlife and other animals from the area: pelicans, fish. The design reminds Katherine of the type of Aboriginal Art you find in tacky tourist galleries, created by someone from elsewhere. The painting is as uncomfortable as the bridge itself, as if it too appropriates all that is sacred. She looks across the water, tries not to feel defeated by the sum of it all.

Eventually Snap turns to her. 'They've got to go back,' he says gently.

When she faces him it is clear that he already expects her to understand, it is a feeling of acknowledgment he wants her to share, of coming to the same ground.

'I know,' she says, 'I just need some more evidence.'

'I think we've got enough.'

Katherine shakes her head. 'I'm not so sure. I'm afraid my treatment of the bones might have made gathering proper evidence impossible.'

'Come on,' he says, 'I've got something else to show you.'

They walk to the car and on the way she disposes of the water bottle in a council bin. Back in the car, the change in temperature seems to agitate her eye. It scratches every

time she blinks. She presses her fingers against her eyelid in an attempt to stop it. As she does she can smell the pungency of the river on her hand.

Meanwhile Snap pokes around in his rucksack, drags out a wad of papers. ‘I know there’s been speculation over the remains we’ve got, where they’ve come from and all that, but you’ve been right all along.’

‘What have you got there?’ she asks.

‘This here,’ he shakes the bundle, ‘is a report that determines for certain the remains are Ngarrindjeri.’

‘A report? I guess I should be angry that I wasn’t told, but mostly I’m relieved. I really thought I’d stuffed up any chance.’

‘Lucky for you the remains have already been tested and matched with existing data. In the nineties a bio-archaeologist named Scott did a whole lot of testing of animal bones in the Lower Murray and the Coorong...this whole area. He was measuring the isotopic values of carbon and nitrogen specific to each region, then he aligned those findings with Aboriginal remains in the state museum whose origins were already known.’

‘To determine the variabilities across the landscape?’

‘Yeah. They created signatures, a register if you like: Coorong, Lake Alexandrina, Swanport. Since then the same bloke has worked with the museum to determine the origins of other bones in their collection.’

‘For repatriation?’

‘How’s that for fucking irony.’

‘I take it Drew knows?’

‘Since the start, or thereabouts.’

Again the weather obscures the island. Even out of sight, Katherine feels a kind of tug towards it, hopeful that it will be revealed again soon. Not that she plans to cross over, not today. Snap wipes a bloom of condensation from the inside of the window, dries his hand on his jeans.

‘You know in that federal case, the judge found evidence to suggest that a senior museum employee was the instigator of the fabrication theory.’

‘Really? It’s hard to believe that at the same time the organization was working toward repatriation.’

‘It’s hard to believe this sort of shit keeps on happening.’

The rain passes. Without it the place suddenly appears busy. People step out of the café and cross the car park, cars surge over the bridge. Katherine starts the car and they sit there for a moment with the engine running and the demister clearing up the windscreen.

‘I think I’ll have to get Gerard on side,’ she says. ‘Let him finish the bones without a fuss. That will give me time to work out how to get them out of the sheds without anyone suspecting.’

‘It’s a shame you won’t be handling them.’ Snap mulls the suggestion over. ‘But it will have to do.’

Matt arrives in the late afternoon. He bangs on the door, causing the lounge room windowpane to rattle.

‘Dickhead!’ Dale switches the TV to mute, but doesn’t move.

Eventually Chris emerges from the back of the house. Alice watches him pass by, hears the lock on the front open and the screen door creak.

‘Front gate’s fucked,’ says Matt as he enters the hall. He stops at the doorway to the lounge.

‘Energetic in here,’ he says.

‘Got a better offer?’

‘I do.’ Matt pulls a bag of speed from his jeans pocket, dangles it back and forth. He and Chris head down the hall.

Dale stays put for a few moments before dragging himself off the couch. He grabs his smokes, leaves the TV on. Alice follows him to the kitchen where Matt and Chris are shooting up. She steps back, confused at first by what she sees. Matt looks up, straight at her, as he depresses the rest of his syringe.

‘Interested?’

Alice looks away.

‘Give her a line,’ says Dale and sets himself at the table. He shoves away some cups and a newspaper to make room for his arm, which he lays across the chipped surface. ‘But count me in.’

Before she knows it Alice is in the back seat of Matt’s Holden. Dale is riding next to her and the other brothers are in the front. They’ve got Johnny Cash on loud as they roll through town toward the freeway.

In half an hour they have left the main thoroughfare and are travelling along country roads. Matt careers the car around sharp bends, swerving back and forth over the white line in order to keep from spinning off the bitumen and onto the dirt. He flies along the straights and whistles, a gaudy carnival tune. Small vineyards and orchards blur past and soon they are weaving through scrub; the trunks of lean gums catch the falling light. With the window down Alice can smell everything, the eucalyptus, the dirt. It is beautiful. Fresh. She’s sure that everyone in the car must feel as she does: this physical rush, this interconnectedness. It doesn’t matter that she has no idea where they are going. All she cares about is the moment, the moment...She leans out of the window, revelling in the cool rain on her face.

At dusk Katherine pulls away from the airport. She had not waited inside for Snap to board, he still had another hour or so before his flight was due to depart and it felt right to drop him at the door, as if they had no more to say right now. She had a feeling too that he needed to be on his own, let the last hour in Adelaide move by quietly. And besides, she can longer ignore the pain in her left eye. Instead of settling down, as she thought it might, it feels as if it is ablaze. She imagines that the concentration she had to exercise, so that she could properly focus on driving, has not helped. If she is to get on with work she will have to have it seen to.

At this hour there is no hope of an appointment at her usual GP and so she heads to the Day/Night surgery that she has passed so many times on her way to work. Inside the waiting area is depressing. She sits with her back to the window as light from the neon sign outside beats a garish blue onto the beige carpet in front of her. Old magazines sit in an awkward stack on a smoked glass coffee table, covers missing. Rental plants droop under the weight of dust. The receptionist excuses herself from behind her desk, wanders outside and smokes; her body casts a long dark shadow across Katherine's shoulders, stretches the length of the room. The whole scene feels completely, bizarrely, grim. Confounded by today's events, Katherine leans against the plastic arm of the chair. The stinging in her eye is relentless and so she presses her eyelid down firmly with her fingers. The pressure offers some relief. Time passes at an agonizing pace. Finally a patient emerges from the doctor's room and Katherine is directed to go in.

A matronly doctor sits at a desk scribbling notes. When she looks up she appears as though she hasn't slept in days.

'What can we do for you?' she asks.

'My eye,' Katherine points. 'I think it's cut.'

'Give us a look-see.' The doctor gestures for Katherine to sit down. Gently she prizes Katherine's eyelid open. Her fingers are surprisingly cool and her gaze comes across as full of concern.

'It's probably nothing,' Katherine says, immediately self-conscious. 'I'm over-reacting.'

'Actually it looks rather angry,' the doctor says. 'I think it's worth prescribing an antibiotic. Some eye drops.'

'It's not serious?'

'More of a nuisance, I suspect, but always best to avoid infection.'

The doctor takes up her prescription pad and fills it in. She rips off the page, folds it over once and hands it to Katherine.

‘Chloramphenicol,’ she says. ‘It’s a standard. It should clear things up in no time. You need to apply several drops six times a day.’ She collects a ball of cotton wool and a roll of tape from a nearby drawer. ‘May, I?’ she asks. ‘You’ll feel much better if you keep it closed.’

She presses the cotton ball to Katherine’s lid and secures the tape across it, making sure that she does not cover any part of her eyebrow. Again, Katherine experiences the gentleness of her touch. She wonders if every patient receives this sort of attention, or whether the care she is getting seems heightened by the lack of genuine human contact in her life.

‘Thank you,’ she says. ‘It feels much better.’

‘In any case, come and see me next week. I’d like to make sure everything has settled down.’

‘If it’s no better I’ll certainly do that.’

By the time she arrives back at work it is dark, but Gerard and Drew are still there as she had hoped. Drew is sitting up on one of the benches, his legs dangling over, a beer in hand. He is chatting away, keeping Gerard company. Gerard is working under the additional light of a lamp and he wears a pair of glasses; the thin metal frames propped high on his nose. He appears grey, without spark. Is it the scene that ages him, or have the recent events given her some detachment, enough to see him in a more realistic way? As she approaches she realizes that the anger she felt this morning has been replaced with something more stable.

Gerard applies a thin line of consolidant along one of the forearm bones. She comes in closer to inspect.

‘I see you’re hard at it,’ she says to Drew.

‘Well hello,’ he replies, then notices the eye patch. ‘Jesus! That looks serious.’

‘Actually, I’m OK.’

‘Really?’ Gerard asks. He looks awkward, momentarily, before saying, ‘I’d hate to think that patch was because of me.’

‘Everything is fine,’ she says.

‘Glad to hear it,’ says Drew. ‘For a while I thought we’d lost you altogether.’

‘Not that easily.’

‘Welcome back, then.’ Drew smiles warmly and she believes he actually means it.

‘I’d say the same,’ adds Gerard. ‘Except I guess it’s not up to me to welcome you into your own work space...’

‘I can see you’ve figured out where things are,’ she says.

‘You’ve obviously figured things out, too.’ says Drew.

‘Maybe I over reacted a little earlier. Alistair’s contract was a bit of a shock.’

‘No need to worry about that now,’ says Drew. ‘We are on the brink of finishing this thing.’

Gerard holds out the long forearm bone. ‘Did you notice this fracture?’ he asks.

‘Yes,’ says Katherine.

‘It makes me wonder how she got such an injury.’

‘It’s hard not to imagine what she went through, isn’t it?’

‘You know it made me think of Alice,’ he says.

‘Of Alice?’ Katherine asks.

‘She’s off the rails, wouldn’t you say?’

‘I wouldn’t go that far.’

‘After the other night?’

‘Your arrival has probably affected her more than you expect,’ she says. ‘Perhaps you could phone her.’

‘I’m not so sure.’

She could explain that Alice’s response is understandable. She’s had to rationalize it herself, since Alice has avoided being at home. For all Alice knows Gerard could have stayed over. What if she had to face him one morning, fixing himself breakfast in the kitchen? Katherine doesn’t blame her for keeping away, but she does have to quell the anxiety she feels about her whereabouts. She has left several messages today and received only short replies: *stayed at Frankie’s, at school, all ok.*

‘Just send her a text then,’ Katherine suggests. ‘To say hello.’

‘I got the impression she’d rather I didn’t.’

‘You might try offering something less loaded than a reunion.’

He looks bemused. ‘I hadn’t thought of it like that,’ he says, and she resists the urge to shake him.

‘Right,’ says Drew. He jumps down from the bench, landing on the concrete with a dull thud. ‘Think I’ll get a beer and order some take away. You staying around, Katie?’

She wonders whether she should join them, try to extend the feeling of camaraderie that she has just worked to create. If it were only a professional mask she needed to wear she could manage it. Except she is already weary of the role she has to play with Gerard, as if they are actually capable of an affable negotiation about what’s best for their daughter.

‘No, I think I’ll come in early and get to work on the storage boxes,’ she says.

‘Good idea,’ says Drew. ‘We’ll be needing them soon enough.’

Gerard waits until Drew is out of earshot before saying, ‘I’m nearly finished here. We could go somewhere else, have some proper dinner and talk about the contract.’

‘Maybe that can wait,’ she says.

‘Sure.’ He kisses her cheek. ‘I’m really sorry about your eye. I hope you understand that the work situation isn’t personal.’

None of it is, she thinks, not even that kiss on the cheek. She is aware that Gerard does not feel as if he has done anything wrong. Most likely he wouldn’t even suspect that her interest in him has shifted. Strangely enough, by taking her job, he has enabled her to finally get some distance.

At some point in the evening Alice stumbles out the back of Dale's place to get some air. The afternoon rain eased off hours ago and the night is balmy. She has the sense she could fly off into the breeze. Above her the Milky Way surges white against blue-black. She has no idea what the time is, except to say that it's late and tomorrow is a school day. She definitely won't be there, not even close. She's certain no one will notice that she is gone: her absences have not been noted yet. Although she gathers that her mum is concerned. She's sent enough messages today to make her point. It's been kind of embarrassing, especially when Dale got hold of her mobile and was able to see that the incoming call was from 'mum'. 'It's your mummy calling,' he'd announced. 'Should she be worried?'

Alice doesn't think so. For once she feels as if she's actually crawled out of her cocoon. She knows the drugs she's taken must be having an effect, but she is sure they are only enhancing aspects of her that are usually dormant.

She sets herself on the back step. The sound of Chris' acoustic guitar drifts outside and she can hear the brothers in the back room, talking and laughing together. Occasionally there is a raised voice and while it seems as if they've come to arms in the past, today there have only been threats. She quite likes the edginess of their dynamic and wonders if they really are as volatile as they make themselves sound.

There is a rusted out bomb at the back of the yard. Weeds grow up and around its wheels, some of it reaching past the car windows. She watches the way the tallest strands dance in the wind and she can't believe how graceful they are. It seems at odds with the derelict car, but she likes that too. Maybe she will go inside and find a pen and paper so that she might try to replicate what she sees before her. In the meantime though, she thinks about the disparate nature of things; the way harshness and beauty live side by side.

She returns home to find Alice's sketchbook open on the kitchen bench, her bag still pushed to one side. Unless she has been attending classes empty handed, Alice has not been to school. Katherine realizes she has heard no word from her since this afternoon and now, surrounded by the emptiness of home, she starts to worry. She knows there is no point checking Alice's room, but as usual, she goes in there anyway. Inside there is nothing but chaos. The devastation is predictable, but it does nothing for Katherine's state of mind. Surely she hadn't expected Alice to be inside, patiently waiting for a kiss goodnight. She checks the home phone in the study; there is no message. She paces back to the kitchen and takes another look over the area, in case she missed something before: a cup in the sink, or some food gone from the refrigerator. There is no sign. Is it too paranoid a thought to call the police?

She finds her mobile in her handbag and discovers it is on silent. How stupid! She must have forgotten to switch it back after leaving the doctor's surgery. There is a message from Alice, finally a sentence with more than two words, explaining she will be home tomorrow night. Of course Katherine is relieved, but she is frustrated too, by the fact she has not been paying enough attention. Once again she is struck by how lonely the house is without Alice. Isn't it common these days for children to stay at home until their late twenties, even into their thirties. Katherine doubts her daughter will be one of those statistics. It already feels as if she is in the process of leaving.

Since her visit to the doctor she has tried to forget about her eye. As she returns the phone to her handbag she is reminded of it: a packet from the chemist remains unopened. She takes it with her into the bathroom and sets it on the sink. She peels off the dressing. Opening her eye is more painful than she anticipated. The bathroom light is hot, piercing. She holds her eyelid open with her fingers and leans closer to the mirror to inspect it. It is red and dribbling tears, but she can see no actual cut on the surface. Focusing hurts and so she tilts her head and applies a generous dose of drops. She blinks away the excess and repeats the process, anticipating that a little extra can only make the healing process faster. After several minutes with her head back she begins to feel dizzy. She applies the patch and hypoallergenic tape and decides to lie down. It has been a long day. Perhaps things will be better in the morning.

Eleven

Her eye is not better in the morning. It feels as stupid as it does painful and she forces the drops in before covering it with a fresh patch. She pushes herself against an unusual feeling of tiredness and arrives at work early with pastries and take away coffees. She, Gerard and Drew eat together discussing the day ahead. Apart from her eye, which both men comment on with varied degrees of sympathy, everything feels normal.

For the first part of the day she works between the lab upstairs and the downstairs shed. Since most of the objects are complete, the shelves that were used to house the desalination tubs are mostly bare. She uses them to store items as she checks them off. She opens each lid, rereads the tag inside, checks it against the box then ticks it off on her manifest. Soon she has a rhythm and Gerard, who is completely focused on the bones, pays her little attention. At lunchtime she excuses herself to work upstairs, under the pretense of finishing his storage boxes. He simply says, ‘thanks,’ and makes another apology about her eye. His focus hardly shifts from his work and she wonders if he avoids looking at her out of guilt, or whether it is simply self-absorption.

Once upstairs she does not work on the boxes for Gerard. She had completed them months ago, as a kind of procrastination for dealing with the bones. Instead, she removes the sister basket from a large drawer, cradling it gently with both hands. Even though the polyethylene glycol has given it a dense waxy look, the lively slippery quality it had when it was wet is gone. She sets it on a bed of cotton wool while she completes the construction of its storage box. It will be larger than the actual basket, deep enough to hold two layers of foam, which she carves to form a crib. She covers this with silk, folding the edges of the fabric underneath the base so that the crib is lined. This is where the weaving will nestle. Another section of foam, also covered with silk, will be fastened inside the lid of the box, so that when the box is closed the weaving will be held secure between the two layers. A tag will be attached to the weaving. The object will be numbered, as will the box; both pieces assigned a registration code that will locate them as part of Barton’s *Violet Collection*. She creates the box and then she makes a second, an exact replica.

She locates the sister basket she bought from the weavers at the Coorong and carefully splits one handle to imitate the basket from the wreck. Obviously it is in better condition than the conserved piece. She needs to rough it up.

So as not to draw attention to the noise she is about to make, she takes the weaving into the stairwell. It is hard not to imagine that she lays waste to a body, that with each hit of the rubber mallet she is pounding at flesh rather than woven sedge. When the basket is softened, she returns to the lab. She mixes up a solution of shellac adding small quantities of red, green and amber pigment. She uses a fine brush to test her mix on the fibres, adds a little black, until she is satisfied she has the correct colour. As she coats the weaving, pressing the bristles in between each tightly bound knot, she reassures herself that she will be left alone. If Drew or Gerard need her they will not take the extra few minutes to visit her up in the lab. They will lift the phone.

She works wearing latex gloves, wary of discolouring her hands and the additional layer distances her from what she is doing. It takes her about an hour to age the basket, which she then places on a wire rack in one of the larger storage drawers. A little later, when the shellac is properly dried, she will coat the basket, inside and out, with a mixture of Elmer's Glue. This will give it the look and feel that the polyethylene glycol has given the conserved piece.

She is totally preoccupied with what she is doing and so when the lab phone rings it throws her. She experiences a moment of panic, visualizing a Big Brother camera in the corner of the room, as though Drew and Gerard have been watching her every move.

'Yes?' she says, tentatively.

'I'm heading out.' It's Gerard, sounding affable. 'I was wondering if you'd like me to bring you back a coffee?'

'Um, no thanks, I'm OK.'

'Just wanted to let you know I'll be an hour or so. Drew is next door.'

'No problem,' she says. Although she finds it strange that he should be informing her of his movements. When they lived together he would often wander off to his study without mentioning what he was doing. They could have just finished dinner and she, having cleared the table, would return to continue their conversation and find him no longer there.

She waits ten minutes before heading downstairs. In her absence Gerard has disassembled the internal walls of three humidity chambers and has lined them up to form one long compartment, which he has raised from the ground. It appears eerily like a coffin and as she approaches she feels as if she is walking down the aisle of a funeral parlour, about to experience a viewing. Gerard has laid the bones out straight, the arms neatly

alongside the ribcage, the skull facing upwards. What on earth is he doing? There is no reason for it, not even to dry out the topical consolidant; at this stage the ambient room temperature is perfectly suited for that. She wonders if this is how Barton wants to display them. Perhaps Gerard has been taking photos to send on as a preview. She has the urge to pull everything apart and return the bones to the curled up position in which she found them. She contemplates fetching their storage boxes from upstairs, packing them up and heading straight over to Daphne Ellis. But she has no substitute. She is positive that their sudden disappearance will undermine what she has worked out with Snap. Looking down at the remains, she tries not to worry that the plan they have may not be possible to carry out. The problem is, she has no idea where she is going to find replacements.

He had not expected that phoning Alice would make him nervous. It takes him back to the days of early courtship. The days when he was unsure of the sort of responses his advances would bring. Her voice changes when she realizes it is him and he blunders forth, explaining that he only wants to catch up for a short time, perhaps a coffee after she finishes school. He is almost troubled when she agrees; it's clear he has no idea how to talk to her. Only one minute on the phone and he struggled with what to say.

She brings a friend. It's a gesture he's familiar with. The friend is the security card, the buffer. He supposes that even though Alice agreed to see him, she too has come with trepidation. What's incongruous though, is how different she looks. Her face is no longer set against him. She is smiling. And she isn't wearing a school uniform, as he'd imagined. Instead she has on some kind of supermarket outfit, a shirt with an emblem and black pants.

'Been at work?' he asks, standing up.

'I'm on the way.'

He notices Alice checking his cup on the table before she says to her friend, 'I'll get us some coffees.' She wanders into the café leaving the young woman to fend for herself.

'Have a seat,' he says, sitting himself back down.

'Sure.'

As the young woman sits she leans forward a little, so that her top droops open and he has to look away. Then she settles in, perching her elbows on the table and resting her chin in her hands. She stares at him.

‘So you’re Gerard,’ she says.

‘That’s me,’ he replies, disarmed.

‘I’m Frankie.’

‘Hi Frankie,’ he says.

‘Hi Gerard.’

Her gaze is rather intense and he shifts in his seat. ‘So,’ he says, ‘how do you know Alice?’

‘From school.’

‘Oh. It’s just you look older.’

‘I am.’

‘Sorry, but how does that work? My memory of school is that year levels don’t really mix.’

‘Honestly? We met in the toilets. Both got caught smoking in there. I guess we had a lot to talk about when we were on detention.’

‘Was that a regular gig?’ he asks, beginning to relax.

‘Until I got suspended. Alice and I kept in touch, but I didn’t bother going back to school after that.’

‘Doesn’t seem like you missed much.’

‘Mum always says that experience is the best education.’

‘She has a point.’

‘I know.’

He knows that he is old enough to be her father, but Frankie has something that not many young women seem to have these days. Is it the ability to flirt? He supposes he should withdraw, behave more parentally, but it’s not as if he’s going to follow any of this up. And neither will Frankie.

A little while later Alice places two coffees on the table and the contents slop over the edges of the cups. She apologizes, appears embarrassed. Frankie simply lifts her saucer, pours the liquid back into her cup and starts to drink. Alice sits between them.

‘Thanks,’ says Frankie.

‘That took forever,’ says Alice. ‘Thought I’d never get served.’

Frankie and Alice drink their coffees, say nothing more.

‘And how are you, Alice?’ Gerard asks eventually.

‘I’m good.’

‘That’s good,’ he says.

There is more coffee drinking, more silence, and he is baffled by the sudden shift in tone.

‘Are you sure everything is OK? Are we good?’

‘Let’s just say she’s weirded out,’ says Frankie. ‘Now that you’re back.’

‘Yes, I suppose it was a little unexpected.’

‘More than a little,’ Alice murmurs.

‘And what about it?’ Frankie asks. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Well, I’m working with Alice’s mum.’

‘No you’re not,’ says Alice. ‘You told me you came home for grandma’s funeral.’

‘That too.’

Alice sips her coffee, the obstinacy she displayed the other night back in full.

‘I’m helping out with the conservation,’ he tries to explain. ‘There’s a pressing deadline.’

‘It sounds like you’re busy,’ says Frankie.

‘Very busy,’ he says, grateful for Frankie’s show of interest. ‘It’s an amazing opportunity.’

‘Wow,’ says Frankie.

‘Yes. The stuff we’re doing is probably once in a lifetime.’

‘I bet it’s good to see her again,’ says Frankie.

‘We haven’t had much time together, have we Alice?’

‘She’s not talking about me,’ Alice sighs. ‘She’s talking about mum.’

‘Oh, of course. Yes, it’s good to see Katherine. She hasn’t changed a bit.’

‘Have you?’ Frankie asks.

‘I guess I’m still pretty much the same.’ He laughs off the question; worried that Frankie’s curiosity will soon prove fatal.

‘And is Katherine happy to see you. I mean is she glad you’re back?’

‘I haven’t asked her.’

‘But you think so?’

‘From what I saw she seemed pretty happy,’ says Alice.

‘Is it the same as when you first met?’ Frankie asks.

‘This is a peculiar conversation, don’t you think? You’re asking some very personal questions.’

‘What did you expect?’ Frankie asks.

Not this, thinks Gerard. He feels awkward and under attack. Only a few minutes ago he and Frankie were practically flirting.

‘Right now I was expecting to catch up with Alice,’ he explains.

‘Well I’ve got to go to work,’ says Alice. She finishes her coffee and stands up. Frankie follows suit. He has absolutely no idea what just happened, or how he should respond. Heat, crawls up his neck, takes hold of his chin and cheeks. He does not get up and the two girls, for that is how he now perceives them, wave goodbye.

Well, there you have it, he thinks. What has she just given me? Twenty minutes. Why hadn’t he trusted his guts? He knew another attempt to connect with Alice would be a disaster. He gathers his journal from the table, his pen and glasses case and shoves them into his satchel. He takes the last cold sip from his short black and heads back to work.

Satisfied that the baskets are complete, she rests them inside their boxes. She secures each lid. She opens one of the larger storage drawers and places the boxes side by side, gently pushes the drawer closed. She has been on her own, working solidly for the past four hours, and the afternoon has gone. Having spoken to no one during that time she supposes that Gerard returned from his outing. Like her, he has probably been occupied with the job. She is pleased for that similarity; at least she has had no interruptions. Years ago, when they worked together, ten to twelve hour days were not unusual. It was he that set the pace, and she, wanting to please him, learnt to keep up. There was a time when she would have done anything Gerard asked of her. With this job it feels as if she has come full circle. Not because she is back where she started, especially not with him, but because, now that he is here, she is unable to avoid their past.

A year or so before Katherine’s arrival in Red Bay, a number of burial grounds had been discovered; the remains of one hundred and forty bodies thought to be European whalers. Mostly they were laid out on their backs, their hands crossed over their waist,

their faces carefully turned to the west. She worked on the garments that were found in one of the graves. They were weightless, the fabric more fragile than the acid-free tissue used to protect them. They were so light that on the day she was packing them for storage she had to unfold the tissue and check whether the pieces were actually inside. That day a colleague came to give her a message. Gerard had returned to Australia, his wife had been diagnosed with cancer. Instead of worrying for the wife, she was overwhelmed by his departure. At the time she had thought herself heartless. But when she allows herself to remember, the shock of discovering Gerard was married still bites.

After work Alice finds Frankie waiting for her. She is standing under a streetlight in the car park, talking with one of the night-fill boys. When she sees Alice she kisses the boy, then strolls over.

‘You know him?’ Frankie asks.

‘No,’ says Alice.

‘He’s hilarious,’ says Frankie. ‘Reckons he cuts open packets of chips when no one is looking. That way he can leave them in the damaged goods pile and eat them later during his shift.’

‘I’ll have to give it a try.’

‘How did you go tonight? Got any smokes?’

Alice takes two packs from the bag she borrowed from Frankie, hands one to her.

‘Good one,’ says Frankie. ‘You want to get changed at my place? We can go out.’

‘Told mum I’d come home. Apparently she’s worried.’ Alice goes cross-eyed, as if.

‘At least she bothers,’ Frankie says, ripping the clear plastic cover from the cigarette box.

‘I don’t really think she means it.’

‘She’s your mum.’

‘Yeah, and she’d rather be working.’

‘So why do you care?’

‘I dunno.’

‘We could visit your boyfriend instead.’

‘Why?’ teases Alice. ‘You interested?’

Frankie lights a cigarette, smiling. ‘His brothers aren’t bad,’ she says.

They stand together, smoking in the entrance of a nearby shop. Traffic passes. A group of young men roll by in a glossy sedan, they yell out from the open windows and Frankie gives them the finger.

‘No point hanging round here,’ says Alice.

‘Agreed,’ says Frankie and they step out onto the street.

Katherine makes sure she is home well before Alice's shift at the supermarket is due to finish. She is at the stove when the home phone rings. No one ever calls on it these days and she has to abandon the frypan and run to the study in order to answer it.

'Hello,' she says.

'It's Alice.'

'Everything alright? Where's your mobile?'

'Battery's dead. I'm just calling to let you know I'm staying at Frankie's.'

'Again?'

'I'm helping her out with this play she's been working on. It's really important.'

'I was hoping you'd be home for tea.'

'Maybe next time.'

'But you live here, Alice. You make it sound like you're a neighbour with another engagement, or... a grown up.'

'I'm not a child.'

'It's not that I think you're immature, but you've got school. It's the middle of the week.'

'I've been going to school,' she says, 'and I've promised Frankie I'd help. She's waiting for me now.'

'What about your schoolbag? What about a clean uniform?'

'It's all sorted, mum,' Alice says. 'I have to go.' And she hangs up.

Katherine can smell something burning. She rushes to the kitchen where the chopped up onions have blackened in the pan. She shoves it from the hot plate and turns off the gas.

There is no doubt that she is worried about Alice, but talking to her just now reminds her of how resilient she is. Or thick skinned. Katherine wonders if they are the same thing. Either way Katherine is finding it impossible to get through. Tonight she feels beaten by it. She supposes that over the years her absences, field trips and late nights, have helped to create the wall that is now so obviously between them. But what was she supposed to do? Give up work?

She gives up on dinner, takes a glass of wine with her to the lounge room. She doesn't turn on the lights, just lies on the couch in the darkness. The energy she had at the beginning of the project seems distant, as if it never belonged to her. If only she could muster some of it now. The excitement. The drive. But she is exhausted. She can't

remember feeling quite like this before and she expects that it is affecting her ability to figure out what to do next. The weaving was easy, finding a substitute was simple. Working out what to do with the bones is proving more difficult. At one point she thought she might be able to cast them. Except that Gerard will be working on them for a little while longer and by the time she can get access, to pack them up for transport, she will have run out of time to make copies before they are scheduled to go.

She tilts her head, so she can drink from her glass without having to sit up properly. On an empty stomach the wine goes straight to her head and she takes another sip before lying back down in the cushions. She presses the base of the wine glass against the eye patch. She doesn't know what causes her to do it, but the additional pressure feels good, it alleviates some of the burn. If only she could harness the abilities of the prophets, find clarity of vision in this temporary loss of sight. She stays there for ages, with both eyes closed and the wine glass pressed against the cotton padding of her patch, hoping inspiration will come.

Every appliance in the kitchen buzzes and hums. The freezer creaks as ice forms, the fluoros jitter. The clock on the stove ticks, colliding with other noises: bottles of beer are cracked open, lighters flick on and off, matches are struck, cards are slapped down in fast deals. The needles they keep using for speed are scattered across the table. Alice's mind races, she feels as if she's breathing too fast, that there isn't enough air for everyone in the confined room. She only snorted the speed that Matt gave her, but still, it has her amped. She tells herself to stay calm. Except that Matt sits at the head of the table with a shotgun resting on his lap. He'd brought it in earlier, to show Chris the carving on its stock, but had failed to put it away again. No one else seems fazed by it. Least of all Frankie. Everyone is focused on the card game.

Matt deals. Alice checks her hand, an Ace and a Two of Hearts. Dale jerks his wrist, a sign that he wants another card. It's the Queen of Hearts.

'Fucked,' he says, and throws his hand on the table. He had a King already and an eight.

'Fucked choice, more like,' says Matt.

Dale snarls, says nothing. He stubs his cigarette in the ashtray, tunnelling through the other butts to find some glass to twist on.

Alice gets a four. That makes sixteen, she'll stand.

Frankie has pontoon. Dale folds his arms, lets Frankie swoop away the money.

Matt deals again and the tension is palpable.

'Another.' Dale lays his cards on the table. Face down.

'You making up the rules now?' says Matt. 'You gotta show.'

Dale flips his card. Nineteen.

'Hit,' he calls and busts.

The rest bust too.

'Dealer wins,' says Matt.

'A-fuckin-gain.' Dale thrusts his twenty dollar bill across the table. 'I'm skint.'

'When you ever been anything else?' Matt folds up the bill, enjoys slipping it into his shirt pocket.

Dale misjudges space, hits his beer bottle against the table edge. It froths, slops over. He doesn't bother wiping it up. He lights a smoke, raps his fingers on the table.

Matt begins to deal, pauses at Dale. 'You out?' he asks, sounding amused.

'What do you reckon?' Dale sulks.

'I'd bet on it.'

Everyone laughs, except Dale. Alice watches his face harden. He clenches his jaw and sinew tightens in his neck.

'Hey,' says Matt. He slides the note up out of his pocket, just a touch. 'I can loan you a twenty.'

Dale leaps out of his seat and tips up the kitchen table. A bottle of beer spills over Matt as the ashtray, cards, needles go clattering to the floor. Unlike everyone else, whose reflexes push them out of harms way, Matt does not move. Doing nothing pisses Dale off even more and he jumps over the table and slams Matt, chair and all, hard against the sink bench. Before Alice can tell what's happening Chris has Dale in a headlock and Matt has the shotgun pointed at his temple. Long, thick dribble spills from Dale's gaping mouth. All three of them are panting.

'You might wanna apologize,' says Matt.

'Fuck that.'

Matt blows a hole in the ceiling then aims the gun back at Dale.

Plaster drifts onto the upturned table.

‘Sorry,’ Dale forces it out, bitterly. ‘Dealer wins!’

‘You’re a sore loser, little brother. Why don’t you sit out back for a bit and lick your wounds?’ Matt rests the handle of the gun on the ground.

Dale yanks himself away from Chris, grabs a six pack from the fridge and storms out the back door.

Chris switches off the lights and the atmosphere in the room immediately drops to a more manageable vibe. Someone secures the backdoor open and mosquitoes come in on the evening breeze. A car pulls up out the front: police maybe. They hear the sound of footsteps on the gravel, banging on the front door. It stops after a few minutes and a short time later they hear the car pull away from the house.

Alice finds her way out of the kitchen. The TV in the lounge is on with the sound off. She lays out the lounge cushions on the floor and stares at ads for Audi, for late night call girls and for the New Church of Faith. Eventually she hears Dale come back inside. She hears the table being turned upright. She hears the tap turn on; someone is washing down the table top. Then there’s the syrupy smell of dope and no matter how subdued the mood in there becomes Alice cannot bring herself to get up off the floor and rejoin them in the kitchen. Eventually a guitar starts up. It can only be Chris, creating sound as if two instruments are being played instead of one. This, she thinks, I can return to. She clammers off the cushions and takes up her seat at the table, next to Dale. He smiles at her and she gathers he’s pleased to see her. Matt does not look up from a game of solitaire. Neither does Chris deviate from his guitar playing. Frankie passes her a beer and Alice whispers, ‘Thanks.’ There’s no need to say anything more and for ages no one speaks. The clock continues ticking and smoke hangs above the table in a dense cloud.

Twelve

Katherine wakes later than usual. After sleeping in, she should be rested. Instead she is washed out and the tiredness confuses her. She rests her fingers on the top of her eye patch, feels the texture of it. Soft. Dense. At least the eye doesn't feel too bad. She anticipates that underneath it might be better. She may even be able to head out this morning without the patch. Perhaps it is true that the loss of one of the senses heightens the power of the others, for last night she finally came to something. Her body soft with wine and her mind free to plot away, she was able to form a plan.

She drags herself out of bed to ready herself for the day. Everything in the bathroom is as she left it. The eye drops are on the sink. The packet of spare patches sits crumpled on the shelf. It is unusual for her not to have tidied up, and she experiences a flush of shame. Normally she is so fastidious. Last night she didn't have the energy to keep it up. She puts the patches and the drops in the cabinet and bins the packaging. She showers with her old dressing on. With both eyes closed and her head back she enjoys the force of the shower on her neck and shoulders. Once she's out and dry she strips off the patch. Immediately her eye stings. She grimaces, squeezes it shut and grapples in front of her for the drops. They fall from the cabinet into the sink, where thankfully, they are easy to find. Slowly she opens her eyelid, so red inside and brimming with tears. She applies ample drops, loses count after six large squirts. She positions the patch, holding it in place with a fresh strip of tape, sighs with relief once it is done, and reminds herself that all of this is only temporary.

She spends the rest of the morning on the phone; firstly she contacts Drew to let him know that she is sick and will not be coming in. He doesn't sound overly concerned, if anything he seems amused, as if she's finally shown her true colours and is unable to step up to the challenge of this project. Unlike Gerard and himself. She tells him she will check in later and he reassures her that they have it under control. 'Rest up, Katie,' he says. 'You deserve it.' She refrains from sticking up for herself. Instead of explaining that she *is* actually working she demurely says goodbye. At least he has taken the bait.

It takes a little longer to make contact with the right person at the university's School of Medicine. The lab technician there is a veteran; for years he's been managing medical equipment, models and cadavers for educational purposes. When Katherine arrives, there is an array laid out on the lab bench ready for her to inspect. Close by, a full

length skeleton hangs from a metal roller stand. It rattles as the technician wheels it toward her.

‘Some companies call this contemporary model Stan,’ he informs her, smiling. ‘If you’re after quality, *Stan’s your man.*’

‘Actually, I’m after a woman. I had a quick look on anatomystore.com and a few other sites, but I couldn’t find a female version.’

‘Ah, the female pelvis usually comes as an extra, a piece in itself.’

‘Should have guessed,’ says Katherine. She takes Stan’s bony fingers in her hand.

‘It’s lighter than I expected,’ she says.

‘Hollow too. That’s the style these days. More like real bones.’

‘Have they always been made from some type of plastic?’

‘One producer told me that after the second World War they were manufactured out of windows from recycled fighter pilot planes. Same kind of plastic they still make dentures out of today.’

‘And before that?’

‘It was Plaster of Paris.’

‘I guess there aren’t many of those around anymore.’

‘Not so many. Models weren’t popular in Australia til the ‘90s and by then it was plastic alloy. Nowadays they’re making all sorts of things, some with a rubbery quality, the organs and such.’ He picks up a set of lungs and squeezes it to demonstrate. He slips the lungs inside a rib cage on the bench, absent-mindedly gives them a pat. ‘Popular nowadays. Students purchase them and GPs pop them in their office.’

‘Amazing,’ says Katherine. She wonders how many ‘Stans’ populate the medical community. Or if part of the general public is into purchasing anatomical gear, and have them in their lounge rooms for example, or collecting dust in their sheds. On his hanger, Stan is about five foot tall. It’s a good length. Perfect for what she needs him for, but she is worried that he will be too light and that colour matching plastic might prove trickier than plaster.

‘I take it the plaster versions are much heavier?’ she asks.

‘Quite.’

‘And are they about the same size? I’m looking for a fairly short one.’

‘You doing some kind of research?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘A collector?’

‘No,’ says Katherine.

The lab technician scratches his jaw, pouts a little as he thinks things over. Maybe he’s stalling to see if Katherine will give him more information. She looks away, says nothing. After a minute or two he makes up his mind.

‘OK, lady,’ he says, ‘if you really need one of the old types I can show you a couple.’

‘I’d appreciate that,’ she says, ‘very much.’

Early in the morning, maybe around three, Alice passed out on the cushions in front of the TV. It was well before anyone else looked like going to bed, but she was wasted. Frankie lay down beside her a little while later. It was reassuring to know she was there, the two of them tucked away in the lounge room, safely together.

Sometime around midday Alice wakes to find that Frankie has gone. Did she end up with Matt or Chris, or did she simply get up and go? Alice rises from her makeshift bed and treads past Dale who sleeps on the cushion-less couch, his hand anchoring an empty stubbie to his chest. She tiptoes down the hall. Chris' door is open and she peers in. Frankie is not with him. He is twisted up in a sheet, the only body on a mattress on the ground. A huge poster of boob trees, lit up pink by a sunset, peels from the wall above his bed. Three guitars hang on chrome stands nearby. Apart from that there are milk crates full of clothes and a small shelf stacked with books. It is sparse, but it has way more personality than Dale's barren cave. She heads there next. Matt has completely taken over the double bed, which makes sense of how Dale ended up in the lounge room with her. But there is no Frankie.

She gets a glass of water from the kitchen. Apparently the objective last night was to do away with four cartons of beer. Looking around it seems probable enough; there are stubbies everywhere. The floor is sticky with spills and ash. The Queen of Hearts is face up on the kitchen table, a cigarette hole burnt through her forehead.

Alice doesn't want to stay. She gets her boots from the back door and slips them on at the door step. There is a beer bottle and a few ground down cigarettes on the cement. She imagines Dale sitting out there, trying to calm himself down. If there were a full moon he probably would have howled. In the daylight the weeds that surround the rusted out car no longer look beautiful. The rest of the yard is taken over by a hills hoist, planted on a patch of grass that is strangled with sour sobs. She unlatches the side gate and heads down the drive.

She passes a number of cream brick houses on big square blocks. Some have security gates and thick iron fencing. Some have frangipani trees out front, others have nothing but concrete. She passes one gate and two docked Rottweilers bark ferociously. There is no need to be scared, the gate is closed and she knows dogs, she's grown up around them. But the aggression these ones show makes her anxious and she quickens her pace. Except that she doesn't know where she is going. Frankie won't be home, she must have gone to rehearsals and the spare key she used to have outside her flat was lent to

some artist months ago. Alice doesn't want to go home either. She does not expect her mum will be there, but who knows what she might find since Gerard's been lurking.

She arrives at a street corner, unsure of her next move. When a car slows down and the driver, a middle aged man, beckons her to get in, Alice starts walking. After a few blocks she calculates that it will take her about an hour to get to Queenie's on foot. Quicker than catching the two buses she'll otherwise need to get there. Once she has the logistics sorted, once she has made a decision about where to go, she feels a growing sense of anticipation. It will be good to see Queenie. They can have tea and a laugh. Smoke cigarettes and gossip about the 'olds' at The Grove. And it will be good to be around someone she feels safe with. Someone who doesn't blow holes in the ceiling.

At home Katherine covers the outdoor table with a length of cardboard. She lays the skeleton on top, imagining its transformation from plaster model to conserved remains. It will be impossible to simulate all of the idiosyncrasies of the recovered bones, to replicate each sulphide and corrosion stain, each crack or abnormality, but what she has in mind will be enough. Wasn't it Alistair who said that faith brings with it an air of verisimilitude? She is quite sure that should anyone open the storage boxes they will only see what they already imagine is inside: the original bones.

Firstly she removes the shellac finish from each piece with methylated spirits and soft steel wool. The thin layer comes off easily and the methylated spirits soon evaporates, leaving the pieces dry. She spends the next hour removing the brackets and screws. She sands down the holes. Then, with a lighter grade paper, she sands each piece fully, creating a rough surface, porous enough for the dye to take. Outside she erects a camping stove and uses an old pot to boil up a mixture of black and red clothes dye, one part black to three parts red. She drops one piece into the pot to test the mix, waits the required fifteen minutes before fishing it out with a slotted spoon. Before it is completely dry she knows she has the correct blend, a dark warm colour that resembles the by-product staining of black-sulphide sand and iron corrosion. She brings the mix back to the boil, turns it down, then places a number of pieces into the simmering liquid. As they bubble away she ponders whether or not to bury the bones in the garden for a few days. She stands with her hands on her hips and looks over the back yard. She's been so preoccupied with work lately she hasn't been paying attention to anything out here. The foliage on her quince trees is now so thick she can no longer make out each tree's individual form. While some have started to yellow, ready for autumn, she will have to wait until after winter, once they have fruited, before pruning them back. By then she'll have all the time in the world. She'll be unemployed and be able to spend every day pottering around her plants. The thought doesn't exactly inspire her, but it doesn't depress her either. She returns to the bones that have dried out on the cardboard. They look convincing. Their time in the simmering liquid has smoothed off their surfaces sufficiently and she decides there is no need to bury them at all. Really what's the point? Conserved bones are free from dirt and there is not enough time for the plaster to degrade in any worthwhile manner. She must be tired to have even contemplated it.

She removes another cluster of pieces from the pot, orders them on the cardboard and repeats the process. Later, in the same way as with the weaving, she will paint the model with a thin layer of Elmer's Glue in order to replicate the finish of the real bones.

A woman rests her head on the trunk of a young plane tree. One arm looped across a low branch, keeping her upright. She is backlit and Alice can make out the shape of her frail body through the thin cotton of her nightie. The old woman looks up, sees Alice and separates herself from the tree. She walks, not on the path, but winds through a bank of grasses, her bare feet on the dirt. She is a couple of metres away from Alice when an orderly pads around the corner.

'There you are.' The orderly's cheerful overtones do not hide her irritation.

The old woman rushes to Alice and grips her shoulder. Her nails dig in. The orderly unpicks the woman's hold, finger by finger, all the while talking to her as if she were a naughty child. Once extricated the old woman makes another grab for Alice, takes her hand and pushes something hard into her palm. She stares into Alice's eyes, pleading.

'Come on, Ruth! Let go!' The old woman's eyes go blank and she relinquishes her hold. Her arms hang loose from her shoulders. 'Good girl.' As the old woman is guided away she holds her head to the sky. With her wispy hair afloat it looks as if she is returning to some spirit world, not the secure care of Greenfields.

Alice unfurls her palm to reveal a tiny smooth pebble, perfectly round. She holds it between her thumb and forefinger, puts it in her mouth. She pushes it against her teeth with her tongue, contemplates swallowing it. When she gets to Queenie's place she spits it out. It is wet and dark, curiously fluid. But it soon dries and its stoniness returns. She drops it in her shirt pocket, then presses the buzzer at the front door.

'Darling,' Queenie says, arms outstretched. Alice rests her head on Queenie's chest. She smells of powder and moisturizer and cigarette smoke. Queenie places her hand on Alice's head and strokes her hair. She gathers up the wayward strands and tucks them behind Alice's ear. Her touch is gentle. Its softness overwhelms Alice with a rush of sorrow that comes straight from her stomach and takes hold of her chest. She buries her head further into Queenie, squeezes her eyelids shut. She wants her grandmother to take it

away, to draw it out, dispel this unexpected sadness. But Queenie lets go and the moment is gone.

The lounge room curtains are wide open and Queenie stands before the window. Framed like that she appears majestic and Alice can imagine her on stage, back in the day.

‘Not at school?’ says Queenie.

‘Didn’t feel like it.’

‘Thata girl. Life, that’s what you’re after.’

‘Can’t say it’s all that great,’ says Alice.

‘Give it time.’

‘Did you finish school?’

‘God, no!’

‘Do you think I should?’

‘Possibly,’ says Queenie. ‘But I don’t see the need for university. Look what it’s done to your mother.’

Alice laughs; she enjoys Queenie’s conspiratorial offerings.

‘Fancy a cigarette?’ she asks.

‘Just put one out, dear.’ Queenie gestures to the bathroom. ‘You know you have to sit on the damned loo if you want to smoke inside, they’ve installed new fire alarms.’

‘Same drill as school.’ Alice pulls a face and plods across the carpet. In the bathroom she switches the exhaust fan on, sits down on the toilet lid. She smokes, looking at her feet. Her brown shoes against the yellow tiles make her think of dirt and butter. From her position on the toilet she can see herself in the mirror above the basin. She blows smoke at her reflection. It is dispersed by the suck of the overhead fan and she is left looking at her face, wondering which bits of her are like her father.

Queenie bustles back into the bathroom and the space feels suddenly small. Alice folds her feet under the toilet bowl to make room for her grandmother, who stands at the mirror pinching her cheeks so they glow red.

‘Met your father yet?’ Queenie asks.

‘Yeah.’

‘Any thoughts?’ She pats her hand up against the skin under her chin, defying gravity.

‘Kinda full of himself, I spose. But I’m not sure yet if he’s a total creep.’

‘Not far off,’ says Queenie. ‘Your mum had a hard time when he left.’

‘She never bags him for it.’

Queenie gives herself a generous squirt of perfume before turning around. Alice tries not to gag on the strength of it.

‘She’s loyal, your mother. More than I can say for most people, even myself. I like the pleasantries of life. I like to have fun. I don’t know where she got it from, but Katherine strives for something else. She drives me nuts with all her...’ Queenie struggles to find the word, ‘virtue!... But you’ve got to hand it to her, she’s hard working.’

Alice wonders what that makes her: slack, a bludger? She’s got her job at the supermarket, but that’s all. Not even English classes can keep her at school anymore. She feels as though she is cut loose from something important, that proper experiences are happening to other people, just out of her reach.

Alice holds up the burning end of her cigarette.

‘Just drop it in the loo,’ says Queenie as she trots out of the bathroom.

Alice lifts the lid. A couple of butts float on the surface water of the otherwise sparkling toilet.

Later they stand at Queenie’s open door. From there they both see the old woman dancing barefoot on the pathway.

‘They’ve been taking her back and forth all day,’ Queenie moans. ‘Poor thing. I don’t know why they had to build that facility so close.’ Her face creases with distaste.

‘They’re not all mad in there?’

‘That’s the problem. If you’re not mad, you may as well be. Make sure you give me the pillow, if it looks like there’s any chance they’re going to put me into Greenfields.’

‘Gran,’ says Alice, ‘they’ll never take you alive.’

‘Too true!’ Queenie holds Alice’s face in her hands. ‘Always delightful to see you,’ she says. ‘You are so like me. Funny don’t you think, how some bits often miss a generation? I’m so thankful I didn’t inherit my own mother’s arse.’ Queenie laughs at her joke as she pulls away.

‘Ta-ta, dear,’ she says, closing the door.

Out on the path, the old woman has an agapanthus in each hand. She bobs them up and down, shifts them like wands above her head. Alice thinks she’ll return the stone, but as she passes, the old woman doesn’t notice her. Her once pleading eyes are reduced to

opaque spheres and Alice decides not to interrupt. Instead she looks back to Queenie's window to wave goodbye and finds that her curtains are already drawn.

She still has several hours to kill before her shift at the supermarket. She thinks about heading back to Dale's, maybe they are wondering where she is. Although she expects they haven't stirred. She imagines them, comatose while the weeds creep in and take over the house. Really, she needs a work uniform, some clean knickers. She needs to shower and to eat something. She stands outside The Grove, waiting for a bus into the city, which does not come. She sits in the bus shelter for ages, watching passing cars melt into the haze that lifts from the main road. It has turned into one of those late summer days that people refer to as perfect. Weightless days. She supposes she loves them too, the warm light on her body, the delicate texture of the air. Except today she does not feel bright. She feels aimless and stuck and decides that walking is a better option than wasting time here.

There is little shade on her way into town, barely any trees along the footpath and the sun's heat begins to press on her. She feels lodged inside her dirty clothes; her jeans dig into her stomach. The denim, stiff with several days wear, rubs against her thighs. She lumbers past a number of shops; bananas bake inside the window of Sunny's Fruit Barn, at the post office a man in a wheelchair shakes a tin at her. She slips in her bus fare. Outside the deli the headlines on the dailies stand read, 'Howard commits 2,000 troops to the War on Terror'. Alice feels hotter by the second. Her shirt and jeans stink of cigarette smoke and sweat. She passes a high school. The grounds seem deserted, until the lunch bell rings and students spill onto the well-watered grass. The tall, good looking boys take over the oval and a football game starts up. A scruffy kid skirts around them to the fence, to pick up a delivery order of pizza. Nice work, thinks Alice and wonders if he'll last the day. A group of girls huddle near the fence. They screech with laughter. One of them plaits another's hair. There's part of Alice that is revolted by their girly antics, but the image of their togetherness stays with her for blocks, feeding her dislocation.

Half an hour later she reaches the parklands. Her place is on the other side. Workmen dig up the bitumen between her and the park. A single lane of traffic edges past. Further up she manages to slip through the slowly moving cars to cross the road, hears the distorted radio sound of a Minogue song travel past. She wanders into a section of the park. The buffalo grass, still parched from summer, crackles under her feet. Fat galahs poke around in the dirt. A grove of white poplars provides a circle of shade and Alice walks through them. She lifts her hair from the back of her neck, notices that some strands

remain stuck to her skin with sweat. She shakes her hair, her hands, the fabric of her shirt, until the heat in her body subsides. She lingers at the edge of the poplars. It feels different under the canopy of trees. Protected. Magical. The undersides of the poplar leaves are white and as they shift in the breeze there is a silvery show of white-green-white. The grass underfoot grows in willowy clumps, long strands that bend and drift. There are patches of small yellow flowers and amongst them shaggy white toadstools stand proud. Alice places the stone from the old woman at the foot of a poplar. She breathes in the air of this place, willing the shelter of the trees to stay stored inside her. Then she steps out into the sun, revived.

It is late in the afternoon by the time Katherine has dyed each piece of the skeleton. It is only once she has completed the process that she remembers to check in with Drew.

Gerard answers the phone.

‘It’s Katherine.’

‘How’s the eye?’

Damn him, she thinks, always reminding me of my failings.

‘I’m resting it,’ she says.

‘Smart thinking.’

‘Is Drew there? I said I’d check in.’

‘He’s next door. You can leave a message with me, though.’

Katherine supposes she should be acting more approachable. After all, it is the strategy she worked out with Snap; get on side with Gerard so that he completes the conservation process for Barton while she works out how to undermine it.

‘That’d be great,’ she says. ‘Could you just let him know I hope to be in tomorrow?’

‘Sure thing.’

‘Gerard,’ she takes a breath before pressing on. ‘I’m really glad that you are finishing up the conservation on the bones. They’re in good hands.’

‘Well thanks. You know I’m thrilled at how they’ve turned out. You were pretty old school with your approach though. These days emulsions are used as a last resort. You

could probably have got away with careful air-drying and a little surface consolidation here and there.'

'I've come to understand that,' she says, trying to sound mild.

'Next time,' he suggests. 'Once upon a time I would have considered bleaching them, you know, at an earlier stage in the process, but I have to admit, I've come to like the final colour. It's unique.'

'Really? How would you describe it?'

'Charcoal, almost reddish.'

'Sounds wonderful, Gerard.'

'Look, have you had any more thought about signing that document? I really believe it'll make things easier later on, for the sake of publications and the like.'

'I wouldn't mind another read first. It's here somewhere.'

'I've got a copy. I could bring it over tonight.'

Katherine looks outside, the model still lies on the cardboard drying, and there is equipment everywhere.

'How about tomorrow? I'm still not feeling the best.'

'Excellent, should we say seven?'

'Yes. I'll see you then.'

She hopes she sounds enthusiastic enough. Talking to Gerard is surprisingly draining. Before he mentioned her eye she had almost forgotten there was a problem. Throughout the day she hadn't steered away from it completely, but she lost track of how many times she peeled back the dressing and applied the drops. She isn't even sure if she has kept to the recommended dose. Now her eye thrums behind the patch. She is not looking forward to attending to it; to risking a repeat of the pain she experienced this morning. She decides to put it off for a bit longer; take a rest for ten minutes. Maybe even have a catnap.

She settles on the couch, but sleep does not come. Shadows from the trees outside fill the lounge room and she wishes she wouldn't equate the way they move with the play of light through water. Surely it is enough for them just to be trees. 'Aren't you over this thing with water?' Queenie had asked her recently. 'It is so predictable.' At first she thought her mother had a point. An all-consuming relationship with the sea could be seen as insidious, somehow pathological. But in reality Queenie knew nothing of it. She had not experienced the quietness, deep underneath, that Katherine finds so appealing.

In the sea Katherine feels a sense of belonging and at the same time she is aware that being underwater is a place she can only ever visit. Perhaps it is the very fact that she does not have to survive under there that gives her comfort. After all, she is not really required to fit in. Apart from abiding by the safety rules that diving requires, nothing is expected of her and she feels the need for nothing in return. It is a place where verbal communication is minimized and the solitude of one's own head takes precedence. Diving makes Katherine feel calm. In some circles she has even been praised for it. Her diving reflex is well developed. Her pulse drops quickly when she is immersed in cool water and her circulatory system responds by redistributing the blood that would normally go to her muscles, her skin, hands and feet, to her brain and heart. Someone said that the peacefulness of being underwater must be like being in the womb. But in utero the heart rate is racing; the developing body's demand for oxygen is high. Instead she likes to think of being underwater as expansive, so that even though she is enclosed by the elements, she is also on the cusp of a mysterious world.

She learned to dive with Gerard. He was exceptional, she thinks, and immediately re-evaluates. He was stylish. Not really the same thing. The basics, he'd explained, are crucial if you are to look the part. Be streamlined, never use your arms to move forward, fold them in front of you by clasping your forearms or holding onto your hands, look relaxed. Never drag on the bottom. Never call fins flippers, or your mask a pair of goggles. Always notice the small things: nudibranchs, for example, are of particular interest. The list was endless. It was a set of rules she mastered early and it annoyed him how easily she took to diving. She outlasted him, every time. While she could make a tank last two or three dives his need for oxygen was foetal.

Alice drops her cigarette on the footpath and puts it out with the toe of her shoe. She opens the iron gate and even though it is not yet dark, the security lights turn on as she approaches the verandah. At the door she can hear the thwack, thwack, of Alphonse's tail banging against the wall inside. As soon as she is inside he presses his nose against her. She squats down, rests her forehead on his hard skull. He picks up a raggedy toy and rests it on Alice's leg. She rubs his head, then gets to her feet. The chewed up bunny hangs from the dog's mouth. It's good to see him, but the corridor and the house beyond feels uncomfortably still. Unlike the park everything here is fixed in time. Black and white photographs hang from the walls: pictures of her grandpa in uniform, other dead people she will never get to know. When she walks into the kitchen her mum is standing at the fridge, holding the door open. She is so still it seems as if she has been there for days.

'You getting something out?'

Katherine jumps, turns to face Alice. 'Just thinking about a salad for dinner.'

'Hey,' says Alice. 'What happened to your eye?'

'It's nothing, just a scratch.'

'Work related?'

'You could say that.' Her mum laughs weakly.

'Maybe you should take a break,' says Alice.

'I will. After this project I'm sure to.'

Alice will believe it when she sees it, but her mum really should take some time off. She looks like shit.

'I caught up with dad,' she says.

'I hope that was OK.'

'Didn't he mention it?'

'No, he didn't.'

'I guess you've been seeing him though.'

'Yes. We're working together.'

'So he's not staying over here then?'

'No, but he is coming tomorrow. We've got something to discuss.'

Alice doesn't ask what they're going to talk about. She's seen them talking before and the thought of it makes her sick. On her way home she promised herself she could handle whatever was happening. She figured that just because she thought Gerard was a dick, it didn't mean her mum had to feel the same. But if Katherine has found happiness

with him, she hardly looks the part. Alice watches her now, the way her body wilts under the down lights. The comical patch on one eye. The shadow under the other, like the dark side of the moon.

‘I’ve come home to get some clean clothes,’ she says. ‘I’ve got to go to work tonight, late night shopping and all that. But I’m going to stay at Frankie’s for a little while.’

‘OK,’ says Katherine. She reopens the fridge, pulls out the lettuce and the tomatoes. Other stuff for salad. Alice is amazed by her reaction. She thought she would have tried to stop her. She watches her cut up the cucumber, open a can of tuna and pile it on top of the greens.

‘You want some?’ asks her mum.

‘No thanks,’ says Alice.

‘Well call me, if you need anything.’

‘Yeah.’

Alice finds her schoolbag just inside the door; it sits at the edge of the sea of junk in her room. Crap that she has hoarded for reasons she can no longer remember. Even on her own she feels embarrassed by it all. There is something to be said for the stark house that Dale and Chris live in, their lack of *things*. She changes into her clothes for work, rummages around for a school uniform and jams it into her school bag. She swipes the loose coins from her mantelpiece into her bag, hugs Alphie, and is back on the street in minutes. On her way to work she texts Frankie, hoping that she will be able to camp out at hers.

Katherine eats her salad standing at the bench. It’s hard work getting it all down, but she knows she needs the energy it will bring. Maybe she should have tried to persuade Alice to stay, so she could explain things, but Alice seems defiant about managing everything on her own. And tonight there isn’t time. Tonight she has to deal with the skeleton that she has been working on, in the yard.

By the time Katherine heads back outside it is dark. She switches on the exterior lights and mixes up a small bucket of plaster. She begins to fill in the screw holes, making sure to pack enough in so that when it is dried it will shrink level with the surface of each

piece. Once she has finished she is able to start again from the beginning, and sand each filled in area. Then she uses some of the dye as a base for mixing up a colour match. She uses a fine paint brush to touch up each plaster spot.

The skeleton will need to stay uncovered overnight, to make sure that it dries thoroughly before she packs it all up, but she cannot leave the pieces outside. Painstakingly she carries them in, placing them on the dining table. It feels ritualistic, a crucial step in transforming the artificial bones into something more precious. Once they are safely lain down she cleans up her workspace. She folds away the camping stove, puts it back in the shed with the gas bottle and the old pot. She tidies up the plaster and the tools she has been using, throws away the used sandpaper. She is about to discard the length of cardboard and hesitates. Residual dye from where the pieces have dried has left a charcoal shadow, as if traces of a body remain. In East Anglia a number of body silhouettes were discovered around the site of the *Sutton Hoo* ship burial. In contrast to the sandy soil in which they were found, they appeared as dark brown stains in the shape of human bones. Unearthed hundreds of years after the bodies were buried; the stains provided evidence of the skeletal remains, even though they had completely deteriorated.

Katherine considers how long it will take for the Aboriginal woman's bones to deteriorate. What might a natural timeframe have looked like had they not been conserved? Depending on the type of soil it might take a very long while, and the conservation process, especially the PVA-replacement, will have prolonged the process indefinitely. Organic traces, skeletal phosphorous and the chemical elements of decomposition were present in the shadows of the *Sutton Hoo*. It is impossible that the Aboriginal woman's remains will last forever, but the chemicals present in any future burial site will be made up of limited organic residues.

Since meeting Daphne she has been questioning if she can successfully reverse the consolidation treatment and therefore return the bones to something that will break down once they are buried in the earth. To give them back to Daphne in their current state does not feel right. The problem is that she has no way of knowing *exactly* what will become of the bone matrix if she can leach out the consolidant. There is a possibility that reversing the treatment might destroy the structure of the bones entirely. In which case, how would she return them to Daphne, in a plastic container, in a bag?

She realizes she must consult with Daphne and not make the decision on her behalf. It would be easier to just phone her up tonight, but Katherine remembers the first time they

spoke. It was clear Daphne wanted to discuss matters face to face. Katherine supposes her initial response, to put off meeting for a week or so might have been offensive, especially considering the urgent nature of the call. She chides herself for being so ignorant at that time. Now that she has come to understand more about Daphne's position, the right thing to do is to take the drive out to her place and speak with her in person, about the final state of the bones.

She takes the cardboard inside and props it up against the lounge room wall. She stares at it with her one good eye. Wiped out, she closes her eyelid, and in the darkness she sees the negative image of the body shadow. Her mind aches with the strain of trying to let the pattern go. All she can think about is lying down in bed. She collects her bag, with the necessary gear for treating her eye, and heads to the bathroom. There she can deal with the final job for the day. She removes the patch, applies the drops, and winces with the pain of it. She redresses her eye without inspecting it, as if refusing to see what is happening might make it go away. She settles into bed, aware of every small ache in her body, between her shoulder blades, between the bones in her hand. She concentrates on imagining the sensations fading; she relaxes her right hand, the palm of her hand, each finger, the top of her hand. She relaxes her wrist. Eventually her mind eases away from her body, lying on the bed, and morphs into the darkness that surrounds her.

Thirteen

This morning her eye feels hot and irritable. When removing the patch she notices a little glob of pus. The drops provide a cool respite and yet, under the newly applied padding her eye soon begins to feel uncomfortable again. She cannot remember how long the doctor said it would take for an abrasion like this to heal, but there was mention of a check-up in a week or so. Has it only been a few days? A recovered object can look at its worst when only part way through cleaning, at times steeped in specks of ochre, as the iron is leached out. Often a film of red grit forms on the surface of desalinating liquid, and inside the liquid the specks can hang in shafts and clouds. It is not mysterious, although it often seems extraordinary just how much iron product an object can expel. She reminds herself that cleaning and healing are both a process. She reminds herself not to rush. She telephones work and speaks with Gerard. She explains that she is still feeling awful and needs a little more time to rest. He is put out at first, worried that she is cancelling their evening, but she assures him that she is looking forward to catching up.

Last night she decided to visit Daphne, and while she is weary enough to actually make her sick day count for the real thing, she packs her things up for the drive.

Out near Daphne's the sky is immense, a pale, wasted blue that distends over the landscape. A southerly moves small particles of sand through the air, makes it run across the road in long ghostly lines. Dry pieces of saltbush roll along and Katherine drives with the windows up and the air conditioner on, tunnelling through the glare.

She blinks dust out of her clear eye as she walks the pathway round to the back of Daphne's house. Nearby a wind chime clatters against itself. Katherine knocks on the frame of Daphne's open door. There is no answer. Perhaps she should have called first. Then the sound of a phlegmy cough.

'Hello?' Katherine pokes her head inside. 'Can I come in?'

Daphne is held up in the same old chair. She stops her rocking, lifts her eyes slowly.

'Who is it?'

'Katherine.'

'Who?'

'Katherine...from the conservation team.'

‘The team, hey?’ Daphne’s laugh is wry. ‘Come in.’

Katherine sits on the cane lounge.

‘I need to ask you something,’ she says.

Daphne starts up her rocking, a slow tap of one foot on the floor that pushes her back and forth.

‘How’s your daughter?’ she asks. ‘You getting on?’

‘She’s been staying with a friend.’

‘Because of you?’

‘Not exactly. Well, maybe. There’s some stuff going on with her father. I think she’s angry with me about it. I don’t know if I’ll ever get that right.’

‘What you’re doing here is the right thing. She’ll be proud even if she doesn’t say.’

‘This isn’t really something Alice knows about.’

‘You’re her mother,’ says Daphne, expressing more than a fact. ‘She’ll come back.’

Daphne pours herself a drink, gestures to Katherine.

‘Alright, thanks.’

The rum and coke is sickly sweet, but, as she drinks, the warmth it radiates is surprisingly comforting.

Daphne rolls a smoke.

‘Expensive stuff these days,’ Daphne says, pulling a thread from her lip and stuffing into a rolled up end. ‘My eldest grannie, Bobby, started growing it himself. Clever bugger,’ she says proudly. Lights up.

When Daphne talks Katherine sees a sprawling family, extending beyond the boundaries of immediate relations. Like her own mother Katherine has had only one child, given Alice no sibling to grow through life with. Alice was born into a similar kind of isolation as her own, evenings and weekends spent mostly in the world of adults. And often they weren’t around either. Katherine regrets it now, and deliberates over whether being an only child has anything to do with why Alice acts as if she is so grown up?

‘So,’ Daphne says. ‘What was it you wanted to ask?’

‘It’s about the bones.’

Daphne merely nods, as if it’s a given.

‘You know they’ve been conserved.’

‘Guess you’ve been doing something with them all this time.’

‘After being buried so long in the sea it’s a process that ensures their survival in the open air.’

‘So what’s happened to them?’

‘I’ve soaked them in an emulsion, and once the bones are dry the product hardens, keeping the bones from shrinking.’

‘So they look proper?’

‘Yes, in a way. Although I’m wondering if I should try and reverse the process, so they can break down more naturally once they are reburied.’

‘Didn’t you just say they’re fixed up, so they’ll last on land?’

‘They won’t last indefinitely. But yes, they are fixed.’

Daphne considers the situation, takes a puff on her rollie.

‘If they’re dry and ready to go, then I think that’ll be fine.’

‘Really?’

‘We’ll prepare them our way, no matter what you’ve done.’

‘I was worried we’d tampered with them.’

‘That thought just crossed your mind?’ Daphne says playfully.

Katherine nods with acceptance. There is no point explaining how she’s been thinking about it for some time. This is the first she has mentioned it and so her concern might as well have only just formed.

‘So we’ll keep them as they are, then?’

‘You came all the way out here to ask me that?’ Daphne is full of amusement; for her the answer is simple. ‘Could of just phoned.’

‘I fancied a drive,’ says Katherine, smiling. She is beginning to feel settled and is reluctant to leave.

‘Drop by anytime,’ Daphne offers cheekily. ‘You know, when you’re in the neighbourhood.’

‘Thank you,’ Katherine says. ‘And thanks for being patient with me. It took me a little while to work out how to proceed.’

‘You scared me for a bit, thought you’d never get round to it.’

‘Well Snap was a help.’

‘For you and me both,’ Daphne says.

Now that Katherine knows she can transfer the bones as they are, she should get going. There's still time to make the swap today, before the day, and her energy, totally run out.

She stands and approaches Daphne.

'I'd better head back to town,' she says.

Daphne remains seated. 'Think I'll stay inside. Too windy out.'

'Alright then.'

The women shake hands. It is a tender exchange. Daphne clasps Katherine's wrist for a moment, then rubs it gently.

'Sometimes this hard stuff can make you sick,' she says. 'You take it easy. Take care of that eye.'

'Thanks,' says Katherine. 'I'll see you soon.'

Daphne chuckles. 'Might have to get rid of that patch first.'

Drew has no real cause to check up on Katherine. She hasn't been well. She hasn't even been at work. She's hardly spent a full day in the lab this week, which he realizes is exactly what's been nagging at him. Absence is rare for Katherine. Taking sick days is unheard of. Apparently Gerard spoke with her earlier in the day and his account made it sound as if she wasn't faking it. Drew didn't ask for clarification outright. Instead he expressed concern when he heard she was not going to be in again, fishing for a response. Gerard explained that he was catching up with her tonight and would make sure she was fine. He said she sounded sorry for herself, but he planned to cheer her up.

Cheer her up? thinks Drew. Not likely. Drew has witnessed the way Katherine's feelings toward Gerard have changed. In a matter of days she has gone from flushed expectancy to an elegant distance. He admits it pleases him, although he expects it would be even more satisfying if Gerard noticed it too. And there isn't much chance of that.

Drew had been so caught up by the fact that Gerard had come on board to complete the bones, he'd forgotten just how competitive the man was. When they worked together in Western Australia, the competitiveness seemed normal. They were young men, both striving for something. Since then Gerard hasn't actually changed. As a colleague he remains amusing, rather cynical really, which is something Drew finds reassuring about

anyone. But on the whole, Gerard needs to be the winner, to be the most successful in any situation. It doesn't take much to scratch at his soft spots. Drew dropped a few comments about his own career to see where Gerard would take them. While Gerard didn't elaborate on his own achievements, he gave the impression he was pretty pleased with himself. Maybe he hadn't expected to land this job, but there was no way he didn't feel that he deserved it. Perhaps that same sense of entitlement is what women respond to in him. It is not just his confidence; lots of people have that quality. Maybe it's charisma? Although deep down Drew doesn't believe Gerard really has any. Whatever the secret, Drew knows it is lost to him. He watches Gerard now, carefully rearranging his lighting set up, repositioning his camera accordingly. He has spent the morning recording all of the finished work on the remains. He inspects the piece he has left until last: the skull. He cradles it in his gloved hand, turns it over, determining its best angle.

'You reckon she's coming in tomorrow?' Drew interrupts.

'Couldn't say for sure. But who'd miss the final stages? I don't know how she can keep herself away.'

'Think I'll just poke around upstairs and make sure everything is ready to go.'

'OK, and check on the boxes for the remains. They must be up there somewhere.'

Upstairs the workspace is tidy, even for Katherine. Perhaps a book left open, or a few pages on the desk might suggest that things were going on as usual, but only the computer, keyboard and mouse remain. Drew wonders at first if she has packed up her gear and has already planned not to return. He opens the top drawer to her desk: pens, unused notebooks, tape, a pack of tampons. None of which is a sign she's coming back. People leave this kind of shit at worksites all the time. In the next drawer he finds a collection of folders that look promising. Research on the basket: archival photos and some that must come from her own collection. There are recent pictures of women weaving, shots of the rushes, close ups of the small light green prongs at the head, and other shots of wide landscapes where the rushes grow in fertile clumps. He pulls out another folder. The pages within have been handled; they are creased and appear slightly crumpled inside their plastic sleeves. There's no mistaking what he's looking at. It is Scott's report, a copy of the very one he brought back from Sydney. Immediately he thinks of Snap. He must have given it to her. Filed behind is a more recent article; Scott's follow up work, which provides further confirmation. Drew skim reads the detail, hurrying to get to the next

folder, which he already suspects holds a copy of Alistair's findings. It is there, of course. She has even highlighted the line ... *the bones we have tested are consistent with remains from the signature area of the Coorong* ... So why hasn't she said anything? Why has she left the conservation of the remains to Gerard? Surely, with all that's at stake, she would put up a fight. Drew is beginning to feel unhinged. He starts on the next drawer and before long he's pulling things out, like a jealous lover looking for evidence of an affair. There is nothing of interest among the papers, just a muesli bar that he eats with fervour as he searches through the final drawer. When he's finished, all that's left inside is a few paperclips and a ball of fluff. He slams the drawer shut; leaves loose notes and some maps in a pile on the floor. Throws the empty muesli bar wrapper on top. He slumps onto her office chair and picks flakes of oatmeal from his teeth. None of this feels right. He scans the rest of the lab, looking for clues.

There is a bank of cupboards along one wall. Now that he has calmed down he decides to take a look in them in a more composed fashion. The floor to ceiling cupboard is full of different size boxes, more than enough to pack the remains in. They are all shapes and sizes, some small enough for the hand bones; other rectangular shapes that he suspects are for the femurs and the tibias. Each box has a thin sheet of Perspex under its cardboard cover. Even in his search Drew considers her professionalism. She has created an additional lid through which the bones can be viewed during storage and transportation. He closes the door. Next to the cupboard a number of large storage drawers are set into the wall. He opens the first. Inside there are two white cardboard boxes, both labelled B&C – *Violet* (weaving) item#194. He removes the lid from one box to find the weaving, perfectly nestled into its silken bed. He lets his hand rest on the second box, imagining for a moment what is inside. He lifts the lid and stares down at an identical piece, obviously a copy. Although, with both of them in front of him he is unsure which is which. He had assumed that the first one he saw is the original. On further inspection it is still hard to tell. She's done a bloody good job, he thinks. But why make a double? And what's she doing leaving them both here?

It dawns on him, finally, that she is planning a switch. He doesn't feel anything for a little while, just replaces the lids, pushes the drawer closed. He returns to her desk and tidies up the mess he's left on the floor, covering his tracks. He slips the muesli bar wrapper into his pocket. No point worrying about that piece of evidence, it was stale anyway; clearly she doesn't eat enough to miss it. He is undecided about what to do next.

Take the news to Alistair, or have it out with her as soon as possible? The problem he's having though, as he strolls to the lift and presses the down button, is the unexpected happiness that washes over him. What a turn! He feels remarkably refreshed. Have Katherine's actions enlivened him, or is it the fact that she has acted? He smiles to himself; it is probably both.

On her way back to work, she stops at home to pick up the model. The pieces are dry enough to pack into a couple of removal boxes that she lines with soft towels. She loads them into the boot, pleased that they are relatively light. They will appear empty as she carries them into the building, as if to pack up her stuff from the lab. Once the boot is closed she resists the urge to hurry, responding instead to the necessity of looking after her eye.

Earlier, she had stopped at a servo on the highway to do the same. She had gone into the toilets and stood in front of a bank of rust spotted mirrors. There, she was distressed to find a considerable amount of pus under the patch. Much more than when she had dressed it in the morning. She cleaned her eye thoroughly, applied ample drops and covered it with fresh padding.

But the discomfort continues. The feeling, as if granules of sand are caught behind her eyelid, is ever present.

She parks on the street outside of her work building. It is only half an hour since she left home and she is wondering how long before she will need to redress her eye. She contemplates heading to the clinic, but that would waste more time. She's here now. Shouldn't she just get on with it? She is aware that the shipping containers are scheduled to arrive today and she decides to use the client entrance out front, in the hope that she can bypass bumping into Gerard, or Drew, until she is ready.

Climbing the stairs with both boxes in her arms, she finds herself light headed. On the first floor landing she has to lean against the banister to catch her breath. From there she can hear the goings-on in the sheds below, the beep of forklifts reversing. She looks through the dirty window and onto the car park, out back. Two forty-foot shipping containers lie open on the bitumen. Drew is pacing amidst the action with a clipboard, giving orders. She squints to see if she can pick out Gerard. He's there too, taking photos

while others shift the cargo. Some people work sack trucks and a couple operate the forklifts. Just before she looks away she sees Tracy carrying out a tray of coffee and tea. She's probably has biscuits too, thinks Katherine, realizing she has eaten nothing since breakfast.

She gets to the second floor, but has to rest at the top before making her way down the hall to the lab. Once there, she places the boxes on her desk and sits down for a moment. How the hell did she get so tired? Even the floor looks like a suitable place to take a nap. Worried that she may actually fall asleep, down there on the linoleum, she forces herself to stand up and get started. She sets out her storage boxes from the cupboard, lines them along one of the lab benches to make sure she has doubles of everything. She packs the model into one set of boxes and stacks the other set onto a trolley, which she struggles with to the lift. She has decided to pack the bones in full view. That way she is less likely to be suspected of anything. If someone happens upon her in the shed, it will be completely believably that she has dragged herself in, from her sickbed, in order to finalize the storage of the remains.

The lift jolts at the ground floor in its usual manner, heaving her already unsettled stomach upward. She swallows the after taste of rum and coke. Maybe it was the glass of alcohol she'd had at Daphne's that has made her so sluggish. It is disappointing to think that one drink could have such a negative effect, especially because at the time it had been so heartening. Once the lift doors open, Katherine sees that the bones are ready to pack. Gerard has them resting on lengths of fine white cotton. She can tell that he has finished photographing them; his camera bag is nearby and the components of a lighting kit are neatly stowed. She expects his return at any moment; it would be unconscionable to leave the remains out, uncovered like this for long. The trolley takes some managing, pulling constantly to the left so that Katherine has to force it to go in the right direction. When she bumps into the legs of the bench with the trolley's end she asks herself if keeping things on track has ever been this physically demanding.

In a few minutes though, she has the boxes arranged on the bench and is working quietly, undisturbed by the commotion outside, and with no concern for the possibility of interruptions. She lays the pieces of the remains onto silk, then ever so gently presses them down, one at a time, so that the cotton bedding underneath forms into a supportive cup, shaped by the individual nature of each bone. She folds additional silk around the pieces, secures the Perspex sheets in place and finally puts the lids on each box. Not until she has

completely packed the skeleton does she begin to feel as though she is being watched. She looks up from the bench and is blinded by the flash of a camera.

‘Sneaking in?’ says Gerard. A large SLR dangles from his neck.

‘Guilty. I guess I can’t stay away.’

‘Glad I was able to capture you then, in the end.’

‘Yes, it’s nearly over,’ she says. ‘How’s the packing going outside?’

‘Clunky at first, but I think it’s gaining momentum. I’ve been documenting the process.’

Normally documentation is something Katherine would do. She doesn’t feel usurped or even frustrated by Gerard’s ability to hijack. If anything she’s glad that he is occupied and that she does not have to worry about the responsibility.

‘I look forward to seeing the photos,’ she says.

‘Here,’ Gerard holds the camera’s LCD screen up for Katherine to view, clicks through a number of shots that she can barely see.

‘I’ll take a closer look later.’

‘I suppose it’s a bit tricky with the patch.’

Actually, thinks Katherine, it’s because you’re standing two metres away. How is anyone going to pick up the detail from that kind of distance?

‘Yes, it’s tricky,’ she says. ‘Now that I’m done here, I think I’d better go home and rest.’

‘You want some help with these?’ He points his gratuitous lens at the boxes.

‘No. That’s OK, I’ll just take them upstairs on the trolley.’

Despite her request Gerard assists her to place the boxes on the trolley. He follows her to the lift. He keeps his hand on the doors-open button as she shuffles in. For a moment she thinks he is going to join her, but he steps back.

‘I’ll see you tonight,’ he says. ‘And Katherine,’ the doors begin to shut as he’s talking, ‘it’s been great working with you. Truly. It’s been really good for me.’

As the lift slowly shudders its way to the second floor she does not doubt Gerard’s sentiment. Of course it’s been good for him. And the fact that he admits it, so charmingly, so full of joy, makes it difficult to fault. Even now she finds it hard to pinpoint the manner in which he operates, the easy way he spins a situation to suit himself. At least she can see he’s doing that much, even though she can’t explain how.

Upstairs, she places the boxed up replicas next to each other on the bench. She has already printed out the manifest for these items and she tapes it beside them. Then she carries the originals down the two flights of stairs, out through the client entrance, to her car. It takes her a number of trips. She sweats under her thin shirt and trousers and finds she needs to take short breaks between floors. But it feels proper to handle the remains this way. The difficulty she is experiencing as she moves them, and the time that it takes her, seems like a final act of respect. It seems fitting too that she should be working on her own and that the rest of team is too preoccupied to notice.

Close to home Katherine spots Alice walking along the street. She's in civvies, but she has her school backpack on, stuffed to the gills. Seeing her daughter from this distance brings with it the realization that she has missed her transformation. She has a striking walk, more adult, more confident, than Katherine remembers and she can't actually think of the last time she had watched her daughter for the simple pleasure of it. She is pleased to have caught Alice near to home, perhaps now they will actually have some time between them to spend together.

She slows the car down, sidling alongside her daughter, not wanting to cause alarm. When Alice turns her look is ferocious, so full of intent, it causes Katherine to stall the car. In the following moment it is clear Alice recognizes her. Her face softens and Katherine quickly settles the fear that all of Alice's anger is aimed at her. Alice steps off the curb and leans in through the passenger window.

'You look awful, mum.'

'Thanks,' says Katherine. She pats the eye-patch, conscious of how hot and itchy it feels underneath. 'You want to hop in? I've a few things to unpack at home and then we can catch up. Work is just about over.'

'Can't, sorry. I've got another shift this afternoon.'

'Looks like you've just come from home.'

'Yeah. I've been getting supplies.'

'Is everything OK? You still want to stay at Frankie's?'

'You still seeing Gerard?'

'I really need to talk to you about him.'

‘That’s a *yes* from mum.’

‘It’s not like that.’

‘Like what?’

Katherine winces. She doesn’t want to explain here. Not sitting in the car with her daughter standing outside, on the street.

‘Does it always have to be this hard?’ she asks and regrets the question immediately. She is not surprised when Alice shifts back a step from the window.

‘Sorry, Alice,’ she says. ‘Are we going through a hard patch? We don’t seem to be communicating very well.’

‘Nothing new,’ says Alice politely. ‘Not really.’

‘I could drive you to work if you like. We can talk in the car.’

‘Thanks, but I think I’ll walk.’

‘I’ll see you later then?’

‘Sure.’

As Alice crosses the road Katherine thinks about how well they both do at avoiding conflict. Using politeness to stop them from saying what they really need to. Is it a fear of hurting each other’s feelings, or of being misunderstood? She contemplates Daphne’s advice; that Alice will come back. While reassuring, perhaps in this case it relies on Alice to be the one to act. When isn’t that the mother’s job? Katherine should just step out of the car, follow her daughter, take her in her arms and tell her she loves her. But she does not. Partly because she can’t leave the cargo in the boot and partly because it has been like this for so long, she is unsure if she and Alice can do it any other way. Katherine watches despondently as Alice disappears round a bend in the road. Then she starts up her car and edges away in the opposite direction.

After transferring all of the storage boxes from the car into the house Katherine has to rest. Flattened on her bed, on top of the covers, she sleeps. When she wakes she is still exhausted and a slight fever makes her feel chilled and clammy. It is wretched to think that on top of everything else she has caught some kind of virus. She tries to recall why Gerard is coming over, and then remembers the document he wants her to sign. If only she’d

thought about it at work, they could have got it over with. She has no idea where she left it, but Gerard is sure to bring his copy.

She showers, runs the water cool and stands under it in the hope of some rejuvenation. After a while the idea prompts her to turn the hot off completely. But the cold is far too arresting and she gasps, drawing the plastic shower curtain along its rail so that she can blunder out onto the bathmat where she stands dripping and ridiculous. The stupidity of her situation is remarkable. For a short time this afternoon she had actually felt as if she were *on the right path*. It's an awful phrase, but it made sense of how she had forced herself to make five trips up and down the lab building stairs. She wonders now at the personal struggle of it all and whether it has been worth the cost to her relationship with Alice. She towels herself dry and because the prospect of standing in front of the mirror naked makes her feel too vulnerable, she dresses before managing her eye.

A little later she is reluctantly peeling off the medical tape. Underneath the padding it is the exact opposite of what she had hoped. The pus is thicker, green tinged. Her eye feels colossal. Her left eyelids have become two thick folds of skin: monstrous. She lifts the top lid with her forefinger. She is not sure why she bothers; the abrasion on her cornea is not noticeable. She tilts her head back and presses in the eye drops. Administering the cold liquid is no longer comforting. It dribbles out of her eye onto her cheek. Too much like tears, the sensation discomforts her. She blinks away the drops and splashes water over her face. Tomorrow, she thinks, I will have some time to get to the clinic.

Tonight Gerard comes prepared. He has his copy of the document, nestled inside his satchel, in one of the folders that comes so readily from the stationery cupboards at work. He is convinced that Katherine's signature is only a formality; in principle she has already agreed to the terms. Regardless, he owes her something for not making a fuss about him taking over.

On his way he stops at an up market bottle-shop where he purchases a pinot noir that he is unfamiliar with, assuming, because of its understated label and its price tag that it is the superior choice. It's not just the top shelf red that gives him cause for pleasure. He has been more thoughtful than that. Unlike last time, when he graced Katherine with a bedraggled bunch of flowers, he has with him a proper bouquet. He's bought the most

expensive kind, old-fashioned roses, the sort that have not had their scent and thorns bred out of them. The colours are extravagant, the half-open buds promising fullness. Concerned that the petals might bruise if he rests the bunch on the seat he has the stems propped inside the cup-holder that protrudes from the console. The flowers bob away in his peripheral vision, so bright and lively that they provide him with an atmosphere of cheer all the way to Katherine's house.

He takes the step to her front door armed with gifts. Even before he has the chance to knock he hears the bloody dog growling.

'Hello Alphie, good boy,' he calls, feebly.

When Katherine opens the door her attention is with the dog. She is speaking to him firmly, has her hand clasped through his collar, restraining him. He supposes he should be relieved, but he's actually a little disappointed that her first interest isn't with him. She walks the dog down the hall, murmuring encouraging sounds until she reaches the end of the house. There she lets Alphie go and the dog stands at an obedient distance, watching Gerard pass.

Gerard doesn't really get a good look at Katherine until they are in the kitchen. How long has it been since their episode against the bench? Too short a time for her to have disintegrated so severely. And wasn't it only a couple of hours ago that she looked half decent? She has made an effort, he can see that, but her black long sleeved shirt and soft linen pants do not hide the fact that she does not look good. Her cheeks are sunken beyond the realms of cat-walk grace and her skin glows with a sickly perspiration. It is a pity.

She attends to some garlic that she is frying in a pan, leaving him feeling aimless.

'Hungry?' she asks.

'What's cooking?'

'Oh, just the beginnings of a pasta sauce.'

'Perfect,' says Gerard. 'I've brought a terrific bottle of wine.' When she doesn't turn around he adds, 'And roses.'

'Could you put them in that vase?' She continues stirring.

Gerard spies the one she must be referring to on the breakfast bar, his last bunch wilts in putrefying water. Beyond that, in the lounge, he notices how well she maintains her surrounds, cushions plumped on the couch, lots of books in the shelves, a few tasteful

paintings. He could get used to this. But the state of his decaying flowers unnerves him. It's not like she's cleaned him out of her life, just left him to rot.

'I should be cooking something for you,' he says, 'since you're unwell.'

'You can barely rustle up an omelette.' She manages a laugh.

'Let me open the wine, then.'

She hands him the corkscrew, barely looking at him. He opens the bottle while she has her back to him. He quickly pours two glasses, clinks hers with a cheers and begins to drink. He is suddenly dying to loosen up.

'Where's Alice?' he asks, filling his glass with another splash.

'I was wondering if you were going to ask.'

'It hasn't really worked out the way I hoped,' he explains.

'She's finding it difficult.'

'So am I. I thought she'd be happy to see me.'

He waits, but she doesn't offer any words of support and he starts to think that he might skip dinner after all and just get the document signed. For once though, Katherine seems to be avoiding the topic of work and he gauges that he'll need to wait a little longer before bringing up the agreement. He busies himself with the vase, has no idea where to put the dead flowers, and so leaves them on the sink. She boils water, throws in a good handful of pasta and asks him to set the table.

She already has two bowls, two napkins and two sets of cutlery on the bench. He takes them to the dining table and sets them out. He arranges the roses at the centre and places the wine so that the label faces her seat. He sits down opposite. She joins him and dishes up the meal. He is amazed at how she ploughs on, getting things done when she looks about to keel over. Finally she sits and he can begin to eat. The sauce is delicious, salty and sweet, the spaghetti perfectly coated in good olive oil, the parmesan sharp. He spins large forkfuls of pasta, collecting up as much sauce as possible, before downing each mouthful. Eventually he notices that she has hardly touched her bowl. He slows down, rests his cutlery on the table.

'No appetite?'

'It seems to have left me.'

'Finished, then?' he asks.

'Yes.'

Gerard clears the table of the pasta bowls, grabs his satchel on the way back. He wipes a splotch of oil from the table in front of him before popping the folder there.

‘I’ve brought a pen,’ he says fishing it out of a pocket in his bag. He places it on the folder, and then shifts them over to her.

‘Great pasta, by the way. I’d stay a little longer, but you look spent.’

She merely glances over the document before signing it.

‘Shall I date it the same as you and Alistair?’ she asks.

‘Yes,’ he says, delighted at how agreeable she is.

When he has the folder safely back in his satchel he feels the need to thank her. Should he touch her too? He could reach for her hand, except that he wouldn’t be able to stroke it and a pat might appear condescending. He knows that a kiss is out of the question, he’s really not up for it, and so he slides the vase of roses towards her.

‘They’re really amazing, you should smell them.’

Katherine experiences the vision of the roses, gravitating towards her, as surreal. The warm colours and faint perfume are nostalgic. She brings the vase closer so that she can bend down toward the dense arrangement of petals. The flowers have not fully opened. Even though the centres remain partially concealed their collective scent is pungent. She breathes them in: summer evenings, the sound of the sea, salt, her father’s hands, crisscrossed stems in a vase of water, dark green leaves. Katherine places her hand under the petals and clasps the bunch so that she can draw the flowers up out of the water, closer to her. The stems are rough and thorny, digging in. She loosens her grip and as the flowers drop downwards a thorn tears right down the pad of her middle finger, almost to the second joint. Katherine lets the roses fall back into the vase. Blood swells out of the cut. She puts her finger in her mouth. When she removes it blood splots onto the table.

‘You’re in the wars!’ Gerard jokes.

‘It doesn’t seem to want to stop,’ she says and presses her napkin against her finger. Blood blossoms through the folded linen and begins to drip. Gerard hands her his napkin and she doubles it over, wraps it around the already sodden one. She hears him cough softly and scrape his chair away from the table. He has turned pale and she recalls he had to leave the theatre when Alice was being born.

‘You don’t have to stay,’ she says.

‘I can’t abandon you like this,’ he says, convivially.

‘It’s been worse.’

‘Ha, yes, well only if you’re sure you’ll be OK.’

‘Please,’ she says, ‘I’d rather deal with it on my own.’

Once Gerard has left she fetches a hand towel, which she binds tightly around all the fingers of her left hand. She lies on the couch with her arm resting up on one of the cushions, the cut throbbing like crazy. She can’t stay here like this. She forces herself to get up again and fetch some painkillers. In the bathroom she uses one hand to get the cupboard door open, finds the ibuprofen and pops the tablets free from their silver casing. She doesn’t bother with a glass of water, just throws them down and forces herself to swallow. She sits on the edge of the bath and watches as blood from the cut begins to spread through the hand towel. She unwinds it, pulls another from the rack and binds it around her fingers, holding it together tightly with her other hand. She slips from the edge of the bath, so that the floor can support the weight of her body. Then she rests back against the side of the bath, tired beyond belief.

Fourteen

She can't stomach breakfast, but she manages a cup from a pot of coffee, hoping it will slough off a dreadful night's sleep. Before bed she made sure her finger had stopped bleeding, but she had spent the best part of the night waking in and out of a terrible sweat. By the early hours she is so plagued by feverish dreams that she gets up and sits at the kitchen table wrapped in her quilt. She stays there, trying to ignore the increasing throb of both her wounds, until well after the sun comes up.

Eventually she gets a glass of water, swallows a couple more painkillers. She turns on the radio and listens for about five minutes; talk of Howard's troop deployment in Iraq causes her to switch it off. The countdown is underway. Bush has given Hussein until nine pm Eastern Standard Time to surrender. There will be no moves towards peace. No longer able to avoid the inevitable in her own life, she makes the effort to clean her eye. The amount of pus under the patch is shocking. She can barely open her eyelid to administer the drops. She works as quickly as she can and once she is done she rings the clinic and makes an appointment. They can fit her in at four.

There is no way she is going in to work today, not that she had planned to. Drew phones mid-morning asking after her. She tells him she is still in her dressing gown, has her ugg boots on and feels like shit.

'Perhaps I'll drop by before lunch,' he says. 'I've got a couple of last minute issues to iron out.'

'Welcome to,' she says, envisaging him at the ironing board in his undies. The thought perks her up a little, men ironing, everyone in their underpants. She sees herself surfing in a sky of ironing boards and other domestic bits and pieces, the coffee percolator, the toilet brush. Lewis Carroll's tea tray floats high above, twinkling in a star studded night.

'Katherine?' Drew queries loudly.

'Some issues, yes,' she says, partially brought back to reality. 'Come over to talk to me about those.'

After she hangs up she sits by the phone, ten minutes drift by, maybe twenty. Only when she begins to shiver does she realize how cold she is. She does not have the energy to take a hot shower, not even to run a bath, so she trails outside. She is grateful that the table

and chairs are in the sun and she sits facing her quince trees, her eyes glazed and her mind elsewhere.

It takes some time before Katherine opens the door and when she does, she looks as if she's lost weight. Something Drew would never have imagined possible; she was so thin to begin with. As she walks along the hall in front of him he imagines he can hear her bones creak, no longer muffled by flesh and blood. And her head appears too large for her body, as if it might roll off her neck with its own weight.

'You really have been sick,' he says.

'Maybe it's my eye.'

'Maybe I shouldn't stay?'

'It's not contagious.'

'You look bloody awful though.' He wants to say skeletal, wants to ask if she's planning on putting herself inside the boxes for England instead of the fakes she left at work yesterday.

'Thanks for your concern,' she says.

'Yeah, well I am worried. Have you seen yourself?'

'I know,' she says. 'I'm going to the doctor this afternoon. I've made an appointment.'

'Is someone driving you?'

'I'll be fine.'

Drew decides to stop there. Even if, secretly, she wanted his help, she would not ask for it. Being concerned for the woman was inevitable, how could he not worry about the state of her right now, but acting on it was damn hard. She'd never let him in.

'In that case I'll have a coffee,' he says.

He watches her labour over the percolator, her usual strength has dwindled and she struggles with unscrewing the top from its base.

'Never mind,' he says awkwardly. 'I've already had one.'

She does not object. She leaves everything in the sink unmanaged and says she needs to sit down. Katherine pulls out a chair from the table and folds down into it. She appears doll-like, barely holding herself upright. Still, she seems energetic enough to talk.

‘Everything ready?’ she asks.

‘Alistair has decided to send the remains via airfreight.’

‘Good call. I know he’s paid to have humidifiers installed in the containers, but it is much safer to send them via air. Will he accompany them?’

‘Yes. The whole collection heads off tomorrow.’

‘We made it then,’ she says. ‘Congratulations.’

He sits down opposite Katherine, his large frame threatening to crack her little dining chair, and leans on the tabletop for additional support.

‘A few things on my inventory seem to be amiss. Thought you might be able to help.’

‘I’d be happy to.’

‘The other day I noticed there were two weavings in one of your storage drawers. They looked pretty similar.’

‘Imagine?’

‘Now one of them has gone.’

‘It was just a practise piece, you know while the original was sitting in the PEG solution. I used the copy to experiment with making storage boxes.’

‘Come up with something good?’

‘I think so.’

‘And you’ve used the same technique with the bones?’

‘I thought a similar style box was suitable. The pieces are held securely with adequate padding and firm lids.’

‘Indeed they are, but that’s not really what I meant.’

‘Oh?’ Katherine says, feigning confusion.

He knows she is clear about what he is implying. Does she think he might let the reason for his visit slide? Or is she waiting for him to spell it out? His usual angle would be to go for the jugular, have it out, but he has never been able to muster that with Katherine and he won’t be starting now. He tries again.

‘You’ve left some photos upstairs and some paperwork.’

‘Yeah, thanks. I’ll pick it all up later, when I’m feeling better.’

‘It’s interesting stuff.’

‘I thought so.’

‘How would you explain stable isotopic values?’ he asks. ‘Took me a while to get my head round that.’

She stares at him now and he can’t work out which way she’ll take it.

‘I would describe them as crucial, the key to understanding how each and every one of us has lived on the planet. The stable carbon and nitrogen isotopes found in the collagen of bone, for example, tell us of our dietary intake and if matched with signatures of a particular area they can locate us geographically.’

‘And the Aboriginal woman on board the *Violet*, if she were from the Coorong she would have a really positive carbon isotope value?’

‘It’s more complex than that I suppose, but hypothetically speaking, yes.’

Drew sighs. This is going nowhere. ‘Where are they, Katherine? Where are the bones?’

‘They’re gone.’

He shakes his head, incredulously. ‘It’s that simple!’ he says. ‘They’ve gone?’ Once again he is taken by a remarkable lightness. He begins to laugh. It is a release, an unexpected letting go. He knows it is too late to get them back, that even if he had the chance to chase after whoever it is she has given them to, he would not. If she handed them over to Daphne Ellis, right in front of him he would not intervene. If they were here, in her damn house he would leave them be. So why has he come to see her? To let her know that he is onto her, that he’d found her out? Perhaps, he allows himself to think, he is pleased with what she has done. Maybe letting her know that he’s worked it out is also a way of telling her that he is on her side. He places his hands on the table, notices how calmly she has hers folded in front of her, how self-contained she appears, even in her frailty. She smiles at him and it is clear they have come to an agreement.

‘Let’s just say they’re on their way,’ he suggests.

‘Yes,’ says Katherine. ‘Let’s.’

The pub is packed. Even from outside Alice can tell. Rock and roll thumps through the hotel's walls, making her hesitant to enter. For the past couple of days she has laid low. She has even gone to school. Between her afternoon shifts at work and Frankie's rehearsals they haven't really seen much of each other. Today Frankie sends a text: *going to see the brother's play. same old pub. you should come along.* Alice is reluctant to go, but when she gets back to Frankie's flat there is a note stuck on the TV screen, saying the same thing.

The pub doors swing open and a young woman breezes out, talking on her mobile phone. She holds the door for Alice.

'Thanks,' says Alice grabbing it. She can see Frankie inside, sitting with Dale, Chris and Matt. She pauses. Then Frankie spots her and stands up, starts making her way over. What can she do now? Turn around and go home? Alice steps inside. Kids whizz past with schooners of coke and packets of chips and she stumbles through, as Frankie approaches. Frankie kisses her, full and wet on the lips.

'Let's go to the bar first,' Alice suggests.

Frankie leads the way. She slides through a gap in the bar-leaners and shimmies a spot open for Alice. She rests her elbow on the bar towel, lets her arm dangle out over the service area and flutters a twenty. The barman is there in seconds.

'Two pints of Ale,' she says.

The bar man launches at the fridge, his ponytail swinging. He grabs two pint glasses, spins them both in his hands, flips them into the air, catches them and starts to pour. He sweeps a glance toward Frankie, to see if she's watching. Frankie turns to Alice.

'Wanker,' she says.

'Yeah,' replies a bloke sitting next to them. His arms are crossed over his gut and the heels of his cowboy boots rest on the rail of his stool so that his stocky legs open out wide.

'I suppose he's a little out a place,' says Alice.

'Gotta be a fag,' says the bloke.

'And what does that make you,' asks Frankie, 'since you're looking at him?'

The bloke looks at Frankie's tits.

'You're a teaser, aren't you?'

Frankie licks her lips.

'Us fellas have learnt to ignore birds like you.'

‘Really?’ says Frankie. ‘Is that what you’re doing now?’

‘Just saying it like it is.’

Sitting down, the bloke is about a head shorter than Frankie and her breasts are right in front of him. He shifts on his stool, can’t stop himself from checking them out. Frankie waits for his eyes to flick back over her face.

‘So what do you call that?’

‘Sight seeing.’ He sits up and straightens his back, gaining an inch. Frankie still looks down on him.

The barman rests the pints on the bar towel in front of them.

‘Trying to pick up?’ he asks.

‘Any man would.’

The barman agrees, ‘You gotta strive.’

‘We’re fucking surrounded,’ says Frankie. ‘Wankers everywhere.’

The bloke turns to Alice. ‘You’d better watch her, miss,’ he says. ‘She’s going to get herself into trouble with a mouth like that.’ The barman nods. Both men stare at Alice, expecting a response.

‘Come on,’ says Frankie, grabbing a beer.

Alice gets the other, awkwardly follows Frankie to the table. By the time they get there Chris is making his way to the stage. He swings his acoustic over his shoulder and plugs it in. He hangs his harmonica around his neck and blows, away from the microphone. The drummer hits a few beats. Matt counts, ‘One and Two ...’ and the room fills with the sound of *Cinnamon Girl*. Frankie is up and moving through the crowd to the front of the stage where she begins to dance. Now that she has set the mood, several other women make their way to the dance floor. The men watch, not yet drunk enough to join in.

Alice knew the brothers could play, but she hadn’t really imagined them performing. Matt is more present up there, his usual aloofness exchanged for something energetic. He isn’t overly rock and roll though; he doesn’t show off. Chris stands out in a different way. He emanates the same gentle quality she’s noticed before. He sings with his eyes closed. Like he’s inside himself. Caught up in their music she forgets about the violence from the other night, as though the people she watches on stage are no longer the same men.

‘They’re really good, aren’t they,’ she says.

‘Sometimes they’re shit,’ says Dale.

‘Yeah? That’s hard to believe.’

‘You seen them before?’

‘Guess not,’ says Alice.

‘Guess not,’ says Dale.

‘Why don’t you play?’ she asks.

‘Can’t be bothered.’

‘Well who’s your favourite?’

‘What do you mean? They’re blokes. They’re my brothers for fuck’s sake.’

‘I know. But do you like one of them, you know, musically?’

‘Never thought about it.’

Dale sinks his beer. ‘Want another?’

‘Sure.’

She waits for Dale to go then concentrates on the band. The spotlights on the stage make his elder brothers appear larger than life, bigger than everyone that surrounds them. More talented, or is it blessed, than the swaying groupies who sing along, basking in their glow. Frankie stands out from the rest of the dancers though. She has rhythm. Her arms are high in the air. She must really feel the music, right through her body. Maybe Alice will go and dance with her, after the next beer.

Gerard waits for the transport trucks to exit the car park, then drags the two wire gates closed and fixes the padlocks. He slips the key ring over his index finger, lets all of the keys swing back and forth. He likes the weight of them in his hand and the way he can control the force of their movements. He couldn't have asked for more, not on this job and not in the short time he has had to achieve so much. He looks around, the back ends of the sheds and the old stone building appear romantic in the falling light. He holds the keys still, listens for a while to the hum of traffic and the otherwise peacefulness of his surrounds. Above him Venus has made an appearance, her brightness coursing through the early evening. It feels as if the whole sky arches over him and it makes him think that unlike other times, he will miss the beauty of it when he returns to London.

He takes his time to walk back to the sheds. Drew's ute is still parked at the entrance. No matter that it's locked in. The possibility that he'll be driving anywhere tonight is slim; he's probably half way through a six pack already. Inside, people crowd around the smoko bar. Drew, Tracy and Alistair are there, and a number of volunteers whom Gerard hasn't properly met. One of the trestle tables has been covered with a linen tablecloth, set with tumblers, wine glasses, and champagne flutes. Desalination tubs are packed with ice and alcohol. Another table is laid out with cheese and crackers, bowls of lollies. An enormous chocolate cake, in the shape of a ship, is at its centre and Gerard imagines that if everyone gets through the alcohol Barton has supplied, they'll be eating chunks of it by hand at the end of the night. Around him the mood is more than festive and the party lights someone has rigged up shine across the shed, giving warmth to the almost empty space.

Alistair holds up a bottle of champagne, gestures to Gerard to fetch a glass.

'It's all done,' Gerard says, coming up beside him. 'The trucks have just left.'

'Excellent,' says Alistair. 'And I'm not far behind. Tracy has already checked me in for this evening's flight. I'm afraid someone else will have to clean up the aftermath of this.' Alistair grins as he pours the champagne, finishing with a deft twist, just before the bubbles rise above the edge of Gerard's glass.

'Everyone,' Alistair says loudly and the group quietens down. He raises his glass to them. 'Well done! Barton is extremely pleased that the *Violet Collection* is on its way. This little party is a sign of his gratitude.'

'So drink up!' Drew shouts and he clashes his beer bottle up against Gerard's champagne flute before moving away to celebrate with the rest of the team.

Tracy taps Gerard's glass with her own.

'It's a shame Katherine couldn't be here,' she says.

'Yes,' says Gerard. 'She's still unwell.'

'She's really amazing. I learnt so much from watching her work. Perhaps I should call her, she might come in if we tell her how much she is being missed.'

'She'd be here if she could,' Gerard explains. Although he's fairly sure that by this stage of the evening Katherine wouldn't even answer the phone. In his experience these events were things she avoided, even when she was well. Perhaps her absence seems strange to others, but not to him. In the past he thought it was because she was shy, now he thinks she might just be hopeless at having a good time. It is as if her serious outlook, her need for accomplishment, has stifled her capacity for joy. And yet he does feel sorry for her: on this of all nights, she is most certainly home alone. He has a momentary pang of guilt. He has enjoyed seeing her again. In fact it has been more than that. The understanding she displays toward Alice has actually moved him. He supposes he was in competition with Alice at first. However, last night, once dinner with Katherine was over and as he was heading back to his hotel room, he realized that he has lost the opportunity for familial connection. Probably with either of them. Through a melancholic kind of liberation, he was able to acknowledge that their relationship no longer has anything to do with him.

He takes a large sip of champagne. It is excellent, fine beaded and yeasty and the quality of it brightens him. Around him the party is in full swing. Of course everyone tonight is marking the completion of this project, but for Gerard it is just the beginning. Since the conservation here is over, and Katherine has signed the agreement, he is free to start writing up the process. He is considering a number of journals and a pamphlet for the exhibition itself. Alistair has invited him to give a talk in the exhibition hall during the week of its opening, so he will need to write a piece for that as well. And since he is leaving in a couple of days he will be home in plenty of time to assist with the set up of the entire collection.

Tracy refills his glass.

'You look happy,' she says.

He smiles at her. 'That's because I am.'

Frankie flings herself into a seat next to Dale. She is sweating and her face glows. Bits of her hair stick to her forehead, the rest tumbles around her shoulders. Dale watches her, fascinated by her fervent movements, the control she has over her body. She takes a slug of his beer and then focuses all her attention on him. He is aroused by the way she stares and wonders if she's interested.

'How you doing Frankie?' he says. 'Guess you need a break from the band.'

'Yeah. They're really good. So much energy.'

Dale shrugs, that's not what he meant. He drinks his beer.

'What's up?' she asks. 'You jealous?'

'Why should I be?'

'Alice has got a crush on Chris,' she says. 'Can't you tell?'

Dale glances at the dance floor. He cannot see Alice amongst the pack.

'You're full of shit,' he says.

'I'm a little interested in your big brother. You think Matt likes me?'

Dale sneers. 'He doesn't like anyone.'

'Maybe it's just you.'

'Trust me. It's not.'

'Sure, Dale.' Frankie laughs. 'With my life.'

Dale searches the dance floor again, but can't find Alice. He finally picks her out resting against the bar. She's watching the band. She's watching Chris. She has that dumb look in her eyes like other chicks get when they check out fucking musos. Next time she goes to the toilet he'll follow. Wait outside and get her to explain.

Alice locks herself into one of the toilet cubicles. The ultraviolet light inside turns everything blue. Her skin is iridescent. An empty bottle of cider rests on top of the needle disposal box. Graffiti swims across the back of the door, the familiar words: *Be afraid or act in spite of fear*. Alice gropes for the toilet roll, finds the raggedy end and breaks off a piece. She flushes and gets out. Standing in front of the mirror she feels the base-thump of the band through the floor. She spreads her hands through her hair, combing it into a messy tousle. Satisfied, she opens the chipboard door. As soon as she is clear of the toilets, Dale is in her face.

‘What have you been doing?’

‘Toilet,’ she says, backing up. Dale walks forward, fills in the space between them.

‘What about before?’

‘Listening to the band?’

‘And?’

‘And what? I don’t know.’

‘You know.’ Dale leers.

‘What do you mean, Dale?’

Alice tries to skirt around him, but Dale steps across her path and leans his arm against the wall behind her head.

‘You like the band?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I heard you like more than that.’

Dale takes hold of Alice’s wrist.

‘That’s kind of sore,’ she says.

He loosens his grip.

‘You’ve got your eye on Chris.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Dale.’

‘Stupid, hey?’ He yanks at her arm. ‘Let’s go!’

‘I can’t just leave. What about Frankie?’

‘She’s a big girl.’

Dale shoves Alice through the back doors of the pub. Outside it is early evening, still light. He jerks her down an alley that backs onto a row of warehouses. There is no one around. His first hit whacks her jaw. She sees the ultramarine of the sky as a large dome above her, before landing against the wire fence. He wraps his fingers around her neck, gently at first, as if he is going to subdue her with a caress. She looks at him, large eyes, tears beginning to smart. Spit flies out of his mouth as he throws another punch that slams her back into the fence. Her T-shirt crumples up her back, catches on her bra, as her body drags down the wire and lands on coarse ground. The world closes in. She looks at her hand lying on the little upturned rocks of the footpath. Everything is small and detailed. One finger is bent backwards. She notices that the skin around her cuticles is peeling. Heat burns across one side of her face. Her lip feels swollen and she tastes blood. With her tongue she feels the roughed up bit of skin where she’s bitten the inside of her mouth.

Dale breathes out long and slow and looks up at the sky as though he's searching for something beyond the backdrop of iron roofs. He crouches down. He must be kneeling but it seems to Alice that he is afloat, hovering in front of her. She turns away from the smell of his breath. She levels both hands down against the path and tries to push herself upwards, but she is trapped by the awkward position of her legs. She drops back down. Grit sticks into her palms.

'Sorry,' he whispers. He touches her face.

'I don't want to do this anymore.'

He places his fingers under her chin and turns her head to face him.

'Yes you do. It's OK. We'll be OK.'

Alice averts her eyes. 'No,' she says faintly. 'It's not.'

Dale clamps down on her neck. His thick fingers press against her windpipe. Alice grips his hand, tries to pull it away.

'Fuck off,' she chokes and he punches her again.

It is after nine when Katherine totters out of bed. She has slept right through the afternoon, missing her doctor's appointment. Her eye feels so distended that she can't bring herself to look at it and her fever has taken hold. She feels dreadful. She has not eaten anything since yesterday and has no appetite. It takes her half an hour to fix a glass of water. She does not feel able to make it back to bed so shuffles to the couch and lies down. She turns on the TV, adjusts the volume so that it murmurs in the background. She notices that the cut from the rose thorn is weeping pus. Lots of it. She uses up precious energy pulling a tissue from a box on the coffee table, and wrapping it around her finger, returns to her horizontal position. She crosses her arms over her chest; positioning her hands in a way that keeps her finger slightly elevated. In a strange moment, half-conscious, she imagines herself being buried exactly like this.

Daphne told her that the Old People were buried on large mats woven in a circular design, similar to the sister baskets. She explained that with sister baskets each fold of the rushes, each weave in and under and through, represents the stitching together of family. The centre of each circle represents the *miwi*, the feelings and wisdom that a person has present within. Daphne had placed her hand on Katherine's stomach. 'In here,' she said.

Katherine thinks of herself, lying inside the bubble of her house, removed from the world, while still being in it. She thinks she occupies a small space, on the couch, except that when she looks within she sees a vast emptiness, and she wonders how so much nothing fits inside her body.

Dale holds her tightly around the waist as they walk out of the alley, back onto the main road. The pub is closed.

‘We’ll go to my place,’ says Dale.

He forces Alice to face him. Her arms hang by her sides. He picks them up and slings them over his shoulders.

‘Like you mean it.’ He positions one of her arms around his neck.

She chews the rough skin on the inside of her cheek. Dale kisses her and she pulls away. He drives her face into his chest with the palm of his hand. They both stink. Alcohol sweats out of him and her armpits reek of fear.

‘OK,’ she murmurs. He leans back so that she can lift her face up.

‘Say that again.’

‘OK. We’ll go back to your place.’

Dale smiles. ‘Yeah? We’ll ring a taxi.’

‘My phone’s in the pub. My bag. Everything.’

‘Let me check if anyone’s around.’ He steps back, opening up a gap between them and Alice thumps him in the guts with her fist, hard enough to cause surprise. For a second he looks beaten. He turns to hide his disappointment, his embarrassment, and she tears off across the road. A bus is coming. She runs onto the road towards it and throws her arms out until it stops. Clambering on board she realizes she has no money. She stands in the stairwell; the doors open behind her. She can feel the night air circling her ankles. She is too frightened to look back over her shoulder, in case Dale has followed her. The driver peers over his change tray. Alice takes another step, so that her face is in the light.

‘You alright, love?’ he asks.

‘I’ve been beaten up.’

‘Grab a seat, just here,’ he points. ‘Behind me.’

‘Thank you.’

Alice sits down and avoids looking out of the window to the pub across the road. She stares ahead. A sheet of thick glass separates the driver from the rest of the bus. In its reflection she can see right to the back. The shadows of passengers shift across the surface. Bars of stainless steel, swinging loops of fabric and rows of small overhead lights converge. She doesn’t want to think about who, or what, might be behind her. She looks through the panel and concentrates on how the driver’s head and chair make the shape of a pear.

Katherine is asleep when Alphie leaps from the couch, barking. She jolts upright, terrified, heart pounding. Her fever sidelined by adrenalin. Still she cannot move quickly, she lumbers into the hall. At the front door Alphie is wagging his tail, nose jammed against the wood.

‘Who is it?’

No answer.

‘Who’s there?’

‘It’s me...Alice.’ She is almost inaudible.

Katherine opens the door and struggles to comprehend. Alice looks small. She stands as if her body is in pain, her head and shoulders hang. Has she injured herself somehow? Has she fallen? She appears so fragile that Katherine refrains from touching her.

‘I thought you were with Frankie, that you were safe.’

‘He said I made him do it,’ she whispers.

‘Who did?’ Who is *he*? There is no one on the street, no unusual car, nothing on the corner.

‘What’s happened to you? Shall I call the police?’

Alice shakes her head, *no*, but she does not speak. She just stands there, limp, spiritless.

‘OK,’ says Katherine. ‘OK.’

Katherine guides Alice inside. She closes the door. She places her arms around Alice’s shoulders and leads her up the hall. She takes her into her bedroom and folds back the quilt. She sits Alice down onto the bed and takes off her shoes, her small op-shop coat. She supports her to lie down, brings up her legs and tucks them under the covers. She sits on the bed and takes Alice’s hand, places it in her lap. Alice’s eyes are closed. There are large marks down both sides of her face, bruises around her neck. Her lip is swollen and there is blood at the corner of her mouth. Katherine strokes her daughter’s head, her precious face. She lies down next to her and despite how ill and feverish she is and how wasted the come down from her adrenalin surge makes her feel, she strokes her daughter’s forehead until she is asleep. For a long while after, Katherine cannot get warm. She burrows into the quilt, draws heat from the body sleeping next to her. She calls Alphie onto the bed, and finally, sandwiched between him and her daughter, she falls into a delirious state.

She dreams that the house grows lungs, becomes a diaphragm with which they breathe. Everything compresses to the centre of the bed where they lie. Then lets go. They drift. Katherine, Alice and the bones of the Aboriginal woman, all free floating in the house. The windows open and Katherine is beckoned outside by the voice of her father. His warm hand holding her arm, helping her into the boat. Him, wading out, up to his knees in sea. She at the bow. Sun in her eyes. Light everywhere.

Low clouds shift across the sky, obscuring the stars, then revealing them. The Pleiades set behind the horizon. Leaves fall from the quince trees, onto the dirt at the end of the yard.

Katherine surfaces a couple of hours later, drenched in sweat. Her pyjamas are stuck against her skin, bearing down, and the sheets are heavy with moisture. Her head feels like it too is drowned. Everything around her appears murky, as if she is looking at the world through brown water. Above her the river churns. With enormous effort she reaches out from under the bedclothes to find the light. Her finger throbs, feels as if it has tripled in size. She fumbles around the base of her bedside lamp. Her hand is clumsy and feels slippery on the metal surface. Finally she switches on the lamp and is overwhelmed by the severity of the bulb's light. Katherine closes her eyes and the image of the shade burns back from her lids. She rests her hand, upturned on the bed, and is unsettled by the sense of liquid collecting in her palm. Bringing her hand close to her face Katherine opens her eyes again. Thick puss weeps from the rose thorn cut. It oozes over the knuckle of her middle finger and drips onto her pyjama top. Bewildered, she labours against inexplicable weakness to get out of bed. She is upright momentarily, before her last scrap of energy drains away and the thick weight of her body drops her to the floor.

A slurry of dead fish shifts in the bottom of the dinghy and a half eaten apple slops about in the mix of blood and bilge water. Still, the snapper are biting. Masses swirl under the boat and gulls swoop into the commotion, shovelling their beaks into the ocean froth.

'Never seen anything like it,' yells Henry as he swims another ten-pounder into Katherine's net. They work swiftly, anticipating each other's movements as they bring in the fish. Henry casts again. A bite. He throws back his head and roars to the heavens, letting the snapper run out his line. When his rod bows he knows the hook is set. He winds. Water runs from the rolled up bunches of his shirtsleeves, down his forearms and into the pool at his feet.

'I've got one!' Katherine's rod bends low to the strong drag that the fish gives. She yanks the rod against the force, reeling in, arching, reeling in.

'Good going,' says Henry. 'Don't let him under the boat.'

Katherine drives her fish into the net. Its head rams forward, firm against the knotted ropes.

'Lift him,' says Henry. 'With me.' Together they draw the snapper up. It struggles violently and water spills from its body. Out of the net and it gasps; the hook is stuck through its bottom lip. Henry tugs at the rig and the fish's gills expand and contract, trying to suck in water. He cuts the fish's neck. Its gills flare out, then come to lie still against its swinging body.

Katherine casts and just as suddenly as her bait hits the water, it is all over. The fish and the birds disappear. The ocean flattens out, as if being stretched from far off corners, and they stand, legs wide, balancing as the boat gently rocks. Katherine slots her rod into a shaft by the bow and sits down. Her line doesn't move. She leans over the edge of the boat and hangs her face close to the water. She rolls her hand through the calm sea. All around them is dark blue glass.

Within moments it starts to rain. Large drops pockmark the surface and a grey wall of clouds moves across the ocean from the south.

'Wind em in,' Henry orders. 'We'll leave those fish til we get to shore.'

Katherine gets her line in fast. She stows the rods under the gunwales and is seated. Wind ripples the water's surface and soon the boat starts to pitch, dipping with the rise and fall of the stirring sea. Henry rows, ploughing the oars into the swiftly growing swell. It is hard going; the waves crest in the wrong direction, away from land.

'Katie, get the bloody life jacket on,' Henry yells from the stern.

Katherine pulls at the ropes and anchor under the bow until she can get hold of the jacket. It is salt damaged and stiff from lack of use. She struggles to put it on.

'OK?' Henry calls through the wind.

'Yes,' she yells back. 'I'm OK.'

The boat catches the rise of a wave and Katherine is lifted off her seat. The lunch basket falls overboard and disappears. She sees the thermos, the cup lid still fastened, bobbing maniacally in their wake. The rods and net come loose. They slip and rattle, but there is no time to secure them. The rain falls hard. She can no longer see land. She holds on. Her heart hurtles upwards into her neck as the boat slams down into the next trough. Dead fish are thrown out of the boat, back into the ocean. Another wave crashes over them. Heavy with the added weight of water the boat begins to sink. Katherine scrambles for the empty bait tin and bails out the water. A wave crests before them. It grows higher and seems to hesitate before crashing down into the centre of the boat, tipping them over. The sound of wood cracking travels through the body of the wave. Katherine comes up gasping. Their dinghy is split into pieces. Then Henry appears, several metres away. He is swimming towards her. She moves her hands frantically. Going nowhere. Another wave rises between them and by the time Katherine is atop of it there is no sign of her father, just bits of debris, moving further and further away.

'Dad!' She howls into the storm. But there is only the rain and the sea. Forcing her under.

Fifteen

Alice walks through Emergency in what feels like a tunnel, the bright walls, the fluorescent lights and the glow of a Coke machine all come together to form an avenue, illuminating the way. A heavy door gives way to a large reception area surrounded by individual bays. Each cubicle is separated by green curtains. Alice pauses, unsure of herself, and is soon greeted by a nurse's worried stare.

'I'm looking for my mum,' she says feebly.

'Thought you might be the patient,' the nurse replies.

Alice draws a hand to her neck and covers the bruise that has shaped around it.

'Her name is Katherine Sloan,' she says. 'She arrived a little while ago.'

The nurse shows Alice to one of the cubicles. 'She's in there.'

Alice takes hold of the curtain and drags it back. The hospital bed sticks out from the wall; the safety bars are up, two rungs of chrome. Her mum has all but disappeared under the blanket. How could she have shrunk like that? The skin on her face has fallen and her mouth is slack. One eye is still patched and the other skitters underneath the surface of her eyelid. Alice takes hold of one hand and notices that the other is bandaged.

'Mum?'

Katherine's eye peels open, glazed.

'It's Alice.'

'In your room,' her mother whispers.

'What Mum? What's in my room?'

Katherine doesn't answer, her eye slides closed.

'Mum?' Alice rests her face on her mum's shoulder.

Behind her there is the sound of soft shoes padding, coming closer and then the curtain reeling against the rail as it is dragged open. Alice looks up. A different nurse this time, handling her mother's pale skinny arm, wrapping her tricep in black, pumping up the pressure, and then allowing it to release.

'Is she going to be alright?' Alice asks.

'We've taken bloods and are waiting on a number of tests.'

'What kind of tests?'

'The paramedics found Chloramphenicol drops in your mum's bathroom.'

'What are they?'

‘A broad-spectrum antibiotic. It’s rare, but sometimes it can cause aplastic anaemia. It’s a condition that causes severe marrow suppression.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘As a result of the drops. The body stops producing sufficient blood cells, so if there’s an infection, even of the smallest kind, the body can’t fight it. Judging by the state of your mum’s finger we think she has septicaemia.’

Alice is far from comprehending. She has a million questions, none of them fully formed. She watches her mother’s face glowing with perspiration. It contorts and the nurse says,

‘Shhh now. It’s OK.’ She slips Katherine’s arm back onto the bed, pats the sheet in place. Katherine settles; she seems to sink away. Everything is quiet, but inside Alice feels wild.

‘Well what are they doing?’ she blurts out, desperately.

The nurse finally turns to Alice, gives her her full attention. She changes the tone of her voice, speaks slowly.

‘We’ll give her a large dose of antibiotics, to counter the infection. The doctor has decided she needs a blood transfusion. We’re just waiting to hear from intensive care about a space.’

‘She’ll be all right then?’ Alice asks again.

‘There’s no guarantee,’ says the nurse. ‘Sit tight, we’ll have to wait and see.’

The curtain rings scratch against the rail as the nurse leaves the bay. Her footsteps pad away, and then stop. There is the sound of her voice, part of some hushed conversation. Is she talking about her mum? Do they know something new? The loud ring from a telephone suspends all other noise. Someone is making plans for lunch, ordering take away dinner. Pork spare ribs and fried rice.

Alice sits by the bed and waits.

A few hours later and they are still standing by for a space in intensive care. Queenie has gone outside for a cigarette, after complaining to a nurse in the hall about the time things are taking. The nurse comes in to take Katherine’s blood pressure. She smiles at Alice, but gives no explanation. She works rapidly and is soon gone to attend other patients. Alice is alone with her mum again. She strokes her hair, just as Katherine had done for her the previous evening, shaken by how diminished her mother now appears. Her face has

changed since they arrived. Her mouth has completely dropped open and there is an odd smell in the room; rank, like rotting fruit.

It is as though Alice can actually see the final breath slip out and away, as if its warmth and texture is a colour that dissolves into the ether right in front of her. The moment is inconceivable, so brief that it is gone in the space of that one exhalation. All of the time it has taken to get to this instant congeals: the sickly green of the emergency bay curtain, the artificial light, the sound of other patients coughing, the smell of food cooking, of cabbage and artificial strawberry, the sound of nurses laughing at the reception desk nearby; the whole world of the emergency department rolling on, turns into one instant that hangs. Then Alice notices that the edges of the curtain move. Has someone arrived to fix things, have they noticed what has happened? But time passes and no one comes. There is just Alice and Katherine, held up in a familiar silence. It is comforting at first, the thought that she will not have to wait for her mother to emerge, that she no longer has to fill in the gaps. She feels a peculiar sense of peace.

Perhaps she doesn't really believe that this is the end. Perhaps she will keep waiting. She has hold of her mother's hand, her fingers tucked tightly around so that they press against her mother's palm. She loosens her grip; lets her fingers trace the width of her mother's wrist. Sun spots spread out across the top of her hand, over the small valleys created between her knuckles. They mark her time in the water, thinks Alice, understanding the ocean's significance in a way that she could not have until now. She sees her mother swimming, her whole body deep underwater, part of it, made from the salt and the waves and the clear, startling blue. She is the light and shade; she is what carries the sun, rippling across the sand. Alice imagines her mother transforming into a ray of light.

But her mother is far from shining. The look on her face is not radiant. Her eye stares blankly at the fluoro above. Her lower jaw hangs too widely open, like it's dislodged. Her nose seems to have grown, sharpened into a foreign shape. Her cheeks sag inwards. Alice hears nothing, not even her own breath. She lifts her hand to touch her mother's face and watches it shake uncontrollably. It seems the only thing in focus as the rest of the room begins to spin. Alice is unable to stay balanced. She crouches on the floor and rests her forehead on the spongy linoleum. She reaches up to take hold of the hospital sheet, fumbles across it for the feel of her mother's skin. She expects her mother to reach out, to take hold of her and draw her back up. She grasps what she knows to be her mother's hand. It is warm, somehow living, but when Alice squeezes it, nothing happens. She cannot bear to look up again and see her mother's face. Neither can she release her

grip. Sounds from the world outside begin to creep into her consciousness. She hears the nurses and the patients, even the hum of the air conditioner. Everything is continuing, regardless. She stays hunched by the bed, wishing that the small curtained off area they are enclosed in, would disconnect itself from the hospital and simply glide away.

Sixteen

The funeral does not take place for over a week. There are things that need investigating before the family can go ahead and make arrangements. Katherine's heart and her brain are tested. Her blood. In the end the autopsy confirms that she died of septicaemia. Even the word feels inaccessible, too clinical; too foreign to have anything to do with her mother.

Alice spends her time in a state of numbness. She doesn't see Frankie much, her show has opened and she is completely busy with the run. Queenie and Gerard remain someplace else, away from her. She cannot seem to engage with anyone, least of all them. Why hadn't they been there? Even though her father offers things, like stories from the past, she takes nothing from him. He had not made it to the hospital. He was held up at work, cleaning up after the transportation of that stupid ship. He has apologized since, but at the same time he mentioned how he was forced to postpone his trip to England. It was hard to tell what hurt him more; Katherine's death or the delay it caused him.

Queenie wasn't there either. Not when it actually happened. She had ventured off, huffing with impatience. She had pushed through the curtain, leaving it slightly open to the rush of trolleys and nurses so that Alice had to drag it shut. She could hear Queenie at the reception desk, protesting against the fact that her daughter was still lying about, waiting for attention. How long after that had it taken for her mum to die? She must have been close. But Alice isn't sure. What she can recall is Queenie returning to the bedside, red-faced, her hot energy taking over. She had talked and talked, she couldn't believe the state of things in this place, couldn't find a decent cup of coffee, couldn't stand the bloody smell. Could *not* believe this was happening! That's when the nurse finally came in, to check on the commotion. Was the sheet pulled over her mother's face then? Is that when someone removed the patch and closed both her eyes? Alice thinks that the last time she looked at her mum, before she was covered, her eyes were closed. Was there another nurse to help wheel out the bed? Had a doctor come to confirm things? The sequence is now impossible to remember.

They roll into Centennial Park. A procession of dark cars. Alice can see the hearse in front, even at this slow pace the flowers on top of the coffin nod, backward and forward. Absurdly. Inside the chapel she does not hear the details of the sermon; just the few words of a hymn she recognizes from movies and TV shows: *valley, darkness, shepherd, rest*. In

no time they are filing outside where the brightness is overwhelming. The sky too blue, the clouds too white. As she crosses the lawn to the grave she is aware of each blade of grass, unbearably green and full of life. And she thinks that everything in the cemetery is off its face. She imagines the creatures living inside the lawn, navigating the tough, spidery roots that crawl in shallow dirt. She imagines there might be pockets of cool earth to rest inside. How much of the sky would you see from there, flat on your back, surrounded by blades of green?

At the grave a carpet of fake turf covers a large mound of dirt and Alice wonders at the need to hide the earth. She wishes she were allowed to bring Alphie; he would have liked to laze about on the mound, let his body roast in the sun, paying no mind to the plastic grass. No one else seems to notice what's around them; they all look solemnly at the hole in the ground. Queenie holds a white rose, a perfect bloom that is beginning to droop. Gerard has his arm linked through her grandmother's side, propping her up.

Alice zones out of the proceedings. Better right now to close her eyes and feel the sun on her brow, notice the heat on her body, the places where the fabric of her clothes clings. Patches of sweat on her skin. She feels the breeze around her ankles, where her pants stop, and the tiniest pieces of dirt that have slipped into her sandals and press up against her toes. She stands at the grave while the congregation make their way back to the chapel for tea, surprised that it is over. She looks into the grave before she moves away, but cannot fathom her mother inside the coffin. She pushes away the image of her sunken face. She thinks of the small stone she left under the trees in the park and of the mad dancing lady who gave it to her. It had glistened that day, and faded, while she held it in her palm. She promises to collect it and bury it here, thinking it might help carry her mother into the earth.

Mid way across the grounds Alice notices a man stepping out from the shade of an old gum. His face is shadowed by a large, worn hat. As he approaches he takes the hat from his head, holds it down against his thigh. He squints into the sun as he comes to walk alongside her.

'Hello,' he says. 'I'm Snap, Snapper Taylor. I worked with your mother.'

'I'm Alice.'

'I know.' He nods with acknowledgment.

They walk.

'It's a tough day, Alice,' he says eventually, 'one of the toughest.'

‘It hasn’t sunk in yet.’

‘It will.’ He rests his hand on her shoulder.

She knows he is right, but she can’t let it in. Not yet. She can’t let in the fact that his hand and the gentle comforting weight of it might break her.

‘Thank you for coming,’ she says.

‘Of course.’ They linger for a while in the sunshine. Snap replaces his hat, smooths down the brim. ‘I have something to ask you,’ he says.

‘OK,’ says Alice.

‘Your mother has been helping a group of people get back one of their own. I’m referring to the remains of an Aboriginal woman exhumed from the ship we worked on. I’m wondering if you know where they are?’

Alice knows. The night she returned from hospital she started cleaning up her room, piling swathes of dirty clothes in the laundry, throwing out junk, old cigarette packets, and empty envelopes of incense. When she opened her wardrobe to put away a clean uniform she found the boxes stacked inside. It was the perfect place, dark and cool and safe. And there was plenty of space; most of her clothes had been on the floor. She didn’t have to take the boxes out to check what was inside, just lifted the lid from the one on top and saw a set of bones, the dark makings of a hand.

Seventeen

As they drive towards the town, the lake comes into view. She sees it first between the trees along the roadside, blurring silver, before it is revealed as a wide expanse of water. Three pelicans fly close to its surface, their bodies almost touch their travelling shadows. Wings outstretched, they are all that break up the colours of lake and sky.

Snap parks opposite the lake, at the curb of a community lawn. Just as Alice and Snap step out of the car a white Landcruiser pulls up beside them.

‘Daphne’s here,’ he says.

Daphne waves out of the passenger window and smoke rises into the air from the rollie she has between her fingers. The Cruiser door swings open and she carefully gets out.

They meet at the edge of the lawn.

‘Good to see you again, Mr Taylor,’ Daphne grins.

‘And you, Auntie.’

A young woman hops out from the driver’s side of the Cruiser and joins them. She is much taller than Daphne, but they share the same intense gaze.

‘This is Carrie, my eldest grannie. She’s studying law in Sydney.’

Carrie smiles shyly.

‘Hi Carrie,’ says Snap and he introduces Alice.

‘This is Katherine’s daughter.’

Alice says, ‘Hi.’

Daphne opens a little plastic container and stubs her rollie out on the lid, drops it back onto the seat of the 4 wheel drive.

‘Pleased to met you, Alice,’ says Daphne. She touches Alice’s cheek. ‘And I was pleased to know your mum. Lucky to have worked with her toward this very special occasion.’ Alice nods, bites her lip to stop herself from crying.

Daphne guides Alice to her chest. ‘You’re allowed to be sad,’ she says.

Snap and Carrie stand by quietly as Alice sobs into Daphne’s body. It is not a pitiful sight. Or wretched. Instead it is a shared grief, the picture of an old woman holding a child in pain.

Eventually Alice lifts her head and Daphne says, ‘You, show me the way.’

They walk around to the back of Snap's hire car and Alice opens the boot. Daphne sweeps her hand over the white cardboard surfaces.

'It'll be good to get them out of these boxes,' she says.

'Yeah, Nana,' says Carrie. She gently lifts the first box out of Snap's car and transfers it onto an old blanket that's spread inside the back end of the Cruiser. Carrie and Alice shift the load and Daphne arranges the boxes. When it is done Daphne takes her pouch of tobacco from her trouser pocket, rolls another smoke. She lights it. She stands and smokes, looks out over the lake. Once she has finished she fetches the plastic container, stubs out the smoke.

'We've got to be somewhere,' she says.

She hugs Snap and Alice goodbye, then heaves herself up into the 4 wheel drive. Daphne looks down at Alice from her open window. 'Take care of yourself, bub,' she says. 'It's what your mum would want.'

'I will.'

Alice and Snap wait on the curb as the Cruiser pulls away. Together they watch until it is out of sight.

A family of holidaymakers has arrived. They have set up a picnic; kids chase each other across the grass while the adults gather around a barbeque. The smell of cooking sausages is thick.

'Reckon I'm starving,' says Snap. 'There's a bakery across the road, I could get us something to eat.'

'Oh, that'd be good.'

'Meet you over there.' Snap points toward the lake.

'Yeah,' says Alice.

Alice slips off her shoes and leaves them by the car. She crosses the lawn and stands by the shore. Close up she can see that the lake is struggling, in some areas algae stretches out under the water, and a dirty-grey foam laps onto the sand. She remembers her mum talking about how this lake is in trouble, for years people have been warning the authorities that the river system feeding into it is dying. And yet the horizon feels promising and the pelicans, seven or eight of them now, glide and skim over the water. They stop in unison to rest on the lake and Alice sits down on the grassy bank. A low breeze comes in from off shore. The reeds shake and rustle. Tiny waves break on the sand. Out on the lake the

pelicans rise, affected by some invisible cue, and when they fly off into the haze, it looks to Alice as if they are heading directly into the sun.