Our Own Little Kakadu

Janette Turner Hospital

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Abstract
There must be, by Maggie’s reckoning, upwards of fifty chooks running loose, but who would know? When she steps carefully between pineapple rows to test the fruit cones, she puts her foot on at least a dozen eggs. First comes the soft crunch, then the streaky corona-squirt of ochre and snot, then the ooze between her toes. The soles of her feet squelch against her sandals, she is practically skating on slick. Hah, she thinks. Walking on water, tiptoeing on eggshells, what’s new?

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There must be, by Maggie’s reckoning, upwards of fifty chooks running loose, but who would know? When she steps carefully between pineapple rows to test the fruit cones, she puts her foot on at least a dozen eggs. First comes the soft crunch, then the streaky corona-squirt of ochre and snot, then the ooze between her toes. The soles of her feet squelch against her sandals, she is practically skating on slick. Hah, she thinks. Walking on water, tiptoeing on eggshells, what’s new?

‘He took an axe to the chook house months ago,’ her mother said on the drive from the airport. At the stop light, her mother had lifted both hands from the wheel, palms up, and raised them toward the roof of the car, beseeching someone, something, to bear witness.

‘Juggernaut by name,’ Maggie said.

‘You can say that again. I never know what it’s going to be next. I’m terrified he’ll decide mowing’s forbidden. We’ve had two pythons on the verandah already, and God knows what’s living out there in the bus with him.’

‘Mum, the light’s green.’

‘What? Oh.’ The car leaped forward, stalled, rallied. ‘You don’t know what it’s been like, Maggie. Chooks roosting in the laundry, in the bananas, in the vegetables, in the—’

‘Mum, mind the—! Would you like me to drive?’

‘I had a smashed egg in my hair last week. They’re laying on the rafters in all the sheds, you never know what’s going to fall on you. Not to mention chicks hatching wherever you happen—’

‘Mum, pull over. You’re upset. Let me drive.’

‘I’m not upset, I’m scared. He won’t talk to me, he won’t talk to your brother, he’s started drinking again, he does say things to his mates at the pub when he’s pissed, and there’s talk, there’s plenty of talk, but nobody
can make sense of it. Nobody knows what happened. That’s why you had to come back, I’m counting on you.’

‘Oh yes,’ Maggie said drily. ‘We’re famous for getting on famously, me and Jug.’

‘That’s the point. You’ll strike sparks. If he gets mad enough, he might blurt out some clue.’

‘Doesn’t Ben strike enough sparks?’

‘It’s weird. They’re totally silent with each other. Anyway I can’t get your brother near the place now, I have to go to him and Liz. And this is a taboo subject with them. Look, I wouldn’t have dragged you back from Melbourne for nothing.’

‘I think I was looking for an excuse to come back anyway.’

‘Yeah? The girl who couldn’t wait to get out, couldn’t wait to shake the dust—’

‘Yeah, well.’

‘Melbourne people are so up themselves, I did warn you.’

‘Yeah.’ Maggie laughed. ‘Made a bet with myself you’d say “I told you so” before we got home.’

‘And wasn’t I right? Didn’t they give you the pip?’

‘Yeah. Well, you know, there’s all kinds. I’ve got some good friends. It’s just... I don’t know... You can’t even talk about Darwin down there. You might as well announce you’ve come from Mars.’

‘They give me the pip.’

‘Whew, I’d forgotten how sticky—’ Maggie eased her damp shirt away from her skin and leaned out the window. She wouldn’t forgive her body if it had switched allegiance, adjusted to Melbourne chill, lost the knack for wet heat.

And then they passed under the familiar tangle of mango, frangipani, bougainvillia, and she cried, ‘Hey! You can’t see the house at all.’

‘I told you. Pruning’s not allowed, no cutting back, nothing. What we’ve got here is five acres of new-growth jungle with room to walk sideways round the house. Our own little Kakadu.’

Between the half acre of pineapple rows and the house, Maggie can see flashes of yellow, bits and pieces of the bus. It is almost entirely covered by passionfruit vine, though at the four points where its axles rest in the earth, pawpaw trees rise in thick spiky clumps. He must dump the seeds there, Maggie thinks; it’s some new geometric ritual, the compass points of whatever this latest obsession is. He could live on pawpaw and passionfruit without leaving his rusty cocoon, she thinks. He could just reach out through the windows and pick. The light inside must be green now, like under water. He’d love that, Jug would, odd fish in his tank (shark in angelfish clothing? dolphin in sharkskin?), jugging it down, jug jug, tanking up in his tank, probably having a whale of a time, driving them all round the bend. As usual.
She sees now what was impossible about Melbourne. It was having to explain this, him, Darwin, all of it, any of it; trying to explain it without having to endure *how quaint, how awful, how bizarre, how exotic, how horrible,* how—. She couldn’t bear to expose her perfectly ordinary strangeness, her loony family’s ordinary Darwin madness, to people who knew so very little. *Everyone’s a bit troppo up there, aren’t they?* they would laugh, nudge, nudge. *The Top End’s a bit over the top, wouldn’t you say?* I could scratch you, she would think, and you wouldn’t be one sweat layer thick. But she’d learned to do it herself, play the clown, betray a memory here, the self there, one drink, two, it was easy, pile the accent on thick, get the laughs. Besides, only two years earlier, let’s admit it, she’d been frantic to flee, *frantic,* indenitely keen to put as much distance as possible between herself and her own little haywired Top End bubble. *I can’t breathe* here, she’d said.

She breathes the damp air, sluggish with pineapple musk, frangipani, white gingerflower. I’ll drown here, she thinks. I’ll never get away. I’m just part of this blissed-out vegetable world, slumping into the Arafura Sea. **We’re all drugged. We’re all troppo.**

*Hallelujah!* as Jug would have said.

She steps on another egg.

The whole bloody garden must be protein-enriched, she thinks. It seems to be doing wonders for the pineapples. Almost every plant has a plumed cone at some stage of ripening, and when she looks down the throats of not-yet-ruited clumps, she sees the telltale blush of things underway. How sexually blatant plants are, she marvels. She twists four ripe fruits at some stage of ripening, and when she looks down the throats of et-fruited clumps, she sees the telltale blush of things underway. She goes, scratching her legs on the pineapple swords, she makes for the bus.

‘Jug?’ she calls tentatively from the door.

It was a school bus once, long ago put out to pasture, deregistered, bought at auction, on whim, for a song. Maggie thinks the most telling census question in Darwin might be this: how many deregistered, de-wheeled vehicles are slowly listing into your five-acre lot? The Darwin average, she suspects, would be three. Beyond the pineapples, beyond the bananas, the mangos, the vast overgrown lawn, the avocados, somewhere down among the compost heaps, there are, she surmises, four earlier family cars now all but invisible, bleeding rust into jasmine that has run amok.

In Jug’s bus, all the seats have been removed. There’s a galley kitchen in the driver’s niche, a bunk where the back seat used to be, a chemical lav in one corner, a hinged lift-up table along the side, a couple of armchairs spilling stuffing. Everywhere there are cobwebs with watchful spiders as large as poached eggs at their hubs. Chickens, eggs, ants: the floor seems busy. A harmless carpet snake, thick as a forearm, has coiled itself neatly into a chair.
‘Jug?’ There’s no answer so she climbs in. She sees him lying on his back on the bunk at the rear of the bus, arms folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling. He is wearing khaki boxer shorts and a singlet, nothing else, and the bus is ripe with the smell of unwashed male. Light comes through the passionfruit leaves, amber green. ‘Four pineapples,’ she says brightly. ‘Real beauties.’ She puts them into the miniature stainless steel sink. ‘Mum says you’ve given up on roads and bridges and gone into vegies and fruit. The market man, the green-fingered genius, she says.’

_Speak, you stubborn old bastard_, she wills him. She can feel the usual dual pull of rage and protectiveness. For a big blustering man, he looks unexpectedly frail, and she is alarmed by the sight of his skinny legs and bare feet. His face and shoulders and arms are like old leather, but the legs and feet — trousered and shod throughout his respectable years as a civil engineer — are as pale as the skin of young children. She feels embarrassed to see her father this way. It’s like seeing some soft creature with its shell peeled off. Improper. She lifts the lid off his icebox and takes out two cans of beer, watching him. She peels the tab off one can. It makes a slight hiss, and brackish foam bubbles out and spills over her hand. She sees his eyes swivel in her direction and she walks down the bus. ‘Mum tell you I was coming home?’

‘Nope. But I reckoned you would, sooner or later.’ He accepts a beer and swings himself upright. ‘Told you I was bonkers, did she?’

Maggie sits cross-legged on the floor in front of him. ‘Didn’t need Mum to tell me that,’ she says, cuffing him on the leg. Tactful, she makes no comment about the beer, which he had so dramatically renounced ten years ago. Maggie had been fifteen at the time, her brother Ben, eighteen. ‘The Lord has delivered me,’ Jug told them. ‘I’ve been born again, pure as the driven snow.’

‘Not much call for snow round here,’ Ben said, asking for it. But there had been no oath, no swipe at Ben, no bash across the side of his son’s head, so that they had all marvelled and had known something eerie had occurred. Only the rigging in his neck, corded tight, told them the old Jug was still down there somewhere, inside the new one.

‘It’s funny,’ Jug says meditatively now, looking around the bus. ‘Well, not bloody funny at all. Something plays bad jokes on us, eh? I lived in the back of a truck when I first ran away to Darwin, fourteen years old. Jeez, jeez, jeez, I hate the way stuff comes back. Like bloody spiders crawling into your head.’

He never speaks of his childhood unless he’s drunk, and it’s a bad sign when he does. They know almost nothing about it. He began brand new on his wedding day, no baggage, no past, except for the bits that sometimes leaked out of beer-soaked cracks, or showed up, mangled, in rage. He was a famously hot-tempered boss on the road gangs, a short-fused husband and father, a weekend roisterer and larrikin of note.
And then the Lord spoke to him from a Gospel Hall pulpit. It was a steamy Sunday night, and Jug, guzzling from a large Darwin stubby of tarblack bitter, was weaving by the chapel’s open door on the esplanade when the Lord shouted at the top of His almighty lungs: ‘Jug Wilkins, it is required of you this night to be a juggernaut for God.’ Jug broke his teeth on the neck of the bottle in shock, and cut his lip, a potent sign. Blood streaming from his mouth, unnerved but belligerent, he staggered into the chapel and walked down its central aisle. ‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ he demanded, teetering on his feet. ‘I am the Lord your God, Jug Wilkins.’ God fixed him with His pulpit eye, and Jug just stood there, confused – like a kangaroo in truck lights, people said later, swaying at the lip of some steeply pitched gulley. ‘Decide!’ God roared. And Jug did. He jumped. He crossed over. He became an enforcer for the Lord, a role that not infrequently brought him into collision with his rebel daughter and resisting son. Bible in hand – his surveyor’s chart – he would chapter and verse them, laying down markers, calling the shots, mapping everyone’s road to Eternity.

‘Watch out,’ he tells Maggie now, fretfully. ‘I’m infectious. I got these old dreams, bad dreams, coming back.’ He bats vaguely at the air and she sees mosquito swarms of nightmares buzzing him, giving him no quarter. ‘Western Queensland somewhere,’ he says, ducking. ‘Must’ve been. Between Charleville and the Territory border, I reckon. I’d just nicked off, me old man didn’t believe I’d ever do it. I hid in the back of a roadtrain, see.’ He is not so much talking to her, Maggie thinks, as talking in a waking sleep. His voice seems very far away, inside a bubble in his head. ‘It was cold as the bloody South Pole, that’s the way it is out there, nights, June, July, cold as the bloody South Pole. You wouldn’t believe the difference between night and day, she’s an oven by day (you could fry an egg on the road), and deep freeze after dark. If you tripped over your foot in the dark, it’d snap right off, you’d get ice in your eye. Blimey, it’s cold, it’s cold.’ He huddles into himself and begins to shake. ‘I’m shivering under this tarp, which, let me tell you, stinks of bloody cowshit, stinks, and me old man steps out of nowhere with his whip in his hand. Steps out of the air, abra-bloody-ca-dabra, and into the back of the truck and rips off the tarp. He’s got horns on his head.’ Jug drops the beer and puts his arms in front of his face, warding off blows. ‘Jug!’ Maggie says, alarmed. ‘Jug, you’re drinking too much.’ ‘Gotcha,’ he says. ‘Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha. You’ll never get away from me, you little bugger, you little twerp.’

‘Jug, it’s okay, it’s all right.’ Maggie takes hold of his hands, which are clammy. He’s sweating like a pig, but feels dangerously cold to the touch. ‘He laughs when he does it,’ Jug says. ‘And I never did, I never did, he was right about that, I never got away from him.’ He’s shivering, curled into himself, barricaded behind his arms. ‘He’s back again,’ he says. ‘He’s back. He’s showing up after dark.’
Maggie can’t bear it. ‘Dad,’ she says, hugging him. ‘Oh Dad, you’ve got the DTs again.’

But it’s the wrong thing to say. Wrong word. A sort of spasm passes through his body, and lucidity, like a brilliant tropical bird, swoops down on him. He leans toward her and takes her chin in his hand. ‘I do not have the DTs,’ he says distinctly. He repeats himself intensely, enunciating each word as only challenged drunks can, exaggerating syllables to such a degree that Maggie, helplessly, thinks of stepping on eggshells, thinks of his chook-mad garden, thinks of the crusted goo on her feet.

‘Take my yolk upon you,’ she splutters, on the edge of something, anxiety, compassion, hilarity, fearful hysteria. But this does not help.

That’s cheap, Maggie, cheap. Is that what they taught you in Melbourne? Cheap blasphemy? Blasphemy is cheap. Making fun of the Bible is cheap, making fun of your father is cheap.’ His grip on her jaw is tighter, tighter. ‘Your father does not have the DTs. Can you get that into your fucking head? I do not have the DTs. I know what’s fucking real and what’s not.’ Any second now, Maggie thinks, my jaw will crack. ‘This world,’ he says furiously, ‘is full of fucking people who don’t know what’s real and what’s not. DTs, they say. Visions, they say. Bonkers, they say.’ For emphasis, he bears down on her face with rhythmic force as he makes each point. Because she cannot speak, quite literally cannot speak – she can feel her bones giving way – Maggie focuses her outrage in her eyes, and he glares right back. ‘Don’t you look at me like that, young lady, with the devil between your eyes, and between your legs too, I reckon. Honour thy father, young lady, and fucking remember this: I fucking well know what I’ve seen and what I haven’t, don’t you fucking forget it.’

‘If I ever kill anyone,’ Maggie tells Ben and Liz. She’s still crying. ‘If I ever kill anyone,’ she sobs.

‘Yeah,’ Ben says. ‘I know. Hey, it’s okay, kid. It’s okay. We won’t. I’ve thought it a thousand times, but we won’t. We love the old bastard, and we won’t.’

‘But I would’ve,’ she says. ‘If I’d had a gun or a knife in my hand, I would’ve aimed straight for his gut. I wanted to.’

‘Yeah, well you didn’t, and you won’t.’

‘Ben came close once, though,’ Liz says. ‘In high school, remember?’ Ben frowns, a warning, but Liz barrels on. ‘The night he kicked Ben out. I nearly killed him myself that night.’

‘Yeah,’ Maggie says. ‘I remember.’

She remembers the two of them standing there, Ben and Liz, and Jug screaming at Ben: ‘The beginning of the end, that’s what it is. A man starts fucking boongs, that’s it, he’s into the sewer, mate, and it’s all downhill, all fucking downhill from there.’ This was before God had grabbed Jug by the scruff of the neck. Weeks before. ‘No son of mine,’ Jug had roared, ‘is
going to screw around with some black fucking ginn. You wanna fuck boongs, go and live in their stinking camps.’

There had been fists and blood and mayhem.

‘Get out,’ Jug had yelled. ‘Get out, and take your black slut with you, and don’t ever come back.’

‘Too bloody right,’ Ben yelled. ‘You can count on it, mate.’

Weeks of storm weather had prevailed, weeks of walking on eggshells. And then God had spoken.

And then Jug had pulled in his horns.

‘She’s all right,’ he’d say gruffly of Liz. For a boong: you could hear him refuse to think the thought. ‘Red and yellow, black and white, All are precious in His sight,’ he’d say. In fact, Liz got on better with the born-again Jug than his son or his daughter did. It’s my Mission School background, she’d say. I know that country.

‘How long’s he been like this again?’ Maggie asks.

‘Didn’t Mum tell you?’

‘No. She never said a word in letters till the chooks got her down. So how long has it been?’

‘Since the new road from Jabiru,’ Ben says.

‘Mum says nobody knows what happened.’

Ben says nothing.

‘Well?’ she says, watching him closely. ‘Is that true?’

‘Yes and no,’ he says. ‘I don’t want to comment. I can’t comment.’

‘I can,’ Liz says. ‘He’s been sung.’

‘What?’ Maggie blinks at her. ‘By who?’

‘By my mob,’ Liz says. ‘By the elders of the tribe.’

‘Why?’

‘The road,’ Ben says. ‘The mining company. The new road through Kakadu. It runs through sacred sites.’

‘He knew that,’ Liz says. ‘We made depositions. The press refused to cover it, per usual, but everyone knew. I faced him one day, with the demonstrators. Nose to nose.’

‘So that’s it,’ Ben says. ‘You never told me.’

‘No.’

‘What’d he do?’

‘We just stood there staring at each other. And he said: ‘What can I do, Liz? I’m a working man, I build roads, what else can I do?’ And I said: “You can cross the line, Jug.” And he said: ‘Easy to say, Liz. Easy for you.’ And I said: “Don’t do this, Jug, please. It’s our land, it’s our Dreaming, it’s our old people, you’re tearing us up, it’s our country.” And we just kept standing there, looking at each other, eye to eye, people pushing and shoving, but it was just us two, him and me.’

She is staring at the backs of her hands.

‘Yes?’ Ben prompts.
'I don't know,' she says. 'I felt he was standing right on the line, I felt he was thinking about it, I thought maybe he just might step over and join me, he just wanted a nudge, so I said....'

Maggie pictures the scene: the graders, the steamrollers, the tiptrucks of crushed stone, the sharp smell of tar, the demonstrators, the workmen in their heavy boots and singlets, the heat. She watches Liz remembering it. She watches Ben watching Liz. This is a taboo subject with them, she hears her mother say.

'What happened?' Ben nudges.
'I said something....'

They wait. Liz studies her hands. 'What?' Ben says. 'What did you say?' Liz sighs heavily. 'I said the wrong thing, I reckon.'

'What was it?' But she's back at that line, nose to nose with Jug, her mob and his mob, stalemate.

'What, dammit! What did you say?'
'I said: "You've got a granchild coming, Jug. It's his Dreaming you're messing up. It's his place, it's his country, your own granchild's. You're desecrating his birthright, Jug."'

Maggie watches Liz's breathing, she knows the way of it, how the ragged tempo takes you over, it's like a weather pattern that you enter when you get too close to Jug. 'What did he say?' she asks.

'He said: "You fucking manipulative boong."'

Ben puts a hand over his face.

'And I told him, I hissed it at him. I said, "You're being sung, Jug Wilkins. You'd better make arrangements, because you're gonna be sung."' She starts collecting dishes with extraordinary vehemence and banging them into the sink. 'Fucking boong-hater,' she keeps saying. 'Fucking boong-haters, all of you, deep down.'

When she passes by him, Ben lifts a hand to touch her, but drops it again. Maggie has a sudden lurch of panic: they'll fight, she thinks; they'll say things they can't take back; he'll turn into Dad. Maggie wants a lightning bolt, she wants to point the bone somewhere, she wants someone to unsing the country, she wants to stop all of this. She gets up and puts her arms around Liz, but Liz pushes her away, furious. 'Don't you bloody touch me!' Liz yells, but the words puncture her rage which leaves her in a sudden rush, half sob. She looks deflated and unutterably weary. 'Oh shit,' she says helplessly to Ben: 'I'm sorry, mate. I really thought, you know, he was going to cross the line. I was so fucking disappointed.'

She says to Maggie: 'Anyway, they did. Sing him, I mean. They did it. He's been sung, and he knows it.'

Maggie is standing at the very back edge of their lot. It's night, still stiflingly hot and humid, but there's a full moon and just the suggestion of a breeze beginning to snuffle in off the sea. Around her rise the burial
mounds of old cars. What would an archaeologist make of this? she wonders, this humpy terrain of rusted frames and compost heaps, all smothered and choked with jasmine, allamander, bougainvillea, and the ever rapacious morning glory, all of it sliding back into bush. Who knows where the boundary lies? What mad surveyor ever tried to mark such a thing?

'So wha'dya reckon, Maggie?' His voice is slurred, rising from somewhere in the smothered heaps of junk.

'Oh God, Jug, don't do that, you nearly gave me a heart attack. Where are you?'

'Where you gonna place your bet, Maggie?' He knocks on a creeper-clothed mound, and it gives back a hollow note, faintly metallic. 'The Earth our Mum? Or the cars? Wha'd'ya reckon?'

'She's still too angry with him for patience, she wants to hurt. 'I've been to Ben and Liz's,' she says. 'You shouldn’t’ve worked on the road. I know why you've gone loco, you’ve been sung.'

'On the road to Ka-ka-du-uu,' he sings drunkenly, 'where the crocs and the jabiru play—'

She will make him bleed. She will. 'They’ve turned you into the fruit and vegie man,' she says.

But he's not listening to her. He's not paying attention. He comes crawling out of the undergrowth on all fours, his head cocked to one side. He's listening for something else. She thinks of the cats watching invisible birds in the bush, that fixed intensity, his concentration focused at the point where the car humps merge into impenetrable wetland scrub. She peers into the moon-washed darkness, curious. 'What are you looking for?'

'Jug,' she says, irritable. She wades through ground cover, creepers, rotting matter, she crunches sticks and eggs as she goes. 'What are you looking at?' And when he ignores her, she pummels his shoulders with her fists. He yelps, and throws her a brief startled glance, but whirls back again as though he dare not waver in his attentiveness. She has the creepy sensation that they are both being watched.

'What are you looking at, for God's sake?'

'Them,' he says.

'Who?' She batters him with her fists, years of rage, anxiety, helpless compassion all shouting through her white tight knuckles. 'Whad'ya mean, them, you bloody loony?'

He catches hold of her wrists. She can see he's snapped out of it now. He's with her again. He's just Jug. 'You see, Maggie,' he says quietly, 'that's why I can't tell you. I can't tell anyone. You'll say drunk, loony, the DTs. It's too big for that. It's too—' He can't even find a word.

But she knows suddenly, intuitively, what he's talking about. She has a sharp vision of a Melbourne dinner party, the usual little terrace house, cast-iron lace balconies, North Carlton, candlelit table, a whole roomful of
elegance, brittle wit, and glibness. Maggie's in mid-flight, and all eyes are upon her, waiting. They are waiting for the laugh. And as for Jug...? someone prompts, but Maggie has fallen silent. There's a line she won't cross. She has bumped into sacrilege and recognized it in time. I forget, she says politely. I forget what I was going to say.

'Except maybe Liz,' Jug says. 'I could tell Liz, but I won't give her the satisfaction, me pride won't let me. And I can't tell anyone else.'

'It's okay, Dad,' Maggie says. 'I know what you're talking about.'

He puts out a hand to steady himself. 'I got vertigo,' he says. 'Comes and goes. Ever stood over a crack into nothing?'

'Yeah,' she says.

He holds his two hands up against the moon and brings them slowly together. He matches them carefully, palm to palm, finger to finger, thumb to thumb. 'There's two worlds,' he says, trying to explain something to himself. 'They're both as real as can be. They match exactly, so you can only see one at a time.' They both study his hands against the moon, a single dark silhouette. He could be someone praying, Maggie thinks. He sighs heavily. 'They match exactly,' he says, 'but they don't fit.'

'Yeah,' she says. 'I know.'

He looks at her warily and she gestures with her hands, palms up. Who has answers? her shrug implies.

He is assessing something. He reads her gestures and her eyes. He makes a decision. 'I saw something,' he says.

'She nods.

'But I can't tell you. It's too--'

'I know,' she says. 'It's okay.'

They watch each other for a long time in silence. Then she raises her hands, palms facing him, and he brings his up to meet hers. They sit there like two children, fingertip to fingertip, palm pushing lightly against palm, an imperfect fit.

'If I told you...,' he says gruffly.

'You don't have to tell me. It's okay.'

'If I tell you, you gotta promise--'

'Cross my heart.' She licks an index finger and gestures over her breast. 'It was before they sung me anyway,' he says. 'It was just after me and Liz — well, I blew me top.'

'Yeah, she told us.'

'Didn't mean to. And then afterwards, I just wanted to smash something. I climbed up on the steamroller. We had the first bed of gravel down, I wanted to crush it meself, I wanted to mash it in, flatten it. I saw Liz leave with her mob. Good riddance, I thought, and I moved 'er up to full throttle. You could hear the road crunching into dirt, it's a good sound that. I was up there behind the wheel, and I suddenly had this giddy feeling I was on the spine of a razorback. Each side of me there was nothing. Nothing. I mean, if I moved, I could've fallen right off the world. And then
I got this funny feeling on the back of me neck, this prickle, like when you know someone’s watching you.’

He opens his eyes very wide, the pupils dilated. The moon, bright orange, sits behind his head like a plate. Maggie sees herself, twice over, in his eyes.

‘I turned around,’ he says, whispering now, ‘and there were hundreds and hundreds of them, thousands maybe, just standing there with their spears in their hands, watching me. They didn’t make a sound. They were naked except for those little things they wear, and white bodypaint.’

He clutches at his heart, a sharp pain grabbing him again. ‘It spooked me,’ he whispers. ‘The way they just stood there watching. They never made a sound, but I knew what they were waiting for.’

He looks at Maggie intently. ‘They are with us,’ he says. ‘I never realized before, but they’re with us.’

Maggie swallows.

‘I climbed down off the steamroller,’ he says. ‘And I walked away. I never went back.’

‘Dad,’ Maggie says gently. ‘Let’s go back to the house.’

But he doesn’t want to. He stands there staring into the wetlands. ‘Alpha and Omega,’ he murmurs. He seems to be sifting through clutter in his mind. ‘The first and the last,’ he says. ‘The First Ones. The last shall be first.’

Maggie tugs at his hand. ‘Dad,’ she says.

‘Seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses,’ he says, pulling at a creeper from the scrub of his Gospel Hall decade. He thinks he’s got hold of something. ‘And in those days, the last shall be the First Ones, and they shall be with us in the land.’

‘Dad, you’re mixing things up.’

‘Nothing fits,’ he says, turning to offer his puzzled benediction. ‘That’s the problem, Maggie. Nothing fits. But I know what’s real and what’s not, and they are with us.’