Why might a man walk out on his life?

SHOW ME THE SKY

‘An assured and gripping debut’ Ian MacMillan

NICHOLAS HOGG
SHOW ME THE SKY

NICHOLAS HOGG
missing adj. 1. not present; absent or lost. 2. not able to be traced and not known to be dead. go missing to become lost or disappear.
Across the empty car park a man walks barefoot. He is carrying a page torn from a book and his electric guitar. Nothing else except the clothes on his back, a pair of faded jeans and a loose white shirt. He follows a gravel path to the cliff ledge. Stones hurt the soles of his feet, but he is glad of the pain, the proof of life. He turns and looks back at the car, the world he has abandoned. Before descending the steep and winding steps down to the bay, he stands and leans, closes his eyes, sways a little in the current of wind. He can hear the Atlantic boom on the pebbled beach, the crash and shatter of waves exploding on the rocks, sliding down the shore, rushing back into themselves to be born again.
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PART ONE
Dead or alive, I have the job of finding him, Billy K, the singer who vanished into thin air on a Cornish cliff top. But I’m not another crazed fan, one of the worshipping millions burning candles beneath his poster, singing his songs like a chant or prayer.

No. I’m James Dent. People who don’t know me call me Inspector Dent, those who do call me Jim. Though the Australian customs officer, erect in his wooden booth, blond, slicked-back hair, not a crease in his starched shirt, flicks his eyes from my passport photo to the flesh and blood standing before him, and addresses me as ‘Mr Dent’. Then he looks again at the photo. ‘Welcome to Sydney.’ He doesn’t ask why I’m missing my connecting flight to London.

Only when the seat-belt sign illuminates for take-off, and the turbines whirr and roar, will the other detectives know I’m gone.

I’m missing the flight home because I am a policeman. And I have a job to do, a man to catch. This might sound melodramatic, but I’ve tracked down drug barons and bail jumpers, runaways and addicts, fraudsters with more names than a football team. No chance an errant rock star can escape. Not after a year of hearing his music in my sleep, reading his lyrics over and over for clues of where he might have run. I’ll dream his face for ever if I don’t track him down.

And this is why I’m walking from an airport with just the clothes on my back. Because the only officer who pulls me from the investigation is this one.
Sydney is beautiful, what with the bridge and the harbour, all that glittering sea. Winter feels like a rumour, a myth from other climates. But I’m no more connected to the scene than looking at a postcard. Jet-lagged and suddenly alone, in a taxi between office blocks and ocean, storeys of mirrored glass flecked with cloud, it all feels unreal, the city a hologram.

I ask the cab driver to make a stop at a bank. I withdraw my maximum limit on three different accounts. Nearly ten thousand Australian dollars. If I travel on my credit card I might as well unravel a ball of string as I walk. There’s no electronic trail with cold, hard cash.

The notes bulge in my pockets. The cab driver drops me at the Opera House. When I leave a tip I catch his eyes, and picture him giving my description to an Australian police officer: ‘Scruffy, even though he was in a jacket and dark jeans. Looked like he’d not slept or shaved for a few days. Tall, over six foot, medium build. Once upon a time an athlete, but losing it around the middle. And no luggage, nothing. I’d even say he was sleeping rough if there hadn’t been wads of cash spilling from his wallet.’

The wharf around the Opera House throngs with day trippers and a school outing. Kids in sun hats balancing ice creams, couples posing for photos, a Korean tour group with flag-waving guide. Sun hits the concrete sails of the famous roof, and I’m dazzled by the brightness. Between the melting ice creams, swaying palm trees and policemen in shorts, I feel like a vampire pained by the light of day.

I need to sleep, to change my clothes. But before I find a hotel and bed, I go to an Internet café and access my MET account. When Roberts, the chief super, realises my untimely disappearance, that I boarded a plane in Fiji bound for London, and bailed out in Sydney, my access to the bureau files will be blocked. Sitting next to Gap-year students and backpackers, I log on to my account, download the entire Billy K file into a private email address and hit print.

The pages tucked beneath my arm, I exit the dingy café and find a hotel. I choose the Holiday Inn, wait in a foyer filled with fake foliage and model flamingos. Here I can remain anonymous, distant from a concierge too busy to notice I have no luggage. Because, like I said before, apart from the clothes on my back, a ream of paper containing the sum evidence of my year investigating Billy K, I have nothing. Nothing. No job. No colleagues. No wife.

And no daughter. My gorgeous Gemma, our precious three hours together every second Saturday.

So what I do have, I abandon. And this most certainly includes Anna Monroe, the woman who’s kept my sanity these last few months. As a fellow officer on the case, I hope she knows me well enough to understand what I have to do, how stubborn I am. As a lover, I hope she knows it isn’t her I’ve walked away from.

When I said I missed the connecting flight back to London because I’m a policeman, I was fooling myself. Don’t get me wrong, I want Billy K found, beating heart alive, or washed up bloated on a Cornish beach. Either way it’s case closed for the Missing Persons Bureau. But what I need more is the investigation, the focus. A reason to wake up in the morning.

The very day I drove out to Lizard Point, to see his abandoned Lotus cordoned off from the reporters and fans, the flashbulbs of the paparazzi, Meg left with Gemma. I got home that evening and the lights were out. I thought perhaps Meg had turned in early, parked the car in the garage. The note said she was at her mother’s. And so was Gemma.

I’m leaving before she’s old enough to realise you’re pouring your life down the sink.

A rock star, a daughter, and a wife, all disappeared on the same day. Meg and I were living a lie, and had been for some time, nobly going about a dead marriage for Gemma. I had no idea love could turn to hate so quietly. No slammed doors or broken glass, just days blurred with drink, Meg distant. Then gone.

I’ve not touched a drop of alcohol since that night. Not a drop. And when I sit on the edge of a hard, single bed, in a hotel room on the bottom of the earth, I think again how she was in that much of a hurry she didn’t even pull the front door shut.

5 a.m. In the hotel bar drinking tomato juice with Worcester sauce and Tabasco. From the large windows I can see the bay, fishing boats returning from a night bobbing on the depths, hauling up nets of wriggling silver. Honest,
hard, straightforward labour. Raw hands and aching limbs. The lights dangle from masts like fiery bunting, and for
at least ten minutes I wish I were a fisherman, that I had a warm bed waiting, Anna to kiss good morning.

The barman, who’s been pouring bottles of tomato juice for the last three hours, finishes his shift at 6 a.m. The
morning barman is a carbon copy of the night barman. Both podgy, redhaired, flashing glasses from hand to hand,
and sharp to realise I need no more than a refill, and to be left alone reading the Billy K file.

When not buried in the pages of interviews and evidence, I stare blankly at the walls. Like a patient sitting in the
corner of a hospital day room.

But I’m only policing. Einstein carried out thought experiments, peered into the workings of the universe via his
mind. I’m staring at walls conducting thought investigations, peering into the mind of Billy K, why he might run,
who with, and where. The reasons he’d dive into a spring tide with his precious guitar.

I’m now also one of the 200,000 who vanish each year. An official missing person with a last known sighting.
And of that staggering number I plan to be one of the majority, part of the 99 per cent found, like the senile
wandering from their houses, catching the bus to the coast in a dressing gown and slippers. Or the office workers
who have upped and run, leaving a pristine desk and crowded inbox, simply to start a new job without giving notice.
Too well I know the anguish of families left in limbo, the fathers who quit jobs to walk the streets with photos of a
runaway child, the mothers afraid to leave home in case they miss a call.

And the trips to the morgue. Escorting relatives to identify bodies pulled from the undergrowth, the lost sons and
daughters, beloved children, now laid out for the coroner.

Thinking about this when the first guests come down for breakfast, showered and scrubbed, drowsy but bright in
new clothes bought especially for their holiday, I go back to my room and wash. I have work to do.

After showering I put back on the same shirt, jeans, and underpants I’ve been wearing for three days straight. I
take my jacket from the back of the chair and shake it vigorously. Time for me to buy a new outfit. A new skin for a
new Jim Dent.
Dearest Monique,

I’m alone but not afraid. Not afraid, because with a pen and paper, the means to write a letter, I have a lightning rod to your soul. Company and love in the middle of a desert.

Last night I camped between the Aboriginal communities of Arlparra and Alpurrurulam, at least 200 km from the next fuel stop. And this is the real red centre, dinosaur country, a landscape forged by the weight of ancient seas. I expect to see a stegosaurus snuffling through the bush any moment.

I slept on the groundsheet of the tent, dreams filled with shooting stars and thoughts of you. The warmth of the rising sun, along one side of my body, was as though you’d eased into my sleeping bag during the night.

Life was good. I stoked the embers and boiled water for a coffee. I was riding across a barren and desolate road to you. How precious the world had become. Tiny birds chirped in the branches of a red river gum. Lizards scurried between the dunes. From the simmering distance, a mob of kangaroos watched as I checked the oil, softened the shocks, adjusted the panniers and rang the air with a pitch-perfect engine.

Fast and fearless, I rode all morning, slipping and sliding on the drifted sand. Rested at midday beneath another gum, drank a litre of water and again checked the oil and panniers. After an hour soft sand turned to rutted dirt and potholes. Vibrations rattled every bone in my body, and I stopped once more to check the fittings, worried the bike would disintegrate in my hands. Every nut and bolt had been loosened by the shuddering ride. The engine block was only a few turns from falling off the frame.

I scanned the lie of a dried-up creek bed, smoothed by the last rains that washed along the narrow, shallow banks. But the creek was omitted from my map, so I climbed the higher branches of the gum and followed the watermark to the horizon. The compass needle and creek pointed the same direction as the highway. I declared the ghost of a river my road and revved up the engine.

You’d be the first to warn about veering from the known track in a featureless landscape. I can hear you now, cursing the brash Englishman, telling me that the testosterone adventurer is doomed.

You’re right.

I checked the compass again and eased back the throttle. The packed sand of the creek bed rode smoother than the corrugated track, only the occasional rock or dead branch to avoid. I wove the natural highway, content, even a little smug, that others would struggle on the bombed-out road while I took the scenic route.

Though what others? I’d passed a German couple in a 4WD yesterday, sharing pleasantries and a peanut butter sandwich, all three of us disappointed to have converged, to have our hectare of personal space intruded.

But today, no one. The world my own.

After an hour I stopped and again checked the compass and the direction of the creek. Then, for the last time I rode on, cruising my private highway, a happy fool beneath the searing sun, painting pictures of Paris, making love to you in a rented room.

And then suddenly the earth was in my mouth. The sky beneath my feet. After a slow, rocky section, the creek bed had smoothed out again. Yes, I was riding too fast, but this wasn’t why I crashed. I crashed because I’d seen death, a skeleton, a fossil of a human being suspended in the eroded bank. In the split second I glimpsed the corpse, I thought it some desert soul escaping from the underworld. I tensed with shock, clipped a boulder and flew. Bits of metal and broken mirror glittered in the air. I saw myself tumble and roll like a stand-in double, the slow-mo scene as bike and body crumpled.

That machine comes to rest with the ousted rider is the curse of the motorcyclist. No matter what speed or terrain they part upon, the smash and tumble always seems to end in an embrace of engine and body.

I was pinned by my bike in the dried-up creek. When I came round, I thought I was dead. How could I be in my body and staring at my head, set down on the sand?

I was looking at the empty helmet, wrenched from my skull by the force of the impact, a fist-sized gash in the left
side. Trapped, no ambulance blaring to the rescue, I was happy.

_Happy to be alive._

Until I wrestled the engine from my dislocated shoulder, turned and scrabbled to see the dead wasn’t chasing, I didn’t even feel the break in my shin.

I dropped to my knees in pain. I swore so loud that if the rotten body possessed a soul, it would’ve been shaken from the bones. When I grasped it was nothing but hollow marrow, I cursed the empty sky, stranded and broken. I was sat between the body and bike, gripping fists of dirt. Yes, close to crying.

Before I worked out how to resolve a wreck into rescue, I wanted to know who had ended my adventure, who had delayed my rendezvous with you.

I crawled across the creek bed, the two ends of my tibia grating, scorching pain, my separated shoulder useless. I should’ve been taking stock of the bike, my food and water, painkillers. But I wanted to touch this attempt at resurrection, confirm it was real, no trick of the desert on a lonely mind.

All flesh was gone, polished by the soil and its hungry microbes, the wind and the rain and the flaming sun. Though the earth still claimed the bones, something of a life remained in the angle of resting. The left leg, arm, shoulder and ribs lay wedged in the dirt. The distended fingers of the right hand reached out from the bank, almost a Michelangelo touch of the light, but clutching, and missing, at something or someone.

I almost shook hands, welcomed myself to the dead. But this wasn’t my final resting place, and to greet this corpse would be to make myself too comfortable. Instead I ran my fingertips along the femur, the blade of the pelvis and the knobbly spine. Feeling this relic of a life, all my own pain was suspended. Who was buried here? Why? And for how long? I thought Aborigines burned their dead.

Then I saw it, glinting from inside the ribcage. A silver cross. I reached into the heart space, and delicately pinched the flash of silver between my thumb and forefinger. Then I pulled my hand back, slowly, careful as a man defusing a bomb, conscious I was defiling the dead, _robbing a grave._

I held it to the light as though it would deliver me from the accident, to a hospital bed with crisp white sheets, into your arms. I turned it between my fingers and rubbed the precious metal – solid silver, crudely finished with a loop at the top to thread on to a necklace. The band must have decayed, and the cross fallen through the ribs like a coin would a grate. I scratched away the covering of clay, blew off the dirt to find engraving on the reverse: _By order of the London Mission Society, 1834._

A dead reverend in the desert. And he had God on his side. I’m sure the skull was grinning, mocking the living. But then all our gleaned jaws seem to smile at eternity. ‘I’m still in better fucking shape than you,’ I shouted, the words lost in all that sky.

I crawled back to the wreck, _my life_. Suddenly the pain returned. My shin felt as though an axe were embedded halfway between the knee and ankle, and my shoulder felt plain wrong, the ball free of the socket. And I was healthier than my machine. No, the bike would never be ridden again. The twisted forks pressed the front wheel against the engine block. Fuel leaked from the ruptured tank and spare jerry can. The exhaust had come clean off, and tiny fragments of the wing mirrors sparkled on the red sand. If it were a horse, it would be shot.

After I pulled the First Aid kit from the top box and popped a handful of painkillers, I hauled the panniers clear of the mangled metal and stuffed a torn T-shirt into the petrol tank.

Yes, I flicked my lighter and lit the fuse.

The bike was dead. I wanted it to have a glorious, flaming end. Not decades of rust in the desert wind. In _Easy Rider_, Peter Fonda burns out like a landed comet, a ball of fire billowing across the highway. This is the best part of the film, when the dream of freedom is granted.

_Insanity_, I can hear you exclaim, sacrificing my bike. Like a Bedouin killing his camel, a sailor sinking his ship. But the plume of smoke is a beacon, an SOS on the cloudless blue. Just as I dropped down into a small trench, the tank exploded like a cannon.

The race for my survival has begun.

The sun is setting. I’m writing propped against the bank of the creek. No one has answered my distress flare. Yet. My foolish shortcut has taken me at least 30 km from the marked track, which at busiest has only one or two travellers a day.

I’ve thrown some dead roots on to the fire. The bike is burning down from crimson to ash grey. The skull is still grinning, maybe happy to have a friend after all these years alone. Though his conversation’s not up to much.

The painkillers are closing my eyes as I write. I’ll talk with you again in the morning, when I can think clearly about getting out of here.

_Woke at dawn in agony. No strength to pitch tent, so slept under stars. Rolled up trousers to look at my blackened_
shin. I could see the bend, the foot askew. Popped two more ibuprofen, then slid the metal rods from the pannier lining. The four metal bars that stop the canvas flapping against the rear wheel will stop my foot flapping against my shin. Using my one and only bandage and another torn-up T-shirt, I bound my broken leg into a splint.

But it didn’t stop the pain. If anything, the pressure made it worse. To take my thoughts from gangrene and thirst, I lay out my expedition and took stock:

- Canvas pannier bag (minus rods)
- Lengths of bungee cord x 3
- Medium ‘day-hike’ size backpack
- T-shirts x 2
- Tracksuit top
- Pairs of socks x 2
- Pairs of underpants x 4
- Pair of swimming shorts
- Diving mask
- Sleeping bag
- Ground mat
- Tent
- Tool kit
- Swiss Army knife
- Flashlight
- Compass
- Pocket torch
- First Aid kit
- Toiletries bag
- Petrol lighter (full)
- Box of matches
- Kerosene stove (three-quarters full)
- Tin cup
- Spoon
- Cooking pots x 2
- Food:
  - Spaghetti 200g
  - Rice 3–400g
  - Vegemite (half jar)
  - Tube of tomato puree
  - Jar of pepper
  - Tin of tuna
  - Onion x 1
  - Instant soups x 9
  - Pack of crackers (crushed to crumbs)
  - Instant coffee
  - Servings of porridge x 4
  - Powdered milk
  - Sachets of sugar x 7
  - Water 4.5 litres (5 days’ worth?)
- Camera
- Canister of film
- Pair of flip-flops
And the clothes on my back, a solid silver cross, one watchful skeleton, and of course this pen and paper, you.

This is what all the preparation was for. I have medicine and shelter, maybe two weeks of food. 4.5 litres of water seems enough, but this depends on how long my desert sojourn will last.

I think of the stranded glider pilot who survived by drinking his own urine. An amateur flyer, he’d confused north from south over the MacDonnell Ranges and touched down hundreds of kilometres from the airfield. The TV docudrama cut from survivor in the studio to actor in the desert, wiping his brow and screwing up his face at another swig of life-saving piss. He’d already been marooned for two days, and after gulping down his one Coke, he began urinating back into the can. Less and less each time. Between toilet refreshments he licked drops of condensation from the Perspex cockpit of the glider. When he ran out of piss and condensation he descended into delirium. He chased monitor lizards in the vain hope of catching them and drinking their blood. He dug a hole, waited for a spring to fountain from the earth. He watched a mob of kangaroos bury themselves in the sand to keep cool, and did the same. Scorching dehydration headaches wrecked his brain. He crawled back to the glider and waited to die.

But we know he survived because he’s in a studio telling the camera how on the fifth morning he woke and stumbled far enough to find tyre tracks. He carved SOS on to the road and collapsed. And because he’s in a studio before a camera, and because an actor is playing his parched self, we’ve already guessed that someone happens to drive past and come to his rescue.

So I wait for my own farmer in a beaten-up ute. Someone taking a short cut through a dried-up creek bed, too narrow for cars or trucks.

What are my odds of rescue?
Strange to be lost, yet know where I am.
14 September 1834

On the suggestion of Rev. Lilywhite, to assist him in the continuing advance of my English, and to make the both perilous and tedious sea voyage to the South Pacific an educational one, I, Nelson Babbage of Whitechapel, London – formerly Naqarase Baba of Lakemba, Fiji – commence this journal.

Stowaway on the ship Fortune in 1824, a boy without clothes, I had no more idea of what lay beyond the horizon than what I could see. Now I sit in a London chapel, dressed as dapper as pampered gentry, dipping my quill from ink to page and writing in English. Although this is not my language, these are my words, and with my hand guided by my spirit, and, I pray, the good Lord above ever watchful, I will bring my life to these very pages.

After such an announcement I am unsure of what I am supposed to record. And for whom? My people do not collect such private thoughts. We are not afflicted with the busy and restless spirit of the white man, and find no merit in a mind not shared with our family and brothers. Though after ten long years upon these shores, much of England and her peculiar ways has no doubt marked my soul.

Ten years in the lands of Europe! Ten years of walking the mighty cities and tumultuous towns, the great speeding streets that swirled with all the vim and vigour of a tropical storm.

Cast into this kingdom as a boy, dizzy with wonder at the feats of construction and engineering, at the mountains of stone and glass, the hissing and clanging machines with fire in their bellies, I believed I were a hapless mortal snagged in the dream of Ndengei, our Great Spirit, and that when He awoke, I would open my eyes on the golden sand and glittering surf of home, believing once more that the world contained no more than our verdant land and the deep blue sea.

But the great ships had already split the sky. We had chosen not to heed the warnings of our Tongan neighbours. We did not believe that pale gods stepped down from the height of the sun, that they ventured into our kingdoms on canoes pulled by clouds. That the learned and chosen amongst their many, many thousands, had transformed trees to paper and transcribed the voice of God, the creator of all creators.

But I know now, as my brothers will know soon, the sun that folds in a breaking wave on a Fijian beach, is the same sun that shines on all lands.

I must sleep now and sleep well. Tomorrow I remove from the Mission Society to the good ship Caroline at Blackwall, the vessel chartered to ferry God to my heathen shores.

15 September 1834

Indeed the Caroline is a fine ship, and by the grace of God she will carry us safely to what is the other side of this spinning globe. That my cabin is no longer than my head to my toes does not dismay. It is a palace compared to the damp and stinking billets of the deckhands, who must share their swinging hammocks with each other – one man sleeps while the other works.

As this land I have made my own will soon be memory, I today took what may be a final walk around my favourite haunts. From the crowded markets of Holborn and Covent Garden, to the grand old trees of Hampstead Heath, where one can admire the view from on top of Parliament Hill. At this vantage point the size of the city is apparent, a skyline ever closer to the clouds, the green of the counties encroached. But what I saw today I did not pass judgement upon. For better or worse, it is God who sees fit that this metropolis grows. I will miss it.

16 September 1834

For the next week I am to assist Rev. Stevens in the loading and stowing of the mission supplies. Expecting to be a labourer of the boxes from carriage to hold, I was most surprised to learn that I was in fact the inventory officer – the men employed to shift and lug our chests, clothes, crucifixes and poultry, noticeably sullied at a man of my skin
standing above them with paper and quill.

Apart from keeping the inventory I have been occupied with the beginnings of an English to Fijian dictionary, a work that will ultimately contain around five to six thousand words. Many dialects have flowered upon our many islands, and I am somewhat diffident about preparing what will be an authoritative text. Though I must confess, to be a teacher of words to the white man is an exaltation I could not have dreamed. I still remember my time on-board the Fortune, jumped up from Lakemba like a wild animal, and afforded little more comfort than the pigs and fowl. Only when the sailors decided I would not eat them in their sleep was I permitted above deck. They joked and toyed with my tongue as though it were a plaything, putting words into my mouth like handfuls of stones. I spoke and they laughed, not knowing the oaths and blasphemes I was uttering. Beyond the curses against God I was taught the lexis of the ship, and then commanded about it by the bark of the captain in single words, gathering a vocabulary no bigger than the names of the sails and masts I had to scale.

And then the cacophony of London, the screams and shrieks, the intelligible tongues wagging without meaning. Only when the Mission Society confirmed my schooling with Mistress Beaumont did I believe this a language I could tame. A strict and imposing teacher, she peered over her spectacles eager for our errors. I and various other indigenes of the Empire’s reach – Malays, Indians, Hawaiians and Tongans – fast became adept with a tongue we wanted or not. One soon learns to write correctly when the stroke of a cane punishes a spelling mistake, or the bony hands of Miss Beaumont rearrange lips and teeth to fix a mispronounced word.

To think now, with the scratch of a split quill I have the power to shape the mouth of an Englishman!

18 September 1834

This morning the Caroline and her senior officers formally welcomed on-board the Rev. Lilywhite, director of the South Pacific Mission. Despite his senior years and frailty of body, he must surely thank God for his lasting keenness of mind. For the best part of my schooling he was my financial guardian, making regular visits to Miss Beaumont to assure that the sponsorship of the Mission Society was being put to worthwhile use. I trust he learned that I was consistently top of both my English and Theology class.

Assisting the Rev. Lilywhite will be a Rev. Jefferson from Edinburgh, and for one year previous, of Botany Bay, New Holland, where he presided over a parish of indigenes and men in chains. Youngest of the clergy is the Rev. Stevens of Worcester, a man of jolly countenance and vigour, whom I am most looking forward to working with and learning from. All reverends are joined by their families, though the older children of Rev. Lilywhite will disembark in Portsmouth, where we will also welcome our final pilgrim of the South Pacific, a Rev. Thomas, whom I only know by name. If his character glows with God as that of his brethren, then the Lord has selected a fine charge of men to sally forth with his message.

22 September 1834

With his bible wagging in his right hand as he spoke, the Rev. Lilywhite launched the Caroline south on Matthew 28:19–20, so that all on-board can be sure that we voyage into the deep with God on our side: ‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded of you.’

The Rev. Lilywhite followed this with a prayer for calm seas and fair weather, and that ‘the God of Jonah be our God’. The Bishop of London, on-board for the farewell ceremony and officially representing King George, then added his blessings: ‘For those devoted to the work of preaching the Gospel of Christ to the poor and benighted inhabitants of those godless islands, know we pray here in England that the Lord sails with you.’

When the bishop and his entourage stepped off the gangplank, and the length of wood that joined us to dry land was raised, the Rev. Lilywhite turned and cried, ‘Onward Christian soldiers!’

Capt. Drinkwater ordered that the anchor be weighed, and as the Caroline slipped her moorings, the Rev. Jefferson and I hoisted the missionary flag – three silver doves on a purple field, bearing olive branches in their beaks – to the tip of the masthead. The wharf was a carnival of well-wishers, and it seemed every parish of London had come to Blackwall to wave us off, many joining the reverends, their wives, the captain and the crew, in singing the hymn ‘Jesus at thy command we launch into the deep’.

24 September 1834

Just after dawn the Caroline weighed anchor from Hope Point and made sail for Sheerness. Feeling for the first time
a stiff wind, we merrily raced towards the mouth of the Thames and the North Sea, the riverbank rolling by as though it were the deck fixed and dear England sailing.

26 September 1834

This afternoon, standing on the prow watching the garden coast of Kent flare and shadow beneath the scattered clouds, I was taken aside by the Rev. Stevens and informed something of our final brethren, Rev. Thomas – due to join us in Portsmouth tomorrow. ‘He is the only one of us without kin,’ Rev. Stevens most earnestly remarked. ‘And despite my knowing that you are a man of most impeccable manner and etiquette, I feel it correct to warn you of enquiring about his family. Well, what was his family.’

The Rev. Stevens went on, in hushed and discreet tones, to tell me of how Mrs Thomas and their teenage daughter had been tragically robbed and shot by highwaymen earlier this year. On a trip to Exeter, while Rev. Thomas took relief in a dell, bandits assailed the carriage, murdering the coachman and his two passengers. Though the motive was presumed robbery, the killers had fled empty handed, leaving only the corpses of the coachman and the family Thomas.

Rev. Thomas was of course distraught, and public reaction to the murder of a minister’s family prompted officers from London to assist in the case. To heap further misery upon the tragedy, a Detective Mills of Bow Street vanished whilst staying with the reverend – thought accidentally drowned taking an early morning swim in the Channel.

The reverend has remained stoic throughout. However, with the murderers still at large and the case unsolved, each passing carriage or mother and daughter a reminder, the mission to Fiji and New Holland seemed a timely diversion from family tragedy, as well as a call from the Almighty.

Rev. Stevens concluded that, ‘Perhaps his character is not tempered as well as the other missionaries, but know that his soul is devoted, and trust in him and the Lord we have.’

27 September 1834

Gathered for our second and final farewell, we depart Portsmouth, and finally England. She will be within view for some time yet, but the feel of her beneath my feet has gone. With the tearful children of the Rev. Lilywhite waving goodbye until they were but specks upon the harbour wall, the leaving of land seemed all the more emotional than the choral fanfare of Blackwall. Several eyes watered on-board, including reverends and hardened sailors. I also had to use my sleeve to quell a tear, as though I were at the wake of a good friend, or even a family member, I would never see again.

The briefing from Rev. Stevens about Rev. Thomas proved most invaluable, as our introduction was a most awkward misunderstanding. When the Rev. Thomas reached the foot of the gangplank, the porters set down his luggage to be stowed by the crew. My name had been lost in the melee of greetings with the other reverends and their wives, so when the Rev. Thomas turned to see my dark hand held out for shaking, he snapped, ‘Put your hand upon my case, boy! Not my palm.’

There and then I had not the courage to correct the rev. and properly introduce myself as translator of the mission expedition, and quickly did as I was told, carrying two cases to his room before the Rev. Stevens had us formally acquainted.

The Rev. Thomas is a large, ruddy-faced and portly man, puffing his chest and gasping for air as though each breath were his last. His ‘apology’ consisted of a lecture on how to introduce oneself in a correct manner, and the confession that my ‘dusky hand’ had been the first ‘neither white, nor olive’ he had ever been offered, taking him somewhat by surprise.

Tonight I pray that I am wrong about the Rev. Thomas, for he seems the kind of man who would immediately wash after shaking hands with a man of my skin.

1 October 1834

With much shame I answered the Rev. Lilywhite with an untruth when asked upon whether I was regularly keeping this journal. The rev., no doubt suspecting my falsehood, replied, ‘It is a daily record, Mr Baba, not the meanderings of our hand given to whim.’

The excuse was that upon departing the damp isles of Great Britain, again watching the wind unravel in the billowing sails and feeling the deck creak beneath my shoeless feet, I was quite overcome with joy. Once more I
could rise and fall with the rhythm of the sea, breathe the same sweet breeze that blows across the waves, and not choke on the chimney smoke or fetid stench of a London street.

Though the Mission Society has secured my passage, requiring me to do little more than sit and wait for the shores of Lakemba, I am not a man to rest my limbs while others labour. As a boy apprentice on-board the Fortune, I learned the rigging well enough to haul sails with the crew, and now this time with the men of the Caroline.

But the Rev. Thomas, as many a white man who considers himself greater than his peers, believes physical labour, including the skilled and brave toil of our intrepid sailors, is only fit for those without words, the ‘uneducated and illiterate’, and while shining down the mizzenmast I was scolded like a disobedient child and ordered that I put my shoes back on. ‘If you want to be regarded as a gentleman, not a savage, then you must behave so.’

Many times, cut with comments that would start wars between chiefs and tribes in our respectful kingdom, I have held my tongue before the white man and his twisted wisdom. As I listened to the reverend lecture on the mind before the arm, forbidding my ‘labour among the commoners’, contented myself with the blood-rush of exertion pulsing in my limbs.

2 October 1834

Today the wind freshened, and after slow progress tacking the English Channel, the dotted end of the Needles finally slipped the horizon, the British Isles gone.

This was a kingdom my mind could not have entertained prior to stepping down from the gangplank of the Fortune ten long years ago. Alas it has receded into cloud and sky, again a world only to be conjured by my inner eye.

Once more do I realise that I might never see her again.

4 October 1834

Amid the rising swell, the cold brace of the Atlantic and its northerly winds, the reverends and their families have been much quietened by seasickness, finding the open deck and its shifting topography only conducive to discharging the contents of their stomachs over the sides.

This morning the wife of Rev. Stevens, worst affected by the motion of the Caroline – even somewhat queasy bobbing along the Thames Estuary – appeared most suddenly from the hatch, running hither and thither and shrieking about the deck in a most delirious whirl, threatening to whomever may hear that she would cast herself into the waves if the Lord ignore her prayers for a calmer sea. Several sailors and myself restrained Mrs Stevens – quite forcefully keeping her person until the arrival of her husband and the capt. She was ushered below by the somewhat embarrassed Rev. Stevens, and it was only after a drop of rum and the administering of some sleeping medicine that brought her peace of mind.

On witnessing such a commotion, a complete dejection of self just from the rolling waves, I was moved to utter a small prayer of thanks to the Lord for sparing me of seasickness.

6 October 1834

This being the sabbath, all on-board, save the most necessary sailors, listened to a service delivered by the Rev. Jefferson. Many of the rougher deckhands, no doubt as far from the Saviour as the people of my untutored lands, seemed to barely tolerate the sermon, whispering snide words and flashing grins like mischievous schoolboys.

It is this rejection of the Lord, by those verily born into His midst, which suffers me much consternation for the missionaries and their gallant efforts to convert my heathen brothers – us who have known only the toy gods and false idols born from our darkened minds.

7 October 1834

The squally seas have subsided, and with a light yet favourable wind, the Caroline cuts the waves with fair progress. The missionaries are men of schedule and order, and a working rhythm to the days has already been established, along with a voyage committee formed by the following:

Rev. Lilywhite – should be considered director, though Captain Drinkwater will supersede authority on maritime
matters.
Rev. Jefferson – vice-president, with natural ascension to president if some misfortune were to occur to Rev. Lilywhite.

Rev. Stevens – to take charge of the library, with myself as his assistant.

Rev. Thomas – responsible for the stewardship of the missionaries’ provisions, ensuring the equal distribution of articles – mostly tea, sugar, butter and cheese – and their quantities.

How the thought of this stodgy sustenance makes one long for the succulent papaya! So swollen with juice it falls from laden boughs on the gentlest breeze. English fare may derive from many more pots and pans, but a pudding of suet or ladle of gruel does not enliven the palate as does a bowl of turtle soup, the gleaming oyster slipping the tongue, a coconut creamed, or an orange that glows like the setting sun.

God may have spoken to the white men first, but surely he came home and sat at the table of Fiji for his dinner!

12 October 1834

I am a week without an entry in my journal, as each morning of the past five days has been spent with the Rev. Stevens in the small but well-stocked library, nestled between the galley and the quartermaster’s stores. First we unpacked the boxes of books loaded at Blackwall, before arranging them upon the shelves – minus several bawdy tales belonging to the captain, quite flushing the cheeks of Rev. Stevens upon closer inspection – and logging their contents, title, and author.

In the habits of the officious and paper-loving Englishman I am versed, and know well enough not to complain. But how he loves to invent a job! Several instances I had to bite my tongue on instruction from the Rev. Stevens, particularly when asked to rewrite the catalogue again by title rather than author. This laborious process of copying words from one place to another is to provide a reference list for the borrower – even though it is only the reverends, their wives, or the senior officers likely to be perusing the collection. All this importance to an arrangement of books that will be taken down and dispersed on our arrival in New Holland!

Such an invention of labour and importance I shall not miss. Though I have little doubt that both the good and bad habits of the white man will accompany his travels.

13 October 1834

Reading the final sentence of my last entry, I am moved to offer a few words to our Saviour:

Dear Lord, I pray that my apprehension for the future of my people, my fears for the earnest work of the missionaries, and the calamities of my imagination be wronged by your divine intentions. The passengers of this ship would not be the first of your harbingers to meet their maker on the end of a Fijian war club. Nor grace the feast of a chief with their very own cooked flesh. May your love and care keep us safe from harm. Amen.

14 October 1834

The further we sail from the shores of the British Isles, and the closer we get to my sunlit home, the more I am engaged in reflecting upon my adopted kingdom.

Beyond those cities of smoke and industry, a land scarred by factories and foundries, a people with so many hands busied producing more and more things whether useful or useless, it is the inner effect of this life that begins to trouble my soul.

Many times, be it in the court of a Lord or tavern of drinkers, I was asked whether I was homesick for my distant shore. Not wishing to offend, for a man does not visit the hut of his neighbour and talk of his own roof, I would answer their polite questions with compliments for the English soil I stood upon. Yet my heart was no diplomat. For the first time in my life, maybe in that of any Fijian, I understood the word lonely.

But I do not mean to be by oneself, without companions, for any Fijian knows that whether in the depths of the darkest forest, walking at dawn on an empty beach, or even diving the reef among silent fish, we are held by the hand of the Great Spirit, joined to the beat of breaking waves and wind in the leaves, all things singing life, together.

With or without God, lonely is a word carried by a man in a room full of strangers, along a busy street where he
does not know the names of those he passes, and offers neither greeting nor his hand in acknowledgement. This lonely is a state of being unshared, of private thoughts imprisoned and starved, wasting away without light or company. Even the closest families can live in loneliness, sitting at the same table each night for dinner, but wasting breath on triviality rather than sharing matters of the heart.

I am warmed at the thought of embracing my brothers, of clasping my mother and father tight to my chest. They are my very own blood, yet they may not recognise their own son, surely the first Fijian to be clothed in a suit from Savile Row.

22 October 1834

Nothing remarkable has occurred since my last entry over a week ago, and as the Caroline makes good progress on a favourable SE wind, we have little to do but tend to our duties assigned by the committee.

25 October 1834

The warmer climes and lightened breeze have given the missionaries and their families some aspect of what to expect beneath the southern sun – and how inappropriate to be clothed in a heavy cassock of black.

One would have thought that a lesson from the midday rays would educate the missionaries of the need to shed layers. Yet the zealous piety of Rev. Lilywhite has caused much grumbling among the seamen. On observing his wife taking her circuitous stroll among the sweating, half-naked sailors, the rev., a greying and frail man, moved more swiftly than one would have thought possible, scolding the bare-chested men and sharply ordering his wife below deck.

Has the Lord not created us in His image? If so, why is this a shape to be ashamed of?

27 October 1834

Dead calm. Fearing a vertical sun’s ‘sickening effects’ the missionaries have untied their hammocks, and along with the bedding, brought it upon the decks to be aired, thus affording the benefit of fresh air to their berths once the smoke had cleared from fumigation with tobacco and sulphur.

How the white body shrivels before the burning globe! It makes one think of pale worms dug from the dank soil. Blessed are we with skin cured dark from the glorious sun, free to enjoy its rays without layers of cloth and hats of straw!

2 November 1834

The torpor of a dead calm has finally passed, and not soon enough, as neither seaman nor missionary finds comfort with idle hands.

It is this incessant attention to time that I fear will frustrate my dear pilgrims the most. My Fijian brothers and sisters, and the ancients gone before them, were content to reckon time from the rising of the sun. Yet of all the unnatural obsessions of the West, even beyond the accumulation of power and status through money, the measure of success by metal and paper, it is time, the thing that cannot be held, kept, or driven by any will but that of the stars and the moon, of which the white man makes constant commotion.

The idea that each moment in each day can be divided and numbered, sliced into so many pieces like a sweet papaya, then again multiplied by the amount of days, weeks, and months in a year, will be a mystery to even the wisest chief.

When asked my age, I could only answer with a guess at the number of moons I have walked this earth, for the Fijian does not countdown his death in such a fashion. The enquirers duly felt sorry I had not a day reserved on the calendar to celebrate my birth, yet it was I who felt pity for them, a lament for the soul waiting to expire.

Time escapes the white man like a slippery fish, clutched too hard by the hungry hand. By not chasing something that cannot be caught, my brothers can live without haste and fear of a ticking clock. God has not enslaved us to his pocket watch. My people should be wary of the white man and his sickness of the passing day. We do not need more than what is between the rising and the setting of the sun.

5 November 1834
Further work on the dictionary has kept me from this journal, along with preparation for the Fijian lessons due to commence with Rev. Stevens, the only one of the brethren on-board to be stationed in my homeland.

I am both nervous and excited about assuming the role of teacher. The Rev. Lilywhite took me to one side this morning and reminded me of the responsibility invested in those with knowledge.

17 November 1834

Once again I have neglected my journal. I have missed this dialogue with the page, a chance to give form to thoughts I could not share with acquaintances considered more professional than friend.

Regardless, a dedicated teacher must be fully committed to his pupils, and much time has been spent preparing lessons for the Rev. Stevens, which normally would have been dedicated to this diary.

The rev. has been a model student, benefiting greatly from his studies of Hawaiian and the wider origins of the languages known as Malayo-Polynesian, of which Fijian is a member. On first learning that my mother tongue had cousins dotted across the Pacific, from Formosa to New Zealand, Easter Island to Madagascar, I was thrilled to hear how far our family had spread. There are chiefs who will deny this truth as malicious rumour. ‘Fijian is pure,’ they will bellow. ‘A single kingdom with a single tongue.’ Following which exclamation will be mistrust and suspicion of the white man, with only the magic of the musket, or the Gospel, to enforce the truth.

This bleak prediction of the future aside, it is with great pleasure that the Rev. Stevens and I sit and study, most generously offered the captain’s quarters while he is above deck supervising our journey south. Though I have resolved to be a tamer instructor than the Mistress Beaumont, I am committed to producing a competent speaker of Fijian, a man to stand before my brothers in the name of God and tell them to cast aside their false idols and heathen ways.
Stolen Car

He was lifted from his seat, weightless on earth. The car hung in the sky. For a few precious moments, Jimmy was an astronaut floating in space. All that had happened and would happen meant nothing. He was free.

And then the ground.

Glass sprayed in glittering arcs as the car flipped and toppled down the bank. Even when the world stopped turning, the wheels kept spinning. Strung upside down by the seat belt, he opened his eyes. A crimson ribbon unravelled on the surface of the stream. Blood dripping from his forehead. He unclicked the seat belt and splashed into the freezing water, then crawled through the broken window.

‘Now, you’re not going to start running, are you?’

The voice came from the clouds. He looked up to the bridge and saw black and silver uniforms, a blue light pulsing. The policemen watched him stagger like a drunk and fall face down in the rain-fast brook.

Two days before the crash, just as his teacher marked him down as absent, he had stood at the junction of the M1. Sunshine beamed through the grey and broken clouds. The shadows on ploughed fields drifted into each other like shifting continents. He watched the changing map. He listened to the traffic. It sliced through the water with a sound like hissing through teeth. He stepped back from the exploding puddles.

When no cars passed he took the penknife from his pocket and wiped the bloodied blade on the wet grass.

The first time he stuck out his thumb, a driver reined a truck on to the hard shoulder in a fanfare of air brakes and plumes of spray. The cargo was a mass of steel girders that shone through the rain. He ran along the kerb, pulled himself up to the passenger window and tapped on the glass. A bald man studying a map shooed him away. He jumped down from the step and called him a cunt. But no one heard or was there to listen anyway.

After an hour of waiting, of watching cars splash and pass, staring faces hanging in windows, he jogged over the slip road and under the bridge. He turned to the wall and pulled his numb hands from the sodden sleeves. The dried blood of another life cracked across his skin. He fumbled with the buttons, desperate for a slash, dead hands, paled and paralysed with cold. His piss was luminous yellow. Steam rose to the roof, dry and dusty with blackened cobwebs, shuddering with the weight of roaring traffic.

He shivered when he finished, thought of him walking on his mother’s grave.

From the next change of lights a black Mercedes pulled over. The driver pressed the horn twice, and again, Jimmy ran along the kerb. He bent over at the passenger window and a Pakistani man in a navy suit put the glass down.

‘You goin’ London, mate?’

‘I stop forty miles before M25. I can drop you at the services.’

‘Sound.’

The Mercedes door shut with a satisfied clump.

‘Cheers.’

Jimmy had never been to London, but this is where people from the North go when they run away.

‘You look cold.’

‘Fuckin’ freezing.’

Jimmy shuffled in his seat and sniffed. The leather squeaked against his wet jeans, muddied and flecked with the same red clay that covered his trainers.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the driver. ‘It’s a good heater.’ He drove the tilt of the slip road and eased into the southbound flow.

‘Nice car, mate.’

‘You think it’s mine?’ He smiled and drove on. ‘I drive diplomats and foreign dignitaries. To and from the airport. Meetings, lunches, you know.’

No. Jimmy didn’t know. He sat back in the seat and rubbed his hands in the stream of hot air from the vent. The driver looked across smiling, assured, nodding. As though he divined his past, present, and future.

‘So, what is it you’ve done?’

‘Eh?’

‘Or what is it you’re going to do?’

‘Just goin’ to see me auntie, mate.’
‘Of course, of course.’
They drove on in silence. Jimmy looked to the hedges and pylons stepping off into sheets of rain. Then the driver looked across again.

‘What do you think people see when they look at you standing there? By the side of the road.’
Jimmy sniffed and creased his forehead. ‘Probably think I’m gonna rob ‘em or somethin’.’ He shrugged. ‘I dunno, mate.’
‘You’re a distance they’ve never been to.’
‘What?’
‘Sorry. Maybe I don’t make sense sometimes. My English.’ He switched on the wipers and spoke his name. All Jimmy heard was a muddle of sounds. ‘And yours?’
‘James. But most people call me Jimmy.’
He nodded. Weighed it like it was of the greatest significance. The traffic was slowing in the rain and he changed from the inside to the middle lane.

‘Life is very curious, you know. When I was a boy I had a rifle of my own but no shoes.’
He stopped and thought about his words, looked ahead, through the rain-splashed windscreen.

‘At your age, I lived in a village of sticks and stones. I collected firewood for my family, threw rocks at snakes, played cricket with a bat made from a banana tree. How could I imagine all this, right now, driving in this rain, this car, seeing these people, speaking this language. How am I here?’
A white van cut dangerously in front of his bumper. He hit the horn with the heel of his palm.

‘Is this what I wanted? Driving in British rain thinking of Pakistan?’
The motorway turned into a swirl of blue and yellow lights, mobile signs with flashing arrows. Policemen in fluorescent jackets were slowing and filtering traffic along the hard shoulder. Each space was contested and tight, and he slowed to nudge through.

It was raining hard as they passed the first ambulance and fire engine. Three cars had piled into the back of a truck and lay crumpled like a buckled concertina. Firemen cut through the roof of a crushed Mini with hydraulic scissors. The trailer had been carrying a load of steel girders that now lay skewed on the mangled cab. Jimmy looked for the switch to put the window down. It was the same truck he thought had stopped for him an hour ago. When the driver had slammed on the brakes, the weight of the steel had slipped and cleaved off the cab. Twisted metal lay beneath the slant of toppled silver. Blood drained from the wreck and pooled thinly on the road. It seemed too much for just one man. Jimmy looked at the diluting pool, losing its colour in the rain.

Paler than the life he had leaked from a man the previous night.
The traffic fanned out and they drove on through pouring rain. The sky was lighter to the west and the sun fell bright and sudden on a new estate. It looked like some mirage of town that would disappear if they ever turned towards it.

‘We’ll be at the services soon.’
The black clouds cleared. Sun blazed up from the road in a dazzle of watery reflections. The driver indicated to the slip road that led on to the services and turned towards the main car park.

‘I think you’re a good man, Jimmy.’ He pulled up before the entrance to the shops. ‘Listen,’ he said as Jimmy lifted the lock. ‘When you run from somewhere you never really leave. People hold us like ghosts in their memories. We hold people like ghosts in our memories. We’re forever haunting or being haunted.’
‘I don’t understand.’
‘When you understand, then it’ll be true.’
Jimmy said thanks for the ride and that he would try to remember his words.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ the driver called through the open window. ‘You’re a young man and can’t be stopped.’
I slide the vinyl from the sleeve, swivel the disc in my fingertips and carefully place Billy K and his band on the turntable. They hiss and crackle, come alive in the groove. I have goose bumps. I close my eyes and I’m there again, in the Dog and Gun, reporting on my third ever gig. When I hear his plaintive cry, my soul sails from my body. Billy K is alive. It’s as though he’s in the room, and I’m afraid to open my eyes until the record stops, afraid of what I might see. Then the grooves run out, a hiss and crackle, silence. A blow to my stomach. The abandoned car on a Cornish cliff top. If his ghost’s in the room, he must be dead. But I don’t believe in ghosts, life after death. I believe in songs, music after death. And who says he’s dead? I don’t know, and neither does anybody else. The only clue he left us was his life.

The first time Billy K – plain Barry Fulton before the big time – felt the full weight of an electric guitar he was four years old. He toppled it from the metal stand in the lounge and dragged it by the neck across the kitchen floor. When his alcoholic father swore, Barry dropped it clanging to the floor. He ran screaming from the room with a scarlet handprint across his backside.

Mick Fulton left and the guitar stayed. His mother kept it as a divorce trophy, letting dust settle on the polished gleam. The day her panel beater boyfriend carried his suitcase up the stairs, she tossed the 1962 Les Paul into the loft.

Barry hated music class. He whistled ‘Three Blind Mice’ on the recorder at the pitch of screeching bats. The music teacher ordered him to play properly or leave the room. He kicked over a xylophone and walked out. His creative talent was spent playing football, or fighting. He often came home from school with cut knees and torn trousers. Reports noted he swayed between ‘moody self-exclusion, and demands to be the absolute centre of attention’.

Life changed course when he broke his leg. Dared to leap from the assembly hall roof before an audience of hundreds, he tied his coat into a cape and flew. The adrenaline surge from the screaming girls and awestruck boys enabled him to stand up and walk away with a shattered tibia.

Home alone with his itching cast, he watched TV for days. On the hunt for hidden porn he opened the stepladder and hopped into the loft. When he hauled himself into the musty space, the ladder toppled. He found the electric guitar but no naked women. He sat with the cast leg on a beam, the guitar across his lap. He picked tunelessly, twanged nonsense through the empty house. From a cardboard box, he pulled out Frets and Folk Hits – Learn to play the guitar. He clawed his hand and arranged his fingers as instructed. He warbled ‘Michael row your boat’ before his stepfather came home and knocked him to the floor. Compared to the numb burn in his fingertips, the slap was nothing.

Everyday for the next month he climbed into the roof and played the guitar. He flipped the guitar upside down, tinkled with the bridge, picked at a single note for hours. He struck chords and held the thrum a centimetre from his cheek, feeling the air ripple his inner ear, tuning his being to the sound of six, shivering strings.

His first concert was for his first girlfriend, Michelle Brook. She sat on his bed, hypnotised by the bad boy in soft focus. ‘It was something magical,’ remembers Michelle. ‘Barry was so beautiful that day. We skipped school and ran across the fields to his house. Nobody had any idea he could play the guitar, he was seen as a bit of a thug really, well, until he started strumming.’ In his cramped bedroom, Barry felt the power of performance, the boy shaman and his first follower.

Now sixteen, he stole every spare second of the day to practise. Riffs and licks turned to songs. His early lyrics were musical accompaniment rather than literary statement. He wrote ‘Chemical High’ before he’d taken anything stronger than an aspirin. Once the pariah of his music class, Barry was now its star pupil, a shining example of
delinquent tamed by the power of song, composition and application. He acquired the beginnings of Spanish and Flamenco styles, learned how to read music, to decipher the dots, lines and bars into rhythm and sound.

The night he slipped into his first gig at the Dog and Gun, he arguably discovered rock 'n' roll. He stood next to the amps. His skin prickled in the surge of hissing current. The walls perspired with the heat of the simpering crowd. And the nerves, not of the band, but of the fans, the crushed bodies barging the barriers, levering out spaces and gaps to dance or sway, to be part of something bigger than themselves.

And what a night he chose for a baptism of live music. Sets by the Fun House, then a scarcely known punk and ska outfit, had been described by journalist Harry Fenway as: ‘Nights of complete mind and bodily abandon, where crowd surfers hovered like coffinless icons’.

Barry dropped out of school the next day. He got work in a record shop and glimpsed something of the future, the nature of obsession, how people lived through a leather-clad rock star or piano-playing diva. And that for some, a disc of grooved vinyl gave more meaning to existence than work, family, or God.

No more than a pub with a backyard, the Dog and Gun was a venue with soul, jamming the crowd against the stage, the crooked redbrick walls of the adjacent brewery funnelling sound through the heaving audience. It was here Barry witnessed the conception of ‘Thunderstruck’, ‘Fuck the Money’, ‘Stormy Monday’, and not forgetting the brief but sonic boom of ‘Snipers on the Roof’.

Now approaching his eighteenth birthday, Barry was not just under the influence of music. He began experimentation with drugs that never reached a conclusion. Speed before the gigs, weed and whiskey on the comedown. It was during this cliché apprenticeship of sex, drugs, and, yes, rock 'n' roll, that Barry’s home life disintegrated.

If not at work, listening to records and thumbing through stock for lost classics, he was busking on the street. But the pavement became his best friend. Kicked out by his stepfather, with just his beloved Les Paul and the clothes he was wearing, he slept in the storeroom of the record shop, on the floor between stacks of forgotten LPs by forgotten artists. Each morning he woke and looked at the faded sleeves, the dog-eared albums nobody listened to any more. He vowed never to end up a dust-covered singer at the bottom of a box.

Strut, a local support band playing covers in working men’s clubs, hadn’t even reached the stage of forgotten record. Barry heard them play in a Battle of the Bands and thought them nothing special, just another collection of young men clunking through the numbers. Then he realised in fact they were perfect, the foundation to launch more spectacular sounds, missing everything he possessed.

On a rainy Monday evening, before an audience of nineteen, the Notorious was born. During the Strut soundcheck, while the Feeney brothers tuned up and Ronnie Strong adjusted his bass pedal, Barry took the stage and plugged in his guitar. He ripped their opening number into a scintillating burst of gravel and gold. The voice of a whiskey-beaten choirboy that would fill stadiums on every continent stopped them dead.

‘I was there,’ brags doorman on the night, Tony Mann. ‘And I thought, fuck, this kid’s something special. I probably should’ve been checking his ID, but once he started singing all I could do was stand there and listen.’

Though younger than the rest of the band, with no experience of gigging, getting up before an audience, dodging bottles and pool balls, Barry naturally took the spotlight. He riffed zest into stale songs, put words to music as easily as he breathed.

Only a week later, after three rehearsals in a garage, they debuted at the Dog. Gigs boomed exponentially. Fifty, one hundred, two hundred, four hundred fans outside in the cold, climbing fences and back walls, already a bootleg passing hands, all for the boy wonder and his band.

Ronnie Strong nicknamed Barry, Billy the Kid, fastest fingers on the frets. This then shortened to Billy K, and the day he signed with Gecko Vinyl, Barry Fulton died. He never used his given name on a contract again. CEO Ricky Wise gushed to the press, ‘This is the sound discovery of the summer, the year, in fact the decade. I have nothing to do for this band. No delay-release strategies, no bartered playtime with tin god DJs or blowhard promoters. The music, Billy K and the boys will ride their own wave into rock 'n' roll history.’

‘Fires and Lies’ shot straight to number one. TV, radio, festivals and talk shows shook with the Notorious. Billy K, still shy in interviews hiding behind his sunglasses, left the talking to Ronnie and Tommy.

Dr Jekyll offstage and Mr Hyde performing, Billy K began the life of a rock god tentatively. On stage he transformed before the baying fans, twisting and thrusting, naked from the waist up, each and every muscle taut with the music and the screams. Behind the scenes he was the whirring devirish come to rest, energy drained and vulnerable.

The Notorious, still only two singles and an imminent album old, were originally billed as support for the Saturday night at Reading when the Infantiles self-destructed in a Paris hotel room. Thrust before 100,000 sweltering festivalgoers, Billy K took the stage as though he’d walked into his own living room. He performed such a pitch-perfect set that even if it had rained the crowd could’ve walked on water.
Billy K, the boy who’d played his first concert to an audience of one, who’d been kicked on to the street with just the clothes on his back and his electric guitar, who’d slept between the records of has-beens and dead singers, now found every second of his life, each breath he took and word he uttered, recorded and scrutinised, edited to a sound bite, set between the pages of a magazine above his picture, the curly haired Adonis of youth, adored by the men who wanted to be him, the women who wanted him, the schoolgirls and housewives, beating at the glass of the tour bus and limousine, rushing the stage to offer their bodies, to reach out and touch, transforming a boy with a guitar into a man with a legion of fanatics.

For rock ’n’ roll stars barely in their twenties, young, good-looking, talented and virile, the Notorious were angels with instruments – apart from the occasional spliff and post-gig booze-up, hotel rooms and TV screens remained intact.

But starved paparazzi had column space to fill. Billy K read about his fictional orgies and coke binges, recorded with such detail and clarity that he wondered if they’d somehow occurred without his knowing. His subsequent fall from grace was as though he’d decided he might as well become the rock demon press and public portrayed, that Billy K should jump off the stage into the fiery pit fans and journalists had tended for him.

The louder the gig, the greater the rush of sound and screaming fans, the higher the crowd surfer rose above the stage, the lower the post-gig comedown. To upend his mood, Billy K, like his peers past and present, took drugs, smashed up rooms, had sex, and drank. He became the ultimate enfant terrible.

On return from tour he bought the warehouse home in East London, paying in cash with a carrier bag full of fifty-pound notes. While the Feeney brothers headed north for a break from the scene, Billy K and Ronnie stormed the capital as though each night was the last of their lives.

Gecko lawyers first defended Billy K on charges of public disorder and the breaking of an archaic byelaw: ‘Negligent animal husbandry within a mile of the Houses of Parliament.’ When Billy K and Ronnie released a lorryload of spray-painted sheep into Trafalgar Square, each one sheared and luminous green, bleating down Whitehall with pink earmuffs and an anagram of the Notorious as a mock brand on their rump, lawyers claimed ‘political statement’ rather than a puerile stunt, and Ronnie and Billy K escaped with cautions.

Fines dealt with a soliciting charge in Rome, and arrests for cannabis and cocaine possession resulted in nothing more than a week’s stay at a rehab clinic. These ‘misadventures’ enhanced his reputation as the tortured artist – too talented and sensitive to play by the rules of us lesser mortals – and it was only his fleeting, but intense relationship with 48-year-old Czech born actress, Zdenka Vandova, that gave a brief respite for the Gecko lawyers.

The press needed no Freudian experts to conclude the toy boy calmed in the company of a much needed mother replacement. Since the night he was cast out on to the street, he hadn’t spoken to or accepted a single phone call from any member of his family. Billy K was eight when his natural father was killed with a tyre iron in a pub car park. His stepfather beat him, and he’d never forgiven his mother for allowing her lover to throw her only son on to the pavement.

It was during this hiatus of rock-star tomfoolery that Billy K penned ‘Love at the Speed of Light’. Many of the original drafts still remain on public display, as Billy K wrote, scratched, sprayed, carved and burned the words and music on to whatever surface was at hand when the muse called. The toilet door from New York nightspot the Confession Club has been suspended by steel cables in the domed reception, adorned by the lipstick-painted lyrics to ‘The Last Show on Earth’:

On this night of dying light,
your shadow on the floor like a stain
or ghost,
the book face down and
streaming words,
I watch you strip,
see the universe blaze on skin,
the runaway stars
come home.

Stadiums, concert halls and clubs packed out and pulsed with Billy K and the Notorious. New songs still jumped and jerked on the raw energy of youth, but now navigated the listener through deeper, more complex emotions.

Until Zdenka appeared on the front page of Fame, massaging tanning oil into the corpulent body of her former husband, Gene Fontaine, on his Monaco yacht, Billy K had focused the band with the acumen of a master conductor.

Little is known about his brief disappearance after the headline infidelity of his supposed lover. Ricky Wise cancelled dates in Barcelona and Madrid, covering up the vanishing of his star with a tonsillitis scare. Only a week
later, a day after the attempted shooting of Fontaine in his swimming pool, did Billy K surface again, performing a subdued set for disappointed fans in Berlin.

While the gendarmes questioned him about the ‘missing week’, no formal inquiries were pursued. However, Gecko lawyers issued writs and demands for retractions of tabloid speculation venturing on accusation.

From Sydney to San Francisco, for a month after the split with Zdenka, Billy K played and sung for his very life. Performance was his raison d’être, and the world beyond the stage was nothing more than distraction between him, his guitar and a microphone.

But tiffs and tantrums marred the post-gig comedowns. Billy K fired roadie Mitch North, then immediately rehired him as his personal drug mule, buyer and pimp. ‘He was just permanently wired,’ recalls Mitch. ‘Before he had a bit of peace after a concert, downtime. Then after Zdenka it went nuts. If he wasn’t singing, he was snorting, smoking, or having sex.’

His guitar was his security blanket. No technician was permitted to touch his beloved Les Paul, let alone soundcheck. Then to watch him play, caress, and fan his fingers across the six strings, who would have dared come between Billy K and his object of desire?

Thanks to Ricky Wise and an envelope stuffed with euros, Billy K dodged jail for his rented lover in Rome. Another time, against a charge of ‘Gross sexual indecency in a public place’, the state prosecutor of Oregon wasn’t about to be palmed off by a record exec in a tailored suit – though the saxophone-playing judge would later be spotted in a Chicago nightclub at the table of Wise.

Before a set of 20,000 fans, the ‘gross sexual indecency’ was allowing 22-year-old Veronica Fry to climb onstage and unbutton his trousers. Billy K did not resist her advance.

On his release, the Seattle Star quoted Billy K as saying, ‘I had the time of my life.’ Two weeks of prison, before the judge threw out the case, had allowed him to take a breather from the baying press and screaming fans. During the internment he scratched a whole new album on to the ceramic walls. He even asked if he could purchase the tiles lining his cell. Warden Brubaker refused, declaring his etchings, ‘Nothing more than typical and wanton disregard for state property that is endemic of a generation lacking respect and, dare I say, artistic aptitude.’ The angry thrash of ‘The Philistine Burns with Eyes Closed’ was dedicated to him.

The Lightspeed tour finished in Europe. And so did the band. At the Red Square Rocks concert, Billy K slipped offstage mid-set, replacing himself in Houdini-like fashion with a pre-briefed, pre-rehearsed double, who for two songs fooled both the band and crowd.

For the Feeney brothers this proved that Billy K was superfluous to the sound. ‘He took the piss,’ said Tommy. ‘He got bigger than the band, bigger than us, when we were all just as talented as he was.’

How wrong they were, embarking on a lacklustre album that proved only their mediocrity without the sparkling brilliance of their lead singer or drummer Ronnie Strong, who along with Billy K fronted the slimmer, louder, pared-down sound of the Notorious.

Again, his arcadia was a studio. Involved in the production, mixing, as well as playing bass on four of the tracks, Show Me the Sky was his coming-of-age record. Slower, more intelligent, yet still bristling with the angst let loose on previous albums, it was another global smash.

Despite the success, he began to spend more time away from prying eyes at his sprawling manor in Cornwall. TV interviews and live performances were scarce. Rumours he was training with the Russian Space Agency circulated on news of zero gravity flights he took on a free-falling airliner above Siberia.

In an act of generosity we must now analyse as a precursor to his ‘disappearance’, Billy K auctioned off almost everything he owned. Music awards, furniture, cars, an antique jukebox, his three Persian cats, and the warehouse in East London. Sotheby’s auction director Harold Wapshott would only comment that, ‘Mr K was adamant that not a single possession remain in his property. All belongings went under the hammer, or into the skip.’

Homeless charities received all monies raised from the sale. When police searched his Cornish mansion they discovered floorboards stripped of carpet, rooms devoid of fixtures and fittings. His final possessions were a reed mat, a penny-farthing, and his empty guitar case. The Les Paul has never been located. Score marks on the floorboards were attributed to the solid rubber tyres of the antique bicycle. His final days had seemingly been spent sleeping on the reed mat, riding a bicycle around an empty house, and strumming his beloved guitar.

Had the teen-turned-rock-legend burned out? Has he joined the other doomed icons too delicate to survive the chaos and fury of their own fame?

He’s been spotted on every continent. Mediums have conversed with his floating soul and transcribed their conversations for Sunday magazines. A Cornish farmer swears he saw him pilot a microlight towards France. A plastic surgeon in Sao Paolo sculpted him a new face. Zdenka kidnapped him. Gene Fontaine killed him. Ricky Wise has imprisoned him until he records a new album.

A year on since his disappearance, police have drafted extra officers to pursue the deluge of reported sightings. So
far, all have proved to be dead ends. Inspector James Dent, leading officer on the case, and much maligned for lack of progress, has refused to speculate on whether murder is a line of inquiry.

The tragic fact is that Billy K, singer and guitarist of the Notorious, who streaked across our heavens with a comet-like burn of glory, is still, by legal and spiritual definition, Missing in Action.
Morning rush hour in downtown Sydney. Towers of the Central Business District reach for the sun. Below, commuters step through sliding doors, footfall the rhythm of daily routine. In two hundred years, from a harbour of wooden ships filled with marines and convicts, aborigines on the shore with painted skin and ancient song, to a city of steel and glass, a way of life erased.

I have to think what day it is.
Wednesday.

By now the rest of the bureau will know I’m AWOL.

I feel the weight of my cell phone in my jacket pocket. It’s switched off. If I turn it on there’ll be messages. An irate Roberts, a concerned Meg. Or is this wishful thinking? Anna will be angry, furious even, that I turned to smoke on a Qantas plane. Then the anger will be worry, hurt. But if I think of her now, I’ll end up catching the next flight home.

I take the phone from my pocket. Inside the maze of microchips and solder, there are names, numbers and hundreds of photos, mostly of Gemma. The wallpaper is a shot of her in Regent’s Park feeding the ducks. With her big green eyes and floppy blond curls, she can extract a chocolate bar from me at will.

I clip off the back cover, slide the memory stick out, and dump the phone in the nearest bin. Carefully I wrap the memory stick in an old receipt, and slip it into my wallet.

I tell myself I couldn’t have kept the phone, even switched off. The temptation to check for messages would defeat my lonelier moments. Feeling guilty for making those who love me worry, I keep walking, towards the shopping district, every step closer to him, Billy K.

And I think of Robbie Reynolds, a legend of the estate I grew up on. We estimate he nicked a thousand cars in less than five years. His secret? He said the first thing he did after starting up the engine was to rip off all the mirrors. No need to look backwards when he was going forwards. No time for glancing over his shoulder with a pedal pressed to the floor. And it worked, because he was never caught.

Until he was shot in the face, double-crossed by the thugs he was driving a getaway car for. Killed the only time he turned around.

So the tossed-away phone is the ripped-off mirror, no looking back now. Maybe to catch Billy K, to understand how and why he vanished, I have to disappear too.

It’s hardly the first time I’ve run.
In a large, bright, empty department store, I fill a basket with shirts, underwear, trousers, jeans, shorts, and a pair of dark trainers. The cashier watches me peel notes from the fat roll.

Outside I find the nearest public toilet, duck into a cubicle and change into my new outfit. I leave my stale clothes folded on the cistern, and step out on to the sunlit streets, flowing with the surge of late commuters and office workers.

I feel so light I could be blown to the sky.

After an hour drifting streets and parks, afraid to actually sit and think about Billy K, I walk round the Botanic Gardens mindlessly reading plant names: kangaroo paws, flannel flowers, paper daisies. Signs in the ‘Palm Grove’ date the trees from the 1820s, and I wonder if Nelson Babbage strolled these very same paths on his stop here in 1834.
We should have investigated Ms Draycott more thoroughly before flying out to Fiji. My mistake. It all sounded so promising, an Australian marine biologist, researching parrot fish in the South Pacific, seemed a woman possessing the scientific rigour necessary to state fact before fiction.

But she was also a founding member of the Oceania branch of the K Club, fan club of the Notorious.

Ms Draycott contacted the Met after a Fijian member of her research team recounted meeting a ukulele-playing Englishman ‘living and singing like a local’ on a visit to Tavu Na Sici, an island located several hundred miles from the mainland in the southern Lau group. What astounded Ms Draycott, and myself, was that when addressed in English, the young man either replied in pidgin Fijian, or simply quoted passages from *Show Me the Sky* – the book discovered in the glovebox of Billy K’s abandoned Lotus, minus the last page.

And I was desperate for a lead.

I knew she was president of the the K Club but avoided asking myself if she was just another nut making up fairy tales. She was adamant it was him, Billy K, castaway in the South Pacific. So I convinced the chief super this was our man.

Even though Ms Draycott had never met Billy K, I believe she was truly in love. She couldn’t bear the fact he was gone so resurrected him, washed up on Tavu Na Sici. And Billy K lived until we stepped ashore and Ms Draycott started wailing. Because by arriving on the island we actually killed the myth.

And I take the blame. Entirely. I was in charge. I’d become that much of a bear my colleagues were afraid of speaking their mind.

Bad policing.

Along with his electric guitar, a pair of jeans and a white shirt, we know Billy K vanished with the final page torn from his copy of *Show Me the Sky*.

If his songs, lyrics, and even conversations were not obsessed with escape, I’d mortgage my house on foul play. But he wanted to fly. I’m sure of that much. And the journal was a pair of wings, a lost manuscript discovered by a lost motorcyclist in the Australian outback. No wonder the teen star found kinship in a Fijian boy brought to England and groomed by the church, an identity manufactured by third parties.

*Show Me the Sky* is all I have to go on. Every other lead has been exhausted, the reported sightings and forensic tests, even the visions of deranged fans. But what kind of lead is this? The church, not surprisingly, will only acknowledge that there was a Fijian translator on the *Caroline* voyage to the Pacific, accompanied by a Reverend Thomas. The final entries of the journal, which Billy is, or was, most occupied with, can’t be confirmed as fiction or truth.

Therefore this will be my starting point. It’s all I have left. I missed the plane home because I don’t have a lead, not because I do. Monique Cabanne, French girlfriend of the motorcyclist who discovered the manuscript, is now settled on a homestead south of Alice Springs.

I scan the case contact list and find her number. Then, covering the tracks of a Jim Dent trail, I make the call as a Dr Adams from the University of East London. Maybe I’m paranoid, thinly disguising my identity, thinking my disappearance more important than it actually is. But I’d rather be paranoid than caught, pulled from a case I’ve lost a year of my life on.

‘Researching the manuscript,’ I lie. Ms Cabanne agrees to meet me at her home tomorrow. ‘It would be great help to the faculty,’ I enthuse.

I kid myself I have a mission, a tangible goal. I ask the cashier the best way to Coober Pedy, an opal mining town in the outback of South Australia. He directs me to the coach station, tells me it’s a town in the middle of nowhere.

I walk the wide streets with a carrier bag of clothes.

I sleep on the coach, the sleep of a dead man, dreamless and empty. When I wake just before dawn, the bus is cutting through a glowing moonscape of low, craggy hills. And looking from this tinted window to the reeling
scenery, I’m a boy again, a ten-year-old on a trip to the seaside, the three of us together, my mother and Gary, my younger brother. The days before my stepfather. I used to scream if not sat by the window, head pressed to the glass, watching the trees and fields rolling past, imagining myself astride a white horse with a flowing mane. While Gary scrawled in colouring books, and mum circled names of flowers in a bumper wordsearch, I galloped across meadows and leaped over streams, raced to the tops of hills and danced across rooftops, felt the thunder of hooves in the hollow of my bones.

No wonder I made a career chasing those who’ve bolted.

The coach squeals to a halt by a gas station. And I’m glad to stand, shake off sleep. I wake with such physical longing for my mother and brother that I wonder if I close my eyes I could travel time, inhabit again that ten-year-old on a trip to the beach, unclipping the lid from a plastic lunchbox and pulling out a cheese and pickle sandwich. Before the driver called out ‘Coober Pedy’ I swear I heard my mother ask if I wanted a biscuit.

But she didn’t. And I’m here, in the middle of nowhere.

British, Dutch, and German backpackers crowd the aisle with tents and sleeping rolls. I carry a plastic bag with my one change of clothes. I want no awkward small talk with other travellers, and keep my head down as I pass a huddle turning a map looking for the youth hostel. I head in the opposite direction, go by two bottle shops, and several boutiques selling opal. Looming above the frontier town is the Big Winch, a remnant of better days digging precious stone from these dusty plains.

Temperatures reach 50 degrees in the summer, and locals have tunneled homes out of the red rock, hiding from the simmering heat like gophers. I stop and stare at the descending staircase of the Catacombs Hotel. But when I imagine curling up to sleep in a hole in the ground, I feel tightness in my chest, and walk on.

Beyond more souvenir shops, another liquor store, a sporting goods shop selling hunting rifles, and a peeling billboard advertising a grassless golf course, I read that the Prince Albert Hotel has vacancies.

In the gloomy bar men sit on high stools, construction workers with muddy boots and pitchers of beer. It’s only 10 a.m. The TV flickers with a rugby league match. I ask the barman about a room, and without looking at me, he says, ‘Other door.’

I go back outside to the next entrance along. An aboriginal woman is also watching TV, but a different channel, a soap opera with cardboard characters on a cardboard set. She glances from the TV and says, ‘Thirty dollars a night. No breakfast.’ I unpeel three tens from my roll. She reaches up to the keys hung on a row of hooks and plucks number 32. ‘Third floor. Lift’s broke.’

A dump, a fucking dive. This is what I think walking up the stairs with my plastic bag. But this is what I want. No comfort. I’m the barefoot monk in the snow, the firewalker on white-hot embers. No distraction from the case, the state of my life, when I’m brushing dead cockroaches from a bed sheet.

From my window, once I slide back a rickety mosquito screen, I can see a dirt yard patrolled by two mangy dogs. Beyond the mesh fence is a second-hand car dealership, or maybe a scrap yard. Looking at the hulks of cars corroding in the desert winds that sweep off these vast plains, it could be either. But somewhere in this desolation of space, beyond the glitter of cracked windscreens bouncing the relentless sun, Monique Cabanne has made her home.

The man at the tourist information booth suggests I rent a bike to get to her house. I pay $20 and leave my passport as a deposit. Just in case I ride into the desert and never return.

I raise the seat, check the map and follow the wobbly pen line drawn by the assistant. Not a hill or dale in town, and I ride easily through the quiet, glaring streets, past a man jogging, then a woman changing the wheel on a beaten-up ute.

Beyond the houses and asphalt I pedal an unsealed road, winding between small knolls of rock, many cut and drilled into subterranean homes, like burrows.

On the edge of town, before civilisation gives way to desert, dingoes and snakes, I find the house of Monique Cabanne. She lives in a rock home. Crude windows dot the walls at different heights. I kick out the bike stand, knock on the door, and reach into my top pocket.

There I have a Dictaphone. Before boarding the bus, I walked into an electrical shop to buy a device small enough to conceal on my person. Certain protocols and ethics don’t apply to police officers outside their jurisdiction. Like requiring permission to record private conversations.

‘Hello, Ms Cabanne?’
‘You must be Dr Adams. Please, please. Come in.’
‘Thank you for seeing me.’
‘No problem.’
‘At such short notice.’
‘Really. No worries. Ha, ha! You see I even speak Australian now. Have a seat.’
'Thank you. What an amazing place. I imagined it would be cramped and dark, but all the windows really spread the light. Coober Pedy feels like the real outback. Well, whatever that is.'

'They filmed Mad Max III here. Have you had a chance to see the Oldtimer’s Mine, the opal reefs?'

'Not yet, no.'

'You should go to Crocodile Harry’s.'

'Sounds ominous.'

'No, no. It’s just one of the dugouts, a huge cave home.'

'Maybe later.'

'Iced tea? Beer?'

'Tea, thanks.'

'You haven’t been in Australia long enough. Not many Aussies take tea before beer.'

'Well, I am working. Here at the expense of the university.'

'The University of … ?'

'East London. I’m a doctor of South Pacific history.'

'So that’s the interest in the manuscript. And who found it.'

'Yes, yes. It would be interesting to know as much as possible about the circumstances surrounding the finding.'

'Two years I have talked to not one person about this, then two of you arrive at my door in the space of two weeks. Amazing.'

'Two of us?'

'A childhood friend of Cal’s. Philip Bell. Said he wanted to meet me, to know more about his friend.'

'That’s quite a coincidence.'

'After what happened, you know, I think I need other people to make me talk. It was hard enough breaking the news to his family, well, if you could call them his family. But you want to know something more about the manuscript, the journal?'

'Yes, and how Cal found it.'

'We were only together a month. But for three of those weeks it was the two of us on his motorbike. He’d just arrived in Darwin from London, and needed to shake off the city before crossing the deserts. He knew I’d cycled all the way from Adelaide, and his chat-up line was something about me saving his life, and if I didn’t teach him a few tricks of the desert he’d probably get lost and die. I told him this wasn’t funny, that he should take the outback seriously. Forget the snakes and spiders, it’s no water that will kill you.'

'I’m sorry.'

'Don’t be. It’s good for me to talk. I think. Again he came to me and said I should be his teacher. I said no, he should learn himself. But really I liked him. He was direct. What do you say, cheeky?'

'Ha. Yeah, cheeky.'

'It took me a few days to lose the solitude of the desert. I’d been cycling alone for weeks, months. I forgot how to communicate, have fun, and, you know, be admired. But he was very persistent, and finally I gave in.'

'Did you travel together?'

'He was going where I’d already been, the central deserts. He was typical English bravado, wanted to conquer the sands like Lawrence of Arabia. And something else about his drive, some trauma he was running from. But this only made him more interesting to me. Anyway, I told him to use his brain before his body. Before his journey south we went on a little trip to Kakadu, you know, to see the crocodiles and the giant lilies, and then on to Litchfield Park. We toured around for three weeks on his motorbike. For ten days it was just the two of us, completely alone. We took turns on the pillion. He was impressed how I rode, and we went deeper into the park, off the tracks, camping by the springs and waterfalls. So beautiful. Cooking at dusk, talking around the fire, then … then the morning, swimming naked in the streams and rock pools with the little silver fish. We were Adam and Eve. Time stretched for ever. We found aboriginal paintings, pictures of humans transformed into animals, flying, dancing, giving birth to the world. We could’ve stayed for weeks but we finally ran out of food. Because we were afraid of leaving the bush we actually fasted for a day and night, only drinking from the stream. Hungry yes, but for each other, not food. Then finally we had to go. Now, I don’t believe in signs, you know, omens. But on the way from the park, we had to ride between the bushfires. Huge, some of them, the smoke so black against the blue sky. Let me show you something … One moment. I have a picture.'

'Of the bushfires?'

'And Cal … Here.'

'Wow. You’re so close to the flames. Who took it?'

'The timer. I told you he was crazy. He rode right up to the fire, jumped off the bike and put the camera on a rock. About ten seconds after this picture, this tree here, just exploded. Whooosh. A firework. And Cal was laughing and
laughing, the sparks showering us as we rode away … riding and laughing … Excuse me.’

‘I’m sorry, really. I didn’t mean to make you upset. Here, I have a tissue.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I’m sorry to bring all this back.’

‘It’s OK. I’ve kept too much inside for too long. This is why I couldn’t stay in France. I had to come back here, to the desert, and the sky.’

‘Not a lonely place to live?’

‘There is more life than meets the eye in the desert. And anyway, I share this home with my fiancé.’

‘A fiancé? Is he French too?’

‘Australian, part aborigine. And you?’

‘Erm … separated. I have a daughter, four years old. Gemma. But anyway, we don’t want to hear about me. Now, I’m sure it’s not easy to talk about, but …’

‘No. But, well … I want to … You know I said I would travel with him, that we could ride the Sandover Highway together. But he said he needed to go alone, to know himself in all that space. So a week later I’m waiting in Mount Isa. One day, two days worrying where he was. Then I decided to call the police, first in Mount Isa, then Alice Springs. Both the officers told me the track was clear, and they had no reports of anyone lost. I told them he was late to meet me and they asked if he was a relative or my husband. I said no, and then they asked if he was my boyfriend. When I said I was not sure, they presumed the same as me. That he had stood me up. They thought I was some, how do you say, erm, fling? Yes, some fling he had forgotten. I waited one more day, then called the Alice Springs officer one more time. He told me a friend of his from Cairns had arrived that morning, by 4WD via the Sandover Highway. Then he began to lecture me that “a young fella needs to spread his wings”. I slammed the phone down. I was angry at Cal two times. One, he had just walked away from me. Two, he had not the sense to let me know he wasn’t coming. This was more than courtesy. Anyone travelling across a desert for a date needs to say if they’re late. Or not arriving at all … I was so angry. And all that time he was crawling across the sand … thinking of me.’

‘I’m so sorry, Monique … so sorry.’

‘I actually left Mount Isa for Cairns. I thought fuck him. Then asleep on the coach I dreamed he was out there, a nightmare he was dying on the sand. I told the driver to pull over, that I had to get off the bus. He dropped me on the edge of the highway and I hitchhiked back to Mount Isa. I went straight to the airfield and begged a pilot to fly me to Alice Springs. I paid him all the money I had. We flew above the highway the whole way, high enough to see for kilometres either side … high enough to see the smoke from the fire. We circled three times. I could see him lying there. I was screaming at the pilot to land. He said we would crash and be killed, that it was too bumpy. He had to hit me in the face to stop me pulling the plane from the sky.’

‘Could he not radio others closer?’

‘This was the most desolate part of the highway. The closest rescue had to come from Alice Springs. A police officer and medic were already on their way by the time we landed, but of course I had to go too. I hired a 4WD and drove like a maniac. A few times I nearly crashed. I wanted to catch the rescue unit, thinking they’d get there before me. But the rains were coming. The blue sky was suddenly black. Then the raindrops so huge, like a lake falling from the sky. First the road was just greasy, and then it turned to mud, thick and heavy. About a hundred kilometres from where we’d spotted Cal from the plane, the police officer and the medic were stuck in the ruts. The wheels spinning and spinning. They told me to tow them out but I said no. They had to come with me, we had no time. So the police officer navigated as we drove off the track. I followed the edge of the creek, and already it was rushing with water. And first we saw the little ruin. Then Cal. I jumped out and ran … and … to see him I had to lift the journal off. He must’ve laid the cover over his face to protect himself from the sun.’

‘Sorry, Monique. I really don’t want to force you to share such upsetting memories.’

‘No. It’s fine. I want to talk. I want to tell you something else, that he … how can I say? He saw something out there. Something I can’t explain.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘All the time he was stranded, he was writing. A letter for me. In this letter he explained some very strange things.’

‘Could I read it? Or am I rude to even ask?’

‘Well, I gave it Philip to read, Cal’s friend. I suppose it makes no difference if you do too. One moment … it’s in this drawer.’

‘Thank you, Monique. But honestly, if it’s personal …’

‘If I can find it … it should be right here. Only a few days ago Philip had it in his hands. I never put it anywhere else … Merde!’

‘Don’t worry. Unless it has anything to do with the manuscript itself?’
‘It has everything to do with the manuscript. I told you he saw things out there … other people.’
‘Other people? You mean a hallucination? From lack of water? Thirst?’
‘I don’t know, really. He wrote about things in such detail. This kind of happening scares me. I don’t believe in God or ghosts, so when a man I love and trust tells me he saw a Victorian priest wandering the desert, I’m afraid. Afraid that I don’t understand the world I live in, that I’m missing something.’
‘A priest?’
‘Well, a reverend. A Reverend Thomas. And a convict called McCreedy.’
‘And this is all in the letter?’
‘I need to show you … It should be here. I don’t understand. Three days ago.’
‘This Philip, he read the letter?’
‘What? Yes, of course. I told you, he was a friend of Cal’s from school.’
‘So he was English?’
‘From the same town.’
‘I guess in his early twenties?’
‘Why would he interest you? I thought you wanted to know about the finding of the manuscript?’
‘Oh, er, yes. I just want to know if anyone else is researching as thoroughly as I am. All this work I’m doing. And at the university’s expense.’
‘He just wanted to know more about his friend, what happened at the end. He and Cal grew up together.’
‘Is he still here?’
‘I don’t know? I’m not sure. OK, Dr Adams. Look, I can’t find the letter. Maybe my fiancé moved it somewhere. And I have some things to do. Even in a little town like this we are busy sometimes.’
Riding between these homes of solid rock, the dugout suburbs of a desert town, I wonder if Monique Cabanne’s visitor stole that letter. And if he did, why? I wanted to ask if she were sure this ‘Philip’ was not Billy K.

But of course I was Dr Adams, a researcher of South Pacific history. I was there enquiring about the manuscript, not a missing rock star.

Back at the hotel I lie on the bed and listen again to the Dictaphone recording. I write the names Thomas and McCredy in my notebook. The Reverend Thomas exists, I know this much from reading the journal. But McCredy isn’t familiar.

I take a shower, remove a knotted condom blocking the plug hole. Hardly the Ritz. From the bathroom window I can see palm trees, the leaves rattled by the wind. I stand naked and shave, blown dry by the desert breeze. Back in the room I switch on the TV and sit on the bed. Breaking news is the success of a DNA sweep by local police, the apprehension of a murder suspect from 1979. I’m jealous, and wonder why the hell I’m lounging around.

Then I realise something. When the journal reached the university, before it was restored, transcribed and printed for a twenty-first century readership, the pages were melded into a solid block. Only the first two diary entries had been legible. Neither of which mention the Reverend Thomas. So how did Cal Smith know his name?

Instead of sitting in my room thinking about Billy K, and the ghost of a dead reverend, I sit on a high stool in the hotel bar. And think about Billy K.

It’s 6 p.m. This is where the thirsty locals drink, dusty men from construction sites and opal mines, dropping in for a swift one on the way home. Then staying until closing time. I order an orange juice and watch others get drunk, because it stops me doing the same.

The barman flicks the TV from rugby league to horse racing. The noisy hubbub dies for the start of the race, and then builds with the breathless commentator along the final furlongs. A man called Chukka slaps his thigh like a jockey, leaping off his seat when his horse noses in first. He waves his betting slip shouting, ‘You fucking beaut.’ When his friends call out their orders, he shouts, ‘Pick your own winners, and buy your own piss.’ And as if to taunt me he’s wearing a Billy K: WANTED T-shirt, the million-selling design with the cancelled tour dates printed on the reverse.

Invisible in the corner with my soft drink, only the barman has asked me where I’m from. When I said England he nodded his head and served someone else.

I have my notebook open on the table. The name McCredy has been underlined and circled, repeatedly. But I want to think of something else. Not the hallucination of a lost motorcyclist, not Billy K. Or the fact I’m supposed to be taking my daughter to a petting zoo this weekend.

I pick up a copy of the local paper discarded on the counter, wrinkled with spilled beer. I want to hide in their words, lives unconnected to mine. The lead story is about a funding award to renovate the local park. Dominating page two is a letter to the editor warning about addiction to slot machines, ‘pokies’. I look up from the article where men huddle around a bleeping, flashing, money eater. Before I turn back to the paper, Chukka, the happy gambler, catches my eye and wobbles over.

‘I bet you’re a Pom. A thousand bucks.’

I bet him a thousand bucks he’s Australian.

‘Too right.’ He slides along the bar. The Billy K face stares from his chest. ‘You don’t look like a backpacker. You here on business?’

I tell him research, that I’m from a university. Before I fabricate further he stops listening and starts talking, slurring the ends of his words. ‘Nothing against you fellas. And fuck, a shitload of people hate your guts. Bloody Poms, they say. Not me. Me mum’s got a plate on the wall with a picture of old Lizzie in the middle.’

I suggest we might even be related, go back two hundred years, and who knows?

‘Bloody truth. Get this. Me brother, real smart. He’s the manager at P&G tool hire, on George Street. Well, last year he fucks off to Canberra for business. You been there?’
I tell him I haven’t.

‘Don’t fucking bother. Fake town. Shit pubs. But straight up now, me brother comes back from his business trip, with guess what, only the family bloody tree.’

Then Chukka looks down at his chest, studying the T-shirt, as if the Billy K face might join in the conversation. He starts patting the material and I have no idea what’s happening.

‘Where the fuck’s that gone? Shit. Don’t tell me I’ve lost it. Hold on.’ Next he starts undoing his work shirt tied in a knot around his waist. ‘I know, mate, I’m a fucking mess. Just don’t tell the missus, ay.’ He undoes the shirt and opens it out. ‘Here it is.’

He thrusts a large white badge into my face. A speech bubble from a cartoon man with a ball and chain says, Convict and Proud.

‘Me brother went to the national records. Turns out me great great granddad stole a loaf of bread and got thrown in the brig. And I tell you what, better finding out I’m a crim than a copper, one of those bastard redcoats.’

I laugh. I say, ‘Who’d wear a badge that said, Policeman and Proud?’
I still have my clothes in a plastic carrier bag. When I stand before the bold lines and columns of the National Library, the stately, whitewashed pillars reflected in the lake, I feel too dirty to enter, a rootless hobo.

About a minute after drunken barfly Chukka showed me his Convict and Proud badge, I walked to the bus station and bought a ticket to Canberra. If it occurred to me to check out McCready, then Monique Cabanne’s mystery visitor might have also wondered about the connection. Perhaps Billy K, a man obsessed with the words of the journal, suddenly hearing a new name in the story of Babbage and Thomas, wanted to know more too.

But of course I don’t believe I’m suddenly on his trail, do I?

The next morning, before beginning the search for McCready at the convict archives, I go into a public toilet with a plastic razor and shaving foam bought from a chemist. I’m shaving for other people, not me. Appearance is a luxury right now. Massaging the foam into my stubble, feeling the skin tug on the cheap blade, I wonder if Billy K stands before a bathroom mirror each morning. Can he look himself in the eye, his very own ghost? And if he is out there, alive and kicking, does he know I’m after him?

At the bus station in Canberra I had bought a leather holdall. With it swinging from my hand, I feel respectable enough to walk through the grand doors of Australia’s depository of knowledge. I ask at the front desk about researching the convict records, and fill out a request card with little more than the name McCready, and an arrival date guessed between the years 1820 to 1840.

Waiting in line to speak to an archivist, I read that between 1787 and 1868, the convict transportation register lists 160,023 men and women arriving here in chains. Crimes punishable by shipment to Australia included stealing fish from a pond or river, bigamy, clandestine marriage, thefts above the value of one shilling, and watermen ferrying illegal numbers of passengers across the Thames.

My information seems scant considering such staggering numbers, but the archivist, a middle-aged man in a polo shirt and heavy glasses, reads the name on the card and peers above his lenses to see my face.

‘Not 1826?’
‘Possibly. This is about as much as I know.’
‘That’s quite remarkable. From tens of thousands of names, I get two Englishmen enquiring about the same man in the space of a week. Are you related?’

Suddenly my heart leaps, thuds in my chest.

‘Sir?’
I realise I’ve been standing staring into space. ‘Sorry. Related? You mean to McCready, or the other researcher?’

‘Well, either I suppose. People using the records are often tracing relatives, or, until the recent fad for bragging about criminal great-grandparents, forgetting them.’

I tell him I’m not related to McCready. Then, I give him the Billy K physical outline, suggest my cousin might have driven up from Melbourne.

‘That seems about right.’

When I ask for a name he clams up completely.

‘Sorry, sir. Confidentiality is paramount for those researching their genealogy. Even if it was your own brother, I couldn’t say.’ Then he taps the card on the desk and says, ‘Won’t be a moment.’

He returns twenty minutes later with a manila folder.

‘Not such a common Irish name, you see. Might be tricky if it were. The English seemed to think our fair land was a pleasant holiday destination for many of their neighbours, particularly those who found work on their lordships’ farms disagreeable.’

I thank him and take a seat at one of the tables. I open the folder and pull out a photocopy of a handwritten document. A judge at Bow magistrates court signed the sentence of transportation to Australia: Patrick McCready, convicted of breaking and entering an apothecary. I read that for the crime of manslaughter of the chemist, he was found not guilty. If he’d been charged, he wouldn’t have travelled any further than the gallows. And I wouldn’t be
sitting here hoping he was a link to my missing rock star.

I walk out the library, almost skipping down the steps. Yes, ridiculous, wishful thinking, I know that much. But I'm following a Billy K lead. And no, I'm not insane enough to think I've stumbled upon our Billy himself. Am I? Would he really have given up everything to study the journal, to find out more about Babbage and the story that inspired him to cast off his life and run?

Now I have a lead, a bite, the fish tugging at the hook, I need help to haul him in. Whoever he is.

I walk the clean, immaculate streets downtown, and ask for directions to the nearest Internet café.

From: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
To: anna.monroe@metpolice.gov.uk
Date: Wed 18 Jan 2005 15:27 + 1300

Please reply via a private email account, on an external, non-MET network.

From: anna_m@hotmail.com
To: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
Date: Wed 18 Jan 2005 15:59 + 1300

Reply as requested. Who is this?

From: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
To: anna_m@hotmail.com
Date: Wed 18 Jan 2005 16:22 + 1300

To confirm this is Ms Monroe, could you tell me what you ate for breakfast on the morning of 16 Sept?

From: anna_m@hotmail.com
To: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
Date: Wed 18 Jan 2005 17:09 + 1300

Toast, cut off a loaf from the bakery café downstairs, with strawberry jam spread on top.

Jim?

From: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
To: anna_m@hotmail.com
Date: Wed 18 Jan 2005 17:21 + 1300

Who else? The man who fetched you that loaf. I’m OK, Anna. You know me well enough to know this much. I hope.

Might need your help soon. What’s the fallout in London?

Sorry to have worried you. So much to tell you, not least how much I miss you.

From: anna_m@hotmail.com
To: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
Date: Wed 18 Jan 2005 17:48 + 1300

Worried?! I’ve been worried sick. Really, to just vanish in transit like that! I don’t know what you’re up to, but you could’ve told me something.

Roberts had us in his office the moment we were through customs. He really put the boot in. Surprised you didn’t hear him bellowing, even in Australia. Then I was personally summoned for ‘a little chat’. Not quite an interrogation, but warnings of reprimands and the CPS if you were to contact me and I didn’t pass on any information. He even did a good cop, bad cop routine, starting with concerns about your mental health, telling me he understood the pressures of the job, of failing on such a high profile case, before pushing the threats of a disciplinary.
And I am worried about you, Jim. But remember, I’m here. Call me on my cell, or give me a number I can reach you on there. Is your mobile switched off?

Please write soon,

xx

From: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
To: anna_m@hotmail.com
Date: Wed 18 Jan 2005 18:11 + 1300

Anna, I can’t call you because … You’d probably talk me out of what I’m doing. I have a lead. Maybe. And that could be a big maybe. One way of checking it out is if you could pay a trip for me to the London Mission Society records in Russell Square. Check whether the name Patrick McCreedy is connected with the Reverend Thomas. Turns out the Cal Smith guy who found the manuscript discovered more than just a journal buried in the sand. His ex-girlfriend, a Monique Cabanne, now living in Coober Pedy, told me he ‘saw’ this man called McCready.

Now, if this was just a tale from the mouth of a drunkard or drugged-up kid, I’d laugh it off as fantasy. I’ve had a lifetime among crooks and liars, where even the guilty, stunned by the creativity of their own lie, believe themselves innocent. But Monique was adamant. She believed what Cal had told her in his final letter. I believed her. When she went to get the letter, it was gone. The only other person who’d seen it was a man named Philip Bell, introducing himself as a long lost friend of Cal.

As we both know, in this line of business, coincidence is rarely innocence. When I got to the convict archives in Canberra, he’d already beaten me to the McCreedy file. Now, and you’ll probably think I’m losing it when I tell you this, but he matched the physical outline of Billy K. Could he be making a pilgrimage to the site of the book that fledged his wings?

Worth a thought?

From: anna_m@hotmail.com
To: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
Date: Thu 19 Jan 2005 10:49 + 1300

Yes, it is worth a thought, definitely. But look, Jim. I’ll help you with whatever you need, but I also need some love from you, a little something to show that Billy K isn’t the only person you’re thinking of!!! I’m more than just another officer!

Anyway, the LMS archive has nothing on McCreedy and Rev. Thomas associating, but Thomas’s final correspondence, dated 4 August 1839, certainly demonstrates how keen he was to leave Australia: ‘Please note, that although I have been forced to humble myself for the passage to England, seeking both fare and leave of my duties sooner than the agreed tenure of my Sydney parish, it is merely an admission of my failing health, not a dereliction of duty.’ The letter is brief, and apart from wishing the LMS to arrange his travel arrangements with some haste, he notably warns of, ‘nefarious forces in the South Pacific, who, by hook or crook, would wish that the Lord Jesus remain a stranger on those heathen shores.’

But this archive has been outshone by Google. Yes, pixels beat paper on this one. I spent a while on the web searching for McCreedy. Well, maybe no more than name sharing chance, but in 1841 the Reverend Patrick McCreedy Orphanage was founded in Mombassa. It’s still there today. Does this help with anything?

Here in my darkened flat, drizzling outside, the only light the glow of the screen.

Thinking of you,

A x

From: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
To: anna_m@hotmail.com
Thank you, Anna. For everything. Sitting in a Canberra hotel room waiting for inspiration is easier knowing I have you. And believe me, I’m not forgetting you, despite thinking of Billy K all hours of the day. Though I’ll be honest and admit there is another young lady that I painfully miss too. I took a walk around the lake earlier, then had lunch at a café and tossed the last of my sandwich to the ducks. And God, how I missed my Gemma. I could see her clear as day, right there on the steps, throwing handfuls of bread. I actually forgot myself, what I was doing on the other side of the world. Why I was alone.

But then back at the hotel I was reminded. Flicking through the channels I flashed past a John Wayne Western, quiz shows, an Aussie Rules game and FOX news. Then finally the man himself. The video playing was ‘The Philistine Burns with Eyes Closed.’ Billy K struts around a prison wing in flames, walking the landing with his guitar as burning paper falls from the cells above. The prisoners dance as they riot, and Billy K opens up cell doors as he walks.

‘I’m going to find you,’ I said aloud. ‘Even if it kills me.’

I’ve convinced myself that if I get him, I get my life back.

And sitting there by myself, no number to call, no one to talk to without deception, I wondered if Billy K is made to run for ever.

But then who is?

Too much time to think. If I don’t have a line of enquiry by tomorrow, I could be flying home. At least I’d get to hold my gorgeous Gemma. And you.

x x

From: anna_m@hotmail.com
To: paraphernalia1278@yahoo.com
Date: Thu 19 Jan 2005 13:55 + 1300

You know I’ll be waiting if you do. But also know I’ll be ready to assist if you do play rogue detective a little longer … Now, believe it or not, I’ve just been over to your house and turned it upside down. Roberts, in his cunning, decided it was time to check for clues of your whereabouts. He also decided that a criminologist accompany the search team, and that the criminologist should be yours truly.

Does he really know the two of us are that involved? If so, it was a cruel thing for him to do. Thank God I’m not the love letter type! As PCs Laurel and Hardy lifted up seat covers and opened cupboard doors, Roberts walked me through the house, asking for a ‘professional and personal’ hypothesis on where you might run, who would you contact to help … But apart from your taste in underwear and how much you love your daughter – Does your ex know how many pictures you have of Gemma? – Roberts learned nothing new. Was he hoping to find something that would incriminate us both? That I’d suddenly crumble and tell all on the sight of my own bra?

Within an hour of being back at the station Roberts informed the team that your details, including photo, had been passed on to the Australian police and customs. He already knew about your $10,000 withdrawal at the bank in Sydney – smart move making one debit then using cash. Tension on his face tells me this is all he has. But be careful now.

Anyway, I am with you whatever.

A x

So, I’m officially a wanted man. And not for the first time, though I suppose I was a wanted boy as a teenage runaway, a bloodied knife folded in my pocket.

That day by the motorway, I had no idea where I was going, only that London glittered like some spinning carousel, a fairground ride I could hop on-board and forget who I was. And what I’d done. I’d stood on the edge of a
motorway and waited for a magic carpet to whisk me all the way there. As if it was London I was heading for, and not just a clear blue sky.

This time I fly by plane, to Alice Springs, the red heart of Australia. From this height the land looks uninhabited, pockmarked and scorched. I watch our winged shadow race across the desert floor.
What beautiful country to drive I dodge kangaroos and skittering iguanas, the bickering vultures on the edge of the road fighting for the carcasses of run-over cattle. No people, just the odd tree, defining the curve of the earth, growing from the horizon on nearing.

Thinking again about Cal stranded in the desert, I hired the best kitted-out Toyota 4WD in Alice Springs – GPS, two-wave radio, maps, First Aid box, enough tools to strip the engine and put it back together, and a spare 10-litre jerry can brimming with water.

After the flat monotony of Route 1, the Sandover Highway is a roller coaster. I’m glad to get off the asphalt and feel something more than the occasional roadkill flexing the suspension. The track is rutted but not too rough, occasionally juddering my hands from the steering wheel.

I drive for hours, no thought in my head but the holes in the road. I’m happily numbed by the focus, only pulling over when the sun touches the horizon. I pitch the rented tent, cook a tin of beans on the gas stove and light a fire. The one dead tree I find and break for kindling stands at the edge of light, and the knots and bark shadow like the furrowed brow of an old man come to warm himself before the coals.

I sleep, then wake up cold, the roll mat too thin for the desert night. Stepping outside, I’m stunned by the light of the universe, the stillness of it all. How a galaxy in mid-explosion can seem so calm. Now the dead tree glows with a crown of stars, the furrowed brow smoothed. I stand and take a piss, crouch to the embers of the fire and rub my hands.

And then, as sudden as a switch is flicked, a lone gust of wind. The coals flare, ash races on a gale, the tent swells like a billowed sail.

And then nothing. The wind gone, blown.

I set again off just before dawn, making the creek around midday. I had imagined navigating dunes of drifted sand, but a rough track, no doubt carved by others seeking out the ruin, leads me all the way.

And what should have been a drive focused on direction, oil checks and overheating, was a study of the dream I had last night.

It was a replay of the first time Anna and I went out together, when she picked me up two streets from the station, without asking, because she knew that I wanted her, to be driven out to the coast and forget who I was, who I was chasing. She’d pulled over, leaned across the passenger seat and flicked open the door. I noticed her painted toenails, that she drove barefoot. I asked her if the car was stolen and she laughed. She asked if I had enough money for a stick of rock.

On waking this morning, I’d thought the dream reality and the desert the dream. Driving now, it plays vividly on, as bright as the Australian sun.

We were heading towards the coast, along an empty dual carriageway.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘A kestrel.’

Anna followed my finger to the hovering bird. It dropped like a stone to the verge. I gently gripped the inside of her forearm, felt the heat of her soft skin, a pulse. The car veered across both lanes before she regained control. She wound down the window.

Even in my sleep, cold on the desert floor in central Australia, I’d tasted sea air, perfume.

‘Are we running away?’ she asked.

‘Just like a singer.’

She looked across, knowing. ‘Or a fourteen-year-old in a stolen car.’

I laughed. ‘But with a romantic ending.’ I added. ‘The two of us, sailing on the sun.’

‘Into the sunset,’ she corrected. ‘Not on the sun.’ She laughed. ‘We’d burst into flames.’

A seaside town flickered past like a reel of film. I saw the reflection of the car in a shop window, Anna the driver and I the passenger, the pair of us incognito.
She pulled up in a car park where shifting sand had blown into the corners, halfway up fence posts and signs, dissolving kerbs and footpaths. We felt the fresh wind. Anna locked the doors and we walked across the road on to the beach. She tried to trip me and we wrestled and laughed. The sea boomed against the shore. A rabble of gulls squawked above. I walked with my arm over her shoulder and pulled her close to feel her hair dance about my face. We stood and kissed for a long time. I kissed her neck and hair and cheeks and nose, pressing against her pelvis.

And when we stopped and stared, I could see myself in her eye, as though I occupied her pupil. She turned and pulled me towards the dunes. She walked backwards and tugged me along. And when I ran ahead, Anna chased. Up and down the dunes, like children, weightless on the crests and blown with the wind, one step from flight.

We felt laughing into a dip and rolled upright with sand pouring from our hair. We turned and over again until she lay on top. She lifted her head and listened. ‘No wind here,’ she said. ‘Nothing at all.’

And she bent to me like a woman from the sky. She bit my lip and gripped the hair at the back of my head. She sat upright and reached around and into my trousers.

‘Here,’ she said. She worked her hand up and down. She told me to lift up her skirt, and I did.

It was cold when the sun dipped below the rim of the dune. Anna had fallen asleep. When she finally opened her eyes and saw that the day was fading she said, ‘We should go.’

But this wasn’t how it had happened last night. If the dream had been faithful to memory, we’d have opened a bottle of wine and eaten cheese and bread, watched children fly kites above the surf. But this dream was the cut of a cruel director.

Instead we stood and climbed, into the brunt of the wind. Sand whipped up and stung our eyes. Our shadows walked ahead, elongated on the beach. We saw a white yacht on the horizon.

‘See,’ said Anna. ‘Sailing into the sunset, not on the sun.’ And suddenly she was crying, pointing. ‘Look.’

Then I saw her. A woman, facing out to sea. Standing in the surf. Her favourite dress fluttering in the wind. My mother. I called out but she didn’t hear. I shouted, screamed. She didn’t hear because she was speaking to the little girl at her side, the granddaughter she never met. Gemma.

I tried to run, but the hard sand softened, clogged my steps. I tripped and fell. I could only watch as my mother lifted Gemma into her arms and waded into the sea, engulfed by the foaming surf.

I’d woken lying halfway out of the tent door, clutching fists of red sand.

Only when I pick up the fresh ruts of another 4WD does the dream end. To think of something else, to think of something different from loss, I imagine finding Billy K sitting on a rock and strumming his guitar. In an act of benevolence I’d allow him to finish the song before snapping on the cuffs. Even though I have no cuffs, or the authority to put them on him.

After this little fantasy, when I get to the ruin at dusk and there’s another jeep already pulled over, my heart races. But no Billy K. Yet. Just Albert and Edith from Melbourne, a retired couple touring out their twilight years. I introduce myself as Dr Adams, and apart from dodging a few awkward questions on South Pacific history, it’s good to sit and feel normal.

Too dark to see the tumbledown building properly, I happily accept the offer of a couple – and only a couple – of Albert’s beers. We sit and talk, watching the moonrise and Edith grill chicken. Beyond the chatter of complimenting the chef, the subject turns to family. They have grandchildren, happy families with houses and pools. Then I’m asked if I’m married, whether I have kids. And though I dread the question, I find myself opening up about the divorce, Anna and Gemma. Edith offers comfort, that a loving father is a loving father, separated or not. Then Albert ventures I’ll be home soon enough, that before I know it I’ll be back in London, girlfriend and daughter waiting.

Alone in my tent, no return flight booked, I wonder when that day might be.

I bid them farewell in the morning, with an excuse about checking oil and tyre pressure delaying our travelling together. Once the dust cloud of their SUV settles, I investigate the ruin, crude and broken bricks, splinters of beams. Historians say there’s no evidence of a church, only that it was a store for stockmen driving cattle, with lead shot ammunition and a candlestick also recovered from the debris. With no expertise on matters of archaeology, I can’t disagree.

But what does count is the touch and feel of reality at the end of my fingertips, a poem I can trace like Braille, scratched into one of the sandstone bricks:
In the desert, lost and lonely, company
a white plane high and silent, the burning
ground a mile and more from sound.

Then I notice grains of paler sandstone on the red bull dust. This etching is recent. I copy the poem in my notebook and get back in the Toyota. When I swing a U-turn off the track, I realise I’m not the first to have driven here only to head back to Route 1. Another 4WD had recently detoured to return south.
If my mystery man has been out to the ruin, and for whatever reason wants to know the Reverend McCready and his Kenyan orphanage a little better, I may have a way of finding out. With the help of Anna, and a broken law, or two.

But I have to wait until midnight to start my ‘investigation’. So I sit at a computer in the youth hostel waiting for the bars to close and the backpackers and drunken locals to stumble home. I buy a postcard of a kangaroo from a stand on the counter.

Dear Gemma

This is Daddy writing all the way from Australia. It is the other side of the world, so I’m feeling a bit dizzy upside down! I’m being silly, but it is a long way away. Do you like the picture of the kangaroo? Did you know they have pockets in their tummies? I’m sorry we didn’t go to White Farm on Saturday. I promise we will when I get back. See you soon. xxx 000 Daddy

When the streets are quiet I walk to one of only two 4WD hire centres in Alice Springs. I feel conspicuous, guilty just thinking about my next move, convicted by the plan in my head to burgle. But I’ve learned from the crooks I’ve caught. The crook I was, a fourteen-year-old stealing food and clothes.

The first office has no alarm, just a pair of sliding doors that lift off their runners. No need for gloves, as they’ll never know I was even here. Because they keep records on good old-fashioned paper, all I have to do is wait for the photocopier to warm up.

Office two is a little trickier. But I guess there’s no remote connection to the alarm so disable the bell by bending back the hammer, and the light by simply unscrewing the bulb. I slip around the side of the building, take off my jacket and spread it over the toilet window. Then, my heart in my mouth, I have the sensation of being watched. And I am. A black cat, still as a gargoyle, perched on the fence above, staring. I hiss, throw out my hand. The cat slinks away and I scan the dark yard again. I punch straight and hard, creasing my face to try and hide the noise of breaking glass. The alarm triggers, rattling faintly inside the plastic cover. Inside, with their computers left on, my only problem is finding paper to print off the customer list.

Walking the empty roads back to the hostel, the lists folded and tucked into my back pocket, my head tipped to the glittering heavens, a police car flashes then pulls up beside me. I feel my knees suddenly knocking, the adrenaline stream.

‘Sorry, officer,’ I say. ‘Star-gazing instead of watching the traffic.’ I wonder if they can hear the wobble in my throat.

‘No worries. We thought you might be pissed.’

‘Just admiring your clear skies.’

‘You’re a Pom, ay?’

‘Last time I opened my passport.’

‘Well, make the most of the stars before you get back to the smog.’

They laugh. I tell them I will. When the car turns the corner I realise my heart is thumping. For the first time in twenty years another policeman has made me nervous.

Back at the hostel I sit at a computer. The clerk watches a late-night horror film on a portable TV. I open a Word file and type out the names from the stolen customer lists. There’s no Philip. But this means nothing. In fact it tells me if this guy isn’t who he said he was, he has the funds, or the know-how, for a manufactured ID. And he’s not the only one.

Next I mail Anna. I know she wants some emotion, some longing, but typing I miss you seems like a defeat, and I hit the delete key.

But then I type it again, because when I stop being afraid of feeling, I do want her, curled against my back in bed,
her hands across my chest.

First I ask her to cross-reference the names stolen from the 4WD hire centre with passenger lists from Sydney to Nairobi, advising to hint terrorism so the airlines immediately comply. Secondly, if a name from the hire centre matches with a passenger, I need her to return to my house. I tell her to pull up the length of string attached to a key buried beneath the rose bush.

In the kitchen, sealed in a gap behind the top tile behind the back left burner of the cooker, is a plastic freezer bag containing a credit card, driving licence, and passport. The picture is mine. The name is not. Three years ago I went undercover for Vice as a Charles Nash. I thought this man could one day be helpful, so I kept the identity live.

I instruct Anna to take out the bag, and replace the tile with some grouting from a tube and spatula kept under the sink, then FedEx the ID to Koala Rocks Youth Hostel, Queen Street, Sydney, and book Charles Nash on a flight to Nairobi.

And if a name doesn’t jump from one list to another, I ask her to book me on a flight to Heathrow. As Jim Dent.
Prodded life into the smouldering bike and crawled to and from the bank, ripping out exposed and rotten roots for kindling. Built the fire around the back wheel, making sure the flames licked against what tyre hadn’t melted into the sand. The black smoke beacon is my best chance of rescue. I’ve taken off the front wheel so I can roll it on the fire when the rear tyre has burned away. Although I could loosen the nuts with my left hand, I couldn’t even raise my elbow from my ribs when attempting to lift the wheel off. Doubt my shoulder could even take a crutch, if I decided to hobble out of here.

Am I weak to feel loneliness? A hardy explorer wouldn’t consider such abandonment a problem, just another challenge.

Took an hour of tedious and painful manoeuvring to boil water for some porridge. Spilled first pot when I tried to lift from flames with right hand, precious H2O hissed away. Swore to the sky, the grinning skeleton, at myself. I need a nurse, my mother, and have no shame in this admittance.

Or is it just the morbid thought of a last breath that makes me want to make peace with my parents?

No. I’m not planning on death just yet, so I have no need for this false longing. Because I found you, or because you found me, I could forget the past, my father, my mother, the flesh and blood that brought me into the world squealing, then abandoned me to the mercy of others. I know I should tell you more. I know I should’ve told you more, when we were lovers gently interrogating each other, finding out who we’d fallen for. You talked and I listened. You were open, free with who you were. I edited my biography, and you knew, but blamed it on my Englishness. When we meet again I promise I’ll tell all, the uncensored Cal, the triumphs and tragedies. But to talk about this now would sound like my last words. Which they are not.

Energised by coffee, and electric thoughts of you, I scabbred to the top of the creek bank. Only 2–3 m high, but triumphant as Hillary on the peak of Everest, even though the view was more scrub and sand, spinifex and the odd dead tree. Except for a stand of gum trees around what I thought was a pale, rocky outcrop. I almost jumped on my broken leg for joy when I saw what looked to be a building. I pulled out the binoculars and focused. Yes, man-made. A tumbledown ruin without roof or rafter.

Scabbed back to the bike and checked the map. Neither ruin nor creek marked. I’m definitely south of the Sandover Highway, but how far? For the 50 km I wound the creek bed, the bearing had only slightly wavered between NNE and NE. 20–30 km seems a fair guess.

And the tumbledown shack? 5–7 km further up the creek. I can’t waste water and energy on both as a destination. The ruin could be an old storehouse for a homestead. Maybe a track leading to an unmarked farmhouse? But how far?

Too many questions without answers. I have nothing to wager, and no second chance. I’ll crawl, hobble, hop, and scabble to the highway. I’ll rest here today, stow the essentials in the backpack and set out before dawn tomorrow. I’ll fashion a crutch from the exhaust in the hope that my shoulder can bear some weight by the morning.

Feels good to have a mission. My spirits have lifted. Again you give me strength. And to think you cycled from south to north by pedal-power alone, no cheating with a combustion engine – what good they are.

Dozed through midday, then burned the last tyre rubber on fire. The black smoke distress signal is finished. After hammering a crutch from the exhaust pipe, I realised my panic had actually turned to a brief peace. I lay in the shade of the bank, undeterred by my grinning skeleton friend, and watched puffs of cloud drift on the wind.

To see the clouds waltz across the sky is to think of the day you walked into the bar in Darwin, scarf swept over your shoulder, announcing you had conquered the length of Australia with a flick of your hair and dusted boots. Where the Victorians set out to cross the sunburned plains as though marching to war, you rode into the desert to befriend its wilderness, to learn from those who evolved on the scorching sand, how a flame can leap from a twisted stick, the waterholes and quenching plants.

Any man who saw you in that room didn’t go home and think of his wife. My trip lost meaning, it seemed trivial. I suddenly had nothing to do in Australia except win your heart.
Fitful sleep. In and out of ibuprofen daze. Strengthening wind rustling bushes and whipping up sand. My paranoia turned a whistling breeze into hissing snakes. Last thing I need is a King Brown in my sleeping bag.

But the real threats are nothing to the imagined, what the brain can do to a weakened body, the fleeting dream I conjured of the skeleton last night. I closed my eyes from the starry sky to see the sunlit desert and a reverend approaching in a black frock, his coat-tails whipping in the wind like a flapping raven. I looked to the creek grave. It was empty, the body gone. The reverend strode towards where I lay, crippled and pinned by the bike. He carried a shovel that glinted in the sun. The closer he came, the more frantically I tried to wriggle free. When I finally wrenched away the bike, I saw my legs had gone. I dragged my torso along by my hands, but the reverend didn’t chase.

It wasn’t me he was laying to rest. He was digging his own grave. The body he pulled from the bushes was his, but naked, a swine-pink belly that wobbled, the same ruddy cheeks and fuzz of thinning red hair, fat fingers bulging over the knuckles. And the silver cross, which the living lifted over his head and placed upon the corpse. He then took the shovel and cut the ground with the fervour of a man tunnelling to the centre of the world. He climbed from the grave and rolled in his dead self. No thud, as though the body never hit the bottom, still falling. He shovelled on the dirt, but it didn’t fill the grave. I woke when he walked away because I was terrified. Terrified he hadn’t even noticed my presence. Even in my own dream I could die a forgotten death.

It was still an hour before dawn, and while the western desert glowed with the coming dawn, the sunlight in my sleep had been so bright my eyes had to adjust. Is this possible? That the glare in a dream can dazzle on waking?

And of course the bones were still in the creek. I’m a fool for even checking.

Built up the fire to boil water – 3.4 litres remaining – for porridge and coffee. Stocked backpack with ALL food, stove, Swiss Army knife, lighter, sleeping bag, First Aid box, compass, and map.

The exhaust pipe crutch is redundant. Shoulder too numb for the weight. Because the broken leg and dislocation are on my right side, I have no use for a prop. I have to crawl out of here. For my life.

Two hours of slow progress, maybe 1 km covered? Impossible to crawl in a straight line as spinifex so thick. Thirsty already, but must stick to ration.

Sure I can get to the highway – if estimation of km and direction correct. Leg swollen from blood pumping around break, shin dark purple. But a direct, no-nonsense pain is easier to defeat than the electric nerve damage shooting along my neck and shoulder.

And worse than the physical toil, the snapped tibia and twinge of shoulder, is that I can only guess at my progress by calculation. I squat on my good knee and look above the bush, but have no landmark to gauge distance. It really is nothing but horizon, the irony of a landscape so flat you can see the camber of the earth. Death would seem a preferable end to crawling this arid plain for ever.

Palms scalded from burning sand, and not even midday. I can barely grip the pen. Crawled and cursed through pain for nearly two hours in sweltering heat – cooling breeze has blown to sweeter climes. Took socks off and wore over hands. If anyone did find me like this, crawling on all threes – tied right arm into sling with underpants – with the snakes and scorpions, they’d have me committed for believing I were a marsupial. Even the lizards seem to laugh, skittering away, then stopping and turning, cocking their heads to mutter, ‘Who’s this idiot stumbling through our desert?’

Unzipped my sleeping bag and slung it between two of the more sturdy bushes. Solid shade, but I’m roasting without the breeze and soaked with sweat. Hate to think the salty millilitres in my clothes exceed what I’m drinking.

Feel fresher without ibuprofen – and hopefully no nightmares of resurrected priests – but every drag of right leg a Herculean effort. My jaw aches from gritting my teeth so hard. Need to focus pain away from aggression, as swearing as loud as I do must burn precious calories. Have to trick my brain into believing a broken leg is bliss. Somehow.

Will rest out heat, boil pasta – lid on to stop precious water evaporating – and crawl on.

So hot. Napped two hours then cooked. Pasta, tuna, onion, tomato puree, and a little pepper never tasted so good.

Plan to beat pain by thoughts of future … with you. Forgive me for the liberties I’m taking, but I’m going to transcend agony and doubt by building us a home in my mind. I picture a little stone cottage by a bend in a river, caressed by weeping willows and fields of corn, where the only sounds are the wind in the leaves and chattering ducks. My focus, instead of staring at the sand and bearing pain, will be constructing a dream by hand. I can see pallets of stacked bricks on the gravel driveway, waiting to be laid. And when I’ve finished the house I’ll weed,
trim, cut, and prune the garden. You’ll be able to meander a stone path to the river edge, between rosebushes and bougainvillaea, and toss crusts of bread to the swans.

Sorry to presume so much of your brief affection, but I need a world beyond this burning sand.

Foundations of our little stone cottage dug. I’ve gone for small and beautiful: kitchen, living room, bathroom, bedroom, and a roof terrace. When it’s warm we can haul the bed outside and sleep beneath the stars. Already the walls are two feet tall. Progress rapid because I’ve tricked pain into creation. With each shuffle of my buckled body I laid another brick and crawled closer to rescue.

Only resting does the agony return. And the doubt. Or is it logic? Maybe I can make the distance. Maybe I can beat the pain. But without water? I’m down to 2.4 litres – 2.9 if you count the emergency supply I’ve been saving in the empty Gatorade bottle. Even if I drink my own urine the fuel remaining won’t last the journey. How far could I crawl without hydration?

My thoughts are spiralling. Should rest mind and body, but need to cook before the sun goes down. Tonight’s chef special is rice, packet tomato soup and, you guessed, a little pepper.

Sitting before a huge fire of spinifex and a dead tree. If I torch the bush could I hitch a lift home on the fire truck?

Leg numb, shoulder aching from dangling when crawling. But if I take the pain and consider the progress of our little stone cottage, I’m almost content. If not showing you around the construction of the kitchen, I think of us again in Lichfield Park, camped by the bubbling spring, where that species of fish evolved like a hidden people. We sat and watched them glide, a stream so clear they were hung in ether. And then, naked as the day we were born, we swam, bodies glowing by the light of the stars, our laughter echoing across the universe.

Right now, before this fire, I sit and watch the Milky Way turn through heaven. And I’m not in pain, nor afraid of what the morning may bring.

Only by reading what I wrote last night have my spirits lifted. A mantra of two plus two equals three rattled my dreams. First I was back at school in maths. Each time the teacher asked two plus two, I answered four. Each time he cracked my knuckles with a wooden ruler. ‘Three!’ he barked. And so the scenes continued: Selling rubber life-saving rings on a market stall priced at £20 each. A man buys two and gives me £30. I say twenty plus twenty is forty and he laughs in my face. Next I was a racing-car driver, a world champion whizzing through chicanes. With the chequered flag in sight, the engine whines and dies. I’m stranded metres short of the finish line. The team manager runs on to the track, throws down his clipboard, and shouts, ‘What the fuck were you doing? What do you think powers an engine? You missed the fuel stop. I said four more laps.’ The rest of my team hold up lap-time boards, except the numbers have been rearranged into sums: 2 + 2 = 3.

In each scene, one face remained constant. The red-haired reverend was the maths teacher, the man at the market stall, and the race team manager.

I’m not superstitious. I played rugby and wore the number 13. I don’t believe in signs or omens. A broken mirror is an accident, a crow a bird. But logic tells me the reverend’s right. I can’t crawl 20, possibly 30 km to the track on 1.9 l of water. The sums don’t add up.

Fuck.

Fucking idiot. Fucking shoulder. Fucking leg. Fucking decision to take a short cut. This has been my life, slacking off and not doing things properly. I’ve fucked up. If I were a better mechanic I could’ve fixed my bike. If I were a better map-reader I’d never have taken the creek that took me so far from the track.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

Sorry. I’ve calmed down now. I needed the words to have an audience instead of vanishing into sky. Right then I just wanted to be heard, to feel human, to be more than this ragged mute crawling across a desert.

I have to face facts. I have to go back. Anything more than a light wind will dust over my tracks. A following rescue team could find the bike and not know which direction I’d gone. And there’s a chance if I dig into the creek bed I’ll find water.

A chance.

Please think of me as a fool and not a coward. I could crawl all the way back to France if I had the water.

Midday. Strung my sleeping bag between the same two bushes I did yesterday. I move each limb as though I’m crawling across the surface of a heavier planet, gravity an agony. Only when I transcend the pain and build our cottage can I rise from the despair of returning to the creek.

The first floor’s complete. A construction site now looks like a house. Next the beams for the upper floor, huge
oak timbers the size of railway sleepers. They wait stacked on the grass by the kitchen doorway, my work for the afternoon crawl, after the last of my rice.

A success on this dark day of backtracking – though a foul detail of survival I wonder if I should even share? For lunch I had rice and instant chicken soup. Cooked the rice with minimal water and the lid firmly on, and then boiled up more water for the soup. The ‘water’ for the soup was from my emergency supply in the Gatorade bottle.

I think the culinary lingo is *tart*.

This time I’m still hungry. And thirsty. There’s no after dinner slouch, no sitting back with a slackened belt. I’m only resting because the sun’s still too fierce. If I crawled now the sweat would drip from me like tears.

Even though I’m returning to a wrecked bike and sorry corpse, I have to keep moving, crawling, inching along and adding bricks to our cottage, my arcadia from this gathering desperation.

I’ve stopped because something has happened. *Someone is in the creek*. They must be. I’m still a kilometre from the bike, but I know someone’s there because a line of black smoke is rising above the bank. Maybe a rescue party making camp? Calling out to the missing with a fire?

But what rescuers? No one’s expecting me. I’m not late because I’m not yet due to arrive. I must crawl on. It’ll be dark by the time I get there. And I’m lonely and wretched enough to shake the dead reverend by the hand. Even if he’s risen from the grave to warm his bones before the fire.
The voyage was gliding, the waves and wind carrying us effortlessly onward, a toy boat on the breath of God, when the *Caroline* ran aground on a broken commandment: *Thou shalt not steal*.

At an extraordinary meeting of the voyage committee, called for by Rev. Thomas, the steward of the supplies, it was announced that the depletion of the cheese stock could only be explained by thievery. Capt. Drinkwater was immediately informed, and on news of a villain on-board, assembled all men above deck. The crew listened in silence as their master requested the guilty man to step forward, promising a sparing of the whip, and also the wrath of his shipmates, for if no culprit put up his hand there and then, their quarters would be vigorously searched, ‘as though a legion of Viking horribles had thundered through their beds’.

When no man volunteered his guilt, the capt., accompanied by his second officer, stampeded through the stinking billets, slashing hammocks and clothes with his swishing cutlass. We were quite a crowd gathered for this spectacle. Even the sabbath service does not congregate the population of the *Caroline* so excitedly.

When the capt. appeared from below, shining with sweat after his furore, I wondered whether the vim of his search was simply a performance to display his authority and lack of tolerance for thievery.

But no. With dramatic swagger the capt. took the forecastle and held aloft his shining cutlass, dangling from its glinting point a muslin bag of cheese. Gasps were followed by a deathly hush. The capt. called forth his second officer, a man almost wider than he is tall, and gave the command to his ears only, dismissing his executioner to the lower deck with a look of solemn satisfaction. The crew parted before this arbiter, as did the Red Sea before Moses, all in silent apprehension until finally the accused wretch was hauled across the deck to the feet of the captain.

Never have I seen a man protest his innocence so vehemently, even in the eyes of living ingredients before a Fijian oven, begging clemency from a hungry chief. He even continued to shriek his truth after the butt of a musket was jammed against his nose, and it was only when the flogging commenced did his protests turn to yelps. The capt. dismissed the wives below, deeming the flogging ‘a sight not fit for the eyes of a lady’. Once the unfortunate was tied to the mast and stripped of his shirt, the Rev. Lilywhite gave up pleading for the punishment to be delivered in ‘a fashion more Christian than savage’.

The burly second officer was no stranger with a cat-o’-nines, and blood was quickly drawn. I am long immune to the cruelties of man to man, but the missionaries quickly averted their eyes and descended to their quarters. Only the Rev. Thomas remained, craning his neck to peer over the shoulders of the crew.

It was the punishment of the seaman, rather than his crime, which has cast a long shadow upon our sunny voyage for the last few days. The whole episode has been declared a taboo subject among the chatter of the dinner table. Last night the Rev. Lilywhite had to chastise the Rev. Thomas and cut short his graphic recount of the flogging. If I am not mistaken – bearing in mind a Fijian is skilled in reading the countenance of his company, for we live in a land where bad manners and poor etiquette is met with a meal of ourselves – the Rev. Thomas betrayed some glee at the severity of justice.

If this bloodied back be a subject not fit for conversation, a horror unspeakable, then the missionaries to my cannibal islands must take a vow of silence now!

Thank the Lord for His kingdom of the deep! The majestic sight of a hundred and more dolphins this afternoon lifted the downcast mood of the *Caroline*. Glory is surely upon these seraphs of the waves! Scourge of sharks and friends of sailors, they launched from the blue with acrobatic joy, splashing down then surfacing with the laughter of Heaven. When Rev. Jefferson informed me that a group of dolphins is correctly termed a *school*, I did not have to enquire why, for only children can abandon all for the mindless pleasure of play.

Though seamen are no strangers to the wonders of the deep, many passed comment that indeed none had before
seen such an abundance of dolphins swimming as one, and surely this be an omen of good fortune for the Caroline and its passengers – an auspice most readily heard by the reverends and their wives gathered upon the decks as audience to the impromptu show. Christians of the strictest compliance they may be, they are also quick to apply their private superstitions to the work of the Lord, whether contrary to what is written in the good book or not.

10 December 1834

Remarkable progress with the Rev. Stevens continues, along with what one may call a budding friendship. While we are from opposite ends of the earth, our skins as dark and light as night and day, we share a common sense of humour, along with a loving, yet questioning faith for the word of God. Where the Revs Lilywhite, Jefferson, and in particular the Rev. Thomas, deliver sermons as though they were authors of the bible themselves, the Rev. Stevens accepts that a literal translation is not always the true representation of the Lord.

His theological reasoning is not his only endearing quality, as his energetic and youthful approach to life is equalled only by his gentle soul, a man who attends his wife as though she were the most delicate flower in bloom. It is also a joy to talk with him in my mother tongue, despite the range of our conversation being limited to his basic vocabulary. Numerous times his mispronunciation has produced much mirth, with mistakes such as, ‘Who is the dog of this island?’ and ‘How long have you been a banana?’ reducing us both to laughing fools. The Rev. Stevens always took these errors in good humour, and it occurs to me that those unafraid of their ignorance are quicker to learn than the proud and fearful.

14 December 1834

It is in direct contrast to the character of Rev. Stevens that I must write of the Rev. Thomas, for when he addresses me it is as though I were the dirt upon the end of his shoe. I realise how lucky I am that it is not he I am escorting to Fiji, for he seems a man who has taken on God in fear and guilt, not love and light. He may hold the bible in his hand when he speaks, but it does not mean the words rest within his heart. A man of the cloth perhaps, I doubt he considers true the adage that ‘All men are created equal’. Before his eyes I am little more than an animal with a voice, the savage boy saved by God and England, my dark skin a label of stupidity, a rank of nothing more than upright beast.

Only yesterday I was preparing a Fijian lesson in the mess when I heard the Rev. Thomas and the second officer in his quarters discussing my superior language skills. Thinking I would hear my first compliment from a man who had thus far spoken to me as though I were no better than his servant, I put my ear to the planked wall and listened. ‘Nonsense!’ I heard the rev. proclaim. ‘He is no more remarkable than a monkey in Covent Garden. Trained to work tricks for rotten apples.’

Unfortunately he is not the only white man who holds up the light to guide the way for others, yet himself stands in shadow.

17 December 1834

Whipped along by the wind and waves that crash into each other from two different oceans, the Caroline today began her turn east, beyond the tip of Africa. It is a war of attrition between the Atlantic and the Indian, for despite swells that rise as high as mountains to swallow their opposing brothers, ultimately they are joined, washed together as one. Each drop of rain that falls and splashes down hill and dale, gathering in the runnels, streams, and greatest rivers, is but emptied into a single sea.

On the tilting deck Rev. Lilywhite led a short, salt-sprayed service, investing our care in ‘He who holds the wind in his fist’. As we prayed for providence to deliver us beyond the Cape of Good Hope, men scrambled and dangled in the rigging, wrestling sails and ropes from the gathering wind.

19 December 1834

After only two nights of tumbling sleep, rocked from my dreams by the warring waves, I can stand upon the deck without fear of falling over, for the temper of the Cape has abated quicker than both passengers and sailors could have hoped.

Capt. Drinkwater reminded Rev. Lilywhite that we still had fathoms of sea to sail before the port of New Holland, and that a thanking of the Lord should be attended with further petitions for a safe passage. Thus once more the rev. gathered us above deck to acknowledge ‘He who makes the waves and blows the wind’. On completion of the prayer, the Rev. Stevens, in a moment of broken protocol between himself and the senior reverends, added a few words for the brave sailors: ‘lest we forget those who labour for our lives without thanks’. The Rev. Lilywhite audibly snorted, walking away mumbling words beneath his breath that I doubt complimented the deckhands
sweating for his safe voyage.

20 December 1834

It is not Fijian custom to speak ill of those who cannot hear to defend themselves, but much of the lesson this morning with Rev. Stevens was spent discussing the Rev. Thomas and his peculiarities.

An unkempt and shambling man, often with more dinner down his cassock than upon his plate, he certainly does not believe that ‘cleanliness is next Godliness’. Regardless, his appearance is a trite observation compared to what he considers faith. Though capable of repeating the scriptures word for word, it is a fiery sentence that the love of God inhabits when orated by the Rev. Thomas. His services are popular with the sailors because he chooses to dwell upon those passages coloured with sex and murder – of which there are many. At times I wonder if he is preaching the word of God, or the riddles of Satan. But just when his sermon has turned a blue sky black, he will transform the message into a lightning strike of the Lord, as though faith were a thunderbolt clutched in his fist, ready to be thrust into the chest of any who dare not believe.

26 December 1834

Christmas Day passed in a most joyous manner, with each and every voice on-board the Caroline singing in unison, no cloud between our song and Jesus Christ in Heaven.

The forecastle, usually strictly reserved for ship matters and the telescope of the capt., was turned into a pulpit for the Rev. Lilywhite, perched above us in his garb of black like a landed raven. He thanked the Lord once more for the fair weather, and acknowledged that it was by His grace alone we were afloat, no matter how hard the seaman toiled – this was followed by a significant pause and noticeable look to the Rev. Stevens.

Beyond the waves to Fiji, he concluded with a prayer for my people: ‘O Lord, see fit that the blackened souls of Fiji may be enlightened, and that where there is misery in ignorance of your name, we might bring joy.’

Will it make his mission more difficult when the Rev. Lilywhite and his colleagues discover that our lives are not lived in perpetual fear and woe? How will my brothers and sisters behave when told that naked flesh is shame, that the glory of their body is a sin before the eyes of the Lord, that to lay with the wife of another man is a broken commandment, and that only God has the right to spill the blood of another?

1 January 1835

‘A new year is upon us,’ announced the Rev. Stevens this morning, before enquiring as to what achievements I had declared to pursue over the following twelve months. If any other Fijian were faced with such a question of the distant future I doubt he would even grace it with a reply, for the day ahead is considered arrangement enough.

After several minutes of silent contemplation, I surprised both the rev. and myself with a candid reply. I first answered that of course I wished the mission to be a success, and that the light of the Lord illuminate the shadows of my darkened land. The rev. had time enough to utter an ‘Amen’ before I continued – perhaps where I should have stopped. I told the rev. that I prayed daily for the deliverance of my people from the soulless ways of the white man who lives with God in his head but not in his heart, he who is a slave to the ticking clock, he who chases metal and paper, he who makes a life collecting more things for his home than could be found in a whole village, he who would have his brother sleep on the street while his house had empty rooms.

I could have talked until the day was out, but I looked in the eyes of the Rev. Stevens and saw his gentle and mild face now anxious and perplexed. Then he turned away from the cabin to the porthole, to the azure sea blazing. After several minutes of silence, just the slap of waves against the hull, the incessant creak of a thousand caulked and fastened planks, the rev. turned back to the room. ‘My dear Nelson,’ he said softly. ‘I could not agree more. We love to talk about progress, industry and civilisation, but so often these words come at a cost to the soul, an affront to He who created us. But Fiji …’ The rev. paused and clasped his hands, as though I were the entire kingdom of islands right there before him. ‘Fiji is a chance to start from the beginning, a land not yet poisoned by the vices of the modern world, of money and greed. We are returning to Eden, to a man and woman in their utter nakedness, lost of body and spirit, no God to instruct what is night and day but us, you and I, blessed to speak with His voice. Yes, we step on to the shores of your darkened land with the burden of a great responsibility, as the sole bringers of light, the knowledge to create a new world. But fear not, in my, sorry, our hands, it is a righteous power.’

With this final word he actually glowed, his face danced upon by the sunlight reflecting from the sea. He rocked back and forth upon his stool like an excited child. Only when the sound of splashing disturbed the reverie did I feel excused to move. I stood at one porthole and the rev. the other. We watched a shoal of flying fish leap and skitter across the waves, scattering from a flock of diving gulls that hovered, swooped, and pierced the ocean like arrows. Not once did they fail to surface without a silver prize glittering in their beaks.
12 January 1835

Nearly two weeks since my confession to the Rev. Stevens, and I have not once sat with my journal. Why this is so, I am uncertain. Though much of my thinking has been forward rather than backward, away from the land that has put the pen in my hand, their words in my mouth. And while expressing my fears to the rev. seems to have left him energised, more studious than ever with his Fijian lessons, I wake with a shadow of apprehension at my side. I am once again fearful of what tomorrow may bring, that this very ship will be anchored in my bay, that a man as meek and good-natured as the Rev. Stevens relishes himself as ‘a bringer of light’, and speaks about the future Fiji as though he himself were its creator.

18 January 1835

Despite my affection for the dolphin and its joyful dance above the waves, I am not so in love to refuse a slice of its delicious meat, and was most pleased this afternoon when the midshipman stuck several with a harpoon and handed them to the cook. But, it was with a degree of disgust from our fellow diners that the Rev. Thomas and I tucked into a fine steak this evening. To add insult to those who had lost their appetite, the Rev. Thomas thence called upon me to support his opinion that if we eat but one of God’s creatures, then all must be considered sustenance. Rarely offered the stage at the dinner table, I was disappointed that my estimation did not venture further than the delicacies of turtle soup, as the Rev. Lilywhite quickly ceased my oration: ‘To talk about turtle with the taste of potato in one’s mouth is distracting to the palate.’

With the benefit of hindsight I feel that this were a saving interjection. Only now do I see the trap of conversation that the Rev. Thomas had laid – by accident or intent I am not decided. Beyond dolphin and turtle, the only flesh more prized by a Fijian is that of his brother. A subject more abhorrent to the white man I have not yet discovered.

28 January 1835

During the course of last week, most commonly in the dying heat of late afternoon before dinner, as I took my stroll to the quieter corners of the Caroline, I was joined by a most unlikely conversation partner – the Rev. Thomas. This man, who has treated me as some underling stowaway, seems to have actively sought out my company, broaching subjects from the creation myths of Fiji, to the wedding-night rituals of newlyweds!

I have to confess that despite his idiosyncrasies, he is a most engaging speaker, for unlike the Rev. Stevens, he is not fearful of the more devilish aspects of my culture. On the contrary, he seeks out the darker corners of my kingdom and, though a little worryingly, takes some secret thrill from the details of debauchery, as well as macabre interest in the practice of cannibalism.

2 February 1835

We are all grateful for this steady wind that blows us east, as many on-board the Caroline long for a glimpse of terra firma, a comfortable cabin becoming no more welcoming than a floating gaol.

The Rev. Thomas seems to have tired in his investigations of Fiji, but I presume he has offices to prepare before his arrival in Port Jackson, where he will take over a parish of convicts. He has been elusive during the afternoons, and noticeably withdrawn from proceedings at the dinner table in the evening. When Rev. Stevens joked with his fellow passengers that they had seen so little of him they considered shouting ‘Man overboard!’ the Rev. Thomas snapped like a tired dog. ‘Writing sermons for the damned, brother Stevens. The condemned men of New Holland need the words of the Lord like a desert does water. Are you mocking my labour with God?’

The wife of Rev. Stevens, usually a woman mild of manner and slow of tongue, defended her husband by sharply retorting that the library study, with its double porthole, may leave the Rev. Thomas more refreshed than being shut away in his gloomy chamber. Rev. Thomas took a mighty breath to utter a ‘Thank you, Mrs Stevens,’ before Rev. Jefferson lightened the mood by saying grace.

4 February 1835

Moderate wind has slowed the Caroline to a crawl, and the midday sun noticeably fags the bodies of the sailors, those who have no choice but to toil as we lounge in the shade. I fear again that our ship will be no more than an ornament on a millpond by morning.

6 February 1835

What a drama today has devised for tomorrow! It began after dinner when I startled the capt. in the library, causing him to flutter like a trapped bird. Once he regained his composure, and had looked into my eyes enough to deem
they were true, he confessed that he owned some books ‘not fit for Christian readers, that may have been shelved next to the very words of our Good Lord’.

I quickly eased his conscience by confirming that I had discreetly removed his bawdy books from general perusal, sealing them away in the oak chest that lay behind the door. Alas, when I took the key from inside a scroll on the bottom shelf, assured that on opening the chest the capt. would be relieved, I was shocked to find it empty, the books gone! The capt., usually a man of lofty and stern countenance, blushed like a teenage maiden. ‘But only the reverends and their wives can read!’

When his manner calmed, the capt. placed his hand firmly upon my shoulder and hushed his voice. ‘It would be of great embarrassment if any of the dear brethren, or indeed the ladies with whom I share the dinner table, should come across these illicit pages.’ He then plucked a ring of keys from his waistcoat and dangled them before my eyes. ‘This is every key to every lock on this ship,’ he confirmed before placing the set into my hands. ‘Mr Babbage, as an order from the commander of the vessel which you ride, as a favour to your capt., I implore that during dinner tomorrow, you creep stealthily between the cabins of the passengers and discover the whereabouts of those missing books. And if you do find them, I want you, without so much as a squeak, to replace them in this chest, keeping the entire affair to your strictest person, and thus hiding both the shame of the owner, and borrower.’

With these instructions I returned to my quarters, most anxious about my part in this drama, a game even, with myself as the most likely loser – either caught red-handed rifling my patron’s chambers, or accused of being the original thief of the books!

But it was a solemn oath that I swore to the capt., and find his scurrilous pages I will!

7 February 1834

The day to my drama began as usual: morning service followed by Fijian instruction for Rev. Stevens, before reverie above deck in the afternoon. But then, prior to the evening meal, I feigned a slight stomach ache to keep me from the table – thus free to skulk about the lower decks undisturbed.

Once the clatter of knife and fork commenced from the diners, I deemed it safe to leave my room and undergo the mission. Most of the cabin doors were unlocked, and little more than a silent turn of the knob was needed to enter.

On embarking the Caroline, each guest had been allotted a cabin and a large trunk – which I would now unlock with the master keys of the capt.

Curious, guilty, frightened of capture and the misunderstanding that would no doubt ensue, I searched through the missionaries’ belongings fruitlessly, discovering only possessions regular to all – diaries, bibles, medicines, and articles for use of the women only.

Where the other cabins gleamed with the polish and keep of a feminine hand, the room of Rev. Thomas lay as fetid and dank as a rat’s nest. I lifted and peered beneath his belongings with little care of replacing them as I had found, doubting the rev. himself would be able to recollect where they had been discarded. Once I was sure no books rested beneath his reeking undergarments and yellowing bed sheets, I took the final key from the ring and inserted it into the chest.

But where the other locks had fallen open, this one snagged the key and stuck fast.

Hearing chair legs scrape across the dining-room floor above, I was sweating through my breeches as I tugged at the key in an effort to work it free. Footfalls creaked their way along the corridor outside, and I realised I was trapped! If I was caught in the quarters of my patrons, and the capt. shied of revealing his intentions of my search, I would be shamed and flogged in the manner of the miserable cheese thief!

When the rev. turned the doorknob, and I stood up from the chest, I had not a reason in my head to offer why I was in his quarters.

But the capt. came to the rescue, a man of his word. Just as the door swung open he called the missionaries and wives above deck, insisting that they observe a particularly starry night sky. In the time he had them march on deck to be disappointed by a hazy vista, I wiggled the key loose from the lock, along with a knot of cloth that had been purposefully jammed in the mechanism! Without knowledge of this sabotage, a stuck key would foil anyone attempting to open the chest. It was not an obstacle that had occurred by mishap, and only the cunning of Rev. Thomas could have arranged it so.

Questions why only multiplied as I made my escape and ducked back to my room.

My brain races with this mystery, but I should try and sleep now, glad that I was not caught, tied to the mast and whipped!

8 February 1835
On opening the library door this morning I immediately sensed the scroll had been moved. I took the key from its hiding place and opened the chest that a day before had been empty. When I lifted the lid it was as though the books had never been removed!

The capt., grinning as I told him of the miraculously returned books, did not seem to care that a culprit had not been discovered, just that he had been spared of shame before the reverends and their wives. When I ventured that the ‘borrower’ must have been one of them, the capt. winked, patted my shoulder and said, ‘Fear God not Mr Babbage, for He knows well the weakness of a man without a wife.’

Then he walked away, my judge, jury, and jailer, certain he had found his fornicator of pages!

I spent the day musing on this brief but dramatic episode, wondering how the books had been so conveniently returned, and whether the Rev. Thomas had prior knowledge of the search.

9 February 1835
The more I consider the Rev. Thomas, the more I understand what a fine messenger of God he is. And, ashamedly, as these acknowledgements of his better character increase, so does my guilt at assassinating his person in these very pages. His direct manner is a most effective tool of conversation, revealing the heart of subjects rather than dancing around them.

As we will part company in New Holland, when he takes his position with the convict church in Port Jackson, and I continue on with the Rev. Stevens to Fiji, I shall pray to the Lord above that we may have the time to become better acquainted.

10 February 1835
Now it is I who has laid a trap! Once the books had made their fantastic return to where they had vanished, I was in no doubt that the Rev. Thomas had sabotaged the lock himself. But how had he known I was to search his quarters that very evening?

Between the words of this journal I have had the same sensation as stepping on to a jungle path near enemy villages. Though the leaves and trees are still, eyes watch my every move from the hidden dark – just as those of the Rev. Thomas have raced across these very pages. I have long suspected his changing moods – temperamental as the sea herself – to be connected to my very words, and this afternoon, after the false accolades of his person had been put to paper, I returned my journal to its usual place on the shelf. But this time, before taking my reverie above deck, I wet a strand of hair and pasted it across the closed pages. Whilst pretending to snooze on a sack of wheat, I opened my eyes wide enough to watch Rev. Thomas slip below, no doubt pausing at the hatch to look left and right for a witness, much in the manner of a fox raiding a burrow.

Following dinner, and the most gracious and cordial reception from the Rev. Thomas, no doubt his mood lightened on reading what a fine gentleman I had now declared him, I returned to my cabin to find the journal unmoved – but the hair gone!

And I can write this in confidence now, sure that the eyes of the Rev. Thomas will not read my words, because the key for the chest in which this journal is stored hangs about my neck!

11 February 1835
Though the Rev. Thomas did not express outward disappointment that my jottings were now unavailable, I did discern a focus of inquisition during our exchange this morning. Our conversation was that of a mighty, slow moving river, its surface of glass betraying the swirling eddies beneath.

It is strange indeed that this journal, which I began as though a task set by a schoolmaster, should form such an attachment to my being that I recoiled with feelings of invasion when realising my private words had become public.

Have I become more Englander than Islander? Judging the inner world more important than the outer?

12 February 1835
I fear the unusual sea conditions are causing the capt. much concern. Though we have but a murmur of wind, the sea billows beneath our bows like a silken curtain. Not a wave even ripples, and this effect of riding aquatic dunes is quite unnerving.

The capt., not about to distress his passengers with prophecies of doom, will not be drawn to speculate on the approaching weather.

Alas, it is apparent to us all, that we are sailing towards stormy seas.

13 February 1835
A humid and heated night has passed, with little change to our conditions but a stronger breeze now riffling the previously smooth surface.

This afternoon the sailors were employed in fastening loose articles to the deck, binding, nailing, and roping any object not already fixed to the Caroline. I dare say Mrs Stevens, the entire voyage suffering from acute seasickness, would also benefit from being firmly attached to the vessel!

I am now returned to my cabin after running on deck to investigate the cheering and calling of the crew. As I appeared from the hatch I was slapped about the jaw, almost to the deck by the surprise and force of my attacker. Fists clench and ready to fight, I saw that my enemy was an immense shoal of flying fish, rising up and over the Caroline like a flock of silver birds. While some whizzed and glittered past our ears, others struck the sails and masts and dropped to the deck, beating and flaring their gills in suffocation. The sea foamed with their multitude, all thrashing winged-fins fleeing from invisible predators, for no birds dived on them from above. The sailors, some puzzled and some afraid, others jumping on the fish run aground on the deck, forgot their labours entirely.

Then when the sea quietened, and the last of the flyers skipped away, we were left with an eerie hush, again that rolling landscape of billowing waves. The silence was broken by a call of ‘Land ahoy!’ from the crow’s nest.

Capt. Drinkwater bellowed, ‘Impossible!’ before the midshipman called again.

‘Land, captain! And hills, mountains that touch the sky!’

The capt. extended his telescope and scanned the horizon. All on-board saw his Adam’s apple genuflect when he gulped.

The floating range was a storm, the clouds smoked up so black and tall it seemed the sea had extinguished the sun. We all gathered at the prow of the Caroline, felt the wind cooling, saw the whitecaps flare on the crests of waves and watched the darkness grow.

We are but insects clinging to a strip of bark.

14 February 1835

Dear Father who art in Heaven, deliver us from this tempest so we may preach your name and your love to those who do not yet know it is you who allows them to live. In your oceans we understand that we are all but miserable sinners ready to be drowned at thy command. Know that with each giant wave that breaks upon the Caroline our love and obedience to your power only strengthens. Amen.

16 February 1835

When dawn broke this morning, and our good Caroline glowed in the rising sun, bruised and battered but floating, we first gave a solemn prayer to those we had lost, taken by the sea in the midst of her rage, swallowed by the depths, but now, we pray, at peace with the Lord above.

I have written nothing for two days but a shaky prayer, as I feared each wave that crashed over my head was the end of my bodily life. In that violent gale we seemed no more than a blow- away kite snapped from its line, the labour of the men in the masts a feeble resistance.

On the first morning of the storm, the sky was as black as night, the only torch to our plight veins of lightning streaking from cloud to sea, splitting and illuminating, shattering white beneath the waves like trees of ice. The claps of thunder were loud enough to blow the glass from the portholes.

When I felt brave enough to face my great tormentor, I unfastened the hatch to lift my head above deck. The rain pelted my face like buckshot. The sky was sea. We faced a wave so huge that we were like Noah, running aground on the peak of Ararat. But just as I believed my soul would be washed from my body, for the summit of sea was poised to crush our raft into splinters, we sailed those slopes as though the Lord himself were raising us that little closer to Heaven, so we may know He can transform oceans into mountains.

Then again the valley, bottomed in the gloom, walls of water towering over the ship, each time seemingly the last. But the good Caroline rode the tempest, and in this predicament of doom there was God, an exaltation of peace, sacred moments of trust in His care and love.

And it is this love we need to guide us through tragedy.

The Rev. Jefferson, on seeing terror possess the faces of his flock, called a meeting of group prayer in the dining room. As the waves rained down and the lightning flashed, we joined hands and begged for His mercy. There was comfort in this union, though when the motion of the room is of a shaken box, the stomachs of those within are soon loosened. Mrs Stevens, much embarrassed by her nausea, insisted on leaving for fresher air. The Rev. Stevens accompanied her, and I too, considering her previous seasickness dementia.

Water had breached the quarterdeck hatch, and as the Rev. Stevens stepped after his wife, he lost his footing on
the greasy boards, clutching at me as he fell and crashing us both to the floor. It was a mighty effort to rise, as each
time we stood the Caroline tossed us back to the planks. But Mrs Stevens had already grabbed the handrail of the
steps, and in her desperation to breathe fresh air, did not wait for her husband.

When we climbed on to the deck, Mrs Stevens was standing at the side as though it were a fine day for viewing.
Both the rev. and I called out for her to return, but she was fixed to the railing in fear, riveted by the rise and fall of
those monstrous seas. The Rev. Stevens shook himself free of my grip and ran across the slanting deck. The ship
tilted so far over that the spars dipped in the sea, and the rev. almost shot clean overboard, his wife clutching out at
her beloved husband. When the Caroline righted herself, bobbing on the swell like a cork in a stream, they were
almost flung into the sky by the force of motion.

Then the Caroline sat bolt upright in the storm, defiant against the bludgeoning, a respite long enough for the rev.
and his wife to embrace as a single soul, her delicate head in his hands of David, before a wave dashed them clean
from the deck.

I took a coil of rope and ran to the rail, ready to cast out a lifeline and haul them from death. But there was
nothing save those turbulent and boiling depths, and I prayed hard and loud to my dear Lord that He might find a
seat for two more servants in His Kingdom of Heaven.

23 February 1835
Abated the rough seas may be, the memory of those raging waters and the souls it swept asunder remains. For the
last week we have sailed upon a vessel in mourning. The flag at half-mast has been a memorial to those we have lost
– the Rev. Stevens and his wife, along with four other crewmembers washed from the decks in the midst of the
tempest.

Indeed, this sabbath was a solemn occasion, with the gloomy skies as leaden as our moods. The Rev. Jefferson
gave a service in memory of ‘those swallowed by the stormy seas’, calling upon the Lord ‘to raise those just and
dedicated souls into thy eternal care, and know that they perished on a crusade in the name of Jesus Christ’.

25 February 1835
Again the sun blazes on our billowing sails, and the Caroline, repaired and ready once more to race down the wind,
makes a rapid advance on the shores of New Holland.

Soul and body we are strengthened by this fair weather, and our resolve to carry the torch of the Lord once more
returned.

27 February 1835
Still no word from the Rev. Jefferson about a replacement for Rev. Stevens, though he assures me that my heathen
brothers are no more or less important to the Lord than any other sinners.

I do not doubt the endeavours of the missionaries. Why would men and women from a land of plenty flout their
lives so precariously upon these depths unless it was the Lord Himself who had commanded them forward? Yes, the
white man has visited my shores before, other sailors who too risked the wrath of the waves to see our golden sands.
But the whalers and sandalwood traders, the ships of war and escaping convicts, Capt. Bligh and his loyal charges,
called only for their fruit and fish, freshwater and refuge, our women. And these ships and men, if not compelled to
my lands in the name of God, were led by the lure of Satan and his meretricious dreams.

A time of change is about our islands, a future uncertain. The greatest fear I have is that the Rev. Thomas will step
into the shoes of Rev. Stevens, and cast his substantial shadow across my sunlit home.

3 March 1835
At last! After five months of nothing but an oceanic horizon, we have sighted land! And this time, as confirmed by
Capt. Drinkwater, it is not a continent of storm clouds.

The silhouette of Mount Dromedary was a stately welcome to the east coast of New Holland, and only the loss of
our dear friends the Stevens could tinge what was a most cheering sight.

7 March 1835
Rockier, craggier, and higher than any mountain on my kingdom of islands, this land, in which I am told could fit a
hundred Fijis, surely rivals the most spectacular works of His creation.

Rev. Jefferson gave a lecture on the history of this vast continent, from the landing of Cook and the Endeavour, to
the oddities of wildlife that roam the interior – including giant mouse-like creatures that bounce upright on their hind
legs – and the miserable state of the indigenes ‘who thus far have remained indifferent to civilisation and the care of
our Lord, preferring to wallow in a miserable and heathen savagedom’. At this point the rev. addressed me directly, stressing that if I should learn anything on this short stay, it be that ‘those who refuse a hand up will remain sitting down’.

As I complete this entry, a call has sung out that the Port Jackson lighthouse has been sighted. Tomorrow I set foot on **terra firma**.

**8 March 1835**

How wonderful it is to walk upon ground that does not creek, groan and roll! While the *Caroline* is docked and the capt. oversees her servicing, myself, the reverends and their wives will be accommodated by the most welcoming Mr and Mrs Holloway – Mr Holloway being the chief superintendent of the Port Jackson Mission. Their wide smiles and delicious spread – Rev. Thomas almost devoured an entire plum pudding – was a warming sight indeed after the grim stares of the townsfolk, many with jaws agape at a man with my skin colour dressed as well as a dapper lord.

Though we travelled through the heart of the town I did not have chance to see an aboriginal among the settlers. But tomorrow, after a reception and service from the Port Jackson Wesleyans, our party will commence a short tour of this far reach of the British Empire.

**9 March 1835**

Refreshed after a long sleep on a bed free of motion, I began the day with vivacity and an inquisitive mind as to the marriage of England and this distant isle, looking forward to questioning an aborigine on how, and if, the white man had improved his lot.

After a morning service in the Macquarie Street Chapel, attended by several scores of worshippers, we set about the town at a leisurely pace – now free to walk farther than a ship’s length before turning about!

A penal colony this settlement may be, populated with the most wretched felons plucked from the darkest alleys of England, it is a fair attempt they have made on this infant town, with many shops and houses replications of those found in their homeland.

While we walked from street to street, often pausing to hear the merits of a building and its construction orated by Mr Holloway, my gaze wandered in search of an aborigine.

But on this first day I saw none, just the same beggarly elements – including the soldiers and gaolers – that inhabit the drinking dens of London. Though Mr Holloway was quick to remark that this is a colony where the condemned man can earn the key to his lock.

When I asked Rev. Jefferson if Fiji were to become another English prison he assured me that King George had different plans, chuckling, ‘What punishment a bounty of fruit and fish with a sweetening breeze?’ He also added, with a little more sobriety, that he had heard rumours from Govt that the carriage of convicts was about to cease, as many of the Port Jackson population had now ascended their nefarious histories and assumed positions of considerable importance, with voice enough to deem it a cruel and inhuman treatment and demand its cessation.

Disappointed not to greet an indigene, I asked Mr Holloway why the town seemed devoid of its original landowners. He answered by confirming the lecture of Rev. Jefferson that ‘many prefer a roof of stars to one of timber or stone’.

I too wondered if I might find the light of Heaven better than a town of drunkards and thieves, murderers and their despots?

**18 March 1835**

It is not unfair to say that the colonists of New South Wales are the ones wallowing in the mire of iniquity, not the aborigines – they, who despite not knowing the Saviour, live more virtuously than the superficial Christians of England.

On a ride through ‘the bush’ to preach at Richmond, accompanying the Reverends Jefferson and Thomas, I observed that the natives have little desire for religion, and services have thus been thinly attended. After preaching in a cold and leaking barn to a congregation of seven, Rev. Thomas was drawn to question, ‘Does the pitiable condition of these people prove that they are barely human, and no more beyond salvation than the kangaroos? Or simply that man without the Gospel is doomed?’

I turned away from the contempt of Rev. Thomas, and sought air beyond the stifled carriage. It was not my place to debate with him before his senior, but he should know that my brothers and sisters, those who have lived for generations with only their invented deities, are not without society, its moral codes, ceremonies, songs and stories.

It seems absurd that I have passed judgement on those not aware of their crimes. Only if the indigenes of New Holland, or Fiji, know the truth of God and then turn away, can I mark them as sinners.
19 March 1835

On return to Port Jackson I was summoned to a meeting at the Macquarie Street Chapel with Reverends Jefferson, Lilywhite, Thomas, and new member of the mission, a Rev. Collins. After making formal acquaintance with Rev. Collins, I briefly met his wife and three sons, all of who will be accompanying him to Lakemba, before the business of a replacement for the late Rev. Stevens commenced.

My heart may have sank when I learned that the Rev. Thomas would be bearing the torch of God into Fiji, but my countenance was kept free of disappointment as I held out my hand to shake his in congratulation.

I pray that a man who has pledged his life to the Lord may be blessed so.

21 March 1835

Once more we board the Caroline and make the sea our home. After nearly three weeks on the edge of this tremendous island, visiting churches and towns along the Hawkesbury Valley, and stepping the streets of Sydney, from the glories of the Botanic Gardens, to the debauched nights of convicts and soldiers at the Rocks, my anxieties for the future of the aborigines now transform to apprehension for my own people.

The few indigenes I encountered seem a people lost of spirit, and of home. Though I use the word home only as an Englishman would, for the aboriginals are not dwellers of a fixed place, and seem to have been disenfranchised by this new world suddenly upon their shores.

The lessons I have learned from this colony are warnings, a prophecy of what my people could become at the hands of foreign rulers. The men who followed in the wake of Cook came with aggrandised visions of themselves, judging the husbands of these shores a lowly and pitied tribe of the human race, lacking the intelligence to even build a house or clothe their bodies.

But if peace with the land be a measure of civilisation, a harmonic balance between man and animal, where all flourish and prosper, then it would have been the Englander deemed savage – he who has blackened the skies with soot and smoke, who crooks the backs of his children in sunless workhouses, who feeds himself fat while his brothers starve.

Virtuous and brave is the aborigine who resists the feeble vanities of his godless invaders. If only those who followed Cook had read his logbook entry on these enlightened people:

They may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans: being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb’d by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life.

22 March 1835

Once more the horizon pitches and we walk on tilting ground. However, the voyage to Tonga will be a brief three weeks on the waves, and again I will be busied with the instruction of Fijian.

The Rev. Thomas, in comparison to the late Rev. Stevens, is a difficult and unruly student, contesting much of what I teach – despite his ignorance of my language – and most prickly towards any correction. I am shamed to admit that thoughts of sabotaging his progress have entered my mind, as the longer he is reliant upon me as his interpreter, the better I can temper his message. If it were him alone I were instructing, I fear the urge to filter his words would prevail, but as my class also contains the Rev. Collins, his wife, and their eldest son, I am true to the grammar and syntax of my mother tongue.

11 April 1835

I have had little time to sit with my journal this voyage, as mornings have been occupied teaching Fijian or assisting Rev. Thomas and Collins with a translation of Matthew 3:2: Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand – to be used as an introductory service.

The afternoons have been available for the brethren and their families to ask questions about the manners and customs of Fijian society – twice the children have been sent away, firstly when the discourse ventured towards cannibalism, and secondly when I began explaining the ritual strangulation of widows upon the death of their husbands.

Mrs Collins quite recoiled at this sad truth, an act of love and obedience I once considered necessary, but now realise is no more than barbaric superstition.
14 April 1835

Rougher conditions – though the ocean is a millpond compared to the great storm that beset the Caroline north of New Holland – have not slowed our progress to Tonga, but the Collins family, after two years of landlubbing in Port Jackson, have been too seasick to attend classes.

Therefore it has been the Rev. Thomas and I alone, which has offered him the lead on the subject of Fijian customs. Once again I am fielding questions about our womenfolk, war, and the occasional detail of our many false gods. Since the change of office for Rev. Thomas, I have observed he has become most energetic about mission business, ensuring our supplies and livestock are prepared and ready to be unloaded, and making considerable progress in his Fijian – despite his reluctance to have myself as his teacher.

22 April 1835

Two days among the Tongans and I am overwhelmed with a desire to see my island. The mission in Nuku’ alofa has converted many heathen to Christian, and raises my spirits to what is possible in Fiji, as the happy Tongans seem ready to serve their new god with hearty willingness.

In an audience with King Tupou, we were presented with a pig and two baskets of yams, breadfruit and bananas. His majesty is a tall and well-muscled man, shining with coconut oil and that glorious Pacific sun. In his company, after ten years in dreary climes, I felt poorly before his gleaming health! Although he was at first curious about my time in England, he soon tired of hearing tales of a land he could not see – a trait of character shared by my Fijian brothers.

Am I to be a castaway for ever from the land of my birth? Stranded in some netherworld between England and Fiji?

24 April 1835

Sabbath, and the chapel bulged with a most eager congregation, all ears on the Rev. James and his service, finely delivered in impeccable Tongan. I believe the Rev. Thomas was simultaneously pleased and disheartened to attend, as despite not understanding a single word, he understood what sway the Lord may have when delivered in the language of his eager subjects.

On return to the bay Rev. Thomas began practising what Fijian he has thus far learned, and also requested the dictionary notes I have been hastily preparing.

2 May 1835

With the wind beginning to blow our way, Capt. Drinkwater has spent the day busying his men and readying the masts and rigging of the Caroline. He is keen to leave this idyllic port, as he and his officers have had to keep a tight rein on the less than Christian members of his crew – more sailors romanced on the erotic tales of Cook in Tahiti – who have rarely been far from the Tongan maidens. ‘It has been like asking children to stand in a sweet shop with their hands in their pockets,’ he confessed.

Though I have not written for a week, I should keep this entry brief, as before sunset I have to instruct the Rev. Thomas once more, now an exemplary student who has made rapid progress since our arrival, surpassing both the Rev. Collins and his able wife as a speaker of Fijian.

3 May 1835

Next port of call, Fiji! With a favourable wind we are but two days from the southern tip of my kingdom.

A great many Tongans came to sing us off, the hymns reverberating around the bay and keeping all on-board in quiet reverence until their fading.

4 May 1835

My hand trembles like a leaf. I can barely write knowing that the next rock to jut from this glittering sea will be Lakemba, my home, the land of my mother and father.

5 May 1835

Almost ten years since I left her shores, after a voyage around the globe and back, with a new language upon my tongue, and an old God above my head, I return to Fiji.

We have anchored just beyond the reef system, as the capt. will not sail any closer until he has made certain the dangers of the waters. And of my people. Therefore it has been decided that myself, Revs Thomas and Collins,
along with six crewmembers, will row ashore in the pinnace.

With his eyeglass extended, the capt. informs me that he can see hundreds running back and forth across the sands ‘naked but for their glinting muskets, bows and arrows, and masks. No, not masks. Faces, painted as red as blood or as black as tar’.

We will land, with I as foreign as my passengers, the uninvited guests. I must sing out our welcome before an arrow of fear pierces my chest.
Stolen Car

Jimmy walked into the services. He hovered between the rows of snacks. He slipped two king-size Mars Bars and a pack of Ritz biscuits into his inside pocket before going to the counter for a box of matches.

‘How much is that?’
‘Thirty pence, please.’
‘Thirty p. for matches?’ He said it like she was wrong.
The girl stared. ‘Where else you gonna buy ’em?’
Jimmy gave her a pound and thought about taking a pack of Polos off the counter. The girl quickened in her turn and he moved his hand away as though he was touching to check they were real.

His body flinched in the sharpened wind. He felt the wetness of his trainers and weighted clothes. He walked to the south exit through the truck park, passing between hulks of trailers streaked and blackened with spray and rain.

A man was already waiting at the exit with a cardboard sign that said: Bedford Please. Jimmy walked to the top of a small bank and squatted on his haunches. He took out the pack of Ritz biscuits and ate them two or three at a time, watching cars accelerate up the slip road. He then ate a Mars Bar and saved the other for later. His clenched hands were pulled inside his sleeves and pushed hard into his pockets. He was motionless in the wind, and waited beneath a small and leafless tree. Passengers who saw him on the bank stared. He looked too young to be standing out in the rain on the edge of the M1.

When the other hitcher got into a car he actually turned and looked around to Jimmy. He turned as though Jimmy had called out his name even though he had not.

Next, an orange, rusting Metro pulled up. A small man in his late fifties, dressed in a cord blazer beckoned Jimmy into his car as though they were part of a getaway. Jimmy hesitated, looked again at his frailty and size and opened the door.

He regretted getting in the moment the door shut. There was a faint smell of shit, and although not filthy, nothing had ever been wiped or cleaned. A film of dust on every surface.

Before a greeting the man talked himself through the manoeuvres of pulling off the exit road.
‘First, mirror, accelerate, second, third, lane clear.’
He spoke the instructions with a flourish. Jimmy watched his jerky and mouse-like movements, leaning over the wheel and too close to the windscreen. They lurched on to the inside lane and slowed the car behind. It flashed angrily.

‘Bloody lunatics,’ he said. ‘People drive much too fast these days.’ As the car overtook he shouted, ‘Do you want to go to hospital? Moron.’ The words reverberated in the little Metro. ‘Now then, where did you say you were going?’
‘London,’ Jimmy answered as he spoke over him.
‘Was it London?’
‘Yeah, to see me auntie.’

Jimmy squirmed in his seat and looked at the car. Empty except for a pack of mints where a radio should have been. The driver was still hunched over the wheel when he turned to look at Jimmy properly. He smiled as though through an injury that hurt.

‘An auntie in London, I see, no problem, although I’m from Wales I know England very well. I’m visiting my sister in Kent this week.’
He spoke quickly and fired pieces of spit like fluff. He had broken veins in his nose and cheeks. His top lip would sometimes stick to his teeth, and he had a cut from shaving that morning. Jimmy liked nothing about him. He drove and moved, checked the rear-view mirror nervously every few seconds and never stopped correcting the line of the car, even if it was centred in the lane.

‘You know there are cheap fares for budget travellers on buses and trains these days. Though I bet they’re still expensive for a young man like yourself. What do you actually do anyway?’
Jimmy lied. ‘I’m a trainee mechanic.’
‘Oh wonderful, I’ll have no bother if we break down then. Yes, a practical skill, a trade, that’s the right way to go,
isn’t it?’ He paused and tilted his head as though balancing the next question to be spoken.

‘I used to hitch myself when I was younger, North Wales, the Peak District, a bit of adventure. Though I wouldn’t do it now, much too dangerous.’

He paused and repeated the last words. ‘Much too dangerous.’ Then he began a monologue on various subjects including weather and winter, global warming, no more good butchers in his village, the decline of school uniforms.

‘What’s your job?’ Jimmy stopped him abruptly.

‘Sorry?’

‘Your job?’

‘Oh, I’m a teacher, well, headmaster in fact. A primary school in North Wales.’

Jimmy looked at his thin and bony hands, small on a small steering wheel. They crested the brow of a long hill. Cars passed continuously in the outside lanes. The wipers squeaked, frantically keeping the spray from the screen.

‘Well, I’m not becoming part of that mess.’

The traffic was massed and illuminated, backed close like some terrific singular vehicle that grew by the moment.

‘Right, what we’ll do is turn off at the next junction and take a little short cut I know. It’s pointless sitting in this.’

He inched forward in the haze of brake-light red. Jimmy sat like a mute. He wiped the passenger window with his sleeve and looked out to the ploughed fields. A whole farm was enveloped in the falling rain. The teacher turned off the motorway and drove under drops of falling sky that drummed hard on the Metro roof. Something in the sound scaled down the space.

‘Plenty of traffic here too, mate,’ said Jimmy, trying to break the curious intimacy.

‘Yes, yes,’ he agreed with enthusiasm. ‘Not such a secret short cut after all.’

He was smiling like an excited imp. All around the car it seemed they were submerged in a world cursed by a constant deluge. It was deafening and the teacher had to shout. ‘I do believe I know another short cut.’

He turned right on to a road that streamed with water. It was cast in a gothic gloom and they passed under wintered chestnuts, black boughs stencilled on the leaden sky. Slowing down to almost walking pace, the teacher drove on through the daytime dark and asked Jimmy if he could believe it was midday.

He did not answer.

When they emerged from the trees the rain abruptly stopped.

‘Well, would you believe it? Nothing, just like that.’

In the sunless noon sheep stood grazing in dim fields. The road ahead was clear of cars and the teacher drove on, twitching and excited by some private thought.

‘Maybe you can answer me a question?’

Jimmy was looking at the lock. The knife was in his pocket, the blade folded. He slipped his hand inside, and worked it open.

‘Why on earth, in the middle of winter, would men go out on a Friday night wearing only a shirt?’ He asked the question incredulous at the thought.

‘It defeats any common sense. I’ve seen young men in the town when it’s barely above zero in nothing more than cotton short sleeves.’

A car passed and dazzled them, headlights on full beam. Then there was nothing, just an orange Metro on a country road progressing through limbo.

‘They band together like a pack of bloody animals. It’s all so macho, isn’t it? Though I can see you’re not like that at all, are you?’ He looked across, the pained smile. ‘I’ve got a good eye for people, you see.’

The teacher drove faster than he had yet. The car accelerated along the empty lane as though by its own control.

‘Now you’re wrapped up properly, aren’t you? Good jacket, thick trousers. What material’s this?’ He moved his hand over to Jimmy’s knee and took a pinch of material. ‘Aah denim.’ He answered his own question. ‘Nice and warm.’

He opened his palm and began to smooth Jimmy’s thigh. That white and pallid hand on his dark jeans. His own hand on the hilt of the knife in his pocket.

The car drifted into the centre of the road.

Jimmy went for the handbrake. He wrenched it hard. The wheels locked, and the car drifted, coasting on the wet surface until the teacher panicked and turned into the skid. The left wing of the Metro clipped the corner of a banked verge. There was an explosion of mud and glass. Momentum reversed through helpless bodies, flung limbs. The teacher struck his head hard on the dashboard. The windscreen shattered like the birth of a star.

The only sound after the smash and flexing of metal was the hiss from a cracked radiator, a jumbled cacophony of clicking and ticking from the engine.

Jimmy undid his seatbelt, shaking, shouting. ‘What the fuck were you doing?’

The teacher rolled his head, dazed and unaware.
‘What the fuckin ’ell were you playin at?’

The teacher made a low moaning sound. Jimmy swung a blow that caught his mouth with the flat of his clenched fist. Trapped air popped as both his top and bottom lip split. Blood pulsed instantly, dotting the window. The second and third blows left him slumped forward. He looked as though he had fallen asleep reading or watching TV.

Jimmy got out and looked back into the wreck. He took the knife from his pocket and folded away the blade. He turned and ran, springing over a metal gate into a field of black and white cows that jumped and jerked. He ran from corner to corner and climbed a wobbling fence, slower now, running through the waterlogged field, gasping for air, his lungs burning. He leaned on the top rail and listened. Apart from his own breathing and his beating heart, there was a brief silence, before the sound of a car changing down gears. Fuck it, he said to the huge-eyed audience gathered at the gate.

He ran down a narrow access track flanked by high hedges and a small copse of cedar and birch. The lane was stained muddy green with manure and harvest spills. Then he ran across more fields. The hedgerows that seamed the patchwork of fields were lined with trees, and Jimmy looked at the land around, mostly flat, except for the occasional gentle hill that lay like the back of a sleeping man. Or a dead man.

The break in pace came when he heard a diesel engine labouring further down the lane. But where to run? The hedge either side was too high or too thick to clear, so he jumped down into the ditch, squatting in freezing water the colour of cold tea. The tractor juddered past, driven by a farmer who looked neither left nor right. If he had glanced down from his cab he would have seen a boy hiding, ridiculous and prone, like a frog prince exposed.

But the tractor passed. Jimmy walked away from its chugging engine. He walked against the muddied chevrons the deep tread had left, and picked up a broken branch with withered leaves. He snapped off the smaller branches and hiked culling nettles along the verge.

Dusk thickened, dissolving the profile of a town he was nearing. However close he got, the more it seemed to stay at the same distance.

Amber hovered as the dark sifted neon lights to shimmer and flicker below the fading shapes of houses and chimneys, a church spire taller than them all. The lanes shadowed, grew forms from his fear. This quiet and older world, far from a city of factories and shops, tower blocks and canals, the streets and people Jimmy was defined by, his brother and cousins. His stepfather. The darkness turned him inside out and smaller still. His imagination reeled. Fallen trees became sleeping beasts or giants of men, stumbled at the wayside. Nests in higher boughs were thorny heads chopped and posted to mark his progress.

When he thought he heard his mum call his name from across the fields, he scraped the stick along the ground and sang out loud. Rock songs, dance loops, theme tunes, anything to break the silence. When cars came he hid behind hedges and trees, not sure if he wanted to be found.
**Missing Person**

**THE PLUMTREE STUDIO DAT**

*Benny Star, the Plumtree Studio manager, has estimated that this recording was made around a month before the disappearance. Billy K had been given a set of keys for the studio, and although unknown to Mr Star at the time, would occasionally escort young women to the upper floors. The identity of Gloria James – this being her name seems unlikely given the context – has not yet been ascertained.*

Billy K – You got it … The green one, probably flashing. Now turn the dial till I’m loud and clear. No need to piss about with the faders. *The sky is Sunday, rain on the glass, empty bottles I’m a drunken ass.* Ow!Fuck! Told you … You step on a fucking cat? Hey! Stop laughing, could’ve blown me fucking eardrums out. Just set it all in the middle and get in here … I’m getting lonely.

Gloria James – Hey Loverman … Hey … don’t go drinking all the whiskey. Shit, it’s weird in here, like on a plane when they fuck about with the pressure.


GJ – Wow.

BK – No soundwaves lapping around the room. They get buried in the foam instead of bouncing back.

GJ – *La, la, la, la, la* … Fucking strange. No hiding in here. What with that glass booth staring in …

BK – No hiding. Try and be quiet, silent. Tell me what you hear.

GJ – My heart a bass drum. Thumping, thumping … So much sound coming from my body. All that gurgling in my stomach.

BK – If you’re alive you’re making music. Blood marching through your veins, a whole brass band in your stomach, playing and drowning all at once. And the air, rushing around your lungs like a hurricane … The only true quiet I know is before a song, between the fourth tap of a drumstick and the opening note, when the whole crowd takes a gasp of air and the room shrinks … Before the exhale of breath and sound blows it to pieces … Listen … *One, two, three, four. I saw you born at the break of dawn, a trick of the light and the sky was torn.*

GJ – Why stop? That was new, yeah?

BK – There and then. Birth and death of a song. Buried in the foam.

GJ – You know how fucking sexy you are singing? Even the angry stuff …

BK – You hear the silence?

GJ – Take your shirt off, Billy K.

BK – No Billy K tonight. I came here as Barry. Flesh and blood Barry. Barry Fulton … the original.

GJ – Barry, Billy, who cares … If we’re playing that game then I’m … Gloria … Gloria James.

BK – Glorious Gloria James … Whatever you want, beautiful.

GJ – Want a hit? Something to forget you ever had a label?
BK – No, no. Put your smack away. Not tonight. Barry goes to heaven playing the guitar and singing … having beautiful, rhythmic sex … with a beautiful, song of a woman.

GJ – Keep talking …

BK – Who’s not afraid of the fact she loves to fuck?

GJ – Especially you.

BK – Come here.

GJ – I’m coming.

BK – Crawl to me.

GJ – I’m crawling … Now let’s get these trousers out the way. You gonna put that guitar down?

BK – I’m gonna play while you sing.

GJ – This is singing.

BK – Fuck.

GJ – This how you like it, Barry? How you want it? Tell me, Barry. I’ll do it for you Barry … You say it I’ll do it … Believe me.

BK – Fuck … This is it. Nowhere else.

GJ – Right now.

BK – Come here. Kiss me. Take your pants off … Sit on me … Fuck… Kiss me … Fuck. You’re so fucking wet …

GJ – Oh shit … I’m staying here … for ever. You want to try and fuck me off you? Think you can?

BK – Listen.

GJ – I’m listening.

BK – No talking, just you, your body, my body, the music of sex, of us … fucking away the world.

GJ – Whatever you say, handsome.

BK – Shhhh …

GJ – Fuck … you nearly lost me there. Thought I was gonna faint … Hey …

BK – I fucking have.

GJ – Where are we?

BK – Not here … Not yet … Pass me the bottle. Fuck …

GJ – Here … Shit, that tastes good.

BK – Only this and music. Two places where it all makes sense.

GJ – Sex and singing. Could be worse… Hey, why the ban on my dirty talk? Thought you liked me getting filthy with you? Worried I was gonna get too crude? Finally shock you with something you wouldn’t do?

BK – Impossible. Anyway, you know it drives me crazy… hearing your carnal poetry. But just for once I wanted it pure and ancient, pre-language, the body-to-body slap of Mr and Mrs Stone Age going at it in a fireless cave. Her screaming orgasm no different to yours.

GJ – We got some furs on the floor, I hope?

BK – Sure, a woolly mammoth bed and some funky cave paintings.

GJ – I can see me in mammoth fur.

BK – Before language, before names for things, what’d you be wearing? Not mammoth … maybe a grunt … Music is the oldest art, the original call from soul to soul. Language dies as quickly as it’s born. New words push out the old. This recording might last thousands of years, burnt on to a disc, saved from format to format. But the language? Dying as we speak. They’ll need some professor of late twentieth-century slang to decipher this pillow talk.
GJ – Not the fucking, though?
BK – Not the fucking, the music of sex. The screaming orgasm spans time, eons. Especially the volume of yours, echoing across the millennia.

GJ – Supersonic sex.
BK – Supersonic sex … I like that. Sounds like a song, but would have to be without lyrics, nothing mortal … In Nevada, the eternally fucked desert of radiation, sculptors chisel and hammer out warning symbols, weld spikes and barbs because the word ‘Warning’ will expire … But the danger of growing a third eye, of melting into the sand, is for ever. Beyond any language of the moment …

GJ – Fuck the signs and spikes. They should pipe some ear-bursting thrash metal from the cacti … Who the fuck would get past that?
BK – Ha. The pen is mightier than the sword, but music is mightier than the pen … cool … You ever see the front row at gigs? Kids hugging the amps, bodies throbbing with the sound.

GJ – You know they’re hugging you, Billy K, not the band, not the songs … as fucking great as they are.
BK – Thought it was just Barry tonight … and anyway, his real name was something else.
GJ – Who?
BK – Who? Billy the fucking Kid, that’s who. Except he was William Bonney, they named him Billy the Kid, the lawmen and the sheriffs. If he’d hitched up his horse and walked into a saloon and introduced himself as Mr William Bonney, he’d have been lucky if the cowboys even looked up.

GJ – Nothing you can do about it. You’re the man they want, Billy K.
BK – The man? The man is here, now. They want this impossible being, beyond frailty, beyond hangovers and paranoia and puking blood, beyond mortality, taking a crap in the morning … I had some fucked-up stalkers. Rubbish dippers and underwear thieves, letters describing wedding plans in intricate detail, outfits for pageboys, piping on the cake. I saw the same woman in America at every gig, not dancing, not singing along, just staring without moving, hovering around like a fucking ghost. She looked like your average Midwest mom, big boned, big hair, heavy makeup. I could imagine her picking up the kids from school, baking a tray of cookies with an apron on. But no, she was at the hotels, outside the dressing room doors, on the sidewalk as the tour bus pulled away. She was scaring me. Ricky said he’d ‘arrange something’ if it started affecting the performance. Shit, what a thing to live with if he did.

GJ – So, what happened?
BK – I invited her into the hotel and had sex with her.
GJ – What? Are you fucking joking?
BK – True. And that was it. All over. I never saw her again.

The myth of me vanished. Whatever she was imagining, she realised I wasn’t it.
GJ – She could’ve been a real nut.
BK – She probably went back to baking cookies, appreciated normality again. I tell you, that was a liberating moment. Never thought I’d be so happy to disappoint. That was where the Moscow stunt came from.

GJ – The Red Square Rocks double? I knew that wasn’t you … I know that ass a mile away.
BK – Ouch! You were the only one.

GJ – He did look like you … but …
BK – The moves were wooden.

GJ – You need a clone, trained to jive from birth.
BK – Wise hired him when the public lost the plot. Mathew. Mathew Quail. Some kid who dropped out of university to be Billy 2. What a fucking job. They were tipping the fucking tour bus on the way out of stadiums. Teenage girls crushed against the barriers. I felt like a TV evangelist, fans fainting as I reached out and touched them. Bellboys and chambermaids selling bogus room numbers for fistfuls
of cash. Mathew would wave from dressing-room windows while Ronnie or Tommy screeched us out a side street in a hire car. I’d peek out from under the blanket and see fans shinning up drainpipes and rushing the security.

GJ – Sounds like fun.

BK – It was a getaway. We were shit scared. We were swerving between gangs of kids wearing T-shirts with our faces printed on them. This was an escape from fame, but not Billy K. Good friends or not, the guys in the car knew. To them Billy K was hiding on the back seat. Barry was nowhere. I needed the full out-of-Billy experience. Mathew already knew the songs, I just had to fine-tune some of his microphone waltzing and who’d know we’d switched? Not the fucking band, Ronnie caning his kit and Tommy and Dave too frit of fucking up … So I slip offstage mid-song, everyone thinking the usual theatrics, except Billy 2. He’s all ready to come bouncing on, same outfit, shirt undone four buttons, doused in water to imitate the sweat and effort of keeping a quarter million Muscovites from freezing over.

GJ – And no one guessed …

BK – Not for two songs. I grab a coat and hat, hurdle the barrier and suddenly I’m in the thick of the crowd, watching myself sing and dance. I was squashed, crushed, spat on and offered swigs of vodka from plastic bottles. The Kremlin floated in the haze like some alien cathedral. It was a fucking wild crowd. Two women had a fistfight. A bottle came boomeranging past my ear and shattered on the back of a hatless head. The man brushed off the glass and punched his fist into the sky. Crowd surfers climbed over us, crawling towards the stage. All this hysteria, all for Billy K. Not Barry Fulton, not me.

GJ – He forgot the words.

BK – Everyone forgets the words. He missed a whole verse. Tommy thinks I’m drunk or stoned, dances his way across the stage and actually manages to look up from the strings …

GJ – Then what?

BK – He freaks out. That’s it. The song sounds like something dropped down the stairs. The crowd boo and cheer simultaneously. King of the fucking castle Wise strides onstage. He susses the double and hauls him off by the collar. Bearing in mind the crowd believe this to be me, Billy K, garrotted into the wings by a man in an Armani suit. And this in a country with a history of vanishings. Family and friends disappearing into thin air, snatched from their beds in the dead of night. The plastic cups and bottles turned to cobbledstones. Ronnie knows the siege routine and digs in behind his drums. I was nearly over the barrier when a petrol bomb exploded in the rigging. Fuck it, I thought. Fuck all this. What am I worsening half of Red Square to get back for? Barricaded into dressing rooms, hiding under room service trolleys, fans kicking in doors and sidestepping bellboys. I turned from the music and ran. I ran with the pack, invigorated, between riot police and cans of tear gas. It was exhilarating. Terrifying. The singular, swaying mass, minutes before united by the beat of a drum and electric guitar, now dispersed by mounted police swishing batons with the flourish of Alexander the Great stampeding a burning city. People fell. The athletic hurled the fallen. I watched a man shrug his coat to the floor and sprint on, faster than the runners swaddled from the cold, faster than a man tripping, rising to his knees before a rider leaned from his saddle and whacked the air from his lungs. And the horses. What a sound, the clattering hooves on frozen stone. I ran faster, helpless against a gallop, almost patient for the crack of polished wood across my skull. But then came the lunatic fringe. A bare-chested rebel cut through the crowd and stuck a broken bottle in the flank of a horse. Men and boys, scarves tied around their noses and mouths, eyes streaming, back-pedalled and taunted the police with open hands, proving they had nothing to lose. We stood our ground, and then charged. I picked up a baton and hurled it against a line of retreating shields. This was every high from every concert. The police regrouped, reorganised, shapes practised by centurions two thousand years ago. Missiles rained. We danced in the street. Tear gas swirled like dry ice. This kid, no more than ten or eleven, skipped about blasting an aerosol horn. It was a party, a celebration of chaos. Another petrol bomb, fumes of melting plastic mixed with tear gas. My throat burned. I felt something wet on my cheek, my blood, my glorious red blood …

For a few minutes we were fucking invincible.
GJ – Fuck, what a rush!

BK – But then came the tanks, rumbling from a side street. Even the police gave them a wide berth. The crowd hushed, a few thrown stones bounced off the armour. Maybe the machine gun was only fired into the air, but the effect was panic and party over, our silly dreams broken by the reality of bullets pinging off buildings. People ran in a crouch, hands over their heads. I recognised the man five steps in front, the big man who’d shed his coat for speed, shirtsleeves rolled up, panting, hunched over by the crack of gunfire, like a fucking bear let loose on the streets. Staggering through a heap of shovelled snow then slipping, his feet higher than his head, slamming the flagstones and hurting …

GJ – Ouch. Poor guy.

BK – A terrible thing to see that, a fat man betrayed by gravity.

GJ – Fucking crazy. Kind of wish I was there … Did you stop and help?

BK – Of course I stopped.

GJ – But the police didn’t know who you were. You were just another rioter to be whipped by one of those batons … or worse.

BK – I stopped because I owed this man. He’d come to hear me sing and play and lost his coat. He was about to hear the beat of the Moscow police drummed across his back. I grabbed his arm. When he stood I thought he was swearing at me, but he was laughing, a hearty boom separate to the danger of the moment, the closing squads of uniformed thugs. He pulled me down a side street where old ladies stood aghast with bags of shopping. The more sprightly officers had broken unit and chased down stragglers with neck-high tackles. I heard shouting behind me, orders to halt. My coatless friend spun on his heels. He extended his arm into the visor of our pursuer. The plastic shattered against his knuckles. One of Moscow’s finest melted on to the road. More police rushed the street. A water cannon washed an old lady and her shopping on to the pavement. Police rampaged down the avenue. Vegetables rolled from her split bag, mashed under jackboots. I was done for, Billy K or Barry Fulton, the truncheon wouldn’t know. Then a lady called out from an open door to one of the mansions. A wide-hipped woman with an apron and headscarf, the cleaner. My friend dragged me up the steps and into the house where he kissed her on both cheeks. I did the same, grappled to her bleach-smelling bosom before she shooed us along the hallway to the back entrance. We shot down an alleyway on to a busy street. Now, I’m not sure if my friend hailed or hijacked the taxi, but suddenly we’re beyond the avenues, skidding through narrow lanes, the coatless man twisting around to speak to me in Russian. I guess he told the story of the KO’ed policeman as he punched his open palm and bellowed another laugh. He turned to me and slapped his chest. ‘Viktor,’ he proclaimed. ‘Barry,’ I said. He studied me more closely and asked, ‘Billy?’ I said, ‘Barry’ again. He repeated my name, the one I was born with, smiled and shook my hand. We drove past warehouses, between smoking chimneystacks. The taxi driver waved away the money Viktor offered and dropped us at the rear of a factory. I was cold now, the heat of running evaporated. Viktor still had his sleeves rolled up. I didn’t care where we were going as long as it was inside. I needed a drink. I could taste tear gas in the back of my throat. Viktor hammered on a windowless door that was opened, and I’m not bullshitting, by a man with a black patch over his left eye. Viktor said, ‘Barry’ and the patch said, ‘Barry’ and we all descended the crooked staircase into a raucous drinking den where men sat around packing crates and downed glasses of vodka that made them spit and growl after each swallow.

GJ – Where were you?

BK – No idea. All I knew was that I was alive. Somebody. Barry. They called me Barry. Viktor navigated us between groups of men to the bar, ducking under exposed pipes, a ragged flag of the hammer and sickle. I say bar, but it was a high wall with shelves and shelves of the same bottles of vodka. Nothing else but a few dusty cans of tonic water. The barman slid Viktor a bottle and two stout glasses. We walked through the drinkers. Viktor clutched men by the shoulders and spun them around. They shook my hand and said, ‘Barry, Welcome Barry.’ The first glass thrust into my hand was brimming with vodka. I downed it in one. The scorch of tear gas erased from my throat. I was melting from the inside out. I heard music, an accordion pumping up the room, and Viktor the bear, backslapping his buddies and laughing, his atomic bellow. Glasses were filled, held, and tipped. I reached into the pockets of the coat and fished out the snakeskin wallet of Ricky Wise. I set free the roubles, dollars and pounds, showering bills on to the bar like confetti. The barman held up the empty
wallet and stood on a stool to announce the generosity of my manager. Roars rattled the shelves of
glasses and bottles. Viktor danced, gravity his friend again, a twinkle-toed big man light on his feet.
He swept his hand across the seated men, ordered a dance floor and the clearing of furniture. Packing
crates and chairs flew into the fireplace, the roof beams shook with stomping feet of men dancing,
singing and drinking. Time didn’t exist here. No clocks on the wall. No sun, moon or stars. I looked
at the long bar and thought of a submarine stranded on the bottom of the ocean, these abandoned men
the doomed crew, making merry before the last of the air.

GJ – How the hell did they find you? None of this ever made the press, did it?
BK – Wise. He was scared of what would happen if the police got hold of me first. Two were killed
in the riot. Maybe I was to blame?

GJ – For singing?
BK – Singing? Not singing? Before the goons hired by Wise tracked me down, I danced and sung in
the bar, standing on tables beating two chair legs together to keep time to jaunty folk songs. I drank,
slept, and woke. Always the packed bar, the fated men knocking back firewater. I dreamed of a
cosmonaut floating in the corner of the room. We spoke to each other. I understood his language of
isolation, the stellar dialect. We shared a dislocation from the planet, a lonely orbit followed by
billions … And then I woke and realised it wasn’t a dream. He was in the room after all, hovering by
the lights in his orange space suit. He was live on the evening news. He flickered across the screen of
a broken TV mounted on the wall, assembling and reassembling in the grainy waves of static … same
way my body came and went in that subterranean bar.

GJ – Fuck … That’s something … Fucking out there.
BK – Best of all was leaving the place freezing, knowing the fur coat of Ricky Wise fitted Viktor like
a glove.
GJ – Story makes me crave vodka … you got any? Pass me the whiskey. Fuck, Barry. I want a little
hit, sure you can’t join me?
BK – No, no … not yet, anyway. I feel like me, Barry.
GJ – Come on … no fun by myself. Don’t desert me now. Now you’re spent.
BK – Never … I … fought the angels from the sky … Nothing they could do, stole their wings so I
could fly … Forgot … the weight of walking on the world … Now I’m … a wanted man in powder
clouds …

GJ – Woooo … we all wanna fuck you, rock star.
BK – You’re all messed up.
GJ – Don’t fucking judge me … I’m the cosmonaut now … Speak to me …
BK – What about?
GJ – Love … That word is for ever … never die. Say it and fucking mean it … I dare you.
BK – Forget it.
GJ – Amore, Liebe … Fuck it … Burn it up, Billy, the view is beautiful from here.
BK – Take it easy.
GJ – Fuck! Ouch!
BK – Fuck. All right?
GJ – The fucking ground, hard ground … I want a beach, soft white sand … Take me out somewhere
… Fuck me in the surf.
BK – You want a beach?
GJ – Waves … Turquoise.
BK – You want to heap your clothes on the sand and wade out into the sea, naked, swim into another
life?
GJ – Just a hotel would be fine. Why so much effort to escape when we have drugs? The getaway
car, always waiting with the engine running.
BK – That drops you back at the scene of the crime … Fucking magic.
GJ – Fuck you, Billy … You’re fucking with my high.
BK – High? A high should be simply being alive … I just want to play my guitar and sing a few
songs. Swing on a hammock plucking bum notes. Have a self composed by me, not the press, not the
record execs or fucked-up fans.
GJ – A beach …
BK – What?
GJ – Fuck me on the beach, Barry K.
BK – Barry fucking K? You’re way gone.
GJ – Come … come here.
BK – And vanish with you?
GJ – Come to the poppy seed … the slopes of the Himalaya.
BK – Good stuff?
GJ – Fucking good stuff.
BK – Pass it here.
GJ – Love the sky, Billy.
BK – Fuck.
GJ – Hold my hand … Now you got your wings.
PART THREE
Charles Nash lands at Nairobi Airport. Charles Nash walks coolly past the customs officers, bored and listless, swatting flies, sweating beneath the cranking fans. Charles Nash has entered Kenya, a travelling salesman in Africa, flying in for a high-powered business meeting, or perhaps a conference.

When Anna mailed back and told me a Peter Cornell appeared on both lists, renting a 4WD on the 20th, and then flying from Sydney to Nairobi on the 28th with a ticket bought in Australia on the 24th, all I had to do was sit and lie low until my new passport arrived.

I admit I had moments of wondering who the hell I was chasing. But this was something. Particularly since Peter Cornell didn’t appear on any databases in the UK – no National Insurance number, driving licence, or previous convictions – despite travelling on a British passport.

Australian customs had looked me up and down twice, then let me pass. Kenyan officials barely glanced at the passport. The moment I stepped from the air-conditioned foyer I was hit by the heat. Like an oven door left open. Past the airport security I’m swamped by taxi drivers and street kids, limbless men with paper cups, the hungry rush of people starting the day without a penny to their name.

And it breaks my heart to see children the same age as Gemma begging barefoot, rifling the bins like stray dogs. I make another promise to be a better man, a better father, once this chase is over.

But there’s money here too, in the armoured limousines and mirrored office blocks, the international banks protected by guards with machine guns. And this isn’t a country I can track a man by his electronic footprint. Needs good old-fashioned detective work here, favours and kickbacks. Threats. Maybe that’s why I buy a panama hat from a market stall. I feel like a character who has wandered from the pages of a Raymond Chandler novel.

I arrange for a car to drive me to Mombasa in an hour, then ask around the taxi stand if a Peter Cornell had booked a ride south. Futile. I’ll need more than luck to catch a man with a week’s head start.
The Reverend McCreedy Orphanage was relocated from the old church to the outskirts of Mombasa in the 1960s. A brass plaque has survived the moving, inscribed: *Reading, Writing, Love and Care, since 1841.*

Miss Oburu, a large, beaming woman, with a gaggle of children swinging from the hem of her dress like satellites, welcomes me through the gates. We walk across a football pitch without a blade of grass, the children running up to shake my hand giggle and say, ‘How do you do?’ Open doorways on to silent classrooms show students bent at their desks, copying sums from a blackboard. Chickens and goats scatter as we turn into the playground. Children too young for schooling follow Miss Oburu into her office like the Pied Piper. I take off my hat, slip my hand into my top pocket and switch on the Dictaphone.

‘Sorry it is a little untidy.’
‘Not at all.’
‘Hello.’
‘Hello.’
‘Hello.’
‘Children. I have business. Out.’
‘Hello.’
‘Out I said!’
‘Bye bye.’
‘Goodbye.’
‘Away from the window! Have you collected the eggs yet?’
‘No, miss.’
‘Well, go now. They’ll be cooked before dinner if you leave them in the sun. Very sorry, Mr … ?’
‘Nash. Charles Nash. Thanks for seeing me.’
‘Away from the window, George! I told you! Sorry, Mr Nash, I’m a very busy mother with two hundred children.’
‘Two hundred! That’s quite a handful.’
‘In fact, can you shut the door?’
‘Sure.’
‘Otherwise the children will just stand and stare, probably interrupt me to practise their English with you.’
‘I imagine the Reverend McCreedy would be very happy to know his legacy has lasted over, what, 160 years?’
‘Oh yes, yes. Well if the reverend is upstairs watching over us, I hope he puts in a good word for me to the Lord. I need a peaceful spot in heaven after taking care of a family this size. But anyway, don’t get me started, Mr Nash, I’m sure you’ve not come all the way to Kenya to hear about my troubles, not that they are worth much next to the trials of these dear children. How can I help you? You said something on the phone about your nephew? I can’t say we’ve ever had an English boy at the orphanage. Why are you asking here?’
‘He’s twenty-three, so I guess he’d stand out from the other kids. No, he had an argument with his father, a fight.’
‘And came here?’
‘Well, to Mombasa. The last thing he said to his father was that he had no family, and that maybe he belonged in an orphanage.’
‘I think he’s a little old.’
‘No, to work as volunteer. Have you had any enquiring recently? I saw on the website you have university students placed here.’
‘This is basically a big house, with a big family and many mouths to feed. I have as many volunteers as possible. Nobody is paid a wage. And visitors, whoever and whenever, so when they leave they drop some coins in the collection box.’
‘Any foreign volunteers this week?’
‘Let me think a moment … Until Tuesday we had three doctors from Sweden, testing the children. But they’ve
gone now. Of course, yesterday a busload of Seventh Day Adventists from Canada came with schoolbooks and bibles – we have to sell them on we have so many. And that is all, I think.’

‘No young Englishman?’
‘Not that I remember.’
‘Are you sure? Even just a phone call? An email?’
‘No, what am I talking about! I’d forget my head if it wasn’t screwed on! Last Friday a young journalist from England visited.’

‘Early twenties?’
‘And quite a slight young man.’
‘Did he look anything like this?’
‘Let me see. Now where are my glasses?’
‘On your head.’
‘Oh, thank you. And this is your nephew?’
‘Peter.’
‘Peter, you say, well now he does look very similar to the journalist, but …’
‘He may have a beard now, or be thinner.’
‘But I don’t think so. You would almost think them brothers, but no. These are two different people. And now I remember, his name was Dominic, yes. I have his card somewhere, here, in this drawer, I think. Yes, there you are. Dominic Toon.’

‘What did he want?’
‘Said he was writing a story on Mombasa street children. He wanted to know about the orphanage, how the children come from the pavement to our family. He also asked lots of questions about the history of the place, about Reverend McCreedy. He even asked, which I thought was quite shocking, if I’d heard any rumours that the reverend was not a properly ordained member of the church. Strange question, don’t you think? But apart from that he was pleasant enough.’

‘And you’re sure it wasn’t Peter?’
‘Can I see the picture one more time?’
‘Here. It was taken a year ago. He will have changed a little.’
‘Very similar, but … I don’t think they’re the same person. Though you do have me thinking I could be wrong now.’

‘Any information where the reporter is—’
‘Miss! Miss Oburu!’
‘What do you want, child? I’m busy with a visitor.’
‘There’s a lady at the gate. Looking for her son and daughter.’
‘Sorry, Mr Nash, excuse me a moment. Come in, child. Did you ask her name?’
‘She says her name is Njenga.’
‘Njenga, are you sure?’
‘Yes.’
‘Oh Lord, Lord. We have storm clouds, sunshine, then again the storm clouds. Sorry, Mr Nash, I have something to attend to. Some bad news.’

‘Her children?’
‘We don’t have them. Well, we did until a week ago. They ran away. You’ll have to excuse me.’
‘Sorry, could I just ask if you know where Mr Toon stayed? Which hotel? Where he was heading?’
‘No idea, I’m sorry. I really must speak with this lady. I have to go now, Mr Nash. This is what I do. Oh Lord, what do I say to this mother? Usually I say we can’t change the children’s past, but we can change their present. And of course their future.’
I palm money to hotel staff, pay for false information. According to receptionists at both the Mombasa Lodge and the Harbour View, Dominic Toon was in two places at the same time.

My taxi driver can see I’m losing the plot and offers a joint. I decline. He lights it anyway, one hand on the wheel, the other used to either smoke or hit the horn. When he finishes he flicks the stub into the gutter, turns and asks, ‘This man you’re looking for, he is single, yes?’ I say I think so. ‘And also young?’ I nod. ‘Unless he a saint, then I know where he go.’

The sodium tubes of the bar illuminate the surrounding tenements, crumbling apartment blocks and roofs of corrugated tin, bones of dogs urinating against the wheels of waiting taxis. Above the dirty street a neon sign glows ‘Paradise’. I pay the driver, take a breath, and enter. Cigarettes and beer. That tang of alcohol and perfume swirling the air. Before I reach the bar a girl has linked her arm around mine. I say no thank you twice before she lets go. I order an iced tea and show a barman the picture of Billy K downloaded from the web. I chose a shot where he looks more boy next door than global rock god. But the barman shrugs his shoulders. I push a $10 bill over the counter. He puts the note in his pocket, picks up the picture and says no. I order another iced tea and sip through a straw. I watch mosquitoes zapped in the UV trap, pool players in high heels and jangling earrings firing balls into the pockets.

After the second iced tea I order a whiskey and coke. And I tell you now it feels good. New blood in my veins. Then I have another, a double. I swivel the stool and study the rest of the bar, mostly American and European businessmen, a few tourists who have wandered from their safari. The local girls slink the dance floor, a feline knowledge for those men wanting a rented woman in a rented room. When they sit on the stool next to mine and lean over for me to light their cigarettes, I show them the picture and ask if they have met a Peter Cornell. Or a Dominic Toon. They shake their heads and rest their palms on my thigh. I lift them off and say more no thank yous. But I sit at the bar and allow myself to be pitched sex by the prostitutes because it saves me walking the dance floor and flashing the photo.

One woman, early forties, shaved head and violet lipstick, watches the younger women come and go, then saunters over. Her tease is ordering a bottle of beer and biting the top off with her gold teeth. Then she puts the bottle between her drooping breasts, squashes them together and offers me a sip. I say no and again show the picture. She snatches the beer from her bosom and takes a quick gulp. ‘An English boy?’ she shouts above the shuddering sound system. ‘Maybe a week ago.’ She looks at Billy K more closely. ‘Yes. He was here.’

I ask her who with and she rubs her thumb and forefingers together. I put $20 in her hand.

‘One of the younger girls. But I don’t think she here tonight.’

‘Where could I find her?’ I enquire, peeling off another $20 note.

‘You know Kenyan girl very beautiful. Well, sometime the man fall in love, take his woman on holiday. Maybe go to the beach, maybe come back in a week, a month. Sometimes never.’

I ask her name.

‘I forgot,’ she says. I put another $20 in her open palm. ‘Kemi.’

Then I drink some more. I ask the barman about Kemi and for $10 he confirms she’s not here. No other women come over to ply their wares, and I actually feel rejected. Alone. At closing time I approach a woman with braids that hang to the small of her back. I pay her to take me to a hotel. I pay her to take me to a hotel because I’m too drunk to see the exit sign. Or hail a taxi. I have no confession to make here. The $50 I give her is to put me into bed and leave.
The problem with drinking is not being drunk. It’s being hungover. Paranoid. Waking in the weight of morning with an eggshell chest. For a while I sit on the edge of the bed and look at my hands. It takes some time to remember what country I’m in, and why. Then I go downstairs for breakfast. When the waiter says cooked or continental I turn and walk out on to the street. Rather the company of beggars and touts selling bogus safaris than restaurant clatter, or the four walls of my room closing in.

I let myself be hassled and snagged by the street kids, give them all the coins in my pocket, then tuck my wallet into my underwear. I wonder what parent would desert their child, have them tramp the streets hungry with outstretched hands. Then I see a dog watching me from a second floor window, and I know.

I walk on. Men ask to ‘change money, change money’. Buses pump out diesel fumes and African dance music so loud the speakers distort. I’m pushed along the road like a branch in a river, happy to have no thought where I should put the next step. I run aground in a marketplace, stalls of fruit and fish, butchers with pigs and cows strung up on steel hooks. I buy two bottles of coke from a kiosk and gulp them down without taking a breath.

Then I see him.

I see him buying a bunch of bananas from a fruit stall. He has a wispy beard. He wears a blue baseball cap. My stomach turns, like I’ve just leaped from a plane without a parachute. Can it really be this easy? I shadow him between tables of watermelon and guava. He turns and glances back, but pays no mind to another foreigner haggling for fruit.

Then while I’m paying for a bag of oranges he slips down a side street. I give the stallholder $5 and say keep the change. And the oranges.

Away from the market the narrow lanes are very quiet. Old men sit on doorsteps and smoke or drink tea from tiny glasses. A woman beats the dust from her rug with a rolling pin. Always a stray dog. I keep the blue cap in sight until a maze of alleyways comes out at a junction. Right or left? A boy, three or four years old, wearing a T-shirt but no pants, sees me. I ask, ‘Which way?’ The words mean nothing but he knows what I want. He points right and I whip out a $10 note and put it in his hand. He has no idea what it is. Then I run. When blue cap sees me, he runs too. We sprint the cramped streets. He cuts across backyards and flaps through a washing line hung with sheets. I can taste whiskey in my sweat. I belch acid. I chase and guess at about a minute of exertion before I’ll collapse.

I catch up with him in the car park of a derelict factory. Pigeons flutter through the broken windows. Bits of glass everywhere. He’s scaling a fence. I shout, ‘Stay right fucking there,’ and the rotten wood splits apart. Right or left? A boy, three or four years old, wearing a T-shirt but no pants, sees me. I ask, ‘Which way?’ The words mean nothing but he knows what I want. He points right and I whip out a $10 note and put it in his hand. He has no idea what it is. Then I run. When blue cap sees me, he runs too. We sprint the cramped streets. He cuts across backyards and flaps through a washing line hung with sheets. I can taste whiskey in my sweat. I belch acid. I chase and guess at about a minute of exertion before I’ll collapse.

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When he says, ‘Back off, motherfucker,’ in an American accent I realise I have the wrong man. Whoever this toerag is he’s not mine. And I’m ready to be the diplomat, explain the mistaken identity and walk away. But he swings at my stomach. I curl my body up and back like a cat. He swings again as I sway, swishing the air between us. When he jabs at my chest I parry the fence post with my forearm and clutch his wrist. I pull him close as a lover and butt him across the cheekbone. He goes down. I keep hold of his wrist and break it as he falls. It makes a sound like snapped cane. Only then does he drop the fence post.

‘Mvembo’s gonna fuck you up,’ he snarls.

I say nothing. I twist his wrist at the break.

He gargles another, ‘Fuck you.’ He goes on that if I have a problem with a woman, it’s not his. ‘I keep my girls on a close rein,’ he says. ‘You think the five-star hotels let the gutter rats past the door?’

And when he tells me he has friends in the police, I’m particularly offended. So I stand on his neck, my foot neatly across his windpipe. ‘You aren’t him,’ I say. ‘If I want to beat up pimps, I can do that in London. I’m very sorry I’ve made a mistake.’ Then I let him go.

He chokes a breath. He says, ‘My fucking wrist,’ and: ‘Damn right you made a mistake.’ He fumbles in his pocket. He drops a knife on the ground, and just before he clutches the hilt I kick him in the stomach. Twice. I leave him wheezing in the dirt. Then I walk away to find a drink. Filled with ice and whiskey.
After waking up drunk, hungover by midday and fooling myself I’m sober by sundown, I get into a taxi and ask for the Paradise. The driver, a shrunken old man, his wrinkled skin left behind on his diminishing body, simply stops the cab and tells me to get out when I ask if he knows a man called Mvembo. ‘Gangster,’ he says, as the spinning wheels flare up dirt.

Mvembo was the man going to ‘fuck me up’ according to the blue cap pimp I left crumpled on the street. The Paradise bar seems the most likely place in town I’d run into either of them. But it’s also where I’ll find Kemi, the girl who spent the night with Dominic Toon.

I take another taxi to the Paradise. Still quiet, just a few early-birds propped against the counter. All men. The girl I want to speak to isn’t yet here. I play and lose three games of pool with the barman. He knows Kemi. ‘She was here last night,’ he says. I don’t ask him about Mvembo, or the American. I sit on a high stool and wait, one eye over my shoulder. This is, I decide, the worst place in Mombasa for me to lie low.

I walk through the old town, down to Fort Jesus where shadows skulk from alleys offering bags of cannabis. Then I go down to the sea front and sit on a rock, watching the lights flicker across the bay. Moored fishing boats ride the waves rolling off the Indian Ocean. If I smoked I’d light a cigarette, but I don’t.

With the sun slid behind the town, silhouetting mosques and churches, the ramparts of Fort Jesus, I think about Anna, and how empty this beautiful scene is without someone to share it with.

First I see the American. Lit like a ghost beneath the tube lights of the pool table, his wrist in plaster. He leans against the edge of the baize, tilting back a bottle of beer. His blue cap turned backwards. Two Kenyan men stand guard beside him, smoking. I take a seat in a coffee shop across the road and watch girls walk in and palm rolls of money into his good hand. They pay him to work the bar. He stays sitting on the table and only stands when white men wander in from the street. He sidles up to them and gestures across the room with sweeping arms. Demonstrating his wares. Then he returns to perch again on the edge of the pool table. The only black man he stands for is the passenger of a silver Mercedes. The driver pulls right up on the pavement outside, gets out and opens the rear door for a tall, thin man, whose skin pigmentation has left pale patches on his face, like a map. He steps from the car and struts into the bar. He shakes the American’s hand without looking him in the eye. But the gesture is transaction, not greeting. The fold of bills slip into his top pocket.

I ask the waiter of the coffee shop, a young guy wearing a faded Arsenal shirt, if he knows the owner of the Mercedes. He gives me that shrug of the shoulders signalling the answer is going to cost money. I give him a $10 bill. ‘Mvembo,’ he says.

Mvembo reaches out and balances the cast of the American. He shakes his head. I move my chair a little further towards the rear of the coffee shop, into the shadows. Mvembo only stays long enough to pick up three girls and leave. Again the driver holds the door as he gets in the Mercedes. Along with the three girls who clamber into the back. If one of them is Kemi, my lead on Dominic Toon has gone.

Still the American marshals the bar. More girls and drinkers arrive, and along with them more cohorts around the pool table. Two of the Kenyan bodyguards argue and square up. The American steps between them, says something and they back down.

It would be a suicide mission for me to walk in and begin questioning the girls. I think of his knife stuck in my back.

I order a beer to follow the cappuccino. Just the one. I need my wits about me. I watch the waiter go over to a motorbike parked in front of the coffee shop. He tops up the oil. After he washes his hands I call him over to my table. I gesture for him to come a little closer and ask if he wants $100. He looks around. Does he believe me? Then he says if I want to put my dick in his ass there’s not enough money in the world. I shake my head.

‘Two favours,’ I say. ‘One, go over to the Paradise and tell a girl called Kemi that a rich admirer is waiting for her in the coffee shop. Two, park your motorbike around the back of this building and sit on it with the keys in the ignition.’ I deal him five $10 bills and say I’ll give him the rest after a ride to the edge of town. He looks around the
coffee shop, the peeling lino and buzzing flies, old men smoking. I know the answer.

‘Kemi?’ he confirms. I nod. ‘I know her.’ He puts the money down the front of his pants then straddles his bike and revs the engine. The other waiter shouts something but he opens the throttle and spins out a turn. I hear the bike thrummed down an alley between this building and the next. The engine stops and my getaway vehicle and driver enter through the back door. He looks at me, nods, and takes off his apron. He looks young walking across the road in his football shirt. I feel guilty for buying a favour, but I’m out of options.

The American only glances at the waiter as he enters. He greets one of the Kenyan men with a nod. Once past the front door I lose him in the glitzy lights and smoke. And then the sluggish clock ticks. Two minutes or twenty would feel the same until he comes back across the road. I have my eye on the rear door, and curse myself that I didn’t ask for the bike keys as part of the bargain. Before the waiter returns to my table he ties his apron back on. Then he says, ‘She coming.’

Kemi has made me wait long enough to drain a second bottle of beer. The American stops her at the entrance. I guess he asks why one of his staff is taking a break. She points to the café. I push my chair against the wall, away from the glare of the naked bulb. Even from this distance I can see she’s a beauty. She comes walking across the dirt street as though a red carpet’s been rolled out. She wears a skin-tight dress with a circle cut-out to reveal her pierced navel. Her scraped-back hair shines. And when she flashes her eyes at the waiter, I understood how Dominic Toon had crumbled.

The old men smoking at the next table turn to watch her sit down. She snaps something in Swahili and they go back to their cigarettes and tea.

‘So?’ she says curtly. ‘You want to go somewhere?’

‘Here is fine.’

‘Fine for what? I not some cheap girl who’ll fuck you in café.’

‘No, no.’ I say. ‘I just want to ask you a couple of questions.’

Then she kicks the chair back and stands to leave. ‘You waste my time. I have people to pay money and this is costing me.’

I pull $50 from my wallet. ‘Sit down,’ I say. ‘Tell me about Dominic Toon.’ She takes the bill and tucks it into her bra. Then she sits. I look over her shoulder to the Paradise and see we’re being watched. I nod at the waiter to sit on his bike.

He undoes his apron once more, stands nervously at the end of the counter and says, ‘I wait here.’

Kemi taps her varnished nails on the wooden table. ‘Who you want to know about?’

I say his name again. She shakes her head. This is getting expensive, I think, pulling out $50 more. She has the money palmed and inside her bra with the sleight of a magician.

‘Yes, an English boy. He look like that rock star. About a week ago. He very kind. And generous.’

I ask if she knows where he is now. She shrugs her shoulders and looks to the street. I unpeel another $50 and again she quickly steals it away.

‘I not sure, but I know he came from Australia because he try to give me Australian dollars. I say no good, he have to change them.’

Before I ask another question, I notice the waiter fidgeting, sweating, glancing back towards the Paradise. The American and his two Kenyan thugs stride across the road. I have about five seconds. ‘Where’s he now?’

She smiles and says, ‘This a big planet.’

Nearly $100 flutter out when I empty the wallet on to the table. ‘Where?’ I shout, but she’s too busy collecting the notes to answer.

Now I’ve stood I’m out of the shadow, revealed by the yellow of the naked bulb. The American shouts something from the middle of the road and starts running.

‘The bike,’ I snap. ‘Go.’ The waiter is a deer in the headlights, frozen with the keys in his hand. I rip them off him. He moves to take them back and I clip him under the chin. He falls, clattering over the chairs.

The American has paused on the street outside the café, and the Kenyans are shooing customers from the outside tables. No witnesses to my murder. Then the American storms inside. He pulls a matt black handgun from beneath his shirt. I tip tables and duck out the back door, run for my life.

And Kemi is a step in front, kicking off her heels and running, turning only to shout, ‘Home. Your boy gone home.’ Then she darts between the buildings.

Her voice is the last thing I hear before the revved engine. And the gunshots. I accelerate up the street between bullets, the first one fizzing past my left ear, the next shattering the rear window of a taxi. I twist back the throttle and lean into the rushing wind. And I guess I broke the wrist he uses to shoot with, because he empties the entire clip without finding the target.
Terra Incognita

The resurrected hadn’t tended the flames, though I swear I’d have preferred a ghost as company to the burning bike. And the black smoke? Just the sump oil, leaking on to the glowing embers and igniting in the wind. No one’s come to stretcher me home. And the reverend still grins from the grave. Now with a told you so look to his smile.

Have built up the fire and unscrewed the front mudguard from the forks and started digging. Well, if digging is the right word for a one-handed cripple and a mudguard. And no water yet, so I’m writing this as an excuse to rest.

No, that’s a lie. I don’t care about rest. I’m writing to stop myself from vanishing. Physically, mentally, and spiritually, I’m fading away. I could dig my way back to London, to Paris, if you were by my side. I’m writing because I need my existence confirming. How do I know I’m alive without another human being to verify my soul?

I’m used to being alone, no brothers or sisters. No family. But then you came along, shared your heart and soul, wanted mine. And I know I insisted on riding this stretch of desert by myself, to prove something, to resolve what had gone before and examine my life beneath this lens of sky. What I do know is that I’ve never wanted someone so much as I do you.

Morning. And the undertakers are here.

Woke to the squawk of two vultures perched on the bank. They wear their ragged wings in the style of funeral directors, two sombre men in long, dark coats, waiting. Maybe they think my well a self-dug grave?

I threw handfuls of stones at them, and missed. Though I landed a few close enough to scuttle them into the bush. For now. They’ll be back. All morning I’ve listened to their cackles. I wish I’d bought the air rifle a Danish backpacker offered me in Katherine. I’d put a pellet between their beady eyes and roast them on the fire, skewered on a spoke like a kebab.

But what would I drink to wash them down? My well is four feet deep, and though the sand is damp, water isn’t gushing from the earth.

Again: two plus two equals three. Now the sun is up I’m pouring with sweat.

0.9 l of water remaining.

Took off all clothes to cool down and wait out the afternoon heat. Will dig again this evening. Slumped naked in the shade of the creek bank, opposite the bones of the reverend, twirling his silver cross between my fingers. ‘Do you expect me to start praying?’ I asked. ‘Forget it,’ I called out. ‘My fate is in my hands. Not yours. Not God’s.’

I felt stupidly powerful making these claims, the uncontested ruler of the void where I’m stranded. Then I heard my own voice echoing. ‘Crazy fucker,’ I shouted. ‘Talking to a pile of bones.’ My words ricocheted along the narrow banks of the creek and flew into the great blue sky, gone.

I’ve not seen another human being for three days. Not a long time, but neither have I seen evidence of life beyond lizards and birds. The silence is crushing. But then no, it’s not silence, because there’s wind and swaying bush, the crackling fire and hungry vultures. It’s loneliness that’s crushing. I had to fly to the bottom of the world and die in a desert to realise life is about other people.

I think of Miguel, a motorbike courier I worked with zigzagging parcels through the streets of London. We were standing in the shadow of St Paul’s Cathedral, dealing laughs and jokes with the other riders, when Miguel lifted off his bag and dropped it to the pavement. ‘Theis city,’ he announced, before looking to the glinting towers of finance and banking, Sir Christopher Wren’s great dome, another bu soaked of camera-toting tourists, and the technicolour brokers in lurid jackets, looking for all the world like ice-cream sellers rushing to save melting stock, ‘is a lie. A great beeg lie.’

He emptied the contents of his bag on to the kerb, brown and white letters stamped urgent, and rode all the way back to his village in northern Spain.

Right now, it’s that lie I want to be a part of.

The dying sun has ten minutes to live. Strafes cloud hangs like purple bunting, and I’m spooning coffee granules directly into my mouth. Will the caffeine buzz last long enough for me to dig down to the buried river? I have hopes of a fountain whooshing me into the air. Though the best I can expect is a mire of fetid water.
I’m sorry I’ve left our little cottage unfinished. Now the painkillers have run out, and my leg is burning agony, my right shoulder numbed and left arm jelly from the digging, I have the focus to build our petite palace. I dare not read back this letter. A macho Englishman would shudder admitting he needed someone so much. I want to write this every time I put pen to page, but I’m afraid of scaring you with the strength of my emotion, my love. I wish I’d gathered the courage to tell you this when we said au revoir at Threeways junction. I promise I’m not just declaring it now because I’m only a drop of water from thirst. It’s dark now, and I must dig, scratch and burrow for my life. I’ve built up the blaze and dragged it to the edge of my hole. Half naked, covered in dirt and lit by the flames of a desert fire, it’s only the dream of our stone cottage that reminds me I’m human. Nearly sunrise. I’ve dug all night without rest, and my left palm is blistered and raw. Blood covers the mudguard shovel. I’m completely naked and black with dirt. Stripped off again so I wouldn’t sweat and fade away before morning. Now I emerge from my hole, earth-dark and wild, a muddied beast of the underworld blinking in the daylight. I’m about to gulp down my final water. There should be some ceremony to commemorate my farewell to H2O. I should thank the two hydrogen atoms and the oxygen hanger-on, for everything they’ve done. From floating a single cell in the Cambrian seas, to filling swimming pools and water pistols. I wonder how much longer the 60 per cent of my body that’s water will remain. To the stuff of life. A la votre!

Not moved for three hours. The less I move the less I’ll evaporate. I want to sleep, but eating coffee all night has frayed my nerve endings. Until I dream away the heat and thirst, I’m taking slow and measured breaths, calming my beating heart, conserving strength. I close my eyes from the bones of the reverend and see the cottage. The second floor is complete, the rafters fixed in the brickwork. I’m awaiting the delivery of the slates so I can climb into the sky and nail a roof above our heads. Even when a snake slithered along the bed of the creek I didn’t stir. Maybe I could’ve killed it and drank the blood? But I was hypnotised by the muscle of light, the forked tongue of a bible villain. I don’t know this species, whether it’s venomous or not. In this land I’m as innocent as Adam before the fall. I’m a trespasser, an alien. There could be a water hole ten feet from this spot, an ice-cold bore deep enough for me to submerge my entire body. But I don’t have this knowledge. I know every station on the Central Line, the name of each prime minister since the war, that Buzz Aldrin was the second man on the moon, a byte is a group of bits, who shot John Lennon, Mg is the symbol for magnesium, slugs and snails belong to the Gastropoda class, the speed of light is 2.997 924 58 x 10(8) metres per second, Reginald Dwight changed his name to Elton John, a zygote is a fertilised egg, and that evaporation is to change from a liquid or solid state to a vapour. I’m becoming air through ignorance. I’m going to find out which plants have moisture, which ones will double me up with stomach cramps, poison my blood, or keep me alive. I’ve not eaten myself to death, yet. My stomach churns, but I doubt it’s fatal. Took my knife and crawled on to the ridge. Hacked off root ends and waxy leaves, peeled back the bark from a small tree and dug out the pithy trunk. Even before the sun rose high enough to be a burden on my back, I twice had to rest from dizzy spells. No danger of falling as I’m already on the ground, but when the horizon tilted I thought I’d be rolled from the Earth. I crawled into the shade of a clump of spinifex and chewed on my bounty of twigs. What to eat and what not took Aborigines generations of trial and error, death and sickness. I have two days. The roots and leaves I’ve gathered are so dry they cut my mouth. The tree has a tongue-shrinking tang. Maybe the reverend wandered outside for a snack and never returned?

Although I knew I had to get back to the solid shade of the creek, my body refused to move, and despite the baking sun, I lost the will to whip it onwards. Then the nourishment I needed walked on to my plate. A line of honey ants marched along the red sand, each one fat with a glowing, bulbous backside. To keep the highway moving, I took every other ant, pinching the head and sucking the sweet sac into my parched mouth. For ten minutes I lay on my stomach, naked and scratched, only the dirty splint evidence I’d once been tame, and popped ant manna on to my swollen tongue. An entire colony was unwittingly sacrificing itself for my survival. And when the traffic ceased flowing I chased after the stragglers, picking, sucking, and devouring as I crawled. Even though this meagre offering jolted my body into life, I’m wondering about possible psychoactive ingredients. Again, and this time without sleeping, I’ve seen him, the dead reverend, living. Maybe the heat wobble...
rising from the sands, or the shadows of bushes and rocks, conspiring with my broken mind, conjured up his
presence.

I’ll tell you what I saw without exaggeration, as much to confirm and comfort myself. And I say this
understanding that the brain must convert what we see into meaning, that sight is subjective, a sense warped with
experience, language, knowledge, and belief – or their absence.

I saw a white man in a black coat, the reverend. He stood and waved. He beckoned me to follow. Each time he
waved he vanished and reappeared a little farther away, still signalling me to follow. When I snapped, ‘Get a
fucking grip,’ and turned back to the creek, he was right there before me, a shadow rising from the sand, red-haired
and portly, the silver cross missing from his leather necklace.

Of course, he wasn’t physically there. I’m a mirage-maker, just as others who’ve perished in the desert have
projected their minds on to the screen of sky and sand, summoning cities from rocks and lakes from clouds. The
lucky ones stumble and die in an oasis of palms, or maybe a harem filled with veiled and perfumed queens.

Dehydration will bring on more headaches, dizziness, organ failure, and at some point, delirium. I must be aware
of what I’m doing. One wrong decision could be the difference between life and death.

Time has stopped. The sun is neither rising nor setting. I’m the burning ant beneath a magnifying glass. Somewhere
in the cloudless sky a malevolent hand focuses the flames, pinning me to a sliver of shade in this scorched creek.

Falling in and out of shivering sleep – even though sweltering. Have begun licking sweat from body to conserve
water. Is this conducive to staying alive?

I’m waiting, but for what? Rescue? Though the smoke still lifts from the embers of the bike, no one’s come to
investigate, to save me.

Early evening, I think. Could be tomorrow, or even morning again. Can hear the vultures cackling and fighting,
somewhere close. How much do they know about prophesising death?

Even writing tiring.

Please come and take me home.

Woke terrified to the sound of screaming. I saw two reverends fighting for their lives on the opposite bank,
scratching and gouging, fingers in eyes and teeth bared, their black frocks wild and flapping.

But of course it wasn’t the reverends. The frocks and teeth were the wings and talons of the vultures, feathers
flying and hook bills snapping. I’m at least enough of a meal to be fought over. If I had the energy I’d stone them. If
I had the energy I’d pull the skeleton from the bank and smash it to pieces. My life over his death.

Just after darkness fell I heard singing. Beautiful choral singing. Hymns. I crawled towards the sound, up and over
the bank. The tumbledown ruin had been transformed to a church filled with light and song.

Yes, I know what I’ve seen and heard is a dying brain playing tricks. But I’m going to follow the mirage because
it’s all that’s left. I’m going to church, an outback sermon calling me across the sands.

I’ll crawl towards the stars of the southern cross, a sign pointing to the end of something.

I’ve heard no more singing, nor seen the church. I’m just a fool sitting under the stars, writing by the glow of a
burning bush I ignited with the lighter. I’ve had to perform my own miracles. No flames from heaven, no
commandments etched in stone, just a flint and a little petrol.

When the bush burns to embers I’ll crawl again. Hardly know I have a broken leg and dislocated shoulder. A
laughable pain against thirst, my swollen tongue.

A pile of bricks in the bush is now my best chance.

I said I was going to crawl on when the bush burned down. I didn’t. I looked across the silvered land, a vista of
rocks and dead trees lit by a thousand suns, and saw nothing but a cold and lonely ruin. I thought, Why not die here?
Why struggle to another place that you are not?

I curled into a ball, a foetus on the sand. And then the miracle was nothing more than going to the toilet for the
first time in two days. I knelt and cupped my hands, filled my palms and lifted hot, glorious piss to my mouth.

You must forget taste and smell, trivial senses to hydration. Right there and then, my tongue swollen and
blistered, lips cracked and bleeding, it was a glass of vintage champagne.

I’ve crawled all night since this drink, and I’m almost at the ruin. It’s just a pile of rubble, a broken building. But
to see worked stone, a brick, a straight line chiselled by a human hand and not millennia of crushing oceans and
broken stars, is to know I’m not the only one.

I write this by the burn of the coming dawn. A morning so quiet and windless, I swear I can hear flames roaring
The vultures snapped at my heels for the final kilometre. They didn’t need to fly to keep pace with my crawl, wobbling behind like drunken tramps. When I threw handfuls of sand, twigs, the dried-out carcass of a dead lizard, the vultures mockingly dodged and hissed, chuckled and raised their ragged wings.

Once at the ruin I slung lumps of stone and boulder, chunks of rotten wood from a decayed beam protruding from the sand. Only after the vultures skulked into the stand of gum trees did I have a chance to pause and absorb this crumbled structure.

I’ve dragged my body into a broken church to die. I know it’s a church because I dug beneath the sand and found a scorch-marked pew. I don’t know what I expected, searching in the rubble. Maybe just a reason to have crawled here? But deep beneath the drifted sand, splinters of charred wood and broken benches, I discovered a blackened candlestick, two steel ball bearings, and a leather-bound journal. Though the covering has bubbled with whatever fire tumbled this house of God, the pages remain intact – all unreadable except the first, as the entire manuscript has decayed and melded into a single block of paper.

The opening paragraphs, dated 14 September 1834, introduce a Nelson Babbage of Whitechapel, a Fijian returning to his island after ten years of living and studying English in London. I wish there were more to read, an adventure to share. The company of another so far from home.
A week in the bosom of my brothers and sisters, and I seek my journal for solace, not the ears of my family. I am a stranger in my own home, the boy who sailed away half-naked, now a man unknown in clothes. England is in my voice, on my skin, the way I stand in a pair of shoes.

When the boat ran aground, my people did not flee in fear of the white men, a ship of cannons anchored in the bay. No, they fled from astonishment at their brother in a suit, buttoned up in a shirt and pair of slacks.

Then, from the retreat came the pointed spears and loaded barrels, bowstrings taut with sharpened arrows. I stood on the prow of the boat and announced my name, that Kasanita was my mother, and Dreketi my father. Beyond the ends of pointed sticks came a cry of my name, an echo of my own voice. It was Lau, my younger brother! He pushed through the pack to the front, stood a yard away to look me up and down and confirm it was I, then hugged my body so hard I could not take a breath.

A great chatter rattled the guarded ranks. Spears were lowered and muskets downed. ‘But what of the ship and its great guns?’ someone called out. ‘He’s led the white man here to plunder our homes!’ warned another. I jumped back upon the prow, below me the reverends and crew huddled, pawed by my people, the plucky ones pulling at their hats and buttons. I hastily spoke loud and clear of our peaceful intentions, informing my heathen brothers that these white men were not warriors but messengers, that they had braved the foaming depths to bring us God, the creator of creators, the one true Saviour. I implored my brothers to welcome them into their homes, their hearts and minds, as the white man had me when a guest upon their distant island.

‘I have seen their kingdom,’ I said. ‘I have stepped among their great villages, huts so tall they touch the sky, machines of metal powered by flames, the man-made mountains called cathedrals, erected to house the spirit of their creator, our creator.’

‘We know the white man is no god,’ shouted an elder. ‘His blood runs as red as mine.

With this popular fact the crowd roared. I stood taller on the prow, the beach below obscured by a swathe of painted bodies, clothed only by jewellery of feathers or shells, a loincloth of calico, and the wild wigs of fuzzed hair, decorated with the bones of fish, birds, hogs, and men.

I told them these passengers were no more divine than they or I, but that my brothers on-board were messengers, that they had dedicated their souls to the Universal Lord, a god, who, even though every man and woman had offended, was merciful and benevolent, granting those who believed His word great blessings on earth, and after death, eternal bliss.

Still, despite my speech, I was a visitor in my own home. The reverends and the crew, stranded in the surf, grimacing smiles upon a trial of fear, knew very well they had run aground on an island of cannibals. Again I went to speak, but the mob was flooding over the gunwales, and as I pushed them back I was pulled out, hauled away by my brother. He prised me from the melee, wanted me gone from the craft before living men were torn to meat. I fought with him to save the reverends, but others pinned my arms.

Then I heard the report of a musket, and believed not that this was a rescue, but the bell for dinner.

Men leapt back from the flare, and when the puff of smoke cleared from he who had pulled the trigger, I saw that it was my father. His black hair was now grey, and though his body had slumped and shrunk with time, his stature among his peers had grown. All stopped and listened when he spoke.

‘My son does not lie.’ He looked me so straight and hard in the eye that once again I was a boy, his son, running naked in the surf. ‘He may look different, and wear the skins of a white man, but his soul remains the same.’

With these saving words we were welcomed to Fiji. Now the warriors helped the reverends and crew ashore. But when I went to hug my father he winced, as though my clothes were the thorns of a spiky bush. I asked how he was and he did not reply, only ordering us to follow him to the king.

I trod close in the steps of my father, yet fearful of his reticence. Behind me my brother, the reverends – as nervous as clucking chicks behind a mother hen – the crew, and what seemed like the whole of Lakemba, women and children, young and old, touching, caressing, and fondling the foreigners. As I recognised my friends, family,
and neighbours, and as they too accepted that this Fijian in shirt and trousers was in fact one of them, they sang out their welcomes.

But not my father. Even when I asked him about my mother he said nothing, only gesturing towards the fort of King Nayau, his house the largest on the island, surrounded by a dry-stone wall, a fence of reeds, and wide moat that could not be crossed without swimming.

King Nayau, donning the gauze turban only worn by chiefs, did not rise when we entered, instead solemnly nodding to grant us a seat upon his floor of pandanu mats. Reverends Thomas and Collins, with some composure returned in the comfort of formality, offered the king their gift of an illuminated bible, pushing it across the ground to his majesty in the manner I had previously instructed. Though of course the king could not read, he was pleased to hear that the book contained the message of a god.

Addressing him with stately etiquette, both reverends explained the nature of their visit in generally excellent Fijian – only the pronunciation of Rev. Collins a little unclear at times – impressing the king and the principal men also gathered for this most serious of business.

The chief priest was outwardly sour to our presence, but his counsel held no sway before the king, who sat in silent and motionless reverie while considering the request of a mission to be established upon his shores. But it was not the fact that I was one of his subjects that gained favour, or that the love of God had already swelled within his chest. After an age of thought, the only sound the waves on the reef and the waft of a fan worked by one of his wives, he suddenly announced: ‘Everything is true from the land of the white man. Muskets and gunpowder are true, therefore your religion must be true.’

With that he clapped his huge hands together, the smack of his heavy palms as loud as an exploding cap, and dispatched a body of men to clear land for a house, which yesterday, after five days of feverish construction, was completed.

I should be happy that I sleep under such a magnificent roof, that I have been granted a room in the second largest house on the island, but I only sleep here because my father cannot bear to hear what he does not know. My mother, who has been bedridden with sleeping sickness, spoke to me only as though I had wandered into her dream, and seems to think that I have never even left the shores of Lakemba.

When I told my father of London and its spires higher than the tallest palms, that more people live in one city than all the islands of the great Pacific, and that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins, he put his hands over his ears and shouted, ‘Enough! Before the white man we believed that the sun rose in Tonga and set in Fiji. We were happy with our own gods. They put fish in the sea and fruit on the trees and never did we go hungry. Before the ships came men sat content with only their canoe and house. Now they sell their wives for a handful of nails. Now you tell me I will go to a land of fire when I die, that unless I place my soul in the palms of the white man I am damned for ever.’ Then he said, ‘Go. You are my son no more.’ The words stabbed my heart like a knife.

I pray that with the help of the Lord above, and the dedication of Reverends Thomas and Collins, who have already drawn large crowds to their open-air services, that I can guide my mother – if the Lord grant her health – and father along the one true path.

12 May 1835

Today the Caroline set sail. The missionaries are now well and truly left in the care of the Lord.

The three children of Rev. Collins have already made themselves quite at home, running free and gay with the children of the village, laughing louder than I ever heard them in the confines of the ship or their house in Port Jackson.

Whilst the reverends could hardly be described as joyous, I believe they are more than satisfied with the welcome so far. Each day the congregation swells, and the word of our arrival echoes through every village on the island.

13 May 1835

The morning service was attended by the king – his first since our welcoming audience – and though attentive to the account of creation, did not yet wish to offer his soul to Jehovah.

Though my younger brother listens with wonder at my adventures, my father sullenly ignores my very presence, only speaking to mock the shirt on my back. Yesterday he asked, ‘Are you ashamed of your skin?’

The reverends are attended by willing villagers keen to please their newly arrived guests – guests who also happen to dole out fish hooks, nails, and the promise of redemption – with baskets of yams or the carriage of fresh water from the stream.

Shame on me! I am already a sceptic of my people and their embrace of the one true God. Of course I am happy that several scores of my brothers and sisters have pledged themselves to the good Lord, but doubt the sincerity of
some. One man declared himself a Christian when understanding that he must forgo all other beliefs, thus enabling him to pick bananas from a taboo orchard.

15 May 1835

Rev. Thomas and Collins go about their business of the Lord in a most spirited manner, as the numbers of the daily service gradually increase, so does their confidence of success in bringing light to where there is dark. Even though King Nayau is still reluctant to convert – fearing the ruling chiefdoms of Bau and Rewa will see it as a rejection of their power – he is keen to question the reverends about their religion. Like many of the converted, he is drawn to a Christian afterlife, and also wishes that he might be a dweller of the sky, ‘that good land among the stars named Heaven’. But only once chiefs more powerful than he permit this so.

True that Bau and Rewa would view King Nayau’s conversion a weakening of their kingdom, and send war canoes to Lakemba. But I also believe this a convenient excuse for a man who has a different wife for each day of the week, and drinks kava not from the husk of a coconut shell, but a hollowed-out skull.

16 May 1835

Work has begun on a chapel. Part of the king’s decision to grant land by the river previously decreed taboo is, I believe, a direct result of the service delivered this morning by Rev. Thomas.

Though his Fijian is fast improving – due to the necessity of communication if I, his translator, am not present – the service was delivered in English, with myself as orator to the congregation. He has already realised the power of dramatic gesture, and while recounting the story of Noah and his ark, acted each scene with bodily vigour, as though a dancing marionette worked by God Himself.

The tale of the ark running aground on the peak of Ararat also compares closely with the great flood of Fiji. Ndengei, the Fijian lord of creation, was greatly angered by the killing of his pet bird, Turkawa, murdered by his mischievous grandsons who then escaped to a fortified town. They resisted the attacks of Ndengei until he gathered the clouds and burst upon them an ocean of rain. The flood rose, and the grandsons begged not to be drowned. In an act of benevolence Ndengei taught them how to build a great canoe. Thus they floated upon the calamity, and when the waters subsided came ashore on the slopes of Mbengga, with the people of this island now considered their descendants and first in the rank of Fijians.

Though the details of Noah and the flood of Ndengei differed somewhat, many of the congregation heard this story as proof of a single God, the Lord of Creation who is the father of Jesus Christ, the son who died so that we may live.

18 May 1835

Rev. Thomas spent the afternoon somewhat annoyed, as I had not been present to translate his morning service due to fishing with my brother on the northern side of the island. Guilty for allowing the words of God to go silent, I pray that my Lord understands how important it is that I reconcile my ‘old’ and ‘new’ self by bringing salvation to my family.

My brother has already sworn himself to Jesus, and it was probably the noisy and excited questioning of His teachings that fled the fish from our hooks this morning.

But still my father hangs his head and avoids my eye. I took some papaya to my mother yesterday evening, and as I walked into the house he walked out.

25 May 1835

Several pots and pans have gone astray from the kitchen of Mrs Collins, and this morning I accompanied the Rev. Collins to see the king and request that these most vital articles be returned.

King Nayau apologised that such honoured guests had been victims of crime, and swore that the perpetrators would be caught and justice swiftly done.

Returning from the fort, the Rev. Collins seemed most pleased with himself and the promise of the king, but I fear that the missionaries are somewhat naive to the true meaning of Fijian justice.

27 May 1835

This afternoon, after a lunchtime service on the beach, Rev. Collins received a message to visit the king. Again I accompanied him to the fort, apprehensive to what we would discover about the criminals.

The sentence was light – each of the four men involved in the pilfering having their little finger docked by the slice of an axe – though the Rev. Collins did not agree, horrified at being presented with the removed digits. Once
his pink face returned from pale green, he insisted that this ‘barbaric retribution cease immediately’, making it clear to the king that it was not a godly justice he had administered.

The king expanded his considerable girth like a beached puffer fish, letting out a sigh that would have blown coconuts from their branches, and retorted, ‘This is not England! This is Fiji!’

With that he gestured for us to be gone, flapping his hand as though swatting away a fly.

The Rev. Collins, seeing this episode as the lowest point of our stay thus far, sought my counsel on why the king would not convert. I explained that though he was ruler of this isle, Lakemba was but a jewel in the crown of the kingdom of Fiji, and that this crown was worn by the chiefs of Bau and Rewa.

3 June 1835

The Rev. Collins is adamant that the only way to evangelise my heathen shores ‘from north to south and east to west, not merely the toe of the devil but his entire body’ is to establish a mission on Viti Levu – without delay.

The Rev. Thomas, who sulked like a child at this news for several days, protested that a mission could not function on his sole administration, and that his reading class of young women would suffer in their progress if he were to leave now. Though I have ample time to teach both the men and women their letters, he had insisted that he take charge of tutoring the maidens.

The Rev. Collins then praised the Rev. Thomas on his fine teaching, and suggested that the population of Bau and Rewa would also require education beyond the Gospel.

Either this opportunity of instruction, or the news that I would accompany him to the new mission, excited him so that the removal to Viti Levu was thus agreed.

I have not told my brother yet, nor my mother or father. My brother will wail that I am leaving before I have even arrived. I will be happy if my father simply looks me in the eye, or if my mother raises her head from where she lays.

After so long apart from my family, it is only the call of God that could take me from them once again. If Abraham can offer his only son, surely I can sacrifice a further absence from my family?

6 June 1835

We wait for a wind to blow us east, to Bau and Rewa, where the Rev. Thomas and I will carry the torch of Jesus Christ.

Since the announcement of our moving on, I have not seen my father for two days.

7 June 1835

The canoe that will carry us across the waves to Viti Levu has now been prayed over by both the king’s priest and the Rev. Collins. The priest, while chanting his pagan incantations, ignored the protests of the reverends, insisting that their presence in Lakemba had angered the gods enough already, and that as one of his brothers would be crew for our voyage, he had authority to petition for blessings beyond the ‘lying book’ of the white man.

Blessed by all, the canoe is provisioned and ready to sail, and we await favourable conditions.

Still my father is missing.

8 June 1835

Dawn this morning my father shook me from sleep. I had been dreaming I was again a boy in his arms, and at first thought his hand on my shoulder was imagined.

Then he said, ‘Naqarase, come.’

The sun was still a promise in the eastern sky. Neither the reverends nor Mrs Collins and her children stirred as we crept from the house. I trailed my father through the soft light, along a path that led beyond the village, rising above the shoreline. When I asked where we were going he did not answer. We walked far from the houses, above the craggy cliff tops, past the nests of screeching gulls and down to a small, forbidden cove, a taboo place that rests the spirits of the dead. Then we sat, I still awaiting my father to speak.

When the sun rose, the sea lapped against the shore like liquid gold. We could see fish riding down the tide.

Then my father turned to me, ‘This is a world no book can hold,’ he said. ‘What is on paper that is better? What kind of god would need to write this down? Only the people who do not know God need to read about Him.’

I tried to say something about one true God but he shook his head. I spoke to his turned back. I was somehow ashamed, saddened to tell him that God had sent me on a mission I could not refuse.

‘And what is that mission? To lay waste to all of Fiji? To make space for the British? In my short life the sandalwood tree has gone, chopped down and carried across the seas. Now they come for whales and the sea slug,
soon these will be no more than a tale to tell our children. And what do we have in return? Tobacco and guns. A book that tells me to wear clothes, to not fish on Sunday. A book that says only it can show me the sky．

I had no answer that he would understand. My father had not the love for the Lord that I have. He knew not of the Almighty and His grand design.

‘Stay,’ he said.

I did not have to reply because he knew the answer. He did not ask again. He did not cry, nor get angry. Instead he walked to the edge of the cove, picked up two, fist-size rocks from on top of the taboo boulder, and waded into the mouth of the inlet until the sea was about his waist.

And he sang, an ancient song I did not understand, the words and their meaning lost long before my birth. He sang as though the rhythm of the waves kept his beat. He sang to the sun as though it were listening. When he stopped, and raised the stones above his head in the fashion of bringing them down upon his skull, I almost ran into the sea to save him from himself.

But he clacked each stone against the other, a metronome for the tide as each wave broke on the sand, the sound echoing through the cove.

Then, like a family would gather around their father, or subjects before their God, giant turtles circled. When they breached the surface, they lifted their prehistoric heads from the sea, as though in reverence to him who had called them from the deep.

20 June 1835

Two days ago we touched ashore at Rewa. Though the sea journey was more tiresome than troublesome, a Fijian canoe is far from the luxury of the Caroline. On several instances, when larger waves broke over the bows and threatened to swamp the bailers, the helmsman tossed whale’s teeth into the water to abate the swell. The Rev. Thomas had shaken his head, snickered ‘Preposterous’, and offered a prayer that he said ‘would actually be heard and not sunk to the depths’.

We approached the village by paddling up the Rewa River, the biggest in all of Fiji, tumbling down from the Nakauvadra Range and snaking a maze of narrow tributaries through a delta of mangroves and villages.

News of our arrival had preceded us, and the banks thronged with locals shouting and waving – a most cheering sight.

On shore we were greeted by several principal men of King Tanoa, who merrily bid us welcome and escorted us to the fort. The king, an old man without the glowing countenance or physical prowess of King Nayau of Lakemba, saw it fit that a mission be granted upon his shores.

The Rev. Thomas, fast becoming a capable speaker of Fijian, has been more than involved in the construction of our residence, though he did cause some debate among the carpenters on his choice of location, not understanding – or not wanting to – that a hill is a poor position for a house, as all supplies and fresh water will have to be carried up to his kitchen.

21 June 1835

Again the Rev. Thomas used the story of Noah to excite his congregaion, reciting much of it in Fijian. A gathering of nearly two hundred were suitably moved, with several scores pledging their souls.

I believe the rev. has been most charged in his autonomy of the mission, and also the importance that has been bestowed upon him by the king and his subjects. Already he has a small group of followers that gather about him like a flock of sheep would a shepherd.

23 June 1835

Even before our arrival, Bithi, the second brother of the king, had been sick for several days, and this morning, the Rev. Thomas was summoned to pray over his dying body.

The king, hoping that a last-minute conversion of his brother would grant a pardon from death, begged his brother to give his soul to ‘the God of the white man’. Luckily for the reverend, Bithi would not swear allegiance to Jehovah. He reasoned that those he loved before the coming of the white man had died without knowing God and would be in a different heaven. Therefore, if he now became Christian he would be a Fijian without friends in the afterlife.

I say luckily, as Bithi soon took his final breath in the arms of his brother, a fate I doubt would have been different even with a last-minute conversion, thus saving the reverend from a circus test of his ‘powers’.

24 June 1835
All night the wives have wailed for the death of their husband. His body has been bathed, dressed and decorated as though he is about to stand before a great assembly. His skin has been daubed with soot, and white cloth bound around his temple. A club is fixed in his fist so that he may hold the rank of a chief and warrior even in death. Friends and chiefs of various tribes along the Rewa River have visited to present the gift of whales’ teeth and pay their respects. His wives, who have volunteered their death so they too may travel with their husband to the underworld, begged at the feet of King Tanoa to be strangled.

I implored the Rev. Thomas to intercede, to save these women from what ignorance and tradition has taught them. To my utter surprise, the reverend refused, insisting that those who have ‘heard the words of God and remained deaf, are doomed to follow Satan into his fiery depths’.

He then observed the ceremony of immolation as though sitting at a theatre, but with neither grief nor anger aroused upon his face as the murderous cord was in turn fastened about each wretched wife and pulled tight until she was left a breathless corpse.

27 June 1835

Now the wives lie beneath the earth, for ever beside the husband they followed to the grave, I have gathered enough Christian forgiveness to be civil to Rev. Thomas, a man with enough authority to have at least attempted the halting of this senseless murder.

Prepared to reconcile our differences over the affair, I was stunned by his reaction when I merely questioned his impotence before the death ceremony. He instantly turned to rage, stating in no uncertain terms that although we were on the soil of my country, I still owed a debt to England and the Mission Society, and that ultimately, I was still an employee expected to follow instructions.

1 July 1835

Since the row I have attended the needs of the Rev. Thomas with solemn respect and obedience. I should understand that he acts in the name of God, and if I too wish to consider myself one of his acolytes, I must follow his instructions without question.

Again he has declared that he should tutor the maidens, while I the men. A small schoolhouse is under construction farther up the hill, a site backing on to thick bush, and again his choosing.

2 July 1835

Unlike King Nayau of Lakemba, King Tanoa bows to none other than himself, and therefore a conversion to Christianity is but his choice alone. Whilst he listens with great keenness to the tales of Jesus Christ and his miracles, he only hears them as fables, not fact.

He also wishes to know of England, but prefers this discourse with the reverend, as I, who could be called upon to vouch for his words, am still one of his subjects, and must not upstage his majesty by boasting of my travels.

5 July 1835

The schoolhouse is complete. My first class proved too numerous to seat, with men crowded at the windows in wont of instruction. It is with great joy that I help my brothers begin to read and write, for I had quite forgotten the wonder and simplicity of attaching sound to symbol. That one can look at a printed page, and hear words, the very essence of another being, or God Himself, has been nothing short of the revelation it deserves.

Later in the afternoon, I took a walk along the bank of the estuary and came across a huddle of boys gathered around something on the shore. Due to the zeal of their faces, I thought some oddity of the deep had been washed up, when in fact their attention was held by a single letter A scratched into the sand.

9 July 1835

Naraqino, the youngest brother of King Tanoa, has returned to Rewa after a royal visit of the outlying islands. He had already heard news of our arrival from some Lakembans at Kandavu, and wished immediately to meet the rev. and myself.

In the hope that his reputation of warrior and thug had been exaggerated, I refrained from describing him to the rev. prior to our meeting. But before Naraqino had even opened his mouth, it was apparent to us both that he had not the gravity or wisdom of his elder brother. Naraqino is a man constantly armed with a club or mace – protection most necessary, as I understand he has many enemies sworn to revenge. His face bears the scars of battle like a mottled coconut, with a recent gash the work of his deceased brother Bithi, who struck out at Naraqino in the dead of night, fearing his sibling had come to murder him in his bed. Naraqino, overpowered by Bithi, swore he was in
the hut as a bodyguard, insisting he had heard whispers of an assassination and merely wished to protect his brother – second in line to the throne, the one son between himself and all of Fiji.

The ‘conversation’ between Naraqino, his cackling cohorts, the rev. and myself, could hardly be called as such. Naraqino either mocked my clothes or manner – at one point taking my jacket and walking about the hut in a stiff and grotesque mimic of a white man – or challenged the rev. to prove his God was greater with some instant miracle.

The Rev. Thomas, offended and angered by Naraqino, realised he was not a man to debate, and sought the counsel of the king. Hearing of his brother’s disrespect brought an immediate apology, but no action. Judging by the increased number of men stationed at the fort, I wonder how much command King Tanoa has over his errant sibling.

10 July 1835
Wisely choosing the arrival of Naraqino as time for a tour upriver, the rev. and I will journey by canoe and preach to the smaller villages towards the interior.

Our presence antagonises the followers of Naraqino, and a trip away for several days may give chance for them to accept our being in Rewa.

12 July 1835
Rev. Thomas preached to a subdued village this afternoon, and was greatly dismayed to hear that he was not the first white man to stand upon their soil. The nervous reception of our party stemmed from the actions of those who had been before us, the infamous Swede, Charles Savage, and his fellow escaped convicts. The chief told us that Bau and Rewa had existed in peace until the arrival of Savage and his men, who had washed up upon their shores after fleeing gaol in New South Wales. They landed with more muskets than men, and often slaughtered at will, wiping out the entire population of Kasavu for no other reason than target practice. Ultimately the vagabonds quarrelled with each other and butchered themselves, though Savage was killed and eaten at Wailea for refusing to part with his clothes. Sail needles were fashioned from his bones. But not before he had shared his guns with various chiefs, waging war between the villages as though it were a game to appease his boredom.

The rev. attempted to show the congregation that the Lord knew of their suffering, and declared that no murderer escapes the wrath of God: ‘On the day this man stood to be judged, know that the flames in Hell burned higher with one more wicked soul upon the fire.’

But it was not a day for conversions, and we did not sleep the night, as our crew feared that those who had lost family to the men of Savage might seek retribution by way of the reverend.

13 July 1835
Paddling back to Rewa we passed several abandoned villages. Never have I seen such a miserable scene, the leafless frames of the homes like rotting skeletons. The men told us that these were places the convicts had lived, and the people had welcomed the escapees into their homes, thinking it better to sleep with the enemy than have him knocking down their doors. Whilst Savage and his men had waged war on those beyond the borders of the village, their foreign maladies had killed those within. When the population of one parish had diminished they moved on, murdering foes with musket balls, and allies with disease.

I thank the Lord He has allowed us to bring the message of love and salvation to these slighted people.

14 July 1835
We return to Rewa and the glad tidings that Naraqino has crossed the river back to his residence in Bau.

15 July 1835
Fair weather enabled the rev. to preach outside this morning, as a canopy of cloud meant it was cool enough to praise the Lord directly beneath Heaven. His lungs filled with breeze fresh from the Pacific, the rev. was in mid-sermon when several rocks, flung from the cover of bushes higher up the hillside, rained about his person. The congregation gave chase, but the stone-throwers fled deep into the trees. Though the identities of the culprits are unknown, many suspect followers of Naraqino.

Praise be that no rocks struck the rev. or those gathered to hear the words of God.

18 July 1835
While no more missiles have disturbed the daily service, the numbers attending have dramatically dropped – more fearful of the immediate menaces of Naraqino than an eternity of damnation.
19 July 1835

In a stroll along the beach this morning I was surprised to discover a crudely drawn diagram of a woman carved in the sand, with her reproductive parts clearly labelled – though spelled incorrectly. While I have focused on building the basics of grammar, it appears the rev. has begun with the vocabulary of our bodies. I have sought his advice before on my curriculum, and also asked if it would not be a valuable lesson if I were to observe his methods. His forthright reply was that any male observer on his female class would be a distraction, and that I was now a schoolmaster capable enough of supervising my own instruction.

21 July 1835

Last night the rev. drank so much port that I had to undress him and put him to bed myself. Whether he will recall this episode in the morning is doubtful.

The Society permits all reverends a provision of fortified wine to temper both the physical and mental trials of missionary life, but I have long feared that this prescription does more harm than good – particularly with the Rev. Thomas.

Once he was fast asleep, snoring quite like a fat sow, I inspected his cask in the hope of calculating how much he had consumed. But I could not measure the amount imbibed, as there was not a drop left!

After I blew out the candle to retire to my own quarters, I heard the rustle of an intruder beyond the reed fence. I waited fast against the wall beside the window waiting to pounce. Once the rascal climbed into the room I sprang, clutching him about the neck and pulling us both to the floor. Only the him was a her! When I demanded, ‘Who are you?’ she shrieked and swore the rev. had told her to come. ‘Lies,’ I declared. But before I had chance for further interrogation she bit my finger clean to the bone and escaped, stealing back into the night from where she had come.

It is morning now, and when the rev. wakes, sore head or not, I shall tell him of this breach of his room and the fortune of my presence to keep him safe from harm.

22 July 1835

I decided not to enlighten the rev. on the intruder, as such an incident involving a female attacker could be misconstrued as an act of impropriety. The rev. is a shining example of duty to God, the holiness of celibacy. This image must not be shamed by misunderstanding or malicious gossip.

24 July 1835

This sabbath the rev. made his most concerted effort yet to convert King Tanoa. Services have been thinly attended since the stone-throwing ambush, and rumour has it that Naraqino and his thugs have been fording the river and crossing into Rewa to threaten the Christians. Unless King Tanoa converts, and takes action upon his pagan brother, the intimidation of Naraqino could drive us from the island.

The Rev. thus gave his most animated recount of the crucifixion yet, warning that those ‘who turn from God turn to Satan, trust themselves to flame and pain for all eternity’. The fearful sermon shook all but the king, who sat resolutely in his heathenism, steadily diminishing a pile of bananas that had been peeled by his wives. When the rev. called forth ‘those souls wishing to pledge themselves to the one true God’, the king stood, turned his back and returned to his hut.

Today not one of the congregation swore their allegiance to Jehovah.

25 July 1835

King Tanoa summoned the rev. and myself to his quarters, and confessed that he believed the God of the white man was probably true, and that our ships and guns were testament to His superior powers. But for such a leader as himself to ‘sleep beneath the fin of a white man like a whale calf would its mother’, is untenable. ‘It would be message to my subjects that I had rolled over and died at your feet.’

I did not speak, but I wanted to tell him that the moment Dutch explorer Abel Tasman sighted the shores of Vanua Levu and Tavenui, Fiji had been for ever changed. No longer were we hidden from the rest of the world. No longer did the sun rise in Tonga and set in Fiji.

I should have warned him that the harbours of England were crowded with warships, whole forests of masts swaying in the breeze, and that the word of a single man could dispatch a thousand cannons to our isles and sink it to the bottom of the Pacific.

27 July 1835
The rev. has been of a bitter mood in recent days, and I wonder if this is not only the refusal of King Tanoa to publicly convert, but that his cask of port is now as hollow as a drum. On discovering a young boy pilfering a pawpaw from the mission stores, the rev. pinched his ear and vigorously caned him with a switch of bamboo, as though beating this wretch could bring back his wine.

29 July 1835

Daybreak, the snow-white sails of the American whaler *Josephine* flared on the horizon. Half the village gathered on the shore, ready to trade hogs and fresh fruit for scraps of iron, blades and fish hooks. None clutched spears and clubs for this vessel, as it was the third time the whaler had called in as many months, with the previous bartering judged in favour of the Rewans.

Crewed by eight men, a helmsman and two officers – each with a pair of shiny pistols tucked into their belts – the pinnace had not even made the shore before the rev. splashed into the surf. He vigorously shook the officers’ hands, almost pulling their arms off, welcoming them on to the sand as though it were *his* threshold they were crossing.

The crew remained with the landing craft, while the rev., the two officers and myself, made our way to the fort. Officers Dillon and Craig were vigilant but collected, quite accustomed to the travails of the South Seas. With a practised deference, they paid their compliments to King Tanoa, and formally requested anchorage of his bay for the night, along with fresh water and food – which of course would be bartered for at an agreeable price.

King Tanoa, though not a veteran of trade, as the reputation of Bau and Rewa as a cannibal-inhabited port had steered ships clear for decades, possessed acumen enough to remark that the price of breadfruit and yams had risen due to a forthcoming wedding feast – his taking of another wife. Officer Dillon, a tall, pointy-featured man, who had stooped like a wading heron on entering the hut, asked if a present of two dozen muskets would be a fitting gift.

King Tanoa tried to shield his delight that fresh fruit and water would be traded for firepower, but his eyes betrayed his stony face, glinting as sharp as the shine on those polished pistols.
He woke in a derelict signal house that waited for a train that no longer ran. There was no glass in the windows, no clouds in the sky. The world gleamed as though freshly painted, the sun low on its winter axis, the leafless trees like upturned roots. On a bed of wooden pallets, he sat upright and studied his hands and clothes. He was wearing a woollen jumper that was too big, and a fine tweed jacket. Both taken from a farmhouse garage. He looked like some country gent fallen from grace and withered in his clothes.

Green weeds grew from the dirt. When Jimmy stood he lurched and retched saliva to the mossy floor. He spat and stood gingerly, holding his stomach.

In the movies, runaways find hot pies cooling on windowsills, steal rosy apples from a laden tree. He had eaten two frozen waffles taken from a fridge freezer outside the farmhouse backdoor. They were rock hard, and he had to warm them under his armpit to thaw them enough to bite.

Is this what being on the run was all about? Sleepless nights in fields of frost? Dreams of home and an open fire? No path led to the house, and the track was empty of its rails. Jimmy heard a car. The red roof came skimming over the hedgerows, a hay bale bound to the roof rack flickering straw to the wind. He hid behind a broken wall and listened to the car disappear into the day. He was thirsty. The last drink he had was a swig of rotten homebrew from a plastic barrel in the farmhouse garage.

The puddle at his feet was crystal clear. He cupped his hands and pursed his lips. It tasted like metal. He spat it to the ground. He looked in the puddle again and saw his dirty face staring back. Scooping up more water into his palms, he splashed his head again and again.

Then he stopped. This was what he did when he came home drunk, his stepfather, running the tap and dowsing himself in cold water, like it would wash away the alcohol.

Jimmy dried himself with the jacket sleeve, stepped on to the cutting and began walking. The path stayed level with the land and he walked in view of roads and houses, not caring who saw as he passed people in neat gardens clipping hedges and pulling up weeds. A man with green wellingtons and two Labradors passed and said good morning. Jimmy said good morning, too, without raising his head from the ground.

The cutting dipped between banked fields that framed clear blue sky. Bright streams of jets plumed like the tails of comets.

He came to a railway bridge. He climbed a narrow path from the cutting, on to a road where cars shot past flashing with sun. The road curved on to the outskirts of another town. He was the only pedestrian in the busying day and walked through an industrial estate, past warehouses as big as hangars. Food and clothes, spare parts and all imaginable goods were stacked by workers and forklifts in patterns computerised in a constant of change, where lorries came full and emptied, then left full again. In the vast doorways men sat with papers and lunch and cups of tea. They lifted their heads from the back pages to see a boy in man’s clothes.

Past the industrial estate he sat on a churchyard bench and drank a can of coke and ate a Snickers and finger of Fudge. He put his mouth to a tap in a public toilet, then walked into a phone box with his last ten pence. He dialled and waited.

‘Jimmy?’ his brother answered. He sounded as though he was talking from the bottom of a well.

‘All right, Gaz?’

‘Jimmy,’ he said. ‘Where you been? What’s happening? Frank was stabbed at the club. The police have been round and everything. Where are you?’

‘Somewhere.’

‘What sort of fucking answer’s that? I thought you were round Stoney’s, but I seen him down the park last night and he says if I see you to tell you not to do owt stupid.’

‘Calm down, Gaz.’

‘Where are you then?’

‘Down south.’

‘Who with?’

‘Listen. What did Frank say?’

‘Says to call the hospital if you come home. What happened, Jimmy?’
The pips sounded.
‘Look, Gary, me money’s about gone. Remember what mum said about being good.’

Gary said something as he put the phone down. Jimmy checked the returned coins for any change but it was empty.

The owner of the blue Orion held the door for Jimmy as he came out of the garage shop. Jimmy walked across the forecourt to his car and got in. The key was in the ignition. He started the engine and a symphony of sweeping cellos and violins flowed throughout the car. He revved the engine and changed into first gear. When he tried to pull off the handbrake was still on and the car jerked, then stalled. The owner and the cashier sprinted from the shop. Jimmy leaned over to the passenger side and hit the lock down as the owner came flailing at the window shouting, ‘You thieving little shit’, while the cashier pulled at the door. Jimmy let the clutch out to jump on to the road with wheels spinning. The two men watched the car disappear in clouds of burned rubber.

The epic symphony thundered from the speakers and into his bones. Jimmy stamped the pedal to the floor and straddled the white lines, veering cars left and right as they flashed and blared in near-miss panic. At a hundred he passed a line of traffic and went clean through a red light.

On a quieter road he slowed and practised changing down gears to accelerate. The engine jolted on its fittings when he changed from fourth to second on racing pistons. People who saw the erratic and swerving car thought the driver insane or an invention gone wrong.

But Jimmy drove on. He imagined it was really his car and put on the seat belt and drove slowly through estates and waited in queues at lights and pulled smoothly away, calmed now by the slower movements of the concerto.

Then again he thought of him. Jimmy hammered the pistons until they were screaming in their chambers. He wound a country lane and slid the back end out on the corners. He was tiny in his tweed and oversize car. The blind turns came again and again until a bridge appeared before him as the perfect ramp. A road running out to blue.

Jimmy pressed the pedal and flew. The wheels left the road and span through the sky.

Is this how it feels to be taken to heaven? he wondered. Like his mother, to die before your children and be lifted into the clouds by angels.
Missing Person

BILLY K, COME HOME

In an exclusive, unedited, one-off interview with Music Matters journalist Damien Flynn the Notorious drummer Ronnie Strong pulls no punches on what he thinks of his missing ‘brother’ Billy K, and what possible fate has fallen upon the singer who disappeared from the face of the earth on a Cornish cliff top.

MM – Thanks, Ronnie, for speaking to us under such difficult circumstances. I imagine, like the rest of us here at Music Matters, you’re pretty cut up right now.

RS – That’s a fucking understatement. And what’s with the ‘rest of us’ bullshit? None of you had a fucking clue where he was coming from. I was there when he was born, when he crashed the stage and hijacked the band.

MM – Sorry, Ronnie. No one’s trying to steal your grief, it’s just that many fans felt they became close to Billy K through the music. It was, it still is, a profound shock to think he is missing.

RS – Tell me about it. He’s me brother, my kid brother. Out on his own, or worse. I don’t even want to think that.

MM – Did anyone know him better than you?

RS – Maybe not in the beginning, after the success of Paraphernalia and the circus that came with it, we were tight, you know, together in all that fucking madness. I mean yeah, we pissed about, got up to a few tricks, what kids wouldn’t, suddenly up in front of a few thousand screaming fans, pockets stuffed with cash. Just a few months before the big time we were sharing a bedsit, well, a fucking squat really, Billy cupping his hands around a candle and thawing his fingers so he could play his guitar properly.

MM – Was it the lure of fame that drove Billy K, or simply his love of music, of composing, playing and performing?

RS – Listen. Before I answer any more of your questions, and I ain’t no professor of English I admit, but I want to know why you’re speaking about him in the past, like he’s finished, dead and buried. We know fuck all at the moment, apart from the fact he’s gone AWOL.

MM – Apologies again, Ronnie. You’re right, I should rephrase that last question with a more optimistic tense: Is it the lure of fame that drives Billy K, or simply his love of music, of composing, playing and performing?

RS – In the studio, on the edge of perfecting a song, or just watching him sit and strum, you know he’d be happy if he was the last man on earth, just Billy and his guitar.

MM – So it’s purely the desire to play music that gets him out of bed each morning? Nothing to do with the love of the fans? The screaming girls? Packed out stadiums chanting his name?

RS – You know originally, back when we started playing the bigger gigs, I reckon fame and adulation was something he wanted, craved for even. But you’ve got to remember this was a kid who’d been dossing on the floor of a fucking storeroom, too embarrassed to tell his mates he’d been kicked out of home and sharing his bit of floorboard with boxes of crap records. It was a month before he told me where he was really sleeping, in that poxy cupboard, waiting for his boss to rumble him and get kicked out into the cold all over again. I mean, I thought I was rock star before I was famous, but I still went home after a gig to my mam brewing a cuppa, the old man asking how I played, helping me fix a bit of kit, while Billy K, poor bastard, was in that storeroom waiting to exist.

MM – And that he did, sorry, does. Was this a dangerous relationship to begin, to rely on fickle fans
as an emotional base?
RS – He had us, too, the band, the Feeney brothers and me. But it was never enough, no one was. He came from nothing, curling up between boxes of broken records and singing himself to sleep each night, to a life of groupies who would suck off greasy roadies on the promise of a backstage pass, just to be close to him. I’d like to say he was a gentleman, that he only slept with women he thought he’d marry and live happily ever after with. He needed sex as much as he needed music, but emotionally as much as a physical thing. Disappearing with a girl for days, just talking things out. He loved, and needed women. Maybe he got his girl and eloped?

MM – What about the sightings, rumours of him in a Sao Paulo plastic surgeon’s, flying to France in a microlight?

RS – Who knows? When our helpful tabloids offer rewards of thousands for his whereabouts, then every man and his fucking dog is going to see him at the supermarket. A sighting might be genuine, but it could also be hoaxers trying to cash in. Until I sit down and share a drink with him, I don’t know what to believe.

MM – Now, I’d like to apologise in advance this time, for a question you probably don’t want to be asked.

RS – Whether he’s dead or alive?

MM – You know him best. No foul play has been uncovered by the police, so we must assume that his disappearance, whether running for the hills or taking his own life, was of his own volition.

RS – We know he’s capable of doing a runner, vanishing in a puff of smoke. Fuck, he shit us up enough times. The missed shows were bad enough, but they’d turn into missing days. On tour, at home, suddenly he was gone. It was like someone had hit the delete button on him. The worst was after the Red Square riot. Ricky Wise, usually the head above water when everyone else is drowning, was gasping for air. Saying that, we all were.

MM – He went missing during the riot?

RS – He jumped the barrier and went undercover in the crowd, watching his own fucking gig. Wise shut down the story, no papers or reporters. The cops wanted blood. They blamed us for making a mess of their nice square, not to mention a few Moscow riot police. Wise thought they already had Billy in a cell, beaten and naked on a concrete floor. But, as usual, well, until last month, he was out there living it up.

MM – Where had he been?

RS – Holed up in some mafia drinking den. Anonymous and drunk, having the time of his life.

MM – So you think he could have run, slipped his Billy K skin for a new identity?

RS – Who fucking knows? Really. The thrill with drugs for Billy was jumping out of who he was. Maybe the biggest hit of all was escaping for real?

MM – What about the police, have they been forthcoming with any leads? Investigations into the sightings?

RS – The police know Jack Shit.

MM – Have they questioned you?

RS – Like I was a fucking suspect.

MM – And, as I understand, even Ricky Wise?

RS – Someone’s kids go missing, then you question the parents. Wanker or not, he’s the daddy.

MM – The ‘daddy’ indeed. With clause 3.2, he is certainly ‘taking care of his own’.

RS – You’ve lost me, mate. Clause what?

MM – Clause 3.2: ‘Disappearance, or prolonged absence without contact with Gecko records to manage finances will result in the named trustee (Richard T. Wise) controlling all royalties.’

RS – Ricky Wise. So what? Man’s a fucking multimillionaire. I reckon he knows how to handle money. You’re forgetting Billy ain’t spoke to his old dear for donkey’s. Who else would he trust?
Not fucking me. I’d piss it up the wall and he knows it.

MM – Your manager is a man with a shadowy past. As a young boxing promoter he was investigated for the manslaughter of a referee.

RS – And found not guilty. You better change your line of questioning if you don’t want his lawyers knocking on your door.

MM – Could you tell us more about Billy K’s relationship with Zdenka? Whether this could be related to the disappearance?

RS – No. I’m talking too much. We’re just pissing in the wind here. I mean, yeah, yeah, we all heard about his ‘mother complex’, but who fucking hasn’t got one? You lot really milked that. If anything, the media focus on the rift with his mam stopped them ever making it up. I know you have a job to do, all that crap, but I’m only here because you’re one of the few journalists Billy respects. At the end of the fucking day, he’s run from fame, not because he was a gifted guitarist or beautiful singer, I mean, he’s hardly running from music, is he? You say you put him on top of the mountain by writing about him, by letting the world know how great he was. But did you play the guitar for him? Did you write his lyrics or sing his fucking songs? No. He climbed to the top of the mountain by himself, then you cunts pushed him off it.

MM – OK, Ronnie, maybe we should wrap things up, I can see how upset you are about the disappearance of a friend you call your ‘kid brother’. In the hope he is out there, that he walks past a newsstand and picks up a copy of *Music Matters*, would you like to finish the interview with a message, a few words for the missing person, Billy K?

RS – Come home, Billy. Make music. Fuck the rest of them. Fuck ’em all. We know what it’s all about.
PART FOUR
‘Hello?’
‘Hi, Anna.’
‘God! Jim. Finally. I get to hear your voice. Are you OK?’
‘Fine, fine.’
‘Where the hell are you?’
‘Right now I’m in Nairobi airport, but not for much longer.’
‘You sure you’re OK?’
‘Really. I’m just being a policeman.’
‘Wherever you’re going, Roberts probably knows already.’
‘How?’
‘He’s smarter than we give him credit. I accessed your case account and found emails from the Australian police confirming your withdrawal of cash at the airport, CCTV footage of you getting into a taxi, and a statement from the driver confirming he dropped you outside the Opera House. No problems there. But then I found a file of your previous aliases – with Charles Nash flagged live.’
‘Well, Charles Nash will be touching down at Heathrow in about nine hours from now. Perhaps Roberts is planning a welcome home party.’
‘That you’re coming home is great news.’
‘Glad to hear it.’
‘And if there is a party, it’s just you and him.’
‘Intimate. I didn’t think we were that close.’
‘Listen. He’s explicitly ordered DI Calf not to inform British or Kenyan authorities.’
‘He could have me picked up at Heathrow if he wants. Maybe he’s saving the embarrassment.’
‘Is he that caring?’
‘His, not mine.’
‘You know I’m not bothered either way. As long as you’re back. And I’m not the only one waiting on you.’
‘The fans at Heathrow.’
‘Your ex and your daughter.’
‘You spoke with Meg?’
‘And Gemma. They both just appeared in the office yesterday. Meg carried Gemma over to my desk to say hello, and then, after the false pleasantries thought it right to ask about you in front of your daughter. Gemma started crying, whimpering that you hadn’t taken her to the park for two weeks, that the ducks would be hungry because no one’s been giving them bread.’
‘Roberts would’ve put Meg up to it. He must’ve been desperate before the Nash ID revelation. What he doesn’t know is that I have a bite, the tugging fish. If my wife or Roberts knew this I think they’d realise any form of persuasion was fruitless. I’m either reeling in Billy K or letting him drag me under.’
‘You just called Meg your wife.’
‘Ex. Don’t be like that, Anna.’
‘I’ve missed you, and I’m not sure the feeling has been reciprocated.’
‘It has, I promise. Just that, I have something here. Could be imagination. I might be chasing a ghost. Then again, maybe I’m breathing down his neck.’
‘Who, Jim?’
‘Billy K.’
‘You serious?’
‘Serious enough to be shot at.’
‘Tell me you’re joking.’
‘Well, it wasn’t Billy K holding the gun, unfortunately.’
‘I want to meet you at Heathrow. We’ll go away somewhere, on the coast, clear our heads.’
‘Not the airport.’
‘You don’t want to see me?’
‘I do want to see you, of course I do. But, well, for a start it’s odd that Roberts has left this wide open. I don’t understand his thinking.’
‘He doesn’t want the circus of the media. You said yourself.’
‘I don’t know. Something else.’
‘And so what if he is waiting for you? Tell him what you have. A lead. That’s dedication.’
‘I think they call it insubordination.’
‘You’ll come and see me?’
‘You know I will.’
‘Promise?’
‘You trust me?’
‘Of course I do.’
‘You trust me not to put you in danger, and that I wouldn’t ask you to do anything I wouldn’t myself?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘I need you to do something.’
‘Break the law for you?’
‘Detective work.’
‘It’s about Roberts, isn’t it?’
‘Listen, I need to know what he’s planning so I stay a step ahead.’
‘And?’
‘Whatever Roberts is up to, he’s arranged it outside of the MET. Mining his account log would show nothing. We need his mobile history. No way you can access his records without his actual clearance, so you have to go directly for his phone. And I think I know how.’
‘Jim, are you serious?’
‘Just listen. If the world were crashing down around his ears he’d still play squash at the Officer’s Club on a Thursday afternoon – today. He’ll be on court 2 p.m. sharp. Take along passport photos and your MET ID. Join up as a member. But first go into my desk. In the bottom drawer there’s an old-fashioned card reader. When Roberts is in the morning operation’s meeting step into his office, find his gym membership card and swipe it with the reader. Take the print to Begum Electronics on Borough High Street, and they’ll transfer this information onto a new card. Anna, are you still with me?’
‘I should have you sectioned.’
‘You know the gifted are mad.’
‘Go on.’
‘Take this fake card to the gym. Sign up as a member at reception to get your own card. If you swipe the fake on entry the photo will come up as Roberts, so don’t. Then slip into the men’s changing rooms. Roberts’s locker is top row immediately right. Insert the fake, open the door and grab his phone, then whip out his SIM and copy the history.’
‘Good God, Jim.’
‘No sweat. If you get caught, use the excuse of playing me along, you know, drawing me into a trap for Roberts. He’ll buy that. You’re very believable.’
‘And?’
‘Beautiful.’
‘And?’
‘Intelligent.’
‘You can stop there. I’ll give you time to think of some more adjectives before we meet. Anyway, this call might be monitored.’
‘You’re a star. Really. Anna, I want this done with, Billy K case closed, so I have time for you, us.’
‘You better get that plane, then. And I better get some passport photos. Where to meet?’
‘I think you know where.’
‘Does this happen to be a little place by the sea?’
‘Where the waves comes crashing against the harbour wall.’
‘Tomorrow night?’
‘Tomorrow night.’
I have no checked luggage to collect, nothing. My half-empty holdall swings by my side as I walk past the baggage carousels. The first suitcases clatter down the chute from the Nairobi flight, but I’m walking on, sidestepping arrivals from all corners of the globe, the weekend tourists, the returning holidaymakers browned by sweeter climes, the new lives poised on the stamp of a customs official.

And I walk past the rigmarole of arrival, already beyond passport control. I’m still waiting for a hand on my shoulder when I stroll the NOTHING TO DECLARE lane. But then I’m out, beyond the drawn lines. No one has challenged my entering the UK on a false passport. All Roberts had to do was inform customs of my landing, and in the millisecond it took that tiny chip to fire my identity on to a computer screen, an official could have discreetly escorted me into some back office. With Roberts sat waiting, feet up on a desk, sipping a cup of tea.

Instead I squint in the winter sunshine of the Terminal 4 car park. Maybe he’s here, leaning against my car smoking a cigarette?

He’s not. All I find at my car is a ticket and leaflet warning about the overstay rates. Before I unlock the door, I stand and turn, see the planes circling to land, the planes lifting into the cloudless blue. And then again I scan the rows of cars, wonder if someone is sitting and watching, preparing to follow.

Out of the car park, following signs to the M25, I check the mirrors constantly, noting what vehicles stay on my tail for more than half a mile. But most of the traffic is heading the same direction anyway, and though it’s mid-morning, the roads choke, no room for overtaking. A red Saab and a white BMW have no choice besides sitting on my bumper. And when I turn on to the M25 the gridlock continues. Forget the London Eye, this is the world’s largest Ferris wheel, but without the view.

Then the flow of traffic accelerates, together, a group sigh for movement. I can feel tension ease from the shoulders of the other drivers. And when I’m not watching what’s behind me, I’m looking around my own car, acknowledging that it is my car, a two-week-old newspaper on the passenger seat, empty crisp packets tucked into the ashtray, a roll of mints. It is my car, but there’s no comfort in this fact.

And for a few seconds I see myself from the next lane. Walking in the outside lane. I’m walking alongside the car that I’m driving, watching myself focused on the cars in front, eyes forward, the fields and sky beyond blurred with speed. *I’m walking along the outside lane watching myself drive.*

Then I return, to the windscreen flecked with dirt and insects, brake lights and the backs of heads. I can feel the sweat on my palms, the pressure of the pedals against the soles of my feet. Now the countryside has stopped and the car is in motion, trees and pylons zipping past.

I take the slip road to the M1, merge with the rush of trucks, vans, buses and cars pointed north. And now, appropriately, the skies darken, clouds fatten with rain above a monochrome landscape. You can almost see the drivers lean forward, as though steeling themselves for a long climb, that this is the beginning of a great slope to the top of the country.

Each time I drive this stretch of motorway, I’m a passenger of my own memory, no will to think of anything but the back of the police car, my bandaged head, the two quiet officers who drove me home.

I pull into Watford Gap services, not for a break from driving, but a break from thinking, that hum of who you are that vibrates up from the tarmac, the bump of a cat’s eye or join in the road, through the rubber of the tires, along the steering column and into your loose hands, rested there like puppet hands on string.

Maybe I’m just jet-lagged, exhausted. I go into the café and buy a coffee, a sandwich to take away. I could sit down on a plastic seat, but I’m afraid of stopping. In the toilets I need courage to look in the mirror, to see myself fixed in space and time, the fear of a lasting moment.

A fine rain sweeps across the car park. Trucks rattle along the motorway. I’m looking around for someone who might be watching, waiting. Every second person seems like a spy. Nearing the car, I see the rain has highlighted the dirt, the neglect.

And a handprint over the rear wing. Not mine. Level with the back wheel I drop my sandwich on the floor. When
I squat to pick it up, I reach under the arch. I move quickly, dust off the sandwich.

Back inside the car I start the engine. What was fastened above the wheel is in my pocket. Once I’m accelerating up the slip road on to the motorway, I take it between my thumb and forefinger to inspect. A transponder, a tracker, a device beaming my location from satellite to the screen of whoever placed it there, whoever is following.

The harder the rain hammers at the windscreen, the faster I drive. Into fifth now, a firmer grip on the steering wheel. If they want sport, they can have it. The rain streaks the windscreen, I weave back and forth from inside to outside lane, overtaking at 130 mph, 140 mph.

I cut three lanes to take the exit at junction 16. Horns blare. Coming off the slip road I feel like a pilot touching down on a runway. About five miles along the A road towards Bedford, I take a right, on to a narrow lane cutting between fields dotted with sheep, huddled close against the rain.

I’ve been here before, this stretch of desolate road. Last time in an orange Metro, my hand clutched on a knife. If I’d reached across and stabbed the teacher, I wouldn’t be here right now, alone on an empty road, following a ghost, followed by a ghost. But then we can speculate on a million twists and turns of every day, what could and would happen if this and that did. Or didn’t.

Outside the entrance to the field I’d woken in that morning all those years ago, I pull up, leaving the engine running as I jump out and open the metal gate. The track down to the derelict signal house is cratered with deep puddles. A pile of hardcore has been dumped, ready to fill the holes. I weave around the rubble, drive over the grass and through the large wooden doors, propped open by bricks.

Since I slept here, kept from the cold by a stolen coat, the roof has been covered by sheet tarpaulin, flapping wildly in the wind. What was an earthen floor is now covered in straw. Plastic barrels of fertiliser stand in the corner.

I switch off the engine, pick up the tracker and get out. I crouch again by the rear arch of the wheel and reattach it to the underside. Then I open the boot, take out a ski jacket, woolly hat, and a pair of handcuffs.

Before stepping out into the cold, February rain, I scan the lane for other cars. Nothing. An empty field in an empty world. Not even a bird. I zip up the jacket and pull on the hat. I shut the wooden doors and walk back to the edge of the field, where the access track runs parallel to the hedgerow, stepping not on the mud, but the thick green grass. Tyre tracks in, but no prints out.

Then I slide beneath the barbed wire and the hedgerow, slip into the freezing water of the ditch.

Twenty years ago I crouched in a ditch of freezing water to hide. Did someone say you can never step into the same river twice? I don’t believe them. What has happened in two decades suddenly means nothing. I’m still a motherless child a long way from home, in fear of being found.

An engine, the gate opening. When the wheels squelch past my hiding place, I lower my body deeper into the icy water. A black Range Rover brakes before the pile of hardcore. I can only make out the profile of a man in the driving seat, alone. He cuts the engine and sits. For five minutes he’s just a silhouette. Finally I see him moving, checking something in his hand. Then the door opens. I’ve never seen him before. He’s as tall as me but heavier in the shoulders. He has short, black, cropped hair, a broad forehead, and a thick black moustache. I see this when he turns back to look at the open gate.

And I see a handgun, lengthened by a silencer, pressed against his thigh.

He wastes no time staking out the building. He pulls open the wooden doors and storms inside, gun drawn. I scramble up from the ditch and run, ducking behind the cover of his car. I run stooped, like a man expecting a bullet.

Flat against the wheel of the Range Rover, I uncurl and look to the signal house through the rain-smattered windows. He’s still in there. And about to find an abandoned car. I open his rear door and slide inside. I close the door with the handle held up to dull the click shut, and crouch behind the driver’s seat. Mounted on the dashboard is the GPS system blinking with my location.

Now I untie my right boot. Eye by eye I draw out the lace, binding each end around the four fingers of both hands. I can hear only the raindrops pattering on the roof. And my thudding heart. This is hide and seek, boys’ games. But instead of name-calling and ribbing the found, we have a shooting.

Finally the clunk of the lifted handle, the door opening. ‘Fuck,’ he says. He can’t see me. I hear him spit. ‘Where the fuck?’ He stands for a moment, no, an eternity, before getting in. And when he falls back on to the seat, I’m nearly pinned by his weight. I have no idea if he has the gun in his hand or not.

As soon as the door’s shut, I move, up and over the seat back, yanking hard on that lace about his throat, holding on for dear life. He buckles. The lace is a rein. I put my knees into the seat back and pull harder.

He makes no sound, nothing. Nothing. I’m choking him to death and he’s silent. Both his hands work on prying free the cord, but I’ve cut into flesh, slicing his jowls with nylon. When his hand dips to his inside pocket, I quickly pass the lace from left to right, twisting tighter. Then I go over the front of his chest, like a father might fasten a
child into a safety seat. And the two of us draw the one gun. We both grip the hilt, that schoolyard game of
interlocking fingers, not knowing whose is where and how to move. He's stronger, but I have my weight coming
down, gravity. He's trying to angle the barrel from his chest into mine.

‘Give me the fucking gun,’ I hiss. He does not. The lace is about his windpipe, but he can still breathe, the
headrest holding off the crucial centimetre. And he knows this much. In fact he knows a lot, to find me here in this
field, to be this intimate in our deadlock, within kissing distance, my soft cheek an inch from his teeth. He’d bite a
hole in my face if it was offered, and I lean out further. A mistake. He jams a finger inside the trigger guard.

When he starts firing I still have a hold of the hilt. Foam explodes from the passenger seat. I can feel the bullets
passing through the down of the ski jacket, grazing my armpit. I’m over the top of his head now, working the barrel
away from my body. The passenger window pops with the next shot. And now I help him out a little, wedging my
finger over his and firing, firing, firing, the action of the hammer louder than the silenced shot, the flying bullets lost
beyond the broken window.

On the empty click I swing back around the seat, pull again on that nylon noose, and lift. He fights the cord with
both hands, gasping now. I bunch both ends of the lace in my right hand and reach into my jacket pocket, whipping
out the cuffs. I drop them on his lap. ‘Put them on.’ He doesn’t. Once more I pull with both hands, as though the lace
was a length of cheese wire and I might sever his head. ‘Or die in this fucking field.’

When he’s snapped them on, run through the steering wheel as instructed, I release the lace. He gasps like a man
who just swam a length underwater. I jump out of the car, open up the driver’s door and find him slumped over the
dashboard. I grab a handful of collar and wrench him upright. His throat is bleeding, a fancy red necklace.

‘Now talk to me.’

Handcuffed to a radiator in a kitchen, I leave a man who was hired to kill me. When I pushed him through Gary’s
back door with the muzzle of his own gun between his shoulders, I think my brother was more afraid of me than my
prisoner. He saw again what I was capable of, remembered what I’d done with a pocket knife twenty years ago.
How I thought revenge could bring a soul back to earth.

But he had nothing to fear. There were no revelations from a tortured interrogation, no. I’m still a policeman, and
this man on the floor with a strip of duct tape across his mouth is a professional. He understands his game’s up, and
that mine’s beginning.

I already had what I wanted from my assassin’s glovebox, the meeting place and time, a rendezvous with the man
I’ve chased across deserts and slums, through my own memories of escape.

I’d screamed in his face, ‘Is it Billy K? Is it him?’

The only words he spoke were, ‘You’re a copper, Dent. We both know that. We both know that I’m saying fuck
all. Prison is preferable to being shot by my employer.’

So I don’t know who was hired to kill me, and why the man I’ll meet tomorrow was also destined for a rented
bullet. And whether, dare I even think it, he is Billy K.

But first, before the sun rises on a day with answers rather than questions, I drive, once again, to the coast to meet
Anna.
Captain James Cook, at seventeen years of age, left his job as a grocer to work on a coal barge, to brave the crashing white surf of the North Sea, the waves and storms that for the previous eight months he’d watched tumble and foam into Staithes’ tiny harbour.

Walking the steep, cobbled lanes, to the small cottage, I think of Cook as a young man, what dreams he had of countries, whole continents, that were not yet lines on a map.

At the top of the steep lane I look down to the bay, the roofs of slate glinting, precious in the moonlight. The lights of the pub reflect on the wet sand. A car is negotiating the tight turns back up the hill, the headlights flaring off the windows.

Beyond this town of narrow alleys, the mouth of the bay, these sheer cliffs, Cook was called across the globe, again and again, returning from each voyage restless for more, as though the journey itself had become his home.

Inside the cottage I turn on the TV, too loud in the low-ceilinged room. I hit mute on the remote, and leave the sunny skies of a holiday show flickering across the screen. I walk into the bathroom and touch my hair and adjust my shirt collar then go back into the bedroom and open all the drawers and wardrobes, until I’m content at the emptiness. Then I turn off the TV and lie on the bed with my shoes still on. I have his gun by my side, a new clip loaded. Beyond the house, the sound of the North Sea could be warring armies, some epic battle forever raging.

I’m almost asleep when there’s a knock at the door. I jump up and smooth the bed before checking my face again in the mirror. Through the spyhole in the door, I can see her profile, looking down the cobbled and quiet lane. I put the gun in the dresser and take a breath. I open the door, and feel the volts prickling skin and bone. She says, ‘Jim, Jim.’ We stand for a moment, face to face, wordless, not yet touching. When the door is shut we kiss, and kiss, each enveloped by the other, a single being.

She stops and says, ‘I have something to tell you.’ I kiss her again. ‘Important,’ she says.

I only stop to say, ‘Not yet.’ I can taste her in my mouth as I speak.

She takes my hand and leads me to the centre of the room. I breathe in the scent on her neck and in her hair, loosened now, soft and free between my fingers.

Then she reaches behind my head and grips at the base of my skull, almost clawing, then a palm, opening, her fingertips drawing out behind my ear, slowly along the line of my jaw, before hooking her thumb into my mouth. Our eyes meet again, her pupils so dark and vital.

The room is bright and she says so. I switch out the light but the lamp still glares.

‘Wait,’ she says, and tells me to stand still. I ask her to keep the light on, I say I want to see her naked. She’s just beyond my reach, unbuttoning her shirt. I try to talk but have no words, captive to the act of her undressing. And she watches her own fingers pop each button, as though she too can’t look away. Down to the very last one. The shirt hangs from her shoulders, half opened, the contrast of her pale skin against a black bra.

She looks at me seriously now, then smiles, and tells me to take it off. Making that first step towards her, I move like I might break. She stands motionless, waiting for me to draw the straps from her shoulders, sighing as I brush her skin with mine. Before I drop the shirt to the floor she clutches my wrist. She takes the shirt from my grip and drapes it over the lampshade. The edges of the rooms soften. I pull her close now, and kiss the curve of her breasts. Then I reach around and unzip her skirt. She steps from where it drops, and kicks off her shoes. My own clothes seem to fall from my body at her touch. We play the game of kissing, not kissing, aching for each other, making certain how much it all means before we lay on the bed, naked and glowing.

Now she breathes as measured and deep as a diver at sea, and I move and kiss her again, submerged too. Because nothing matters here, a haven of sheets and skin, sperm and sweat, that rhythm of sex for a stamp of being.

We lay in the starlight with the curtains open. The shadows of crossed window frames lay on the floor like targets. And into the bare room the expanding universe burns. Her body is luminous. I kiss from the small of her back, along the length of her spine to her hair, then down her shoulders. I’m afraid that when I run out of skin we’ll talk again of the hunt.
‘I say, ‘I love that sound.’
‘My beating heart?’
‘That too.’
‘You mean the sea on the beach.’
‘Things bigger than us, the moon swinging tides, stones rattled in the breaking waves.’
‘Bigger than one man chasing another?’
‘Or one man chasing himself.’

Now I’m naked, warm, in the arms of a woman who quivered with electricity, took me inside her and erased whatever the world wanted from a life, I want to stay a while feeling small, no challenge but one breath to the next.

She says we have to talk. ‘I have a confession.’
‘I forgive you already.’
‘Do you?’ She sighs, leans on her elbows and looks me hard in the eye. ‘Stolen Car. I took it from your desk.

When Roberts turned over your house. From the first paragraph I knew it was you, fact not fiction. I slipped the manuscript into my bag.’

‘I wrote that behind bars. I was a teenager.’

‘And what happened with your stepfather?’

‘So I’m the one with the confession, not you.’

‘Look, Jim. This case is everything to you, and I have my theories on why it’s more than policing. It goes back to what happened to your mother. And your stepfather. You see Billy K as you abandoning your mother. And what happened to her is not your fault. You were a boy, Jim. He knocked her to the kitchen floor, not you.’

‘I know, believe me.’

Anna leans and kisses me on the forehead, light brushes of her lips.

I gently stop her and ask, ‘And this is the complete theory?’

‘Well, I also know how stubborn you are. But maybe I’m completely wrong on the reasons you’re obsessed with Billy K. Perhaps it’s just your professional ego, the man wanting to win, the result.’

‘Exactly. The result. Finding someone missing. And did you get hold of Robert’s phone?’

‘In my bag. Slipping into his office during the morning meeting was easy enough, had a slight panic sifting through his papers, then realised his member card was tucked into the bottom corner of the notice board. One swipe, then to your dodgy friends on Borough High Street to get it copied. You were right about the gym being quiet, just Roberts and another super beating a squash ball. Was in and out of his locker in less than sixty seconds, copying the SIM data with the adaptor. Now, Roberts did see me in the gym, but no reason for suspicion when I was pedalling away on a cycle machine.’

‘Special Agent Monroe.’

‘I was hoping you’d be impressed. But listen. This is more serious than you think.’

‘Well, it got pretty serious earlier.’

‘At the airport?’

‘Taken care of.’

‘Nothing happened did it?’

‘Something happened. Tell me about Roberts and his phone.’

‘God, Jim.’ She sighs. Maybe she wonders what she’s doing here in bed, how her life has shrunk to a man chasing another man. ‘Caller ID on most of the numbers. His wife and daughter, other officers. So, posing as a market researcher, I dial the others. And, well …’ She takes a deep breath.

‘Go on.’

‘Well, one number belongs to head of Gecko records, Ricky Wise. Only got a name, and a frothing: “Sell your bullshit to some other mug.” Nothing untoward about Roberts talking with Wise, following up with inquiries. But. And this is a big but. I also discover that Roberts sent him a text. And …’ She sits up now, reaches over and switches on the lamp, extinguishes the starlight. ‘Details of a bank account.’

‘Bank account?’ I repeat.

‘Two days ago, an hour after a ten-minute conversation dialled from Roberts to Wise, Roberts received a text from Wise saying, “Where do you want it?” The reply from Roberts is a series of numbers, followed by the instruction: “In $.”’

‘He tipped him off.’

‘What?’
I sit up. ‘The man who came to kill me.’

‘Came to kill you?’ Anna asks this angrily, betrayed by what I haven’t told her. ‘Jim, what the fuck is happening?’

I tell her about the tracker, the field and the man with the gun. How I throttled him an inch from death.

‘And where the hell is he now?’

‘Handcuffed to a radiator at my brother’s.’

‘Look, Jim, this has gone too far. This sounds ridiculous. But we need to call the police.’

I grab her hand and kiss the back. I throw off the bed covers and look out on to the starlit sea. A faint shade of blue pales the eastern sky. I put on my clothes while Anna asks what I’m doing, what the man said.

‘Where are you going?’

I tell her I have an appointment to keep, a rendezvous. I take the gun from the dresser.

‘Who the hell with?’

‘The man I’ve chased halfway around the world.’
The original rendezvous was under a railway bridge at the end of a disused canal, a lonely spot to have died. No grave to dig when a body hits water. I changed the meeting place to a location on my terms, texting a new address from the phone of an assassin. An abandoned house I know all too well.

The garden is overgrown and neglected. Grass grows over the path, moss greens the guttering. I still have the key, after all this time. I kept it in an envelope with some pictures of my mother. When I open the door I’m shaking, but more fearful of a ghost than another person. And that smell, my stepfather, a stale phantom of alcohol and cheap cigarettes. I pick up a wad of junk mail from the hallway floor, letters with his name on them. Then I close the door behind me. I search the ground floor, drawing the faded curtains as I move from lounge to kitchen, before heading upstairs.

I stand in my bedroom. Or what was my bedroom. So long now since I slept in this house. Twenty years. I’m a giant in a shoebox. Where I scratched Jimmy on to the windowsill with my pocketknife has been painted over. But through the layers of gloss, I can still read my name. The entire house has been redecorated, but he couldn’t paint that out.

Two months ago Gary and I came back. We paid a removal company to go in before we even looked. We gave instructions to burn anything that might belong to a man. To him. No name. When we speak about our stepfather we navigate around his name with the skill of sailors over treacherous reefs. Because if we speak of the devil he might come. This is nonsense, we know. But rather not ruin a conversation.

When his death arrived in my letterbox, a note from a solicitor, I felt loss. In the same way I imagine a cancer patient does after a tumour removal.

Twenty years. Twenty years he lived after the night I waited for him to roll out of the working men’s club, drunk.

I walk from room to room, and think about what a Pakistani man once told me in a car park. ‘People hold us like ghosts in their memories. We hold people like ghosts in our memories. We’re forever haunting or being haunted.’

I go downstairs. The house clearance company had done what they said they would. Nothing left, except a single folding chair in the pantry. I open it out and set it down in the middle of the dining-room floor.

And here I wait.

He tries the disconnected bell. Then he flaps the letterbox. I tick-tock across bare floorboards into the porch, feel the gun tucked in my waistband. Then I open the door.

‘Come in.’

‘This wasn’t the arrangement.’

He crosses the threshold, the body of the shadow I’ve chased across continents. He walks into the hallway, nervous, like a man might suddenly feel his weight on a frozen pond. When he sees no furniture in the lounge or the dining room, he turns to run.

But I’ve already shut and locked the door.

‘Let me out, you fucker!’

I take the key from the lock and put it in my pocket.

‘A little chat first.’

‘Who the fuck are you?’

‘What shall I call you? Phillip? Peter? How about Dominic?’

‘You’re in big shit, whoever you are.’

‘How I wish I could call you Billy.’

But I can’t. It’s Mathew Quail, quivering as he speaks. The Billy K lookalike who fooled half a million Muscovites, the impostor chased daily by screaming fans while the real Billy K slipped out of back doors, hotel laundry chutes, concerts.

‘Fuck you. I said let me out.’

He’s a good head shorter than I. And about two stone lighter.
‘In the back room.’
‘You don’t know who you’re dealing with.’
‘That’s what we’re about to find out.’
‘Fuck you.’
‘Do you have a gun, Mathew? No? How about a knife? Because even if you have, and you decide to pull it on me, then I’m going to take it off you and stick it where the sun doesn’t shine.’

He walks into the empty room. He slinks like a dog about to be hit. The entire house empty but for this single chair.

‘As you’re the guest, Mathew, and I’m the host, I suppose I should offer you the only seat.’

‘I haven’t done anything wrong.’
‘And I don’t care if you have. It’s not as though I’m a policeman, is it? Now sit down.’

Mathew backs on to the chair. He reaches with his hands when he sits, as though ready to snatch the chair back from someone who might pull it from under him. And I’m standing before my catch, the cornered prey. Mathew looks smaller sitting down, small beneath the high ceilings.

‘First of all, I want you to know I have nothing against you personally. I just need a little information.’

‘What would I know to tell you? Anyway, why fucking should I?’

‘Well, how about I tell you something first? We can trade knowledge about each other, maybe I can encourage you to make things easier. For us both.’

Mathew fidgets in the chair. I take a step closer, stoop and lean into his face.

‘Know that I’ve given up everything to follow you halfway around the world, to here. This poxy fucking room. This chair. I’ve lost my job. I’ve lost precious time with my daughter. And I have no more idea about the location of Billy K than I did a year ago. Don’t you think I deserve a little explanation?’

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I stand straight again. The boy is sweating. He’s put on a little weight since the Moscow stunt, but yes, the likeness to Billy K is uncanny.

‘Explanation about what? My holiday? You should be explaining why the fuck you’ve been stalking me?’

‘So you’re going be a smart arse. Does he know you’re here?’

‘And who the fuck is he?’

‘He’s the man paying for your jet setting.’

‘Well, if he knows I’m here, you can guarantee he’ll be coming after you if anything happens to me. Think about that.’

‘Maybe I’m counting on it. Think about that.’

‘You’re fucked.’

‘Or how about your mum, does she know where you are?’

‘This has got nothing to do with her. Nothing. I swear, anything’s happened to her I’ll kill you. I fucking will. I know some powerful people.’

‘I had a feeling you did.’

I pace the floorboards, walk a circle around the chair. Each time I go behind him, Mathew turns to keep me in sight, twisting quickly from one shoulder to the other.

‘Anything happens to me, and you’re fucked.’

‘You’ve already said that.’

I think he’d cry if I struck him. I stop pacing.

‘Did you have fun in Moscow?’

‘What?’

‘Onstage, in front of all those fans, it must have been quite a buzz. They really thought you were him, Billy K. From a distance you were convincing, but, well, not him.’

I walk another circle. This time Mathew doesn’t twist in his seat. Again I stop dead before him.

‘You look the same, the hair and eyes. Same height and build. Strange life being a professional fake. With no talent? Billy has more in his little toe than you have in your entire body. He’s special. You’re not.’

‘That’s a matter of opinion.’

‘That’s millions of record sales, awards, more money than you could ever count, girls fainting when they see you. Or does that happen when you pop to the corner shop for a bottle of milk?’

‘I’ve been chased before.’

‘No you haven’t. Billy K has.’

For the first time Mathew Quail has taken his eyes from mine. He’s diminishing in the seat, smaller by the second.

‘Don’t be too disheartened.’ I say this with the tone of a concerned, but lecturing father. ‘It wasn’t Billy K that kept one step ahead of me for two continents. It was you. Well done. I’ll give you credit for that.’
He’s looking at the door. He’s not tied or bound. I don’t have him at gunpoint. ‘You’ve got no right to keep me here.’ He knocks the chair over as he stands. ‘I’m fucking out of here.’

I let him run. I walk calmly behind. He kicks at the door twice before I hook low and sharp under his bottom rib. Mathew groans, all the air in his lungs expelled. He crumples, shrinks to the floor like a burst balloon. I haul him back to the chair by his shoulders and set him back upon it.

‘Stop crying. You’re just winded.’ I was right about tears if I hit him. ‘I need answers before you can leave.’ He’s snivelling, crying like a toddler, not a 23-year-old. ‘How about I talk while you get your breath back? All you have to do is listen, then you can decide if you want to say the right thing and leave, or whether we stay here.’ I go on a knee before him. Even crouched like this I seem bigger than my prisoner, slumped and sniffing, crying into his sleeve. ‘I don’t want to hurt you, Mathew. But I’ve gambled everything to find Billy K, whether he’s dead or alive. From Sydney to West London, each step you’ve taken I have too, each turn on the trail I’ve been your shadow.’

Mathew sits straighter. ‘I won’t get the money if I tell you.’

‘Tell me what?’

‘I can’t.’

‘OK. Let’s do this a different way.’ I rise from my knee.

Mathew screams, ‘Beat me up! Break my legs! I don’t fucking care. I’ll be rich and you’ll be in prison.’ He’s actually frothing at the mouth as he shouts.

‘Calm down. No need to get so excited. You should listen first. I’ll keep it really simple. Listen, because your life depends on it. Yesterday I met a man with a gun. And some bullets. One of them had my name on. The other yours.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘Bullshit? Well, I’m here because he’s not. And if he was here, all you’d get is a hole in the head.’

‘You’ve been watching too much TV.’

‘You little twat.’ I reach out and grab the scruff of his neck. I have his shirt bunched in my fist. ‘You’d already be dead if I hadn’t got to him first. Dead. Not fucking here. Do you fucking understand or not?’ I drag him off the chair. I pull him across the floorboards into the kitchen.

‘What do you see? What the fuck do you see?’ I’m pointing at a spot on the dirty lino. He’s confused, terrified.

‘What do you see?’ I’m not shouting any more.

He says, ‘Nothing.’

I let him go. Then I slump against the wall, drained, bereft at the memory of my mother in that very spot. ‘Be good,’ her very last breath.

Mathew hyperventilates as he talks. ‘Wise wouldn’t hurt me. We had a deal.’

‘Well, he made a new one.’

‘To kill me? I said I wouldn’t say anything.’

‘Say what?’ I ask.

He looks up, decides I’m either too far gone to bullshit, or that the truth has become a burden for his narrow shoulders. ‘Keep Billy K alive. Keep his fans hoping. Wise set me up with the flights and fake ID. All I had to do was go out to Australia, track down the letter, you know, investigate as if I were Billy K.’

‘You stole the letter from Monique.’ He nods. ‘You have it now?’

‘I was going to give it to Wise.’ He reaches into his jacket pocket and I tell him to move slowly. He hands over the crumpled pages, a barely legible scrawl.

‘Then the convict archives.’

‘And the ruin. The poem. A month later Wise would leak the story. Press would hear about a man looking like Billy K going out there, visiting the orphanage in Kenya. All that business with the reverend in the desert. That was unexpected. Freaked me out, but Wise loved it. More mystery I suppose.’

‘And more record sales. More money in his pocket. What about Billy K? Did you ask?’

‘Wise is not the kind of geezer you go demanding answers from, but yeah, I did ask.’

‘And?’ Again my skin pricks. I stand up off the wall.

He just smiles, says something about music never dying, even when the artist does. I asked if he knew he was dead. He said, “He died the day he stopped writing songs. The day he ran back to mummy.”’
I must write this down. I must explain, somehow, this waking and feverish dream, a vision which has possessed my very soul for the best part of the afternoon. This is what I saw and heard:

The church is complete. A crooked lintel above the entrance, two glassless windows overlooking the glaring scrub, a wooden cross fixed to the roof, and the reverend, hammering nails into the base of a broken, upturned pew. He raises the hammer, swings, misses, and strikes his thumb. He does not swear, but grits the curse between his teeth. A pregnant aborigine, more girl than woman, stands at the door. When the priest sees her, he waves her away and bellows he is busy. Overweight and sweating in the heat, frustrated at the menial task beyond his ability, he strikes the nail with such anger and ferocity he splits the seat.

‘Having a spot of bother there, reverend?’ A male voice calls from outside.
‘Jesus.’ The reverend drops the hammer in shock. ‘McCreedy! You jumped me from my bones.’
‘You want some advice on hammering a nail?’ The voice is a silhouette, a shadow on the dazzle beyond the doorway. ‘You should ask a Roman.’
‘Not stopped your blaspheming then.’ The reverend stands, straining.

The two men are similar height and shape, though the mass of McCreedy is the muscle of labour and toil, unlike the reverend, a man bloated on sitting and eating.

‘Come out of the sun, now,’ directs the reverend.

The aboriginal elder with McCreedy does not approach. Instead he turns and walks to the stand of gum trees. He folds his legs and sits down in the shade, staring beyond the little church as if it were not even there. McCreedy takes off his hat, kicks the dirt from his boots against the doorframe, and enters.

‘Well, sit. Sit down, man.’ The reverend directs McCreedy to a pew. ‘And tell me it was a day the devil lost.’

McCreedy is dusted with red sand. His lips are cracked and peeling, the handkerchief around his neck soaked with sweat. And despite the journey here, his weary limbs and nights beneath the stars, he does not sit.

‘Oh yes, reverend,’ he confirms. ‘A day the devil lost.’

The news seems to make the reverend stand a little taller. ‘Dearest McCreedy,’ he says with a smile of relief. ‘The good Lord does not let such deeds pass without reward. And though blood was spilled, and the earth reddened by a commandment broken, forgiveness is close when the act itself was willed by our Heavenly Father.’

Again, the reverend offers McCreedy a pew, fussing until he takes a seat.

‘Was it not Providence that brought the stockmen through our lonely parish, that they delivered news of Mr Babbage and his arrival to these shores? To think that he dare venture a return to England with the audacity of seeking an audience with Queen Victoria herself. That he was journeying into the heart of our kingdom to plead that Britain and the Mission Society leave Fiji, his hell-pit of cannibals and debauchers, to its own devices. We gave this man the power of our language, and he uses it to deny and sabotage the word of the Lord, the light upon his land.’

The reverend takes a blackened handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his forehead and neck.

‘Now what would the Lord think of us, or of any good Christian man, who would hold open the door of his house and let Satan walk right in? This was your calling, McCreedy, a chance to redeem your sins in the name of God.’

‘To be forgiven for my crimes. To be a good man, like yourself, reverend.’
‘A drink, McCreedy. Water?’ The reverend stands and shuffles, uncomfortable with the virtues of piety pressed upon him. ‘Or something to take the edge off the journey?’

‘Rum,’ answers McCreedy. Not for one moment has he taken his eyes from the reverend.

‘Now then, where did I put that key?’ The reverend is patting down his frock and rummaging in the pockets. ‘Ah, of course.’ He pulls out two necklaces from his chest. On one dangles the silver cross, the other a small key. He moves behind the pulpit, bends and unlocks the door. ‘Only hidden to protect our heathen subjects from temptation. Will port suffice?’ Next to the flask are a bible, a muslin bag of moulding cheese, a musket, and a small bag of shot. McCreedy takes the flask without a word. He unhinges the stopper and gulps.
‘Steady now,’ warns the reverend. ‘I want the story from a sober narrator.’

McCreedy wipes the rum from his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘You having some yourself?’

‘A little early in the day for me.’
‘I think you should have a drop.’
A look of panic flashes across the reverend’s face. ‘Tell me what happened,’ he demands. ‘And stop this fooling.’
The reverend does not take the offered flask, and McCreedy, smiling, knowing, takes another gulp.
‘You did kill him, didn’t you?’ The reverend’s question hangs in the stifling heat. McCreedy finishes the flask
and tosses it across the plank floor of the church.
‘With a dirty blade.’
The reverend is both pleased and puzzled by the admission. He frowns at first, and then breathes a sigh of relief,
an understanding that his only trouble is the guilt of his assassin. He sits on the raised stage of the chapel and faces
the murderer he hired with the promise of redemption, not pots of silver or gold.
‘Now, McCreedy. A sinner you may have been, and delivered here in manacles at the request of the Crown for
good reason. But the Lord knows His earth is a brighter place without that cannibal darkening our days. He may
have paraded himself as a Christian at one time, and I admit we were fools to believe we could turn a savage to the
light so soon, but contend not that this was a man sly to the point of sorcery.’
McCreedy takes his canvas pack from the plank floor and sets it down beside him on the pew. He unfastens the
straps and reaches in and pulls out the leather journal of the Fijian.
‘Seen this before, reverend?’
The revelation of what events and commentary may be recorded takes the breath from the reverend’s speech. He
stutters and stammers. ‘The journal! From the voyage out there to …’
The reverend stretches out to clutch the book, but McCreedy hovers the prize just beyond his reach.
‘McCreedy!’ shouts the reverend. ‘Give it here now.’
McCreedy lets the reverend snatch the carrot from the stick. The reverend pulls the book to his chest, as if it were
his beating heart, and he would surely perish if anyone remove it from his person.
‘For once, McCreedy, your ignorance of the written word has done you a favour. Consider it a blessing that such
satanic scribblings have kept their tongue.’
The reverend allows the book to leave his chest. He begins to turn over the cover, then quickly snaps it shut.
‘Will you join me in a prayer, McCreedy? Some words to thank the Lord for the safe return of this burning book.
And of course the health of your good self.’
McCreedy suggests that the reverend first hear of what happened. ‘The tawdry details, reverend, they are a burden
I have to share.’
‘Tell, tell all. Should we not revel in an evil banished?’
‘After I went to the guest house. After I hid in his room and observed him readying himself for the evening. After
a man you pronounced as a flesh-eating banshee fought me tooth and claw for his life, I needed comfort beyond
prayer, a physical embrace frowned upon by our Lord.’
‘You took solace in a whore.’
‘That I did, reverend.’
‘What does that tell us of flesh and loneliness? That a brave man on a mission of the Lord has to seek refuge in
the arms of a poor and stupid girl.’
‘Well, reverend. This “stupid” girl could read.’
The reverend sputters for breath. His jaw hangs and trembles at the news that the words clutched to his chest may
have spread their wings.
‘And tell me a story this whore did.’
‘Lies, lies. All lies.’ The reverend jumps to his feet, spitting forth his innocence, how the cunning take league with
the devil, that this is a test of the righteous and the good, a test for the soul of McCreedy. He is shaking the journal
back and forth as though he were before his flock on a Sunday morning.
‘Come now, reverend.’ McCreedy stands and steps towards the reverend. The plank flooring of the church rattles
with the shuffling, sidestepping reverend, and the steady advance of McCreedy.
‘It may be about you, reverend, but that doesn’t mean it belongs to you.’
The reverend is backed on to the raised stage. He puts a hand on the pulpit to steady himself, but both he and the
stand topple. The bible, pistol, and the bag of shot spill across the floor. The ammunition rolls away like scattered
marbles. The reverend scrabbles for the pistol, grasps the stock and quickly, shakily, aims it at McCreedy.
‘Now, now, reverend.’
‘Cast you under a spell he has. The devil’s poetry, I tell you.’ The reverend stands, quivering with the pistol. He
does not take his finger off the trigger, nor the bead from McCreedy.
‘Reverend, you told me I was a sinner long before, that I had to redeem myself in the name of the Lord by doing
his work, that you could help me help myself. I gave you my blood and sweat building this church. I gave you my
darkened soul in the belief you could bring me to the light. And you told me the Lord wanted murder, that I was to
go away and despatch the devil incarnate from this good earth.’

‘A cannibal he was. A flesh-eater, for ever corrupt before our Lord.’

‘He was a gentleman in a suit. You know what he was doing before I twisted the blade? Polishing his shoes, buffing them to a mirrored shine before his evening engagement with the other diners in the restaurant. And do you know what, reverend? I doubt human flesh was on the menu that night.’

‘A wolf. A wolf in sheep’s clothing.’

McCreedy looks beyond the barrel of the pistol at the reverend. He is studying the shaking hand, the sweat dripping from his face, and the cold stones of his eyes. He knows now that everything in the journal of Nelson Babbage is fact, not fiction, not the work of the devil.

‘You know what else, reverend? I think that frock of yours is made of wool.’

Now the reverend composes himself. He steadies his shaking arm, the pistol. ‘Forgive me, Father,’ he prays without bowing his head or lifting his eyes from McCreedy, no distance between them but the end of the barrel, ‘for I have sinned’.

Then the reverend fires the pistol into the face of McCreedy. But McCreedy is smiling, even after the reverend has pulled the trigger. He is smiling because he knew there was no shot in the chamber. The powder flares and hisses, a flame spurts from the flint. It burns the reverend and he drops the pistol to the floor. He swings back his fist to strike, but McCreedy sways and yanks him to the floor by his sleeve. The reverend kicks out, catching the broken pew. The hammer clatters on to the planks. McCreedy has one hand on the dog collar, twisting the material bunched in his fist, slowly garrotting the reverend. With his other hand he picks up the hammer and raises it high above his shoulder and shows the reverend how to strike a nail correctly by splitting open his skull with a single blow.

When McCreedy came out of the church he was dressed in the clothes of the reverend. He paused and fixed the collar, then turned and dragged out the naked body. The aborigine beneath the gum tree had still not moved, but the pregnant girl now stood next to him. They watched McCreedy pull the pale dead flesh of the reverend by his heels across the sand and towards the creek. His broken head left a stain on the dirt, but not for long. Quickly the sun dried the blood and brain before the gusting wind swept his life into the sky. And now the man beneath the gum tree moved. He undid a small bag tied by a loop of twine to his waist and spread its contents before him on the ground. He put a narrow stick between his palms and twisted the sharpened end back and forth on to a strip of bark. When it smoked he added dried grass and blew. Tiny flames flickered from the embers. He quickly added larger twigs and dried roots until the fire was large enough to burn a branch end that he could carry like a torch into the darkened church.

After McCreedy had laid out the corpse of the reverend in the bushes beside the creek, he walked back to the side of the church and picked up the shovel. Smoke was already billowing from the glassless windows but he did not stop to investigate. He returned to the body and began digging. The grave site was exactly where it had been in my dream two days before. And then I saw myself clothed and broken, watching McCreedy in the clothes of the reverend, tossing dirt into a mound and digging deeper. My other self was oblivious to my presence.

And just as before, McCreedy lifted the cross from his neck and placed it upon the deceased. Again, the body and the dirt did not make a sound when dropped into the earth.

When McCreedy finished shovelling he turned and headed back towards the burning church. But after a few paces he stopped, patted the chest pocket, and reached in and took out a piece of paper. He unfolded the ticket and held it level with his face. It was in the name of a Reverend Thomas. But he could only presume this. He only knew it was a ticket because printed on it was a picture of a steamer with a puffing funnel, stencilled passengers waving from the open decks. To read the destination he put his fingers to the word and sounded out each letter. ‘A-F-R-I-C-A … Af … Af-ri … Africa.’

In the time he had taken to read aloud his first ever word, flames had tangled themselves in the rafters of the roof, and the wooden cross was burning like a flaring mast. From the belt loop of the frock McCreedy pulled a large hat. He slapped the dirt from the wide brim and placed it upon his head. It was a perfect fit.

In the opening of an eye McCreedy and the reverend have gone, figments of history, of my parched mind. Nelson Babbage and the first page of his journal are my only concrete reality of what has occurred here. And even if I saw nothing more than a fevered dream, I feel the keeper of terrible secrets. Though these might be my own if I don’t make it back to you.

Or am I to suppose fate was a crash in a creek bed to bring me here, to this ruined church and charred journal? A vision in thirst that had me believe all I needed to do for a drink was ask McCreedy for a sip from his canteen?

I’ve been pressing pen to page so hard I have a dent in my finger. My senses are shutting down. Took five minutes to count to ten. Blotches have appeared on my vision, blurred spots like fingers in front of a photo.
The hallucination burned what little energy I had left. I have to put it down to dehydration, a mirage. What am I supposed to make of such a scene, I don’t know? Where are my shimmering lakes? Streams of snowmelt quenching my thirst? That I might die without a final kiss from you should have delivered a vision of desire, not the imagery of murder, a Victorian priest and his convict killer. Did I resurrect a ghost from the pages of the journal?

Again the sun is setting.

But of course it is. I write as though it’ll be my last. Though the truth is that when I woke in the afternoon, my face burned scarlet, my body drying out like a withered chilli, the evening cool was fantasy.

But I’m here. If I sleep now I doubt I’ll ever wake. So I shall take a ladder and lean it upon the stone walls of our cottage, steadying the base as you climb up and nail down the final slate. And when you step off the bottom rung into my arms, together we’ll look up and watch the indigo roof actually glow brighter as the sun goes down.

Although I’m so dehydrated I haven’t opened my mouth in fear of it sticking open, I have the moisture to shed a tear.

Can you read this? I’m writing with a piece of charcoal cut from one of the charred beams in the church. The pen finally ran out, and when it did I felt most alone since the crash.

Even if I ran out of charcoal I’d cut my finger and write in blood.

I’ve built a fire in the ruin. Not cold, but the flames warm the desolate landscape, the distant stars and a dead moon rising.

Beyond my vision there’s a city rush hour of movement, an insect metropolis scourged by the tongues of lizards and the teeth of rodents. And these predators are the hunted too, the smaller reptiles and mammals running from their own demons, each death a transfer of energy and verve, the heat of the sun passed from plant to blood and back to earth.

But the cycle of living is absent from this starlit scene. The whole universe has frozen. I’m no more than a figure in a painting, a brushstroke fixed in time.

So when I see motion, the bright white dot of a satellite tracing an orbit above the stratosphere, the solar panels angling the light of the moon to my lonely fire, it’s as beautiful as an angel gliding through heaven.

Before I’m rescued, and just in case I’m not, I want to tell you something. And it’s with this need I’m suddenly energised, maybe a final burst of living for this one last entry. Because suddenly the fear of being unfinished, incomplete before you, makes me realise if I do anything right now, it’s to tell you the reason I didn’t want to speak about my parents is because I’ve never known them. Until last year they were as good as dead. I knew only they gave me up the day I was born, passing me on to a home, then an old woman called Nana May who potted jam and ironed my socks and read fairy tales till I slept and dreamed of those castles in the sky. Two days after my tenth birthday she died. I’ve always thought of her wandering the woods of Sleeping Beauty, or the garden of the Selfish Giant, picking apples and filling her apron pocket.

She left me well mannered, attentive and polite. A boy who made his own bed and washed the dishes, a good son. But ten’s too old for a new start, a new family. I bounced from home to home, foster parents and dormitories, stark rooms where we ran wild, rooms that were locked at night so we’d still be there in the morning. And those clattering canteens the mornings of my childhood, everything I owned labelled with my name. Until sixth form, when I realised that university was my escape, filling in a grant form with the words ‘Not applicable’ in the box for family.

For three years I belonged. The other students, the rugby club, lecturers and friends, knew nothing of who I was, or was not. No false pity or tears. I thought I’d been born again, free of the past.

But then my parents returned, wanted in on my life now I was a graduate with a degree, a success. They tracked me down through the adoption agency. I arranged a meeting in a shopping centre, outside a fast-food restaurant, anonymous and sterile. From the mezzanine level I watched them wait and check their watches, unfold a piece of paper with directions. Like two lost tourists, these strangers that shared flesh and blood. I watched until my mother looked up to the balcony. We caught eyes. Did she recognise the boy she bore? But I left them standing there, apart from the world and, I hoped, feeling abandoned. By the end of that day I had a flight booked to Darwin.

So I flew to the other side of the planet, escaped. Or at least thought I had. Until you asked me to talk about my family. You wanted a history, and I gave you a blank page, not the story of failed adoption, foster care and neglect.

That first time we stood naked in the desert, the cloudless dusk blinking with stars, when we were silent, almost afraid of speaking, I was free again. Because I had a future, with you.

Now that’s in doubt. And only a dying man should have visions of murdered priests and burning chapels. So, if my rescue is late, can you do me a little favour and tell them I’m sorry. Sorry for them, myself, and you. Sorry that I kept you apart from who I am, and can only scratch the unsaid into a letter. Please tell them I would’ve given them
another chance to know me, to talk. And hopefully I’d have forgiven them, maybe understood why they gave me up.

I stopped there because I fainted, chip of charcoal in my hand and head on the page. There’s more ink in this letter than water in body. But that feels good. To know a part of my soul has escaped evaporation.

Perhaps I should stop writing and save energy? But then this is what’s keeping me alive, you.

In the east I can see pale blue, the burning day behind. How terrifying that the sun will rise. And that my leg has lost all feeling below the knee.

But on this page I’m whole. What a strange place to suddenly explain myself, to give voice to this body. At the bottom of the world in the middle of a desert, yet not alone. Because I have something to write with, a piece of paper.


Body burning.

What happens when I can’t write?
1 August 1835

The Josephine seemed to anchor and sail in the break of a wave, with only its glittering deposit of guns proof that she had even called.

Dismayed that he had been ignored during the negotiations – as the officers had directed their conversation via myself to the king – the rev. had not waited to be asked on-board, instead inviting himself, so that he may ‘purchase essentials in a manner more civilised’.

Presuming I too would be making my way on-board, I accompanied the rev. to the pinnace, only to find myself bidding him farewell. The next morning, when four of the crew were required to shoulder his newly purchased trunk up the hill to the mission I was curious as to what he had procured and duly enquired. ‘No more than what is necessary to carry out the work of the Lord,’ was his enigmatic reply.

While the men hefted his trunk, its contents clinked like the cart of a brewery along a cobbled lane.

3 August 1835

Two days the rev. has slept late and delivered ill-prepared sermons. Only when a messenger of King Tanoa shook him from his drunken dreams did he wake before noon today.

Together, seated before an angry king firing insults into the air like fat from a hot pan, we heard how the officers from the Josephine had hoodwinked his majesty – the guns worked, but the kegs of powder had been filled with pepper.

Either daringly or foolishly, the rev. offered that the Lord had punished King Tanoa for refusing His word, the Gospel truth. I translated as courteously as possible, understanding that denigration of the ruler of all Fiji was as good as a blaspheme against our Saviour. When he unravelled my over-polite syntax to discover he had just been criticised, he shooed us from the fort with the barrel of a musket, roaring we were lucky it was seasoning in the chamber and not gunpowder.

Shaking, sweating, calling the king a ‘traitor of God’, Rev. Thomas swore that those who challenge his authority ‘challenge the authority of the Lord Himself.’

I advised that we should quieten our preaching, for a king disdained is a foe possessing pots and pans large enough to contain our limbs. But the rev., his fear now transformed to anger, was a man with God on his side and not to be intimidated.

‘Compared to Christian stratagems,’ he said through gritted teeth, ‘the cunning of the devil is the mere subterfuge of a child.’

5 August 1835

Yesterday, an hour before dawn, the rev. hissed, ‘Nelson, Nelson,’ into my ear and woke me from sleep.

Did I believe that Jesus Christ died so that we may live? Was it by the grace of God that we even breathed? ‘Yes, Yes,’ I answered, before he enquired if I were a solider worthy of a mission for the Lord. ‘Of course,’ I replied. The Rev. then told me to dress and meet him outside.

He led me from the house to a vantage point so that he could point to a lone palm on a ridge several miles inland. In that orange glow the trunk and leaves seemed no more than a painted backdrop, but it was clear enough for the rev. to mark it ‘a tree that will bear no fruit, yet soon be abundant with a harvest of Jesus’.

I asked, ‘How?’ incredulous at his certainty.

He then slipped back into the mission and returned holding what looked like a coconut, only with a long black stalk dangled from its underside. ‘The captain of the Josephine drove a hard bargain, but the work of the Lord has no price.’
He asked if I knew what would happen if he lit the fuse, and I said I did. I knew that a powder blast this size
would burn the clothes off a man fifty yards away. ‘Or the boughs off a palm tree,’ added the grinning rev.
He then fished a handsome silver and gold timepiece from his waistcoat, carefully opened the back casing and set
the mechanism precisely to his own, before slipping it into my pocket. ‘At one minute to midday, not a second
before or after, you must light the fuse of this here charge and retire as though you had tugged on the tail of a Bengal
tiger.’
A simple instruction, I acknowledged, but where and why?
‘In the top of that lone palm, my dear Nelson, so that those who witness the blast will believe it a summoning of
God ordained by yours truly.’
I asked him if it were not a false miracle we were performing, and that to introduce heathens to Jesus by deception
was surely a gross sin.
‘Let us ask God by lighting the fuse.’ He then placed the bomb in my palm and with his fingers closed mine
around it.
It took me three hours to make the ridge. I had prepared the necessary sticks to twist into flame and, as instructed,
kept the smallest, clean-smoking fire tended until the time arrived for me to shin the trunk of the condemned palm.
With a smouldering twig in my teeth, I climbed to the thatch of leaves and wedged the bomb between clusters of
green coconuts. I checked the watch – 11.56 – and clung on till the minute hand nudged 11.59. I then put the twig to
the fuse. Sparks fizzed. I dropped to the ground and scrambled, fearing an early detonation would fell the tree upon
my head.
When the bomb blew, as loud as a crack of thunder, as bright as a flash of lightning, the top of the tree vanished,
nothing left but a charred and smoking trunk, smouldering like a frayed end of burning rope.
Far below, in a clearing wide enough to see all the way to the top of the mountain, the rev. had just clicked his
fingers. The men gathered around him had fallen to their knees, believing he had the power to make any of them
disappear in a puff of smoke.
Only it was not King Tanoa who had been courted with sorcery, but his younger brother.
When Naraqino saw the palm explode on the command of the rev., he too had knelt on the earth. At once the rev.
promised Naraqino the protection of Heaven and Earth if that when he rose he would accept that there was one true
God and pledge his soul to Jesus.
On my return to Rewa, hearing news of this allegiance with Naraqino, I warned the rev. that the king would see
this as treachery, thus endangering our lives to his jealous rage.
‘For that too I am prepared,’ smiled the rev., invigorated with the accolade of a miracle-maker. Then, even with
the sun still not set, he suggested we retire to the mission. We were escorted by two of Naraqino’s most trusted
warriors into our rooms, where four more already waited.
I have written these words with the two more men, both armed with clubs, watching over my person. I doubt I
shall sleep. I trust these men with my life no more than I would do a hungry guard dog.

6 August 1835

As we paddled across the mouth of the estuary from Rewa to Bau, the chapel burned. The sun had just risen in the
east, but all villagers, both sides of the river, watched this bloom of flames as they would the break of day. The rev.,
sitting at the right hand of Naraqino, perched upon the trunk of stolen muskets as though it were his throne, seemed
to read my thoughts.
‘Fear not, Nelson,’ he consoled. ‘Remember Jesus in Matthew: Every government divided against itself is brought
to ruin, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. One government for one God, and the leader of
that single house is he who has pledged himself to Jesus.’
I translated to Naraqino, and he smiled then reached across to pat the rev. on the back.
Before dawn, Naraqino himself had crept into the chapel. To light his way he had carried the lantern of the rev.,
removing the candle from the glass and touching it against the reed walls. While flames brought King Tanoa and his
men rushing from the fort, agents of Naraqino leaped from the bushes to steal away the chest of muskets.
With these thieves and vagabonds we are now allied.

7 August 1835

Believing that a quick dunking from the hand of the rev. would bring him eternal life and power on earth, Naraqino
was baptised in the Rewa River. Once his wives had dried his body, he immediately decreed that no other dweller of
Bau may ‘wash in the river of Jesus Christ’.

The rev., instead of righting a wrong – for all sinners may bathe in the blood of Jesus – said nothing but announce that Naraqino had shown his subjects the light, and those loyal to their leader should follow his example.

All residents of Bau were obliged to attend this sham of a ceremony, including the two dozen men gifted with a brand new musket. Loaded with the gunpowder procured by Rev. Thomas from the Josephine, at the command of Naraqino, the men fired into the sky above Rewa. The crackle and flare was for King Tanoa on the opposite shore, so he may know that Naraqino is now the keeper of guns, and God.

8 August 1835

Though the rev. seems content to dissolve the scriptures to suit the vices of Naraqino, he does hold more sway here than he did on the other side of the river. He has already declared that a heathen temple and chapel must not stand in the same village. Naraqino, ever ready to please the man who dissolved a palm tree in the click of a finger, has ordered that the temple be destroyed and a chapel erected in its place without delay.

He has also dispatched warriors into the hills and told them not to return unless with the body of the runaway high priest – dead or alive.

9 August 1835

The temple illuminated the village the entire night. When the timbers and wooden idols burned down from glowing crimson to cooling ash, the captured high priest and two of his disciples were tossed upon the embers to fan the flames.

Naraqino feasted on their flesh for his breakfast, and though the rev. declined when offered a seat at his table, for one horrifying moment I believed he considered in partaking.

While Naraqino and his guests cut into the body of the high priest, men with axes set about chopping down trees for the chapel.

10 August 1835

The new chapel shall be the tallest building in all Fiji, taller than the grand house of Naraqino, taller than the fort of King Tanoa. All the carpenters are busied with the labours of construction, and the toil of so many men committed to a house of God should be a vision to savour. Alas, when Naraqino – carried aloft to the site in his chair – sees any man tire, he is quick to threaten that if the chapel is short of building materials, ‘It will be the bones of the idle that replace them.’

11 August 1835

Last night the Rev. Thomas drank kava with Naraqino. Though only a liquid derived from a plant, it has opium-like qualities, and when imbibed in large amounts stupefies close to a total paralysis. Back on Lakemba, the rev. had declared it ‘a tool of subjugation brewed by the devil’. This morning his tack was that: ‘What grows from this good earth must have been sown by His divine hand for a reason.’

He had drunk through the night without sleeping. The whites of his eyes were lined with the tributaries of swollen blood vessels, as though a red river deep within his being had burst its banks.

14 August 1835

For two days now I have done little but pray. Sleeping with one eye open has left me in no state for little else but my translation duties. If not assisting the construction of the new house of God, I am recounting the misadventures of Naraqino into English for the rev. – either boasts of his murders, or fanciful tales more fiction than fact, including that he once killed a man with his stare alone, that the spirit being Kalou came to him in a dream and prophesised the rev. coming, and that he killed a shark by putting his hand down its throat and tearing out its heart.

Telling each fairy tale with a straight face I am an actor of the highest order. Though while I have some use I shall not complain. If I am busied Naraqino has less reason to make me the object of his idle violence.
15 August 1835

Before the skeleton joists of the unfinished chapel, the rev. preached officially for the first time since the baptism. Using Naraqino as the shining example of conversion, not one of the congregation failed to volunteer their soul to Jesus.

16 August 1835

Today the rev. and I formally moved into the mission compound, an enclosure consisting of the rapidly rising chapel, a large hut and stores, all surrounded by a bamboo fence, with the post tips cut to a sharpened point – in defence of attacks from those loyal to King Tanoa.

On moving in I wrongly presumed that I would be sharing the central hut with the rev., but what I mistook for the stores was in fact my accommodation.

17 August 1835

Attendances of the services burgeon. Each day the population of a nearby village is visited by a troop of Naraqino’s men and ‘encouraged’ to attend the morning worship.

It is unlikely that stone-throwers will spoil the rev.’s oration, as warriors are posted at the edge of the crowd during each sermon, ensuring against attack, as well as dissent from within the congregation.

19 August 1835

This morning, hanging by their heels from trees outside the grand house of Naraqino, were two men accused of spying for King Tanoa. Naraqino plans to roast and feast on the bodies this evening, eating them entire but for the heads, which he will send back in a canoe to the shores of Rewa, ‘so that the subjects of my heathen brother can see what power the mighty Christians possess!’

The rev., despite regretting the bloodshed with his words, seems more and more unconcerned with Naraqino’s bastardising of the Gospel.

21 August 1835

Again another schoolhouse has been constructed. Again, at the command of the rev., I shall instruct the men and he the women.

I look forward to returning to the classroom, so that once more I may be invigorated by the joy of reading, of tuning a soul to the music of words.

24 August 1835

Today the chapel was completed. A crooked spire of trunks twists towards the stars, and a fine pulpit of polished teak stands at the end of a stately hall, the floor inlaid with large flat stones hauled up from the beach. On top of the stones are mats braided from pandanu leaves, seats for the congregation. The only chair in the chapel is for Naraqino, with a space either side reserved for his concubines to keep him fanned with fresh air.

During the opening sermon, the rev. preaching love and humility as Naraqino perched on his chair above his subjects, grinning like a manic gargoyle, the thought crossed my mind that God had departed, leaving Fiji in the hands of the sinners and the wicked.

27 August 1835

The daily service and instruction of letters has assumed a routine calmness after the tumult of the preceding weeks. Once more I am thrilled to see my students read their first words. After only a morning of phonetics they were able to sound out the name of their own country.

Strange I did not write our country? Yes, I am Fijian, my skin, hair, eyes, arms, mouth and nose is Fijian. But my soul, that what cannot be seen or labelled, is beginning to feel like an impostor in its own body.
28 August 1835

As nervous as my pupils to have Naraqino present, I spent the entire morning instructing an apprehensive class how to write his name. Before students were permitted to leave the schoolhouse, Naraqino inspected each patch of dirt – smoothed earth for want of a slate – using the barrel of his musket to daily above the letters, while the quaking men below sounded out the name of their chief.

Naraqino did not write his own moniker, and neither did I ask, in fear of shaming him before his subjects. Maybe he realised his own deficiencies there and then, because he decreed from this day on that no chief should dirty his own hand by writing his name.

2 September 1835

More sermons and lessons. My translation duties diminish as the rev. advances his Fijian. Rather than wandering the village inviting trouble, I stay within the compound.

4 September 1835

About to put pen to page an hour ago, Naraqino and his cohorts paid me a visit. Ever fearful of something he does not understand, he flung my journal into the trees after failing to decipher what I had written. I explained that it contained no more than what I had experienced on any particular day, and by no means was it something to be used against his chiefdom of Bau. Lying through my teeth, I then told him that if anything it was a document to praise his character and intelligence. Still suspicious, he then asked who was my ruler.

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘It is you, Chief Naraqino of Bau.’

He smiled at my answer, but not a gleam of joy, more the razored glint of a shark about to bite. ‘Fool!’ he roared. ‘My brother is your King!’ He kicked my ink pot across the pandanu mats, splashing the walls of the hut blue, like royal blood. ‘Next time you write, you write about me!’

These very words I write are forbidden. I have been ordered to commit Naraqino’s tales of heroism and bravery to paper, so that when one day all of Fiji may hear the ‘speaking book’ they will know who should have been the ‘real ruler of this kingdom, even before the shores of Rewa washed red with blood’.

5 September 1835

So now I write this journal farther up the hill, in a thicket of brushwood beyond the schoolhouse where none but the insects may see me.

I have said more prayers to Jesus since arriving in Bau than on the entire voyage from England to New Holland. I pray once more that the Lord hears my call and brings His love to where there is none.

10 September 1835

Again I have had to retire to the cover of the bush to write my journal. Naraqino has been firing muskets at parrots, and I do not wish to be a target for his practice.

Below, beyond the drooping palms leaves, I can hear women giggling in the schoolhouse. The rev. still prefers a curriculum devised solely by him, and I am curious to hear what and how he teaches. I have also noticed that either the men learn English quicker than women, or, Lord forgive my pride, that I am a better instructor.

I will creep to the schoolhouse and observe.

What I have just seen answers all my questions – why the schoolhouse has always been so far removed from the village, and why the rev. does not divulge the contents of his instruction.

When I peeked over the window frame the women were engaged in copying the alphabet from the blackboard, all in utter silence before their patches of smoothed dirt on the floor.

Until two of the women began chatting, and the Rev. barked, ‘Silence!’ from the small study at the rear, I knew not where he was. Still below the line of the window I crawled on, stopping only when I heard the rev. mumbling through the Lord’s Prayer: ‘... hallowed be thy name.’ I dared not lift my head for being discovered, so adjusted my gaze until I could find a gap between the timbers to spy.

And there he was, yes, reciting the Lord’s prayer, reciting the Lord’s prayer with his trousers heaped around his
ankles, a young woman on her knees before him, on her knees as though in worship, so close she could only listen
and not speak for her mouth was full of the rev. and his Christian teachings.

11 September 1835

I have not slept. Again I have read Matthew 19:10–12 and tried once more to understand something about desire and
faith, that the rev. was not disguising himself as some demigod to fulfil his depravities. I have avoided him the entire
day and would prefer the sun to set without my eyes resting upon his person.

12 September 1835

If the Lord God is here I pray that He show Himself, for the sins of Rev. Thomas now pale against the orgy of
violence that just took place.

The river is the border between the quarrelling brothers, and villagers that pass from one parish to the other are
doomed. Of course, all know this, and unless on-board a war canoe with a legion of warriors, would not attempt to
cross. But this morning, high tide lifted several Rewans from the reef. The current flowed too fierce to swim against,
and all the unfortunates could do was to beat the sea to keep from drowning. Meanwhile the Bau shore thronged
with a cruel audience, laughing and shrieking, knowing that the Rewans would either drown or wash upon their
sands. Even when sharks threatened to cut the ghastly entertainment short, Naraqino launched a canoe of men with
spears, driving them off so that his dinner could not be poached.

Naraqino immediately snatched the women for wives, while warriors trussed and bound the men. Teenage sons of
the principal elders prepared their bows and spears, for one of the prisoners was to be live sport, running prey, so
that the boys could hone their skills of murder. The petrified man was thus untied and released into the bush, chased
by a mob of boys hungry for death. They brought back his body in parts, limbs dangled from their hands and teeth
like faithful hunting dogs.

Naraqino started a fire beneath the feet of the remaining men. They kicked at the flames licking their toes. When
Naraqino stepped forward and chopped off the arm of a man I had seen swear his soul to Jesus Christ in the chapel
at Rewa, God fled.

And then I ran. I ran before the arm was cooked enough for the guests of Naraqino to take a bite. For sitting at the
grand table with the rest of the diners, merrily toasting the charred flesh with a bowl of kava, was the beaming Rev.
Thomas.

14 September 1835

For two nights I have slept away from the Bau, curled beneath the trees and the stars, seeking answers to why God
must allow such murder and cruelty.

After the slaughter of the Rewans, they who had done nothing but fish the reef for their families, I grabbed my
satchel and stormed away from the village, from the chapel, Naraqino and the Rev. Thomas. I took flight into the
bush, deeper and deeper, beyond the farms of kava and plantations of taro, to the paths where none walk, until I was
utterly alone.

For one day and night I did not stop to rest, eat or sleep. My legs walked as if driven by their own volition. I was
neither thirsty nor hungry. Then, and I do not know why, I shed my clothes, left them shrivelled upon the earth, like
skin, like a snake had sloughed its scales. I was naked, liberated to feel the breeze upon my flesh, unadorned with
the trees and the birds. Again I was a newborn, no space between the glory of creation and myself. I had left behind
the trivia of civilisation, both Fijian and English, to inhabit once more the womb of nature. I followed the path to a
small stream, wading through the shallows until I came across a bend that had slowed the current to a standstill. In
this limpid pool I floated beneath an array of sun-shot leaves, no less beautiful than a stained-glass window or
cathedral roof. Above parrots squawked and flashed their wings. Coconuts thudded to the earth, a rhythm worked
from the sun and the rain, not the hands of man.

In that pool, my thoughts came as clear as the water flowed. I knew there and then the ways of one kingdom are
no truer than the other. If Fiji had chanced upon guns, books, and God, it would be the white man fetching my shoes
and sweeping the floor, bound and chained in a ship of slaves. With pen, page, and gunpowder, God and the white
man have sailed the seven seas as righteous pirates, armed with disease and doctrine, a cannonball and bible.

Before I rose from the water, I dug my hand into the stream bed and scooped a lump of clay on to my palm. I
realised it is I alone who is responsible for its fashioning.
God is not dead, because God never lived.

15 September 1835
This morning a troop of Naraqino’s men passed within yards of where I lay sleeping in the brushwood. Two were armed with muskets, and three others with bows, clubs and an axe. I watched them track my steps into the stream, following my prints in the soft clay until the solid rock.

Before they picked up the trail again, I fled. But if they are good they will have already found my prints, and with each word I put down in this journal they will be a footstep closer to their prey.

16 September 1835
Dawn. I can still see the thread of smoke rising from the embers of their smouldering fire. They have gained on me. I should have ambushed them last night, streaked into their camp wild and raging, just my bare fists flurrying.

If Naraqino has threatened them with his oven, they will not give up the chase until I am dead.

17 September 1835
Because they cannot read, I live. I led them higher into the hills, across streams and rivers, and then down into another valley, following a trail into a steep gorge until it narrowed into a path no wider than the shoulders of a stout man. Where the walls of rock were shaped well enough to be griped, I climbed, hand over foot to the plateau above.

At the top I set about gathering the largest, heaviest rocks I could move, arranging them at intervals along the ledge so that they may be toppled over with the slightest nudge.

Then I waited, listening. Only when I heard footsteps splashing in the rainwater pools did I glance over the ledge, long enough to know which rock to drop first and when. Then I shoved over the boulder. No clack of rock on rock, only a scream and thud of breaking bone. It had staved in the skull of the lead man. In quick succession I heaved over two more boulders, and from the clatter below knew that both had missed their targets. The moment I put my head over the ledge a musket flashed, and the ball flew past my head so close that it singed a line through my hair. I ducked again when two arrows sailed up from the gorge bottom, loosed off so that they might fall down from a height and stick in my back. I watched them rise, turn, and descend, bouncing off the stone yards from where I lay. Two more shot into the sky, but this time the wind caught the flights and scattered them into a stand of palms. I crawled to the other boulders and again leaned over the ledge. The man with the musket had spilled his gunpowder, and grasped at the sprinkled charge.

The nearest archer, despite seeing me release the rock, had time only to raise his hand in defence. The weight of the boulder shattered his arm open at the elbow. He screamed. I swayed back from two more singing arrows and roared, ‘Surrender and I’ll spare you.’

I threw down two more rocks. None hit, but the man with the shattered arm screamed for me to stop. The warrior holding the empty musket struck the injured man. ‘We either die here or on Naraqino’s fire,’ he warned. ‘You heard him! Bring home his book or I’ll cut out your hearts!’

The book. They wanted the journal. They wanted the journal because the Rev. Thomas knew his sins had been recorded. Without the journal, history would be left in his hands, the fiction of how Fiji had surrendered to the good Lord.

‘No more blood,’ I shouted. ‘No more blood of Fiji for England.’

I moved in sight of the archers. ‘If you want the book, take it.’ They had their bows raised and taut with arrows. I reached into my satchel and felt around the back of the journal. I pulled out the bible and waved it so that they might see. Their leader, the man with the musket, hissed into the ears of the others, then called for me to throw it down.

I let the bible go. It fell through the air like a dying bird, the pages splayed and fluttering. When it hit the rocks below, the spine split. The archer quickly picked it up, as though it might suddenly take wing and flap away. None of these men had attended a reading class. None of them knew the difference between a printed and handwritten word. They fussed through the pages. The man with the gashed and broken arm shrieked, ‘This is it!’ He looked up and demanded I let them go. But again the man with the musket cursed. ‘And why would Naraqino think him killed without a head?’ Once more the archers raised their bows.

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘You have a head.’

I needed explain no more. The man with the musket switched it for a club. He stood on the neck of the man I had
killed with the rock and set about disfiguring his face. Then he stopped, stood back from his bloody work and swapped the club for an axe. The blade rose and fell without ceremony. In one blow he had cleaved off the head, executed a man already dead. He put down the axe and looked up. ‘Your shirt, take it off.’

I unbuttoned the cotton skin and dropped it over the ledge. He snatched the shirt from the air before it hit the bottom and opened it out as though checking the size. I thought he would either tear it in two or try it on, but he draped it over the head and wrapped and bundled it like a breadfruit to carry home to his wife. Next he looked up to where I stood, a look beyond my body as merely prey, and commanded in a low and steady growl, ‘And never come back.’

Then he swung the head over his shoulder and turned. The man with the broken elbow tucked the bible beneath his good arm and together they walked away. All of them trod in the blood that seeped through the shirt and dripped on to the rocks.

18 September 1835

Three days now I have trekked deeper into the interior. Here the grand Rewa River is no more than a brook hopping over stones. Clouds slide down from the mountains, tangle in the leaves and stream across the rocks like liquid ether. While walking these whispering trickles I often stop and run my palm over the velveteen moss, peeling away handfuls to wipe the sweat and dirt from my brow. I have eaten only the fruit that has freshly fallen, for my appetite, despite this hike further and further into the hills, has disappeared.

Perhaps I am not hungry because my body has left me. By now the men will have returned to Rewa and presented my death to Naraqino and the Rev. Thomas. Will the men plead ignorance when they hand over the bible as my journal?

19 September 1835

So far I have roamed avoiding villages, but today I wanted company, to hear the voices of others. When I heard men and women singing while they bathed in the stream beyond the path, instead of creeping away I went closer. This tiny village, no more than a collection of huts clinging to a steep embankment, rises from a stream between terraces of vegetables to the plateau above. All day I have watched the men, women and children cook, clean, fish, play, sing and laugh. The dialect here is so alien I barely understood a word. They are completely without iron, guns or clothes, any evidence of foreign lands. I imagine the white man is still no more than a whispered myth, a fairy tale to tell their children.

Never have I seen a people so content.

20 September 1835

In the glow of the coming dawn I write. Before the sun rises I must bury all of my possessions where they might not be found: a pair of heavy cotton trousers, socks, shoes, a leather satchel, a dictionary, my handkerchief, the quill and the blade for cutting its nib, a pot of ink, and this journal. I will lay it beneath the earth as though I were burying a body, a soul only to be resurrected if the pain of return meant freedom from the missionaries for my beloved Fiji.

Then I will walk into the village quite naked, no clothes upon my back or words upon my tongue, nothing remaining of Nelson Babbage, neither name nor language. I forsook my family, the bosom of my mother and the pride of my father, for a belief in God and England. And I cannot say this has made me into something I am not, because I am. But with this knowledge I am liberated, a lump of clay which can sculpt itself, Naqarase Baba, free to laugh, dream, sing, and love.
He saw a woman in blue, her outline blurred, as though he was looking at her underwater. Then he surfaced. She was a nurse bent at the foot of his bed.

‘You’re a very lucky boy.’

Jimmy stared and squinted. His head was bandaged. He looked at the equipment, computer screens and a drip, the nurse.

‘Am I in hospital or prison?’

‘Hospital, of course.’ She pulled up the bed sheet and tucked it under the mattress.

‘Is me brother here?’

‘Your brother? We don’t even know who you are, let alone your brother.’

Jimmy tried to sit up.

‘No, no,’ she said. ‘You need to stay put and rest.’ She placed her hands on his shoulders and ushered him gently back down.

Shapes of people passed outside the frosted glass.

‘It must have been this dream.’

‘What kind of dream?’ She checked his monitor next to the bed.

‘But it was me,’ said Jimmy. ‘I was looking at myself.’

‘But I was older, and it felt like night-time because there was no sun. But, but everything was bright as day.’

‘What about your brother?’ She stopped what she was doing and stood to listen.

‘Well, there was suddenly loads of us just walking on this marble floor, and I looked down and saw Gary was with me, but like when he was just a kid. We walked off this marble into this desert with all these other people. Then Gary and me started digging with our hands. Gary moved away the sand.’

He stopped and looked to the ceiling. He wanted to replay the concussion, to make sure of what he had seen, and felt.

‘He found this piece of light. It was like we were digging for light.’

She put her hand on his. ‘Dreams can be very strange sometimes. Now you need rest and have the doctor check you over.’

‘But that’s not it,’ he said. ‘Gary carried on moving the sand and found an arm, and a leg, and then the body. All made of light. When I moved the sand from the face it was mum.’

The nurse still held his hand. ‘Where’s your mother now?’

Jimmy looked at her then out of the window. Cotton-wool clouds blown down the wind. Now the nurse had both her hands on his. A policeman appeared gravely at the door like a messenger of doom. The nurse shook her head and he disappeared.

Later they would come into his room with plastic smiles and a false patience, trying to coax from him a name and address. He watched them turn their hats in their hands and said nothing.

That evening, clothed in a gown of hospital green, he limped from the bed and out into the tube-lit corridor. He walked with his head down like a novice monk, floating past a policeman at the vending machine. He stood and waited for the lift but when the doors slid open a huge and firm hand gripped him on the shoulder and asked where did he think he was going dressed like that?

After three days they drove him from the hospital. Two officers sat quietly in the front. Sealed in a plastic bag in the glovebox was his knife. His head was still heavily bandaged and he sat upright and regal like some turbanned prince. It was the same road he had journeyed only days before. He recognised nothing. Reeds flowed bright green in a sun-clear stream. Frost streaked the furrows of ploughed fields.

Then the weather changed, quickly, as it had been doing all day. From dark thunderheads that billowed as high as mountains, to shoals of scattered nimbus harried across the blue sky behind. When the car finally turned from the motorway the world loomed as black as judgement day. He was going home. The only gap of cloud that the sun
shone through looked like an entrance to heaven.
MOTHER OF BILLY K MISSING

Over a year and a half since the vanishing of singer Billy K, police last night announced that his mother, Marina Fulton, has also been registered as a missing person. Frank Courtney, her former husband, and stepfather to Billy K, relayed the concerns to police after returning home to collect his belongings after the finalisation of their divorce.

Only a few personal items of Miss Fulton are missing, appearing that she planned to leave. Though police are treating the sudden absence as suspicious, officers have no leads of her whereabouts to pursue. Mr Courtney, last month served a restraining order by Miss Fulton, has been questioned and released without charge.

With the disappearance of Miss Fulton goes the last physical sighting of Billy K. Woken at 2.30 a.m. on the morning of 8 May 2005, by the sound of an intruder forcing her rear gate, Miss Fulton had dressed and gone outside to investigate. But the intruder had fled, leaving only wet barefoot prints on the paving stones, and a handwritten note simply saying, I know you are sorry – confirmed by police graphologists as the penmanship of Billy K.

Much speculation was made of such a gesture after years of no contact with his family. Criminologist on the case, Anna Monroe, noted that many suicides are preceded by a closure, or last farewell. An outcome that police have seriously considered.

Asked about the importance of this last sighting, Inspector James Dent had replied, ‘What does make the sighting worthy of note is the corroboration of Miss Fulton’s statement and the forensic evidence recovered from the vehicle.’

From the discovery of dead skin cells on the accelerator, clutch, and brake pedal of the Lotus, Dent had contended that the last time Billy K drove the car he was barefoot. An observation also recorded by his mother from the evaporating wet trail on the paving stones. Unfortunately, heavy rains and maintenance of the back lawn had hampered attempts to cast a footprint, but detectives had assumed it unlikely that Miss Fulton could have invented such a corroborating detail if it were not fact.

On the negative side of this revelation was the question of how far a man without shoes was, if at all, planning to journey?

Though lead detective on the Billy K case, James Dent, was not available for questioning, police insist they are vigorously pursuing all avenues in the hunt for the missing mother and son.
Epilogue

Jim and Gemma Dent sit down on a picnic blanket. Together they unpack sandwiches and crisps, bottles of fizzy drinks. The car is parked out of view in the hedged lane. And because there is nothing else in the grassy field, not even a cow or grazing sheep, it is as though they have arrived by magic carpet.

Nestled between the rolling hills, a glittering stream and trees tinged with the first green of spring, they can see a large stone house. It is tangled with ivy and an overgrown garden. From the top of the field, with a powerful pair of binoculars, it is possible to make out the faces of the owners.

‘What can you see?’
‘Just clouds, Daddy. Lots and lots of clouds.’
‘Here, I need to focus for you.’
‘Let me do it.’ She tugs on the binoculars.

‘Gemma! Let me put the house in focus for you.’ She lets him take them. He levels the binoculars to his eyes and adjusts the wheel with his index finger. From nearly a mile away the cottage sharpens into view. He can see a woman relaxing on a wooden bench, holding a cup of tea and reading a magazine. The lenses are not that powerful to make out the title, but it does not matter. It is her, Marina Fulton, tracked down from a letter to her sister, no address but a postmark. And Jim Dent, the pardoned detective, can also see a man sitting on the steps of the back door. A man with a guitar but no shoes.

‘Now try.’ He passes back the binoculars, once again holds them to his daughter’s eyes.

‘I can do it.’ She pushes away his hand.
‘Can you see the house this time?’
‘I can see the trees.’
‘Down a bit, slowly.’
‘I can see the chimney!’
‘Down a bit more.’
‘And a lady, reading.’
‘Can you see the man?’
‘Not in the garden.’
‘Are you sure? Can I see?’
‘No. It’s my turn!’
‘Well, there should be a man.’
‘There he is! I can see him. He’s sitting on the back step smoking a cigarette.’
‘Well done, sweetie.’
‘He’s looking at the clouds.’
‘Can I have a look now?’
‘Oh!’
‘You can look again in a moment.’ He takes the binoculars from his daughter and focuses.

‘I want to look again, Daddy.’ Gemma climbs over her father, pulls at the binoculars.

‘Wait, Gemma!’

She lets out a little scream. ‘My turn!’ She gets hold of the dangling strap and yanks the binoculars from his hands.

‘Gemma!’
‘I want to look!’
‘Give them here!’

She throws them into the box of sandwiches. She is about to cry. ‘I want mummy. You’re angry.’
‘I’m not angry, sweetie. I just need to look through the binoculars right now.’
‘Mummy said you get angry when you have beer.’
‘Did she now?’

Gemma stands and stamps her feet. ‘And you had beer!’ She is screaming.

Jim is afraid that even at this distance the mother and son might hear. He picks up the opened can. ‘What does
that say?’ He points at the label.
‘Beer!’
‘Good girl. And what does this word say?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Sound it out. G. I. N.’
‘Gin … ginger.’
‘Ginger beer.’
‘It’s still beer.’
‘Not the kind that makes me angry.’
‘I want Mummy.’
‘Come here, sweetie. Come on. Give me a cuddle.’
She thinks about this for a moment, a two-second protest. Then she rushes into his arms. ‘Sorry, Daddy.’
‘That’s OK, sweetie. You’ll see Mummy in a few hours.’
She pulls back to look her father in the eye, the soul-deep gaze of a child, piercing the facade of adult, police officer. ‘Daddy?’
‘Yes.’
‘Is Anna my new mummy?’
‘Mummy is your mummy. For ever and ever. Anna is just Daddy’s new girlfriend.’
‘I don’t want a new mummy. Or daddy.’
‘I’m glad to hear it. Now, you remember last month, when Mummy said I had to go away, because I was looking for somebody?’
‘Like hide and seek.’
‘Kind of. Well, the man you saw on the step, he was the one hiding.’
‘So you won! You found him.’
‘But he never even hid.’
‘He cheated!’
‘I don’t think he really played. He just left the game.’
‘That’s silly. He’s a silly billy.’
Jim laughs. He does not tell his daughter that was his name. That he faked his own death to hide from who he had become, shed his skin like a chrysalis after reading the journal of Naqarase Baba, to return to his mother. Because he could. Because his mother was alive and kicking, not like Naqarase’s, a whole country, a religion.
Or like Cal’s, a stranger of his own blood waiting in a shopping centre.
Or like Jim’s, a plot in a cemetery.
He thinks about what they all share. Naqarase, Cal, Billy K and himself. Abandoned. He looks again at his daughter, and considers the fate of dying alone in the outback, stabbed in a guest house on a foreign shore, vanishing from one life to start over again. Then he leans over and kisses his daughter. He knows he is lucky, and tells Gemma that he loves her.
‘I know you do, Daddy.’
‘That’s beautiful. How do you know, sweetie?’
‘Because you came all the way back from the other side of the world to see me. Did you fly on an aeroplane?’
He tells her he did.
He does not tell her that he had thoughts about running from his own life, his failures. And what a fool he would have been if he had. Running from a woman who loves him. His beautiful daughter.
He does not tell her that officers cornered Ricky Wise in a restaurant at Heathrow, booked on a flight to the Cayman Islands with a suitcase filled with dollars and offshore bank accounts.
Or that a dog walker found Chief Superintendent Roberts in a New Forest car park, sitting up straight in his immaculate uniform, a hosepipe running from the exhaust through the passenger window.
‘Daddy, can we go and say hello?’
‘They want to be alone.’
‘Maybe they have cake?’
‘Maybe they want to eat it themselves. Anyway, we have some chocolate biscuits. Finish your sandwich first.’
She lifts the top from the lunch box, and then lifts the tops from the sandwiches. She discards a ham and tomato, then finds a cheese and pickle. Jim studies her eating, the concentration of her bites avoiding the crust. He can see himself in her, yes, in her teeth and hair. And in her features he can see where he came from, his own mother.
Gemma drops the second crust on to the plate. ‘Can I look again, Daddy? Please.’
‘Come here.’
He picks her up and turns her around. He gives her the binoculars and sits behind her, angling the lenses on to the house.

‘The lady’s gone!’
‘That’s his mummy. Is he still outside?’
‘There he is! On the step again!’
‘What’s he doing?’
‘He’s playing the guitar!’
‘Can you hear?’
‘Not from this far! Can we go closer, please.’
‘I don’t think so.’

Above the house and field, the trickling brook and swaying trees, puffs of cloud sail on the breeze.

‘Daddy.’
‘Yes.’
‘He’s singing now.’
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Bibliography

I am indebted to the following sources as inspiration:


  The Captain James Cook quote is directly from his logbook, but my attention to this entry was first piqued reading: Horowitz, T. (2002). *Into the Blue: Boldly Going Where Captain Cook Has Gone Before*. London: Bloomsbury.
SHOW ME THE SKY

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