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Towards a poetics of hope: Simone Weil,  
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Christine Howe  
University of Wollongong

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**THE SONG IN THE DARK**

A novel submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**from**

**UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

**by**

**CHRISTINE HOWE, BCA (Hons I)**

**FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS**

**2008**

## **CERTIFICATION**

I, Christine Howe, declare that this novel, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Christine Howe

15 August 2008

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# The Song in the Dark





*Hetty opens her eyes and sees sunlight streaming in the windows. She's lying sprawled on the floor in her nightgown, aching. For a moment she can't remember how she got there. There's smashed glass glinting in the sun over near the armchair. When she remembers the pain intensifies, spreading inwards from her hip to her belly and up to her chest, flashing across the inside of her skull. She feels too heavy and old to move.*

"Mrs. Taylor? Can you hear me?"

A dark shape hovers above, there's warm pressure on her hand. The air is cool and dry, sharp with the smell of disinfectant.

*It is night: Hetty gets up for a glass of water, feeling her way in the dark, not wanting to blind her eyes with the harsh light in the hall. She fills her glass in the kitchen and walks back past the front door towards her room. As she steps into the lounge-room something feels wrong, a strange presence – there's a shadow stretching across the floor from the cupboard, the floorboards creak.*

*They stand staring at each other, although she can't be sure who it is because she can't see his face, and then he springs to get past her to the door, trips and stumbles against her. She staggers, the familiar dark of her lounge-room suddenly thin, strange, unable to support her weight.*

*She remembers falling, but not hitting the floor. The sun pouring through the window is a pounding dryness in her head and throat. The screen door down the hall is still open, swaying back and forward in the slight breeze. Hetty feels the room receding and herself dissolving, drawn up into the harsh light.*

“Mrs. Taylor?”

There’s a pulling, tearing of time and the brightness of walls. Her elbows lie on smooth cool sheets, her feet are cold. The back of her tongue feels like it’s been plastered with sand and old tobacco, and she longs for something sweet, something fresh and sweet from her garden that will clean the taste from her mouth.

*Mulberries. A small boy’s face and shirt covered in bright stains and an offering of berries held up to her in a grubby hand. His eyes sparkle, big and brown and intent on sharing his find with her. Hetty stops pegging out her flannel nighty with the roses splashed across it and bends down to take the gift. The mulberry bursts in her mouth as he rides away, his little muscular legs propelling the bike along at an ever-increasing speed, bumping across the backyard and pulling up with a spray of dirt underneath the mulberry tree. Hetty finishes hanging out her nighty and the juice on her finger leaves a reddish stain on one shoulder. It’s the same colour as the roses: both the ones on her nighty and the ones growing beside the back porch.*

He remembers standing in her backyard, reaching for where it stood, bright red among the leaves. As his fingers closed around the stem, the plant sank sharp teeth into his skin. He pulled away, stung, and saw a tiny, perfectly round ball of blood blossoming from his finger. It was the same colour as the rose. He stood still, staring at his hand, then bolted towards the house.

Climbing the two steps to the tiled porch, he stretched up to open the screen-door, and ran through into the kitchen. She was standing in front of the fridge, holding the door open so all he could see was her slippers, her legs and the hem of her green dress.

“Granny! Look!”

The door closed and her head appeared. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“My finger!” He held it up. “It’s turning into a rose!”

“It’s just a bit of blood, Paul,” she said, bending down and taking his hand. She pulled a tissue out of her pocket, and wiped the glistening bud from his finger. “You’ve got to be careful if you want to pick a rose. Come with me,” she said, “and I’ll show you.”

He followed her out the door and into the yard. She led him to the rose bushes, reached out and took hold of one of the plants.

“Look!” she said. “See the thorns? It’s their defense. A goat or a horse would think twice about eating a rose.”

Paul wishes now that he’d learnt that lesson better at the time. No-one fucks with a rose. He’s hunched over, knees drawn up, the sand a shadowed blur between his feet. His body aches, his gut is empty. Sand stretches down to the waves in a long, hot haze.

Water slides down the back of his neck from his hair. He shivers even in the heat; his wet shorts cling to his legs.

Inside his head is a bloody great whirlwind, a cyclone with grey-green clouds and an uneasy wind that eddies around and overturns everything in its path. Whole dunnies picked up and turned over on their sides, old toilet seats left naked in patches of dirt. Coconuts turned into cannon balls, his mum shouting to him from the verandah of the creaking pole house to get back inside before he and his bike get snatched up and swallowed by the crazy wind.

They left Cairns after the cyclone hit. They'd already been there for a few months anyway, and it was about time for them to move on. His mum had started to get jittery, looking behind her when she stopped at street lights, getting up in the middle of the night and checking to make sure no-one had driven up and parked in their front yard without her noticing, lying to the lady in the corner store when asked where they were from.

So they moved, again. They packed up and left the pole house, the storms that swept over every afternoon and the heavy, wet heat, and they drove south. Slowly. Months in caravan parks in Townsville, Mackay, Emerald. Falling apart fibro houses on the outskirts of Rockhampton, Brisbane, Tamworth, Newcastle. By the time they ended up back in Wollongong it was five years since they'd packed up, left his dad's stuff in a bin out the back, and driven north. They moved into an old wooden house close to the beach, suburbs and suburbs away from where they'd lived with his dad, and all Paul could think about was going to see Granny.

"You're not going," said his mum, running her hands through her hair.

"Why not?"

“Why do you think we’ve been moving every couple of months for the past five years? So he can’t find us, remember? We’re only back here because I’m changing strategy. I’ve got to keep second-guessing him, don’t I? And the best place to hide is where he’ll least expect us to be.” She was standing at the kitchen bench, her thin frame trembling. “If you went to see her, you’d give us away. You know the first thing she’d do if you turned up on her doorstep? She’d ring him up and tell him she knows where you are, and that’d be the end of it.” Her hands kept smoothing her hair, long strands frizzing up against her thin fingers. “You’re not going. Why do you want anything to do with her, anyway? You’ve got me, remember?” She looked at him suspiciously and he saw her face close over, fold into itself like one of those little green leaves up north that jerked shut if you brushed your finger over them.

“You *want* him to find us, don’t you,” she said. “You’re sick of living with me and you want to go and live with him.”

Paul shook his head. “No Mum, no.” He hated it when she got like this.

She wasn’t listening. “Why would you want to go and live with your father, anyway? Don’t you remember the whole reason we left in the first place?” She grabbed hold of his shoulders. Strands of her hair were still loose above her head, floating there like spider threads that had lost their spiders. “Promise me,” she said. “Promise me you won’t try to see her. Promise me!”

“Okay, okay.” She was gripping him so tightly he could feel her fingernails marking his flesh. “I promise.”

Her face relaxed, she pulled him towards her and gave him a hug, rocked him against her. “You’re the only thing I have, Paul,” she said, her tears landing in his hair.

He used to hate those hugs, hearing his mum’s heart beat too fast against his chest. Paul throws a handful of sand at a couple of seagulls that have landed nearby. They

flap up and back, startled, and the sudden movement attracts more gulls. Swooping in from all directions, they stare at him from red-ringed eyes, dip their necks and squawk.

There were seagulls everywhere, that day years and years ago, when his dad left. They'd come for the hot chips, spread out on the open butcher's paper. His mum's bare feet were holding the edges down so the whole thing didn't fly off in the wind. He was sitting beside his dad, leaning over his legs for the chips. The seagulls started moving in, and a sudden gust blew a scattering of sand into the chips. There was something wrong, he could feel it. Paul picked up another chip and the sand crunched between his teeth.

His mum put a chip in her mouth too, then took it out again and tossed it into the crowd of gulls. "They're no good," she said.

"I knew we should've eaten on the grass," said his dad.

"I told you, I like eating on the beach," she said.

"And I told *you* that if we ate down here, we'd get sand in the chips, and that's exactly what's happened. If you'd just backed down for once – if you didn't kick up a stink every time things don't happen *exactly* the way you want them to – it would've been fine."

Paul reached out his hand for another chip. Before he could pick one up, his mum slapped his hand away.

"Don't, Paul! They're no good. The sand'll grind away your teeth. You don't want to end up like your dad, with fillings in every second tooth."

His dad stood up, spilling more sand into the chips.

"Careful!" said his mum, waving at the chips. "You've really ruined them now, haven't you. They're not even good enough for the seagulls." Then she stood too, her leg muscles tight, little spiky hairs sticking out from the skin. They were both standing

above him now, words falling from their mouths like the sand that kept piling up over the chips, the grains landing with little pinging sounds on the open paper.

Paul looked up at their faces, towering overhead, the sky grey between them. He was hemmed in between their legs. Him, the butcher's paper and the sandy chips. His mum's hair was flying out around her face. She lifted her hand and slapped his dad across the face.

His dad just kept standing there. "You want me to leave, do you?"

"I don't care what you do."

His dad bent down, and Paul felt his mum grab him around the shoulders and pull him back against her legs, her fingers pressing into his skin.

"Don't you touch Paul," she said.

"What, you won't even let me say goodbye?"

His mum started to speak again, her voice somewhere above him. "If you go," she said, "You'll never see us again. You won't be able to come back. We'll disappear."

His dad took another step back. "I don't have to listen to this, Eva. Don't threaten me." He looked down at Paul. "I'll come back. I promise." He turned towards the car park and then called back over his shoulder: "I'll take the ute – you can keep the car."

"You'll die before you see him again!" his mum shouted, her voice thin in the wind.

His dad disappeared behind the dunes. The chips were almost completely covered in sand.

"Come on," said his mum.

"What about the chips?"

"Just leave them there!"



She grabbed his hand and they started walking up the beach, further and further away from his dad. When he looked back, the seagulls were in a frenzy, squawking, flapping up into the sky, fighting each other for the half-buried chips.

Paul reaches into his pocket for his cigarettes. The packet is wet, falling apart. He must've forgotten to take it out before he went for a swim. His last two smokes. He feels for his lighter. It's gone. He stares at the ruined packet, at the two soggy cigarettes lying side by side, and throws it at the seagulls. They flap up and away, then crowd around it, squawking. He lowers his head between his knees. He can't even remember to take his cigarettes out of his pocket before he goes for a swim. It's like the bolognaise. Last night's bolognaise. He can't even get it together enough to eat. He has to think about something else, or he'll end up like his mum, crazy as a cut snake.

She'd clung to him the day he finally moved out, her arms bony around his neck.

"You'll ring me, won't you?" she asked. "You'll come to see me?"

"Okay, okay," he said, thinking that there was no way he was coming back here any time soon, not with Gary hanging around all the time, sitting in front of the telly with his flabby cheeks and endless supply of stubbies. Besides, he'd taken money out of Gary's wallet on the sly one too many times, until even his mum had stopped pleading his innocence.

"Promise me." She moved back and held him by the shoulders, trying to look him in the eyes.

"Look, Mum, I've gotta go." He pulled himself away.

"Don't forget," she called.

He couldn't help but glance up when he got to the door, and the image of her standing there in the hall was more silhouette than person, her thin frame upright and her hair tied in a tight bundle at the base of her neck. For a moment he remembered her standing outside their caravan in Mackay, waving goodbye as he left for school, her

loose red hair lit bright by the morning sun. Her long shadow stretched towards him, the dark outline of her dress rippling in the breeze, the mass of hair lifting around her face so that even though she was standing still, her shadow was moving, alive along the grass. She wasn't moving at all now, as she stood at the end of the hall, her arms dangling by her sides. If he could make her life better, he would, he thought, helplessness dragging at him.

"Bye Mum," he said, his chest tight.

She raised her thin, silhouette-arm and waved. "Don't forget," he heard her say again, as the door closed behind him.

The house he moved into was so close to the railway line that every time a train went past bits of paint flaked off the ceiling and the walls shook. It got so cold the first winter they were there that he and his flat mates, Ned and Julie, broke a couple of palings off the fence and burnt them in the fireplace. After that the palings gradually disappeared until there was just a skeleton of posts between the old house and the vacant block next door. It reminded him of living with his mum in all those old houses up the coast. Before they came back, and moved in with Gary. Bloody Gary, with his huge house halfway up the mountain, his pool in the backyard and his telly that took up nearly the whole lounge-room. Gary with his real-estate business he'd built up from scratch and his fat wallet.

It'd been sitting on the laundry shelf, the first time he opened it. His mum must've left it there when she took it out of his trousers and threw them in the machine. He stared at it, remembered Gary's rough hands on his shoulders. No-one was around – his mum was outside hanging out the washing and Gary was watching the telly. He reached for the wallet, flipped it open, and stared at the wad of cash inside. He was too nervous to count it – just pocketed a ten dollar note and slid the wallet back onto the

shelf. Half his mind stayed inside his pocket until he spent the money on hot chips with Ned and Josh that afternoon.

Gary never mentioned it, so the next time Paul saw his wallet in the laundry he took a twenty. Nothing happened then, either, and after that he took fifties. Not very often, just one every month or so. By then he was starting to need the money, anyway. It was after he'd taken a fifty each week for three weeks in a row that things started to fall apart. He heard Gary's voice rolling through the house one Saturday afternoon when he came back from the beach.

"You keep your kid under control, Eva – he's a bloody delinquent."

"Paul would never do that." He could tell, even from where he was in the garage, that his mum's voice was about to give way to tears.

"Well, who else could've taken it? You're saying the *dog* slipped a fifty dollar note neatly out and took it down to the butcher's to buy a bone? You're blind, Eva. You think the sun shines out that kid's arse."

"Maybe you lost it."

Paul backed his bike quietly out of the garage, their voices fading behind him. She didn't even know him anymore. All she ever did was cook and clean for Gary, take her pills and sleep. Even though she'd been jittery and nervous while they were running away from his dad, moving from town to town, she'd never been this bad. He couldn't remember the last time he heard her laugh. She stopped laughing, years ago. After they found out what had happened to his dad.

She'd opened the door too quickly one afternoon when he got home from school, pulling him inside with her. In the hall, she smothered him in a too-tight hug.

"Oh, Paul," she said.

"What? Mum, you're squashing me."

“He’s dead.”

“What?” he said. He thought she was talking about Gary’s dog.

“Your dad,” she said. “He’s dead. We don’t have to worry about him finding us anymore because he’s not here anymore to worry about. We’re free...” Then she leaned against the wall and burst into tears, sobbing, sobbing.

He didn’t feel anything. Nothing. He didn’t believe her that his dad was dead. What did it mean to be dead, anyway, when you weren’t even there to begin with?

His mum reached out and hugged him, crushing him against her, tears wetting his neck.

“We’re free,” she said again, shaking him. “Do you know what that means, Paul? We’re free...”

On the kitchen table was an open newspaper. In it was a photograph of a ute, smashed up at the bottom of a gully. Paul stared at the grainy black and white image, at the wreckage that didn’t even look like a ute anymore, but like a piece of paper someone had scrunched up and tossed against the base of the tree. In the article below the photo he saw his dad’s name. It stood there among the rest of the words, and he knew that this was how his mum had found out. From the paper. No-one had rung her up to let her know, because she had hidden herself so well that no-one knew where to find her. It was this, more than the fact that his dad was dead, that made him go numb. He felt it rushing through his body, weighing down his shoulders, his arms, his chest. It squeezed all the air out of him, mucked with his vision so all he could see was his dad’s name, standing there so small amid the rest of the print.

A few nights later he woke to his mum shaking him in the half-dark, her face close to his as she knelt by the bed.

“I didn’t kill him, did I Paul? I didn’t put a curse on him? Tell me I didn’t.” She was dressed in the old pink dressing gown she used to wear when they lived with his dad.

“No, Mum.” He was more afraid than he’d ever been, seeing her like that. “How could you have killed him? You weren’t even there.”

“But I cursed him!” she said, shaking him. “I did, didn’t I? I killed him.”

“It’s okay,” he said, looking at her crazy face staring at him in the darkness, the whites of her eyes glowing where they caught the orange streetlight coming through the window. The room moved, took on different proportions, fuzzy and unstable. He put his arms around her, held her shoulders awkwardly as she sobbed into his chest. “It’s okay,” he said again, looking past her to the dull orange wall, criss-crossed and swaying with the shadows of the mulberry tree outside his window.

His mum lost the plot after that, and lay in bed all day for weeks with the blinds drawn.

Paul came back from the beach one day, tired after carrying his board and pushing his bike up the hill. Gary had just finished watching the footy, and his mum was in bed. Paul dumped his surfboard and bike in the garage, and came inside for a shower. He left a trail of sandy footprints through the kitchen, along the hallway carpet and into the bathroom. After his shower, he went back to the kitchen for some food. Gary stood in the doorway, his eyes red and swollen around the edges, and pointed down at the little trail of sand at his feet.

“What’s this?” he snarled.

“Sand,” said Paul.

“I can see that,” he said, and moved closer, so that even though Paul was backed up against the wall he could smell the beer on his breath. “What I want to know is how it came to be in my house.”

“I forgot to wash my feet,” he said. “I’ll clean it up.”

“You’ll be cleaning it up alright.” Gary gave Paul a shove that sent him stumbling sideways. A pulse ran down the side of his neck.

“What’s going on?” His mum appeared in the bedroom doorway in her nighty. “Gary?”

“Paul and I were just having a chat, weren’t we, Paul?” Gary said. He spat Paul’s name out of his mouth as though he’d eaten something rancid.

“As long as everything’s okay,” she said.

“It’s fine.” Gary put his hand on her back, so that the thin fabric of her nighty pulled tight over her shoulder blades.

Paul knew, as Gary manoeuvred her back into the bedroom and closed the door behind them, that in this house, he was on his own.

Paul shivers. His whole body is clammy with sweat. He digs his feet into the sand and rests his head on his knees, staring into the darkness of his own shadow. He retches, and there's bile inching over the sand, green, jelly-like. A string of it hangs from his bottom lip until he spits it off. His throat burns. He closes his eyes and sits there in the dark, the smell wafting up from the sand making him dizzy. And he can't get Gary out of his head.

He had just eaten the last piece of cake when Gary came in from watching the rugby. He deposited a couple of empty tinnies on the bench and stood there staring at the crumbs on the plate with his hands in his pockets and the top button of his shirt undone, his belly straining against the cloth as it bulged out over the top of his trousers.

"Where's the cake?" he asked.

Paul shrugged.

"It's okay Gary, I'll make another one." His mum's voice drifted in from the laundry.

"That's not the point," he said. "The point is, your son ate my cake. That's called stealing." He raised his voice. "You want to teach him some manners, Eva." He looked down at Paul, pointed a finger at his face. Stood there like one of those wild boars his mates in Cairns used to tell him about, that trample everything in their path and gore you if you get in their way. When he spoke, it was almost in a whisper, the words spitting out of his mouth. "I catch you stealing again, you'll be out on the street, you hear me? Now piss off."

Paul backed out the kitchen door and followed the hall down to the laundry.

"I'm going out, Mum," he said.



“Where to?” she asked, distracted, pulling dirty tissues out of Gary’s workpants as she slowly loaded the washing machine.

“Ned’s place. He asked me to stay the night,” he lied.

“What about your homework?”

“That’s what we’re doing,” said Paul. “Homework.”

His mum leaned against the washing machine for a minute. “Don’t be home too late,” she said.

She wasn’t listening. “I was going to stay the night,” he said again.

“So when will you be home?” She picked up another pair of wide-waisted trousers and dropped them in the machine.

“Tomorrow, after school.”

She closed the lid of the machine, and smoothed back her hair. “Be careful, okay?” she said, holding her arms out for a hug.

The air bit into his skin as he rode down the hill towards Ned’s place. It was a big house, built into the slope below the road. He pulled up on the side of the road and looked in through the windows. In the lounge-room, Ned and his little sister were fighting over the remote control. Ned’s mum and dad were in the next room across, sitting and talking to each other across a round wooden table. Their house was always so neat. Nothing was ever out of place – even Ned’s room stayed spotless – and you had to take your shoes off before you went in the front door. As Paul stood looking in at them sitting in the light, Ned’s mum got up and pulled down the kitchen blinds. She walked into the lounge-room and the T.V. was turned off, the remote control confiscated and the blinds lowered. The two darkened windows were like eyelids closing. He couldn’t stay here.

Paul looked down at the strip of house lights between him and the ocean. It was too cold to sleep on the beach. He stood there, shivering. He couldn't go to Josh's place – it was too far away. He couldn't face going back home after lying to his mum, and anyway, if he went back, Gary was likely to get stuck into him. But there was nowhere else to go.

Unless he went to Granny's. She lived down the mountain in the next suburb. The school bus drove past her street. That had been the only thing that bothered his mum about moving in with Gary in the first place – the fact that they were so close to where Granny lived. So far, he'd kept his promise not to visit her, but he'd thought about it. Sitting on the bus on the way home he'd imagined getting off early, not going back to Gary's at all, but walking down Granny's street instead.

He looked back up the hill. The lights in the top windows of Gary's place were just visible, the blue flickering of the T.V. He'd never broken a promise he'd made to his mum before.

When he got to Granny's house, her lights were still on. He remembered the row of clipped, bare rose bushes out the front and the carport with the rusting tin roof. Propping his bike against the house next to her old blue car, he walked around the back to the porch. There was a murmur of noise coming from the lounge-room, but it was hard for him to see in because even though the curtains let out some light, they obscured the view inside. Maybe she had visitors. Now he was here, he was nervous, scared she might not remember him.

He raised his hand and knocked on the screen door. The murmuring stopped, and he heard someone call out.

"Just a minute!" There was a pause, then the door opened and she was standing there behind the wire netting of the screen door, smaller than he remembered. She

squinted out into the shadows towards him, her face obscured by the hundreds of tiny mesh squares. She didn't only look smaller, but older, and he couldn't see the smile wrinkles he remembered marking the edges of her eyes.

"Hi Granny," he stammered.

"Paul?" She reached for the handle, opened the door wide and stood there staring at him, the light from the hall shining through her grey hair.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I just..." and then he ran out of words. "Can I stay the night?" he blurted.

She reached out and hugged him, wrapping her arms right around his school bag. She smelled of roses and tobacco, and he could tell, from the way she held him so tight against her, that she didn't mind, not at all, that he'd come back.

"Of course you can." She stepped back, wiping her hand across her eyes. "Where's your mum?" she asked, staring behind him into the dark yard.

"Mum's at home," he said.

"Where's home?"

"Just up the hill a bit."

"Does she know you're here?" She held him by the shoulders.

And there they were, her smile wrinkles, arcing out from the corners of her eyes. He couldn't lie to her when she was looking at him like that.

"No," he said. "She thinks I'm at a friend's place."

"But she knows you're okay."

"Yeah."

She stood back from him a little, still with her hands on his shoulders, and shook her head. There were voices coming from the lounge-room.

"Who's that?" he asked.

“Oh, they’re just some friends of mine,” she said. “Put your bag there, in the corner, and come in.”

He followed her into the lounge-room, where a group of five people were sitting in a circle, a man and a woman cross-legged on the floor, two old ladies facing them on the couch, and an old man sitting on one of Granny’s kitchen chairs. There was an eruption of laughter just before they walked in the door, and as they came in, Paul guessed that the young man sitting on the floor had just finished telling a story. The room was warm and lit up, and there were empty coffee mugs and a cake tin sitting on the low table in the middle of the room.

Granny stepped aside so Paul was standing next to her. “This is my grandson, Paul,” she said. “He just turned up out of the blue.”

“Hi,” said the young woman on the floor. “I’m Annette.”

“And I’m Peter,” said the young man beside her.

“Great to see you, boy,” said the old man in the kitchen chair, as if he already knew him.

“Hello Paul,” said one of the old ladies on the couch. “I’m Margaret. I don’t know if you remember me, but I met you once before, when you were about this big.” She held out her hand above the ground, measuring the height of the arm of the couch.

The other old lady just said, “Hello,” and her whole face broke into wrinkles as she smiled. She looked ancient.

He can’t remember what else happened that night, just that he felt safe, and had wanted to stay in Granny’s lounge-room forever, drinking hot chocolate and listening to them laugh.

Paul raises his head and looks out over the ocean. The seagulls have gone, leaving his cigarette packet and the two useless cigarettes lying a few metres away. There's a grey haze above the horizon, and smoke is pouring from the stacks at the steel works.

He's never been able to figure out what it is about Granny's place that makes him feel safe. Even when he turned up that first time, he stopped being afraid as soon as he walked in the door. As a kid, he used to wish secretly that his dad would find them somewhere – would turn up in his ute with his guitar at a supermarket in Rockhampton or the caravan park in Mackay, and say he was coming back for good, so they could stop running, stop being afraid. He never did.

If he could go to Granny's now, she'd probably make him a cup of tea and get out her jar of pickled onions and a couple of forks, and sit with him on the warm brown tiles of her back porch. But he can't go to her place when he's like this. She wouldn't ask any questions, but that almost makes it worse. She's never asked questions, not even that night years ago, when he turned up on her doorstep after Ned's brother Ben took them to see his crop.

They'd climbed the mountain in a straggling line: Ben first, followed by a couple of his mates, then Ned and Paul. Halfway up, they turned off the track, stepped over a couple of fallen branches, skirted behind a huge patch of lantana, and they were there. Ben had come up to check on his plants.

They sat down, Ben and his mates on an old log, Paul and Ned on the ground. Ben rolled a couple of joints and passed them round, joking that Paul and Ned were too young and shouldn't have any.

"Ah, come on," said Ned. "Give us a try."

“I dunno...” he teased, blowing out smoke.

“Why not?”

“You’re too young for this stuff, I already said.”

“Yeah, right. How come you brought us up here then?”

“Cause you wanted to come.”

“Go on, give them some, it’ll be funny,” said one of his mates.

“I was gonna give them some anyway,” he said. He rolled a couple more and handed them to Paul and Ned.

Paul lit up, drew in a breath of smoke and waited for something to happen. Ben and his mates were leaning back against the trees behind the log, passing joints between them, watching him and Ned. Nothing much changed, but after a while he did start to feel good. Really good, like he didn’t remember feeling for ages, not since he found out that his dad was dead. He looked across at Ned, leaning over his knees on a pile of leaves, drawing on the joint. There was something so funny about seeing him like that, so serious, with those guys sitting watching them on the log, that he couldn’t help laughing. Ned looked at him and started laughing too. It was so funny neither of them could stop. Ben and his mates started laughing as well, and he couldn’t tell if they were laughing at him and Ned or not but he didn’t care.

He didn’t know how long they were sitting there before Ben got up and said they’d better get going before it got dark, or his mum would crack a shit. Things stopped being so funny pretty quick after that. He started to wonder if he smelled like pot. If Gary would be able to tell he’d been smoking and what he’d do to him if he found out.

“Hey Ned,” he asked, as they were climbing back down the mountain, “do you reckon I could stay at your place tonight?”

“I think Mum’s got visitors,” Ned said. “Sorry mate.”

It was the same thing that happened to him all the time. There was nowhere to go. He couldn't go back to Gary's, not like this. He kicked at a stick lying across the path, watched it bounce off into the lantana. No-one understood. Ned didn't know what Gary was like. Not even his mum knew.

When they emerged from the bush onto the grass halfway up the hill, he looked out over the lights starting to appear in the city below. Everyone had somewhere to go except for him. There were ships out on the ocean, floating there like dark thin islands dotted with lights. When he'd turned up at Granny's place that time, she'd told him that his grandfather used to load the ships that pulled into Port Kembla. He couldn't remember ever hearing anything about his grandfather before.

Granny. He could go back to Granny's. He hadn't been back since he turned up when all of those people were in the lounge-room because he felt too guilty, lying about it to his mum. The thought of what Gary might do if he came home like this, though, was far worse than the thought of lying to his mum.

"See ya," he said to Ned, when they picked up their bikes at the bottom of the hill.

"Where are you going?" Ned asked.

"Just for a ride," he said.

"Don't fucken touch our shit," Ben said, circling him on his bike.

It took Paul a moment to figure out what he meant. "Nah, I'm just... going home another way," he said, hearing how lame it sounded.

"Paul's alright," said Ned.

"Yeah, well, he better be."

They got back on their bikes and Ned said quietly to Paul: "Don't worry about it. My brother's a dickhead. He won't do anything to you."

He was glad to be riding away from them when he took off down the hill. The wind rushed past his legs, over his arms, made his eyes water as he pedalled down the street. It was almost dark by the time he reached the old fibro house and knocked on Granny's door. She answered it in a shapeless green dress that hung down below her knees.

"Hello love!" she said. "Come in."

Paul stepped in the door. She seemed pleased to see him. Not even surprised, just pleased. Inside, there were roses everywhere: on the table, on top of the cupboards, on the kitchen bench. There were a couple in vases, but mostly they were in old jam jars. It meant the whole place smelled of roses, with Granny's cigarette smoke lingering beneath.

There was a loaf of bread on the table. She got down a couple of plates from the cupboard and the butter and a jar of boysenberry jam from the fridge, put one of the plates and a knife in front of Paul, and told him to help himself.

"You've got real butter," he said, spreading it thickly on his slice of bread.

"I do," she said, spooning jam onto her own slice. "Have you had dinner yet?"

"No."

"I'm having fish," she said. "Fish and potatoes. I'll put some extra veggies on if you'd like to stay."

As they ate, Granny talked about her garden, about the greenhouse his grandfather had built and her enormous rosemary bushes by the back steps that had grown from a single cutting she'd been given years ago. Then, as Paul started on his second slice of bread, she asked if he knew what had happened to his dad.

The half-chewed chunk of bread moved slowly down the back of his throat. He nodded.



“Your mother still doesn’t want to have anything to do with me, does she?”

He didn’t know how to answer. He couldn’t tell her that his mum would lose it if she knew he’d broken his promise. That she thought Granny was a crazy old woman who would try to take him away from her. He stared down at the jam, glistening on top of the thick layer of butter, then back up at Granny. Her face was angled down towards the table, her finger tracing the rim of the chipped plate. He couldn’t lie to her.

“No,” he said. “She’s scared of you.”

“And are you?” Granny asked, looking back at him, her brown eyes warm. “Scared?”

“No,” he said. He couldn’t imagine being scared of her.

“Does your mum know you’ve been coming to visit me?”

He shook his head.

“Alright,” she said, as though speaking to herself. “You’ll have to keep it here then.”

“Keep what here?”

“Your dad left you his guitar,” Granny said. She leaned back in her chair. “I’ve kept it here for you, but until you turned up the other day I had no idea where to find you. So it’s yours.”

His dad’s guitar. So there was something left of him after all, other than those tiny words lost in the middle of that newspaper article, and the photo of his smashed up ute. Something real, something he could touch.

“Thanks.” It sounded so inadequate. “Thank you,” he said again, looking up at her. He was thanking her for more than the guitar. He had somewhere to go, now, when there was nowhere else.

Then the kitchen came back into focus. He looked over at Granny and caught her licking boysenberry jam from her thumb.

“Can’t resist this jam,” she said. “Margaret makes it, and this is my last jar.”

“I can’t play,” he said. “The guitar. I don’t know how to play.”

Granny licked the last of the jam from her thumb, stood up, and pushed back her chair. “You’ll learn,” she said.

She led him back down the hallway and into the lounge-room, where she opened the doors of a big wooden cupboard standing against the wall. Inside, there were shelves piled high with sheets and blankets, and on the top shelf were rows and rows of jam jars. They held all sorts of things – nails, rubber bands, screws, tap washers, buttons. One of the jars was full of money. Notes, mainly, and coins in a layer on the bottom. Paul stared. There must be hundreds of jars up there. Beside him, Granny was saying that the guitar was on the bottom shelf, and her knees were too old and creaky to get down there any more.

He dragged his eyes away from the army of jam jars, knelt down and reached for the scuffed case on the bottom shelf. It was heavier than it looked, and landed with a thud on the floorboards. When he opened the lid, he stopped thinking about the jars.

The worn fret-board was cool against his palm as he lifted the guitar out of its case. It was the first time he’d touched something of his dad’s since his mum had thrown everything he owned into the bin out the back of the house the night before they moved. But this – he remembered lying in bed, the strings glinting in the light from the bedside lamp, watching his dad’s fingers as they moved across the fret-board. He remembered drinking pink lemonade in the pub when his mum took him to see the band play, the haze of smoke around the bar and his dad in a blur of reddish light on stage.

“It’s probably gone out of tune,” said Granny. Paul handed it to her and she plucked a few strings. “I’ll get Peter, that young man you met when you came over before, to tune it for you. He might even be able to give you some lessons.”

He hasn't been to see Granny for a long time. He doesn't want her to see him like this – doesn't want her to look at him and be ashamed. He doesn't want to have to hide his arms from her. So he never goes.

There was a moment, way back, when he could have done things differently, but he didn't realise what he was committing to at the time. He had no idea what he was doing, that day when he and Ned were out the back of Ned's place, fixing his bike, and Ben walked into the yard.

"Got a job for ya," Ben said.

"Yeah? What is it?" asked Ned.

Ben took out a packet from his back pocket. "You reckon you could sell this?"

"I could smoke it," Paul said, without thinking.

Ben smirked. "I'm sure you could," he said.

"Well, are you gonna give us some, or what?" Ned asked.

"That's what I'm saying." Ben tossed the packet to Ned. "I'll do you a deal. You sell this for me, and I'll give you a cut."

"How much do we get?" Ned asked.

"Half."

Paul looked at the package. Half of that. A quarter, once he and Ned split it. It wasn't bad, and he knew guys at school who'd buy it.

"What do you reckon?" Ned asked him.

He could already feel it in his fingers, see it sitting in a stash under his bed, days and days worth, without him having to steal anything from Gary to get the money to buy it.

Paul's shorts have dried and the sun is setting behind the mountain. He gets up, agitated, his head hot, and walks down towards the water. He misses Granny's place – her roses, her greenhouse, their conversations, her fridge full of food. His stomach cramps; his limbs feel too light. Beyond him the sky merges hazily into ocean. He reaches the water and kicks a bit of driftwood into the waves. His toe stings and he kicks another piece, and another, trying to focus on the pain in his foot instead of what's going on in his head.

Peter, that guy Granny knew, taught him to play the guitar. He did it for free, too – came around to Granny's place to meet him after school once a week for a couple of years.

"That's a beautiful guitar," he said, when he first saw it.

"It was my dad's," said Paul, proud.

Peter taught him how to play a whole lot of old songs – Buddy Holly, the Beatles, the Eagles, folk songs. When he was good enough, they started jamming together.

He stopped going to Granny's place every week at some point, because he was doing other things. Hanging out with Ned, doing stuff for Ben. He couldn't make it to his lesson for a couple of weeks in a row, and when he finally did turn up, Peter wasn't there. The first thing Granny said to him when he opened the door was that if he wanted to continue his lessons, he'd have to ring Peter and apologise. It was rude to not turn up, she said, when someone was giving up their time for free. She'd been embarrassed on his behalf.

He left home not long after that, and asked Granny if he could take the guitar with him. It meant that he could play it more often, but it also meant he hardly went to Granny's place at all. The longer he stayed away, the more decisions he made that he

knew she wouldn't like, the harder it was to go back. At least he'd had his guitar though, leaning against the wall in his room, close to his bed so he could reach over for it when he woke up. He'd lie there looking up at the peeling paint on the ceiling, and play to the rhythm of the coal trains as they rattled past the back fence.

Paul kicks the last piece of wood he can see into the surf. He looks around for another, but they're all already bobbing and floating out with the current like a fleet of ships. He starts kicking the wet sand instead, lifting up toe-fuls of it and spraying it out into the water.

He had been in the house alone one afternoon, playing his guitar in the lounge-room, when a cop car pulled up across the road. He hadn't noticed it at first. His fingers were too busy feeling the strings resonate beneath them, the wood of the neck smooth in his palm. The room was full of music, and he was soaking in the heat of the open fire on the side of the room, the notes radiating from his fingers like embers. He could have been in the middle of a forest, branches swaying with the rhythm of the music. All around the room, spread out on the couches and along the sides of the walls, were masses of plants, drying in the heat of the fire.

He followed the shadows of leaves moving against the walls in the reddish glow of the firelight, his eyes drawn towards the stained lacy curtains covering the window. Ned and Julie had thought it was a good idea to leave the curtains there when they moved in: we can still see out, they'd said, but it makes it harder for people to see in.

Then he saw it, sitting out there across the road. The car.

He stopped playing and the warmth vanished. There was just a terrible, suffocating heat, trapping him in the front room of the old weatherboard house. He left his guitar on the couch, crawled on his hands and knees to the window and peered out through the

side of the curtains. It was still there. Parked directly opposite. He thought he could see a couple of coppers sitting inside it. Shit. If they came to the door they'd find him sitting here surrounded by hundreds of drying plants. They'd twist his arms around behind his back and take him outside into the blinding sun, walk him over to the car and take him to the cells. He looked back at the room, at the dozens of plants. He had to hide them, get rid of them somehow, before the cops came to the door. He swung around, gathered an armful. There was nowhere to hide them. There were too many. There was no way they'd fit in the cupboard behind the couch. It was too hot to think, with the fire burning. He should never have lit it. He stopped. He looked at the flames flickering in the grate, at the bundle of half-dried leaves in his arms.

Bending down, he dumped the plants in the fire. The flames died for a moment then sprang up again, the leaves curling in the heat. He grabbed another armful and dropped it on top. The plants piled up in the grate; the flames rose higher until they disappeared up the chimney. He was about to put the third load on when he stopped, saw the smoke filling the room. Smelled it. In that instant, he knew that it would be rising out of the chimney and flowing over the road to where the car was still parked. The plants in his arms tumbled onto the floor. He would laugh, if he wasn't so petrified. He'd created a joint out of a house, with a cop car just across the road. He had to get out. The walls closed in on him as he ran down through the hall to the laundry and out into the yard. He climbed over the remains of the paling fence and dropped down onto the other side, ran across the train tracks, climbed the rattling wire fence, and landed on the grass. He didn't dare look back as he started to run, heading for the beach. Behind him, he knew the chimney was spewing out smoke.

It was late afternoon and the sun was setting by the time he ended up at the beach. He hid himself among the dunes, thirsty and shaking.

He had burnt Ben's plants. He had dropped two armfuls on the fire, which was just about his share that Ben was going to give him for using their house as a drying shed. He'd been counting on being able to keep a couple of ounces and sell the rest. That was where his next lot of money was going to come from.



Paul raises his head and looks at the flames rising from the steelworks. He'd asked Ned for a loan a couple of days after he burnt the plants, when he was starting to get desperate. He'd been sitting outside, his foot tap-tapping the low brick fence, chewing his thumbnail and trying to figure out what to do when Ned got back from uni. Ned sat down beside him, dumped his bag over the fence and stretched his legs out.

"You up for a surf?" he asked.

"Nah. Anyway, I sold my board, remember?" He couldn't think about anything except for where the money was going to come from.

"I still can't believe you burnt those plants," Ned laughed, and lit up. "You sure it was a cop car?"

He nodded, and tried to think of a way to ask Ned for a loan without it sounding pathetic and desperate. He couldn't. "You got any money on you?"

"What've you got to give me?" Ned breathed out smoke, grinned at him.

"Ah, come on, I wouldn't be asking unless I needed it."

"What do you need it for?"

"You know, food..."

"Yeah, right. Why don't you get another job?"

"Piss off." He worked at the pizza place up the road, but his shifts had been cut down to only a couple of nights a week after he kept turning up late. He wasn't working again for another three or four days. Those four days were already stretching out like a massive car park in front of him, kilometres of flat bitumen surrounded by chain-link fencing, broken glass scattered in the corners. He wasn't going to be able to survive.

“Come on Paul, you already owe me two hundred bucks for last month’s rent, remember? As if I’m gonna lend you anymore.”

“I’ll pay you back.”

“Yeah, right.”

He searched around in his head for some other way to get the money he needed, but he couldn’t think straight. Robbing someone at an ATM. Stealing someone’s wallet.

Ned started talking again. “I’ll give you a hundred bucks for your guitar.”

“What?” Paul stared at him.

“A hundred bucks. It’s worth three, but you owe me two, so I’ll give you one for it.”

“No way. I’m not selling that.”

Kicking at the sand isn’t working. He can’t get this stuff out of his head. He has to find a way to get some money. So this will all shimmer up into a calm nothingness and he’ll be okay. He starts walking towards the steelworks. The waves wash up and cover his feet, then slip back out again.

After a couple of days of not using, not eating, he’d been about ready to kill someone if it meant he could get his hands on some money.

There was an ATM in town that was right next to an alley. Paul hung around for a bit, not too close, until it started to get dark. His heart beating, he waited until a lady in a grey woolen skirt walked up to the machine. He wandered over and stood behind her, watched the money slide out, reached his hand in and snatched it out of her slim, manicured fingers. Twisting away from her, he ran down the alley, his breath coming in gasps. He thought he heard the slap-slap of shoes running after him, someone’s wheezing breath. He ran faster, his head pounding. He kept running, turned into one

street, down the next, until all he could hear was his own feet crunching on the gravel on the side of the road, his own breath drawing in the night air. He didn't stop running until he reached the beach, where he could lose himself in the dark.

A few nights later he thought he could hear the same wheezing breath, the same slapping shoes coming for him. He locked himself in a cupboard, terrified, and didn't move until the morning. When he finally opened the door and crawled out onto the floor, he could hear Ned and Julie talking. He stood, his legs cramping, and made his way down the hall into the kitchen. They were eating melted cheese on toast, and the smell made him want to gag.

Ned bit into his toast. "I'll still buy that guitar from you, if you want."

Paul shivered, and moved to stand in the patch of sun warming the lino. He was still disoriented, cramped after spending the night curled up next to the mop bucket.

"You can play it any time you want, anyway - why do you want to buy it?" he asked. "That's what I should do – start charging rent. Every time you play it, you owe me fifty bucks."

Ned laughed. "Nah, seriously, I'm willing to buy it. Three hundred."

"It's worth way more than that."

"Might've been once. It's not now."

"Do you even have three hundred bucks?"

"You're only getting one, remember?"

Paul looks up at the smog, bright pink as the sun sets, and forces himself to think about something else.

Last week, he'd been sitting in his room, playing his guitar. He held the back of the instrument to his ear and the wood resonated against his cheek, the sound rich and

warm. The chord progression he had been playing morphed into a folk song Peter had taught him. He didn't sing aloud, but followed the lines in his head. *The water is wide, I cannot cross over...* Halfway through the song, he realised he'd forgotten the words. The empty tobacco tin lay discarded on the floor next to his bed and a cockroach scuttled between the skirting board and the door. His head throbbed; he needed to vomit.

When the front door clicked open he stopped playing. The sound died away, and was replaced by Ned's footsteps in the hallway and the creaking of the tin roof expanding in the heat of the day.

Paul changes direction so he's walking out into the water, the surf foaming up around his legs, against his chest. He dives under a wave and the water closes around him, cool against his skin. Opening his eyes, he stays under as the waves pass over the top of him. The water is green, darkening as the sun sets. He surfaces and starts swimming out through the waves. He wants to get away from everything. To get away from the shore. To get away from this city that's closing in on him. Most of all, he wants to get away from what's inside his own head.

He did it. He put the money from his dad's guitar into his arm and felt okay for a while – a day or so maybe – he can't remember.

Once he had the package in his pocket all he could think about was getting it out of the plastic wrapping and inside him. He stopped at the public toilet in the park on the way home. The cement floor had puddles of water seeping in under the doors. He walked inside a cubicle and fumbled with the latch on the door until he'd locked himself in, sat down on the seat, wrenched the boot off his foot and pulled off his sock. He tied the sock around his arm. Reached into his pocket. Spoon. Syringe. He took them out

in a hurry, stuck them on the window sill in the dust. Started to undo the package, and then stopped. Water. Shit. He'd forgotten the fucking water. He stood up, stared down at the water in the toilet. The bowl was brown, coated in what looked like years of people's left-over shit. He couldn't go out of the cubicle to the sink with one boot on and his sock tied around his arm. If he flushed, maybe it'd clean the bowl out. He pressed the button, watched the water flood down like a waterfall then the calm descend over the bowl. It looked just as bad as before. But the waterfall. If he could catch the water from the waterfall it couldn't be too bad. At least it hadn't been sitting there moldering against the walls of the bowl for ten years. Paul pressed the flush button again, bent over with the syringe and sucked the water up as it cascaded down. He squirted some of it into the spoon, let the rest out back into the toilet bowl. Carried the spoon over to the windowsill, mixed up his hit. Drew it up into the syringe. Found a place on the inside of his arm that wasn't seeping pus, and slid the needle in.

And then he was okay.

He slowly undid the sock, and sat back down on the toilet.

Leaning back against the cistern, he looked up at the grimy window. Warmth flooded through him until his insides felt like the ocean. Calm, indifferent. No pain. He'd stopped shivering, his heart had slowed, and he was okay.

Paul keeps swimming until he can feel his body rising over swell, not surf. He kicks harder, slides his arms through the water. His whole body is in pain; he's breathing every stroke. Eventually, he stops. He rolls over onto his back and floats there, looking up at the first couple of stars coming out, the sunset fading. Lights are starting to stand out in the city, and he realises how far he's come.

One of Gary's brothers died in the surf. Drowned.

He's tired. His breath comes in gasps; the muscles in his legs and arms are burning. He's tired of running away, tired of trying to fix up his life and nothing ever working. If he could just sink to the bottom, take a couple of mouthfuls, it'd all be gone. He could stop running, stop worrying, stop thinking about his dad's bloody guitar. What does he have to go back to, anyway? Just that pile of rotting bolognaise in the bin.

There had been a bit of money left, and he had gone into the supermarket for some food. Halfway down one of the aisles, opposite the cereal, he thought he saw his mum coming towards him pushing a trolley. His first thought was that he would have to pretend to be straight when she hugged him. The supermarket shelves formed a long tunnel; the trolley rushed towards him like a coal train. He was standing in the middle of the aisle when she reached him and he realised that it wasn't his mum after all, it was just a woman who had come to a standstill because he was blocking her path. He stepped aside. The loneliness in his gut slid its head out of its shell and stared up at him with big eyes. He hadn't seen his mum for months, had only been back to Gary's a couple of times since he moved out.

He kept walking until he reached the end of the aisle, and stood staring at the trays of mince. He had a craving for his mum's bolognaise. Mince, tomatoes, mushrooms, onion, garlic. Pasta. He could make it now, he realised, reaching into his pocket and counting the remaining money, already tasting the sauce in his mouth. At the register he handed over the last of his money and left with a shopping bag full of ingredients.

He cooked a huge bolognaise that should have lasted him at least two or three days. He had a bowl of it, sitting on the floor of the kitchen, the lino sticky with sweat under his legs. It was hot and humid, the late afternoon sun hazy outside the open kitchen window.

When Ned got back from Uni he stuck a bottle of vodka on the bench in among the piles of festy dishes, and stared at Paul's bolognaise.

"Hey, man, where'd you get that from?" he asked.

"Made it," said Paul.

"Yeah, right."

"Nah – I did. You can have some if you want." In the back of his mind, with the bolognaise sweet in his mouth and the spaghetti slipping down his throat, he wished he could've hidden it somehow so no-one else would've wanted any. Or made Ned pay for it. Give me my guitar back, he wanted to say, and you can have some. He looked up at Ned's full bottle of vodka. "Hey, do you a deal," he said. "Swap you the bottle for the spaghetti."

"No way!" said Ned, rinsing out one of the bowls.

"Okay – half the bottle."

"Yeah, whatever," he said, piling spaghetti and sauce into the bowl. "You could've had some anyway – I got it for tonight."

"What's happening tonight?"

“Tania’s party.” Ned sat down next to him and leaned back against the wall.  
“Hey, where’d you learn to cook this good?”

“Mum taught me before we moved in with Gary.”

By the time they got to Tania’s the vodka was more than half gone. Paul was still feeling okay, his limbs relaxed in the dark. He and Ned were laughing about something.

Tania’s place was half lit, and there were people everywhere. The rest of the night came in a series of images: draining the last of Ned’s vodka, the ceiling floating above him, his face hot. This girl he knew vaguely talking to him about something and the curve of her cheek reminding him of a peach. Walking around among a blur of bodies looking for Ned. Glinting towers of blue and pink iced donuts that someone’d got for free, and standing at the table eating donut after donut. Taking a piss in the dark outside next to a bush. The pink glow of Port Kembla. Wanting to go home. Walking back in the dark, opening the front door, craving more bolognaise, the walls sliding with him, the kitchen lino rising and suddenly feeling too sick to move.

He woke up with his head resting in vomit. It was hot. He lifted his face, his mouth bitter and dry, pink and blue and bits of zucchini smearing the lino, his hair sticky with it. His stomach felt like it had vertigo. He forced himself to get up, left the remains of the donuts and the bolognaise where they were and opened the front door. He had to get in the water. He had to get in the surf because he felt like death and the ocean was the only thing that would stop him from dying before he could scrounge up some more money.

At the beach he stripped off his shirt and walked down the sand in his shorts. He dived under a wave and came up shivering. The whitewash of the next swallowed him, scoured the crap off. When he got out at least he could see again, everything was



halfway solid. His gut ached. He needed money. He walked, dripping, through the streets, carrying his shirt. By the time he got back he was dry, and his head was throbbing.

No-one else was home. He couldn't find anything to clean the vomit up with so he used his shirt, then chucked it in the laundry sink. Back in the kitchen, he stood and stared at the stove. He'd forgotten to put the bolognaise in the fridge. The remaining spaghetti had congealed in the pot, and the sauce was still in the pan. When he picked up the bolognaise to put it in the fridge, Paul thought he saw something moving in the pan. He put it back on the stove and looked more closely, picked up a spoon from the bench and lifted up a bit of mince. Underneath, wriggling in the sauce, was a maggot.

He turned his head and retched in the kitchen sink. Nothing came up, and his stomach convulsed again. A bit of spit dribbled out and landed in a pile of bowls full of dirty water in the sink. He slid down the cupboard, shaking with the unfairness of it. His bolognaise was being eaten by squirming maggots. He turned around and punched the thin wood of the cupboard. It cracked, a long fracture in the green paint. He hit it again, kept slamming the door until his fist went through. Splinters caught in his skin as he wrenched away, leaving a gaping hole in the cupboard; and his hand dripped blood onto the lino.

When Ned got back in the afternoon, Paul was starting to go crazy.

"Hey Ned, you got any money?" he asked. Ned owed him, anyway. His guitar was worth way more than three hundred dollars.

"I've only got two bucks," Ned said. "That's all I've got left after last night. And after paying you, remember?"

Paul thought about smashing him in the face. "Ah, come on. I'm desperate. I'll pay you back."

“I told you, I’m broke. Besides, you owe me, anyway.”

“What for?”

“That vodka last night.”

“Fuck off – we swapped, remember? Bolognaise for vodka.”

“What’s up with you?” asked Ned.

“I’m fucken hungry. I’ve got nothing to eat.”

“What happened to that spag bol?”

Paul pushed past Ned to the front door and slammed it shut behind him. He was sweating, shaking, couldn’t think straight. His feet carried him down to the end of the street and he kept walking towards the beach. He sat on the dunes, as far away from any people as possible. There was still a splinter stuck in the back of his hand and he worked at it with blunt nails. He finally got the end of it and yanked it out. It caught on the skin as he pulled, and bits of it were left behind, dark under the skin. It was still hot, hotter than it should be, no breeze. Everything was muggy and oppressive. Where the fuck was he going to get money from? His guitar was gone. He couldn’t think about it. His hand hurt.

Paul lets himself sink into the ocean. He has to keep pulling at the water with his hands to stop himself rising to the surface. It’s still; the water is dark and warm. His lungs are starting to hurt. He opens his mouth to swallow the water. It slides, salty, along his tongue but somewhere at the back of his throat it catches, won’t go down. He tries to make himself swallow, gags, splutters, and then his head’s out in the air, he’s choking and coughing up sea-water, gasping for breath.

And suddenly he’s scared, terrified, of dying. Of the immense darkness at the bottom of the ocean and of the million memories replaying in his head. What if they

don't stop? What if they keep going, on and on, until he can't bear it anymore? What happens when you can't bear anything anymore and you're already dead? Panic rises in his throat and the night closes in on him, pushing him down. The sea is drawing a noose around his neck. The platform has been kicked out from under him and he's dangling there in the ocean trying to keep his head afloat.

In the pink haze of the sky above the steel works he can still see a couple of stars. Paul tries to kick himself free of the noose as the sea licks around his throat, laps over his eyes and nose, slips into his mouth. He takes laboured, painful strokes towards the beach. He has to stop for a while, to breathe, but as soon as his legs stop kicking he begins to sink. The noose is like iron around his neck. He fights it with his arms, pulling himself up and turning onto his back. He swims backstroke for a while. Water splashes him in the face, he starts to feel the swell pick up beneath him. He rolls over again to see how far he is from the shore, and the white foam of breaking waves seems almost close enough to touch. He keeps swimming. Arm over arm, his legs dragging. If he can reach the waves, he'll be alright.

Finally, he's picked up on the crest of a wave and drawn down into it, pulled and tumbled in the whitewash like driftwood. The wave carries him almost to the shore. Paul drags himself through the shallows, gets knocked over and lost in another wave, and begins again.

When he's finally out, he stumbles up the beach to the dunes. Nothing is real. Everything floats in front of him, merges together into strange dark objects. Eventually he collapses on the dunes, the sand still warm from the afternoon. He shivers, claws at his neck, thinking the noose is still there, trailing behind him into the water. He tries to breathe, shifts his head to ease the pain and sucks air into his throat. Lying on the warm sand, he loses himself in the dark.

There's pain, everywhere. Someone is sandpapering his throat. He tries to push them away, but they keep rubbing. Scratch, scratch. Up and down the inside of his throat.

He can't open his eyes.

He's looking for something, going through the skip bins behind the supermarket. There are rotting cabbages, burst cereal boxes, cartons of smashed eggs. What he wants isn't in there, so he closes the lid and moves on to the next, which is full of broken up cardboard boxes. He's getting desperate. He moves on to the last bin, and there it is, sitting on top of a pile of food scraps. A jar full of money. Paul reaches his hand in, but he can't stretch far enough. He balances on the edge and leans towards the jar. It seems to move further away with every new effort he makes, until he's teetering dangerously on the edge of the bin. He reaches out – it's nearly touching his fingertips – shifts further forward on his stomach, and in one sickening moment, he feels himself sliding forward into the muck. His hand sinks into the pile of rotting food next to the jar and he feels something move beside his wrist, crawl all over his hand and up his arm. It's the bolognaise. The bin is full of bolognaise.

Paul sits up suddenly, his face coated in sweat. He is covered in sand. There are grainy bits in his mouth. He spits, and spits again. Not maggots. Don't let them be maggots. The sky is still dark, a rotting pinky grey hanging above Port Kembla. He feels filthy. He'd been looking for something. Searching for it urgently, desperately. He lies back in the sand, exhausted, and stares up at the sky. He just wants to feel okay. He wants a rest, needs something to take away what's going on inside his head. He's missing something important. Something that leaves an aching space in his stomach, his head, every bloody corner of his insides. He just needs the money. That's the main

thing. If he can get the money somehow, he'll be fine. A half-remembered image jogs itself in Paul's brain. The skip bins. The bolognaise. Reaching for the jar. That's where there's money! Granny. That jam jar in the cupboard where she used to keep the guitar. He couldn't ask her for it – couldn't let her see him like this, but he could always just borrow it, without her knowing. She never locks the back door. If he goes now, while it's still dark, before she wakes up, she'll never know.

Paul stands. Once he gets that money, everything will be alright. He walks up the beach to the taps behind the surf club, sticks his whole head under the tap and takes great gulps of water to try and wet the dryness in his throat. He turns his head and lets the water pour over his hair, down his neck. He doesn't have a shirt on. He can't remember why he doesn't have a shirt. He needs that jar.

Paul starts walking. He walks for a long time. Hours and hours of bitumen and houses that have turned off their lights. Traffic lights stand up bright and strange against the dark sky. Lone cars with dazzling lights slip past. He forgets where he's going and his feet carry him through street after street, out towards the mountain.

He stumbles, his foot shot through with pain. The blurred bitumen becomes suddenly clear, he can see the trees by the side of the road, their leaves glinting in the glow of the streetlight. A piece of broken glass has sliced his heel. He sits down on the wet grass beside the road and pulls it out, blood smearing the skin. Paul stares at his foot. The sharp pain has woken him up, and he remembers where he's going. He stands, limps to the end of the street and turns towards Granny's place. He's not too far away. The blood congeals on his heel and the wound gets blocked with dirt. The pain keeps him alert. It is quiet, the air muggy and still, the mountain dark in front of him. The streetlights throw a strange glow over everything, and Paul, out of habit, tries to move in the shadows. He slows as he approaches Granny's front yard, uneasy about

breaking into the house and just taking the money. There's no other way, though, he thinks, as the scent of her roses reaches him. He can give it back once he gets his shit together. It's just a loan.

The house is sitting there, old and friendly, the rose bushes spread out before the fibro wall. The two front windows look at him through the dark, and Paul's uneasiness grows. He creeps in between Granny's car and the side wall, through the open carport and into the backyard. Once he gets the money, everything will be alright. He steps onto the porch. The smell of roses is overpowering. It makes him think of her, the laugh-wrinkles around her eyes and her green polyester dress. He hesitates in front of the screen door. Granny's chair is sitting over in the corner with her radio on the tiles next to it. It's just a loan. He stands there, his hand stretched out towards the door. He's not stealing it. He'll give it back.

Lowering the handle of the screen door he opens it towards him, slowly, so it doesn't squeak. Very quietly, he slips inside, and shuts the door gently behind him. He treads lightly down the hall, avoiding the squeaky floorboards, and turns to the cupboard. All the familiar objects – Granny's armchair, the couch over by the window, the low shelves full of books, the cupboard against the wall – are strange in the dark. The curtains are half-open; the armchair casts a distorted shadow in the faint light.

He opens the cupboard. It's too dark to see anything – the open door blocks out any light from the window. He reaches up to the top shelf and runs his unsteady fingers along the rows of jars, wondering how he's going to be able to find the right one. He picks one up and holds it out past the cupboard door. He stares at it, willing his eyes to see. It's full of cotton reels. Shit. He puts it back and picks up another. This one is full of nails, or screws, he can't tell which. Sliding it back on the shelf, he moves on to another. Feathers. It's so hard to see. He shakes a fourth jar, thinking that he should be

able to tell by the sound of it whether it's got money in it or not. The jar doesn't make a sound. He feels for the next one. It rattles – the sound of coins hitting the side of the jar, muffled by notes? He holds it up to the light to try and make out what's inside.

There's a creak in the hallway. Paul stops. He looks up at the space where the hall gapes into the darkness, terrified. There's the sound of muffled footsteps. Granny's slippers. And then she's there, in the doorway, a dark shadow stepping into the living room, a glass of water glinting in her hand. She pauses; her head turns towards the shadow of the cupboard door. He can't see her face. He has to get out before she knows it's him. Clutching the jar, he makes a run for the hallway. He misjudges how far away Granny is standing and stumbles into her on his way past, feels his shoulder connect with hers. His mind has gone blank. He keeps running, fumbles with the front door and throws it open, bangs against the screen door and leaves it swaying behind him as he runs out onto the porch, around the back, through the carport and onto the street. Front yards pass by in a blur as he stumbles over tree roots, across the road and onto the other side. The jar is clinking as he runs. As he approaches the expressway he slows, and can't help but look down to see how much money is in the jar.

There is no money. The jar is full of buttons. Red ones, brown ones, blue ones with silver trim, clear pearly ones with four neat holes, a bunny-rabbit one near the top that's staring at him. Paul stops in the middle of the road. He didn't even get the money. Staring at the jar, he feels as though he's crawling with maggots. They're burrowing into the hand that's holding the jar, squirming up into his arm and down into his gut. He stares at his hand, horrified. Drawing his arm back, he throws the jar down the street.

The glass smashes as it hits the bitumen, and buttons scatter out over the road. Paul feels something hit his foot. It's the yellow rabbit button. Moving slowly, as though caught in a thick mist, he reaches down to pick it up.

Up ahead, dawn is starting to colour the sky.



*Hetty is standing at the fridge, unpacking the groceries. She slides a rockmelon onto the third shelf, adjusting the cheese and the jars of mulberry jam to make room for it. It is one of those warm summer days just before Christmas, and she's bought a ham that fills the entire bottom shelf. A breeze flows through the open door and wraps itself around her ankles, flaps her dress against her legs. She hears the screen-door open, and Paul's feet slapping the floorboards as he runs down the hall to the kitchen.*

*"Look!" he calls.*

*She closes the door and sees him standing there barefoot, grinning, with her gardening gloves dangling halfway to his elbows, secateurs in one hand and a yellow rose in the other.*

*"It didn't bite!" he says.*

*She kneels down and he runs for her, lands in her arms and the thorns dig into her bare arm; the gloves are rough against her neck, his hair brushes her chin. He stays there for a few seconds, long enough for the thorns to break her skin, for her to feel his breath on her neck, before he wriggles free and hands it to her. He runs down the hall, looking back and laughing before he goes outside, one of the gloves falling off on the way. She stays there for a moment, looking after him and down at the rose, at the few petals that have fallen off onto the floor, rubbing her arm. It's worth it, she thinks. Everything. It's all worth it, for this.*

Beep-beep. Beep-beep.

There's a drip attached to her arm, a small piece of plastic inside her vein, taped onto her skin. She knows it is there, wants to scratch at it, pull it out and throw it away.

She wants the machine to stop making that incessant noise. She wants to be able to think clearly, to stop feeling so sick. She wants a radio and some pickled onions, a newspaper.

*Hetty is reading the paper at her kitchen table, hands wrapped around a mug of tea. Someone bashes on the screen door and then her son is inside, thumping into the kitchen, his eyes sparking flames.*

*“She’s gone, Mum. She just left, didn’t clean up or anything, took her stuff, chucked all my gear in the bin out the back, didn’t tell me where she was going.”*

*“Sit down, Phil.” Hetty has a calmness inside her that blankets over the fear, contains it. She should have done something. She knew what was wrong when they came to pick Paul up the other day, the car leaving skid marks in the grass in the back yard as it pulled to a halt. She saw the way Phil stepped out and didn’t wait for Eva to follow. She heard Eva slam the door, and watched them walk towards the tiled porch where she was sitting in her cane chair next to Paul, who was taking apart her old radio. Phil smiled at her from a distance, so she couldn’t see his eyes. He crouched down to Paul when he reached the porch and ran a hand over his head.*

*“What are you doing, Mr. Electrician?”*

*“Fixing Granny’s radio.” Paul showed him the bits he had pulled apart, the way things fitted together and the small screwdriver he had been using.*

*Hetty watched Phil watching Paul, and saw that he was not really listening. Saw him glance up as Eva walked slowly across the grass and stepped up onto the porch. They didn’t look directly at each other. Phil’s eyes slid over her before he stared back down at the pieces of radio Paul was holding out to him. Eva’s eyes clutched for him, sent out tentacles that pulled him towards her and repelled him at the same time. That’s*

*when Hetty knew. It was Eva's look that gave it away, and she knew that Eva knew, too.*

*She should have done something to stop it, told him to think of Paul before he thought of himself and that woman he was fooling around with, whoever she was. Told him to watch out for Eva, for that look in her eyes that meant she wanted him desperately and hated him at the same time.*

*Phil drags another chair out. The floor creaks as he sits.*

*"What happened?"*

*"She's gone," he says. "I'd never have left Paul with her if I'd known." He slams his fist down on her open newspaper, onto a picture of an old lady holding a cat. The letters of the headline stand out black and tall as his hand comes up. Pets for Pensioners. Phil's fist falls on the picture again, beating the old woman and her cat into the table.*

*Slowly, the realisation of what her son has just said works its way under Hetty's blanket of calm and floods into her stomach, churning and eddying in whirlpools.*

*He's gone. Paul is gone.*

*"How are you feeling, Hetty?"*

*She doesn't know what is real. Whether this dry mouth is hers, or this head, which is throbbing like someone's sliced into it with an old butter knife. It must be during the day sometime; the light is bright behind her closed eyes.*

*Someone takes her hand, wraps long cool fingers around hers. "We're looking for him, Hetty."*

“We’ll find him,” says another voice, and Hetty knows who it is. Their names flash across her mind and even though she can’t open her eyes she can see them, Annette sitting beside her bed and Peter standing on the other side.

“We’ll contact the police, if we have to. He can’t be too hard to find.”

She doesn’t know about that. People can hide themselves if they want to, can disappear so they’re impossible to trace.

Bitumen, rolling under his feet. Shifting, sucking him towards it like the sea, tumultuous. He stumbles, his feet burning. The highway is molten, a tongue of lava reaching for him. The air sucks past and he's thrust backwards. There's a white line beside him that follows the contours of the swell. He traces it with his feet, walking it like a tightrope. He'll fall if he steps off, be attacked by the monstrous sea-creatures rearing their heads behind him. The line blurs as he takes step after step. Somewhere behind him are Granny's buttons, sprayed out across the road.

He hears a horn, blaring out behind him, and for a moment he thinks there must be a lighthouse, that he must be heading for the rocks. Then there's a screech of brakes, and a car pulls over in front of him, the sun glinting off the roof racks. He's on Mount Ousley. Running along the side of the road. He's at the car door, and it's opening, a man is leaning across the seat and saying something he can't hear. He stops. There is no lighthouse, no ocean, only the road. There's a roaring in his head, so loud Paul can hardly hear what he says.

"You want a lift?"

He just stares. Sees that the man has a brown cardigan draped over the passenger seat, that has cream buttons. One of them is cracked.

"Get in, mate, get in!" The man's voice is urgent, straining at the seams.

Behind him, he sees a truck bearing down on them. He stumbles into the car, reaches for the door and slams it shut. He's sitting on vinyl. The car is moving and instead of the sound of the sea pounding in his head he can hear Bob Marley singing out of the tape deck. The engine shrieks as it pulls them up the mountain away from the truck looming behind.

He leans his head back against the seat. Everything moves, shifts, turns black as he closes his eyes. He opens them instead, stares out the window at the bush. Trees rush past, the sky is bright, the sun shines in through the open window.

“That was close.”

Paul doesn’t reply. He can’t say anything, anyway. His tongue won’t work. It’s dry, sandy, lying like a beach in his mouth. He coughs, pain tightening his chest. When he’s finished, he rests his head back against the seat.

“Are you okay?”

Paul looks across at him and sees him properly for the first time. He has greying hair, a beard, a flat gut that doesn’t stretch the buttons on his shirt. No, he’s not fucking okay, he thinks. But he doesn’t say it, can’t move his tongue of sand. He closes his eyes and wants to vomit, his stomach moving faster than the car. The road is part ocean, he thinks, and this guy doesn’t even know it. He can’t see the monsters bearing down on them from every side, staring through button-eyes.

“Where are you headed?”

He looks out the window at the bush and forces himself to think. Where is he going? Away. Just away. Up north. No-one will find him there. The ocean is different up there, too. It might not recognise him with its soft blue and bright green, its warmth and its jellyfish, its coral. He forces his tongue to move, feels it thick in his throat as he speaks.

“Up north.”

In the space between the gearbox and the ashtray there’s a small piece of white coral, several supermarket docketts, a pen and a name badge. Jim, it says. In capital letters. It has a small logo in the corner, and he twists his head to see better. The Salvos. He’s met a Salvo before, when they were living in Rockhampton. He lived

across the road, and came over every couple of weeks to mow the lawn for his mum. She thought he wanted something from her at the beginning, but he never asked for anything. Just walked the mower across the road on a Saturday afternoon after he'd finished doing his own lawn, and started on theirs. The first time, he'd knocked on the door and asked if his mum wanted him to mow the lawn. She told him no, that she couldn't afford to pay him, but he did it anyway. Paul watched him from the front steps, and a few weeks later, the Salvo let him have a go. Taught him how to pull the cord for the starter motor, and made him wear shoes as he pushed the mower, bouncing, over the grass.

"When was the last time you ate?"

"I can't remember."

"At your feet," he says, "there's a salad roll and some fruit. There's some water, too, if you like. My wife always leaves full bottles of water rolling around under the seats. Drives me nuts."

Paul reaches down and picks up a plastic container, opens the lid and sees the roll. It has sesame seeds on top, and for a moment he thinks he's going to cry. It is soft in his fingers. He bites into it, chews, swallows, and is so hungry as the first bite reaches his stomach that he eats and eats, the roll slipping in chunks down his throat. When he's finished he finds one of the bottles of water and drinks in long mouthfuls, washing the sand away from his mouth, his tongue.

"Thanks," he says, putting the lid back on the bottle.

"You look like you need some help, mate."

His reflex is automatic. "I just need some money." As he says it his stomach convulses, he feels bile rising into his throat and the roll turning over inside him, churning. The car, his legs in front of him, everything is shifting again, moving so fast

he can't see clearly. He feels the car slow, hears the spray of gravel as it pulls off the road. It stops and he's floating, pulling down on the handle of the door, pushing it open, trying to stand up on the gravel and stumbling away from the car out into the bright sun glaring off the ground. He vomits. It's as though someone has reached into his mouth, down his throat and into his gut, and is pulling everything out. He still retches even when there's nothing left. The hand scrapes away inside him, bringing up green bile, slimy and bitter. The sun burns the back of his neck; gravel grazes his knees.

When his insides are all out in front of him, lying there in a pathetic heap streaking the rocks, he stares at them, breathes in the smell that's like rotting flesh and thinks that this all that's left of him. Sprayed out on the ground. The rest is just a hollow, a great dark cave surrounded by body. He's balanced on his hands and knees; some of it has splattered his arms. He can't move. A shadow falls over him; there's the crunching of footsteps, a bottle of water glinting in the sun. He pushes himself up with his arms, leans back on his knees. Jim is crouched next to him, holding out the water, the lid off.

Paul takes it, pours water over his arms, fills up his mouth and spits. Washes it out again and again, and then drinks. The water trickles down his throat, and he can feel it moving down into his stomach. All the way, like a creek. His neck is burning and he realises he has no shirt on. He doesn't know how he got up here with no shirt, kneeling by the side of the road and handing some guy his empty bottle. The bottle has a blue lid, he sees, as a hand that isn't his screws it back on.

"Are you right to get back in the car?"

Paul stands, treads the couple of paces back to the open door, and sits. Lifts one leg, and then the other, back into the car and shuts the door. He closes his eyes as the engine starts and they head back onto the highway, leaving most of him behind, baking onto the gravel.



He can't do this anymore. The thought comes to him with a clarity that takes hold of him, his skin shrinking with it. He sees Granny, alone in her house in the dark. He sees the buttons and the bolognaise, feels the money sweating in his hands as he ran from the ATM, as he handed over the guitar. His fingers are running over each other, his hands won't stop clenching together. He feels like he's lost control of his body. Out the window he sees houses. They pull up at a set of lights.

"Have you got anywhere to go?" asks Jim. "Anyone expecting you?"

"No."

"Are you heading north for any reason?"

That's what he'd said, wasn't it. That he was going north. "I used to live up there," he says. He shivers, his skin sticking to the seat.

"You're still going to have to face whatever you're running away from up there," he says. "It won't just disappear." The lights go green, and he accelerates.

Paul doesn't say anything. His back is stuck to the seat; even his feet are wet with sweat, and he's cold. Freezing. Shivering here all hollowed out, and even the sun through the window feels cold.

Jim keeps talking. "You know there's a rehab in Surry Hills?"

He doesn't respond. The words barely reach him. They glance off the side of his head, which feels as hard and dense as stone.

"If you want to get your life together," he says, "that's a good place to go. It'll get you off the street, anyway."

Paul struggles to grasp what he's saying. What life, he thinks. "What do they do?" he forces himself to ask, when the car slows at another set of lights.

"Help you get off whatever you're on," says Jim. "A friend of mine works there."

They're getting closer to the city, the buildings standing up tall in the morning haze. Paul thinks about turning up somewhere where people are going to try and tell him what to do. He thinks about going up north, about ending up on a beach somewhere in the tropics where he doesn't have to worry about anything.

"I want to go north," he says.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"I don't just want to drop you on the street somewhere, kid. You need help."

They're approaching the centre of the city, and Paul is starting to feel claustrophobic, the buildings closing in on him, hemming him in, blocking out the sky. He doesn't want to stay here. He thinks about the places he lived in Queensland: Cairns, Townsville, Emerald, Mackay. Mackay. The caravan park at Mackay. He'll go there. Go and visit the old grey donkey with matted fur that used to live among people's caravans, poking his head inside tents and nuzzling up to them as they ate breakfast. He'll visit the donkey and go swimming at the beach lined with coconut palms. Pick up a couple of coconuts and break them open on the bitumen, salvage the juice and chew on the white flesh. He doesn't know how he's going to get there, but that's where he wants to go. He could catch the train, if he had some money.

He looks at the name badge, rattling next to the coral and the pen with no lid. This guy, Jim, might give him the money for a ticket. Maybe. If he's like the guy who used to mow their lawn. He hates doing it, but he's so desperate he opens his mouth and asks.

"Could I have some money for a ticket?"

"Pardon?"

He says it again, louder, feels the words echoing in his head after he finishes speaking. "...money for a ticket?...for a ticket?"

They pause at an intersection, and the man, Jim, looks across at Paul. "Where to?"

"Mackay," he says. "I want to go to Mackay."

He follows Jim into the station, enters the cavernous space echoing with trains, hurrying feet, ticket machines. People stare, fix their gaze on him as they pass until he's surrounded by eyes, faces, hundreds of them following him as he walks in the small oval of space that ends in front of his feet and glides forward along the dirty floor with each step. He focuses on Jim's canvas shoes and keeps his head down.

When they reach the ticket office Jim approaches the counter and asks the girl sitting behind it if he can buy a ticket to Mackay. While they were still in the car, he told Paul that he wasn't going to give him any money, but because he didn't feel right about leaving him stranded, he'd buy him a ticket himself. There are posters tacked neatly to the wall behind the counter. The Kuranda railway, winding up through the rainforest to the tableland behind Cairns. Uluru, squat and reddy-purple in the sunset. A palm tree leaning over two blue and white deck chairs, set on fine sand a few metres away from clear green water. Train and bus timetables.

The girl stops tapping at her computer and says, "You'll have to change in Brisbane." She looks up. "I'll check availability for you – when would you like to leave?"

Her question dissipates, doesn't mean anything to him. Shining there in her dark hair are two pink rabbits. They're sitting on a hairclip, long ears dangling, staring up at him with silver eyes. He puts his hand into his pocket. His fingers graze the button and he squeezes it against his palm. The small piece of plastic tattoos his skin. Eyes, ears, thigh-bone, paw.

Jim is speaking. "There are no seats until the day after tomorrow. Do you still want the ticket?"

The other two rabbits, the pink ones huddled in her hair, are watching him. They can see Granny's buttons scattered over the bitumen among splintered glass, bright in the dawn. Paul drags his eyes away. Still they accuse him, waiting on the edge of his vision as Jim's offer hangs somewhere in front of him. His skin prickles, tightens. He is cold, his fingers clammy, forehead humid with sweat. He can't go. They're holding him here with their gaze, those bloody rabbits.

"Do you still want to go?" Jim asks again, and Paul hears the words as if he's standing way across on the other side of the station.

He shakes his head, no. He can't, not now.

The floor vibrates beneath the bare skin of his feet as they walk back. The XPT is just pulling out, its blue sides shining as it moves beyond the shadow of the roof and into the sun. It'll be heading up the coast: Newcastle, Coffs Harbour, Casino, Brisbane. He feels lost as the train picks up speed, the last carriage carrying with it the grey donkey, the coconuts, the muggy warmth of the tropics as it disappears around a bend in the tracks. Outside on the concrete his feet burn and he squints in the shock of the sunlight, follows Jim to the car and gets in. For a moment the seat feels familiar, as though he's always been here, with the windows down and heat radiating off the dashboard, the smell of damp beach-towels stewing in the back.

Jim looks at him before he starts the engine. "I'm going to take you to the rehab," he says.

Paul is still holding the button, the rabbit caught in his palm. He stares out the window at the hazy blue sky beyond the buildings. He's adrift, sitting here in the car as Jim drives away from the station. The name badge blurs in front of him, and the bit of coral next to it looks like a dead tree, bleached white by the sun. The car jerks to a stop a few minutes later, and he looks out the window at a tall brick building with a large

doorway and bars on all the windows. It looks like a jail. They've pulled up behind a shiny black car, its boot open. A couple of guys walk out of the doorway, carrying a coffin. They edge down the steps, slide it into the back of the car and shut the boot.

Jim is saying something to him.

"What?" Paul only catches the last couple of words. He's staring at the hearse pulling away from the curb.

"Come and I'll introduce you to my mate," he says.

"Is this it?"

"It's not as bad as it looks." Jim gets out of the car, leans back in at Paul still sitting there. "If you don't like it, you can leave whenever you want."

"What, in a box?"

"Look – I can leave you here, on the street, or I can take you in to meet my mate. But you're going to have to make up your mind soon, because I've got to get to work."

It's the first time Paul has sensed any impatience in his voice. He opens the door and steps out onto the pavement. The sun reflects off the roof of the old brown car and he has to squint to see the expression on Jim's face. Glare and heat combined make his head too heavy, his stomach too light. He's the wrong way up. Top heavy. Like the mulberry tree after Granny got him to prune it because she'd found a snake under there. She'd been standing under the tree with half an icecream container full of mulberries when she looked down and saw a red-belly slithering out from under the tree, right between her old blue terry-towelling slippers. After he'd pruned the tree it stood up against the fence, stripped bare to the ground with just a hat of leaves and branches stretching out at shoulder height and above. It had looked like it was about to tip over.

Paul leans against the car to keep himself upright. He doesn't have a choice.

It is cold inside the building. He hears kitchen noises, tables scraping across dining room floors and pots clanging somewhere in the distance. There are a couple of old cushioned chairs near the reception desk and a lady with short grey hair standing behind it. It smells of disinfectant, reminds him of a hospital.

Jim says something to the lady behind the desk and Paul sits down on one of the chairs. He shivers, concentrates on sitting upright, on not falling sideways off the chair. The lighting is bright, and the hallway, lined with office doors, runs deeper into the building. He can't think.

Jim sits down beside him and asks if he's okay. He doesn't answer. He looks down at his knees and sees instead dark water, bright stars and the glow of whitewash near the shore, feels himself surfacing, spluttering into the night, mucousy water running from his nose. His throat is constricted, the air coming in gasps. The noose drags behind him as he crawls up the beach, under the rotting Port Kembla sky.

Someone shakes him, hands warm on his shoulders. Jim is standing there with another man, old, in a white uniform with red bands on the shoulders.

"This is my mate," he says. "Major Thomson."

Paul gets up, sways, stumbles back against the chair. They catch him, steady him on his feet, speak past him to each other. There's a pot plant over in the corner, growing up green between the walls. The kitchen noises increase and the hallway swells with people, screened off from him by the alcove created by the two men.

"You have to have an interview with a counsellor before they'll let you stay," says Jim.

He nods. A counsellor. His mum tried to send him to a counsellor after she started going to her shrink. He was a nice guy, but Paul never knew what to say to him. He wore suits, like Gary. Grey suits and stripy ties.

Jim touches him on the shoulder. "They'll explain everything to you in the interview." He takes a step back, smiles. "At least you're not dead, eh?" He shakes hands with his mate the Major and walks out into the sunshine. The hall is empty, gaping behind Paul into the building. He remembers the hearse, sees the space where Jim's back receded until he stepped out into open air, and thinks that he's crazy. He's walked in here voluntarily, let himself be handed over by a guy he doesn't even know.

"Come this way," says the Major. He's got grey hair, cut neatly above his ears so the skin shows below the hairline.

He doesn't have to go. He could walk out of here right now if he wanted to. Walk out into the sunshine, turn the corner and lose himself in the streets where the light doesn't reach, down between the highrises. The day is so bright, falling in through the doorway and landing in a rectangle on the carpet, that he doesn't want to go deeper into the building. He sways, his eyes caught by the light, unable to move his legs or his arms or even open his mouth to speak, and then he feels the air giving way, his body awkward, lethargic, his head like a bunch of weights piled on his shoulders, grating against each other, metal on metal, until one slides out from underneath the others and he's dragged down among the tumbling disks. He doesn't even feel the floor when he lands.

He is standing on a beach, the sand silver between his toes, the ocean reaching further than he can see, wet with light. Behind him the sun is so near, its blaze so strong, that it warms his back and throws his own shadow before him, cut clear against the sand. He walks forward into the shallows, water warm around his ankles, his knees. It is flat and clear; the sun refracts as it hits the surface, playing over the sand in loose, rippling lines of light. It is so quiet the only thing he can hear is the crunch of sand tumbling over itself, caught in the water as it runs up along the length of the beach and



eases out again. He feels dirty, wants to scrub himself until his body is free of the grit and sweat that has solidified like armour on his skin. He dives. Swings his arms out, and in that instant feels the glow of sun on his side, sand crumbling away from his toes, air rushing into his lungs. The ocean folds over him, and for a moment he's suspended, moving through the green depths into shafts of light.

Paul feels a hand beneath his head and the hall appears through the darkness. He rolls over, convulses, the wrenching in his gut tightening every sinew in his body. He feels like he did that day he looked back and saw his dad disappearing behind the dunes, the sand stinging his legs. Abandoned. Being pulled somewhere he doesn't want to go. For a moment the touch of the sun lingers, the utter quiet. Then the floor comes into focus and he retches, brings up nothing. Starts to shake. People on either side help him up, support his arms, take him to a chair and sit him down. A glass of water is put into his hand and he drinks, spilling some of it over the edge and onto his leg. It trickles over his thigh as the rest of it drains down his throat. Someone wraps a strong arm around his back and walks with him down the hallway. He recognises the Major's shiny black shoes, and doesn't resist. Just goes wherever he's being led. If the Major let him go, the hall would swallow him like quicksand.

A door is opened and he's guided inside, sat down on a chair. He sees the Major's shoes walk out the door, and shivers. Another man steps in, sits in a chair opposite him, rustles some paper. Paul looks up. He's a big guy with a wild grey beard, bright blue eyes. He looks like he's just stepped out of the bush.

"My name's Murray," he says. "Murray Bowles." He sits down in a chair next to the desk, opposite Paul. "What's yours?"

"Paul," he says.

"Okay Paul, I'm going to ask you a couple of questions – standard ones we ask everyone who comes in."

His big hands look awkward holding the pen and sheet of paper. Paul thinks that he doesn't look like a counsellor. No grey suit, no stripy tie. He looks more like Peter,

the guy who taught him to play the guitar, and because of that, without thinking about it, he trusts him. He's past lying, anyway. He feels too sick to care. And so he answers everything.

"What have you been using?"

"Heroin." The question strikes him as ridiculous. Irrelevant. As though it really doesn't matter. It could be anything. The point is that there's nothing in him now, and that last night he broke into that little old fibro house with roses spread out the front, looking for money.

"Anything else?" he asks.

"I dunno – pot, alcohol..."

"When was the last time you used?"

"A couple of days ago."

"How long have you been using?"

The questions continue until he feels like time has shifted and rearranged itself, and he's been here for days with this counsellor who doesn't look like a counsellor.

"We're nearly there," he says eventually. Just a couple more questions and then you can interrogate me for a while." He smiles. "Why do you want to do the program?"

Paul's mind goes blank. He stares at the big guy in front of him and can't think of anything to say. Why is he here? He'd wanted to go and see a grey donkey in Mackay and he'd ended up here instead. With a little yellow rabbit button in his pocket and no money.

"I've got nowhere else to go."

"Okay," he says. "And why should we let you stay?"

He shrugs. "I dunno."

The counsellor waits, watching him. The silence grows, hovers in the office until Paul's ears ring with it. With great effort, he dredges the words up from way down deep, up from his gut. Up from where he'd thought he had nothing left, after he vomited that salad roll out on the side of the highway. He looks away. His eyes unfocus and he stares past the ceiling, right through it to pink-grey sky, feels sand stuck to his face and the terror of grainy maggots eating away at his tongue.

"Because if I leave here now I'll probably end up dead," he says. He looks back at the counsellor. "And then this shit that's in my head will keep on going and going but I'll never wake up because I'm trapped there. And you can't kill yourself once you're already dead."

He is given a pair of pyjamas, a towel, a bright red dressing gown, and is shown to the showers after the interview. He stands there shivering as the water slips down his body, burning his skin. It pools around his feet and swirls down the drain. Steam rises, is caught by the ceiling and collects like mist over his head. He sways there in the reddish darkness behind closed eyes, face turned towards the gushing water. He crosses his arms to try to stop shivering, bends his head, hunches over so water glances off his back and runs down his legs.

Someone knocks on the shower door, tells him he has to get out. Paul keeps his eyes closed against the white shower walls and ignores the voice outside the door. He calls again. He calls three times, and finally Paul opens his eyes and reaches out his hand to turn off the taps. Immediately the water stops, he begins to shake. The muscles in his arms tense, burn, as he dries himself. The towel feels like it's made of sandpaper. He steps into the pyjamas, accidentally treads in a puddle and one of the ends flaps

damply around his ankle. He pulls the shirt over his head, wraps himself in the dressing gown. It is red. Bright red.

The man waiting for him outside the shower block is clean-shaven, and is wearing a Salvo's uniform. He smiles at Paul from behind round glasses and leads him down the corridor into a room full of beds.

"This is the hospital wing," he says. "You'll be here for a couple of days, while you detox, and then you'll join the other guys."

He is given a bed near a barred window. About half the beds are full, red dressing gowns draped over the ends. An old man with grey hair and missing teeth lies on one side of him, and another guy with tats covering his arms and chest is stretched out on the other. Everything reeks of disinfectant.

"The nurse is over there if you need anything." The Salvo with the round glasses points out a man wearing blue trousers and a white shirt. "And dinner's in an hour. When the bell rings, just follow the others down to the dining room."

"Okay." He pulls back the blankets, eases himself down, sinks into the mattress. Drawing his knees against his dressing-gowned chest, he tries to stop the nausea. He closes his eyes and lies between the sheets sweating, his legs aching, trying not to think. Granny appears in the darkness, sewing a brown button onto her woolen cardigan. Her wrinkled fingers push the needle into the wool and pull it out, joining the two buttonholes together with thick brown thread. He'd chewed the button off when he was a kid, in the car as they were driving home from the shopping centre. He was cold, and she had wrapped him in the scratchy wool, and he had chewed at the buttons because he was shivering and it made him feel warmer. When the button came loose between his teeth, he opened his mouth and it dropped into his hand. He didn't want to tell her, and closed his fist tightly around it. When they got home, he held on to it until lunch time,

when Granny asked him if he'd hurt his hand. By that time, his fingers were so stiff that they did hurt, and he nodded, mute.

"Let me have a look," she said, and he let her take his hand and prise the fingers open, one by one, until the guilty button lay there in his red palm, chipped and with a frayed end of brown wool still attached.

"How did that get there?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Did you pull it off?"

He shook his head, too scared to look up at her face.

She picked it out of his hand, and the wet piece of wool slipped out between the holes. She bent down to pick it up off the floor. "Did you *chew* it off?" she asked.

He nodded.

Granny started to laugh. She picked up his hand and rubbed it between hers, warming the fingers out of their numbness. "You silly chicken," she said, and he'd watched her sew the button back on, the cardigan spread out on her lap.

He presses his head against the pillow, tries to throw out the image of her sitting there in her armchair, fixing his mistake. She loved those buttons. He'd seen her one afternoon sifting through them on the round kitchen table where she'd cleared space for them by piling up the newspapers in a corner and balancing the radio on top. She'd shown him a blue one with silver trim that had been passed down through the family and had belonged to some distant relative in France more than a hundred years ago. A dark green plastic one that had fallen off a pair of his grandfather's workpants. The yellow rabbit that she had bought when he was born, to sew onto something she said she never got around to making.

What if she finds them? Goes for her walk in the morning and sees them flung out across the road, cracked and dirty? All her hundreds of buttons, and the rabbit button missing. Squatting in the pocket of his dressing gown, where he put it after his shower. What if she knows it was him? If she rings the cops, and they fingerprint the door? He rolls over, the room comes into focus and he realises that they'll be able to find him, won't they, now he's in the system because that counsellor made him show his Medicare card which means he'll be on their books and the cops will be able to trace him. He's broken his mum's first rule: don't go to any kind of authority. Don't give anyone your address. If someone wants to track you down, give them a false name. Never tell the truth about who you are, where you've come from. But he'd had to, because they wouldn't let him stay without his card. His card that was in his wallet which was coated with salt and spilling sand, that he had pulled out of his pocket when the counsellor asked for it, without thinking. Don't ring the cops, he thinks, and wills her to forget it, to pretend it never happened. To forget about him, because he's not worth it. The handle of the screen door had been loose as he pressed it down; it had opened so easily, so smoothly on its hinges. She should have been in bed. Asleep, not padding down the hall in slippers that glowed white in the moonlight.

He rolls over, the dressing gown folding under his body so the mattress morphs into rocky outcrops and sunken dunes. His feet are freezing. Disoriented in this room full of strange men, he shuts himself away, tries to burrow into the bed so he can't see or hear anything.

When he wakes it is dark and he is surrounded by snoring, wheezing men, squeaking bed-springs, guys muttering in their sleep. He pulls himself free of blankets and out of bed, his throat dry. He's hungry and his skull is squeezing in on itself, fracturing just

above both eyes so pain throbs back into his head. Over in the corner there's a nurse, sitting in a slab of light. Paul walks through the shadows towards him, the dressing gown a thick weight on his shoulders, flapping around his legs. His pyjamas catch under his feet and he stumbles, hitches them up.

The nurse gives him a glass of water and a couple of Panadol. After he's made the long trip back to his bed he swallows the tablets and stretches out on top of the blankets. He stares at the ceiling. As if Panadol is going to do anything. Won't help him get to sleep, won't take away his headache. If he had some money, he'd be able to fall asleep. Painlessly, freely, without effort. He doesn't want to be here, lying here in this room full of restless guys, hungry and awake, shivering.

He longs for something familiar. The sound of the surf, reaching in through his open window, his board. Which he doesn't own anymore anyway, because he sold it too, before Ned bought his guitar. So all that's left in his room is his mattress, and those bloody cockroaches that crawl around the wooden floor, scuttling under cracks in the skirting board. Ned and Julie won't care that he's gone – they'll probably think he's taken off down the coast to see Josh.

The room is getting lighter, the traffic picking up outside. A loudspeaker crackles and the Muslim call to prayer is chanted out across the city. When the bell finally sounds through the hospital wing and the lights are switched on, Paul is wrapped tightly in his dressing-gown, pillow discarded on the floor, the call to prayer still echoing in his head.

He has breakfast in the dining room with everyone else. He sits at a table close to the door and stares at his cornflakes, lifts the spoon to his mouth and watches the milk spill over the side into the bowl. It's cold and slippery and as it slides along the back of his



tongue he gags. Around him the room is full of noise: chairs scraping along the floor, cutlery clinking against plates and bowls, a bunch of guys laughing somewhere behind him. He focuses on the bowl, on the table, on raising the spoon to his mouth.

Afterwards he walks back up the carpeted stairs and turns into the hospital wing. By the time he's reached the toilets he's sweating and aching, foot burning, stomach heaving, and it all comes back up. Floats there in the toilet bowl in chunks. Kneeling there with his hands gripping the toilet seat he feels it rise in the back of his throat and dribble out his nose. He stands, flushes it away, and stumbles out of the cubicle. Washes his hands, sees himself in the mirror. He shivers, his hands clumsy as he turns off the tap. He doesn't believe he's here. He doesn't believe it's him, standing in this bathroom with cubicle doors opening behind him and his eyes staring back at him and out at the room beyond. Turning the tap back on, he splashes his face with water, cleans out his mouth. Stares up at the mirror again and sees the water dripping from his chin. He wants to go home. He is filled with such an urgent longing, he has to hold onto the basin to stop himself falling. He doesn't understand: he doesn't even have a home. It's not the house beside the train line he wants, or Gary's place with the thick carpets and massive television. It's not even Granny's house, with its pastel-green fibro walls and brown tiled porch. It's Granny. Granny herself, and him enfolded in her hug as a little kid, smelling her cigarettes and her roses.

He's walking out of the bathroom then, the tiles passing under his bare feet, into the corridor onto blue carpet, and along to the alcove near the stairs where there's a payphone attached to the wall. He's lifting the handle and punching in the numbers and wanting so badly for nothing to have happened and for the walls enclosing him to disappear and for him to be there with her a long time ago before all of this happened. In her lounge-room, with wide windows opening out onto the brown lawn, the mulberry

tree bright green against the back fence. Sitting at the foot of her armchair, the floorboards stained dark, worn lighter around the entrance to the hall. The wooden bookshelf, the jars and jars of yellow and peach and mauve roses.

The phone rings. The sound reaches him from a distance, and in a moment everything comes into sharp focus: the blue metal payphone, the cream walls, his aching foot. The second ring tone fades as he draws the hand-piece away from his ear, and cuts out abruptly as he slams it down. He can't do it. Not now. Not after what he's done.

Paul feels like he's wading through the air as he walks back down the hall and into the hospital wing. It parts around him as he climbs into bed, and folds around his face, thick and close, as he breathes. He's lost, lying here suffocating in the heat, with nowhere else to go.

He sweats, shivers, showers, eats, vomits and tries desperately to go to sleep for the next few days. The sore on his foot is cleaned and dressed each day by the nurse. The meals are so big and so good he eats until his stomach is stretched and warm and full. And then he walks slowly back up the stairs with the other guys from the hospital wing. He vomits after every meal. The second day, after dinner, he shouts at the toilet and punches the tiled floor. A couple of Salvos come, help him up, and take him to the nurse. The nurse fixes up his bloodied hand and tells him to go back to bed.

The old guy next to him watches as he lies back down. Paul is unnerved by it and rolls over, his back to him. He says something. Paul tries not to hear. He says it again, louder.

“Hey, you, what’s your name?”

He turns over. The whole room feels like it’s on another planet. A white hospital planet with splashes of red.

“Leave me alone,” he says.

“What’s your name?” the old man asks again.

“Look, I’m feeling really fucken sick, okay?” he says. “Leave me alone.”

He laughs. A kind of wheezing that jolts out his throat. “Course you feel sick. Everybody feels sick. I’ve done this three times and every bloody time I feel sick. That’s what I wanted to tell you. You get better. It gets better. You feel sick but it gets better.”

Paul doesn’t say anything. He just lies there with his hand wrapped up in a white bandage, his red dressing gown draped over the end of the bed and his legs and arms aching. He’s starting to feel like he’s trapped here, caught in this strange world of

snoring, groaning, and vomiting so everything he's just swallowed splatters out onto the white curve of the toilet bowl. He'd leave, he thinks, as he rolls over, his back to the old man, if he didn't feel so bloody sick.

He searches for an escape, runs through the possibilities in his head. He could go down the coast and stay with Josh and his crazy old Swedish uncle, who makes sculptures on a property on the edge of a national park. Last year he spent a couple of days helping Josh drag massive fallen branches into the clearing in front of his uncle's yurt for him to carve. He'd go back there now, if it weren't for the spider. He'd seen it the night before he left, after he and Josh had eaten a couple of mushrooms. It was as big as the yurt, its legs slender and furred, its pincers large enough to crush his head. He'd sat huddled on the edge of the clearing for hours, terrified, waiting for her to pounce. He left that morning, hasn't been back since. The thought of seeing it again is almost as bad as the thought of going back to his place, with his shirt still crusty with vomit in the laundry sink and his empty room.

He hates it. Hates this searching, this running through his head of all the places he can't go to anymore because things have fucked up. He feels like all he's ever done is search for somewhere he can go where everything hasn't already gone to the shit. He used to go to Granny's, ride over there and lean his bike up against the fibro wall under the carport, walk over the cracked concrete driveway and climb the tiled steps to the porch. Even if she wasn't there he knew the door would be unlocked, and he'd go inside and play his dad's guitar until she got home. When she arrived she'd switch the radio on, start frying a pan full of fish she bought at the market down the road and talk to him about politics. He sees himself sitting there on one of Granny's kitchen chairs playing the guitar, listening to her tell him about the strikes his grandfather was

involved in during the 1950s and how he should never believe straight out what he heard on the news. He can't go back there, either. Not now.

He stays in the hospital wing for nearly a week, every day waking up to the call to prayer, then drifting through the hours wrapped in his dressing gown and treading the path between the toilet, the dining room and his bed, until he wakes up one morning without his pyjamas clinging to his back and with last night's dinner still safely in his gut. That afternoon the nurse tells him that he's going to be moved out of the hospital wing and into a smaller room with three other guys.

He has to share a bunk with the old guy who was lying next to him in the hospital wing.

"You'll have to have the top," he says, when he sees Paul. "I've got a bung leg, can't climb up."

"Okay," he says. He watches the old man limp towards the bed, pull back the blankets. "What happened to your leg?"

"Shark bite," he says, sitting down. "I never caught your name, son."

"Paul." He doesn't believe the story about the shark.

"Jack." He holds out his hand for Paul to shake. It's old and wrinkled, the knuckle of his thumb bulging out and stretching the skin. "You've never been here before, have you, Paul."

"No." The old man's grip is strong, his skin rough and warm.

"You'll be right." He lies down, rolls over so he's facing the wall. "It's not too bad. Them counsellors have got their heads screwed on right, most of them."

When the lights are switched off, the noise of the city soaks through the walls and wraps around his head, and he gets lost in the dark. He sweats, throws the blankets off,

gets cold and huddles up like he used to do as a kid. He remembers all those old houses they lived in up the coast. The one in Brisbane had creaky floorboards with gaps you could look through to see the dirt underneath. It had a mouse in the kitchen cupboards and a dunny out the back. He used to wake up in the night needing to go to the toilet and be too scared to go outside in the dark. Kids at school told him the house was meant to be haunted and some old woman had died out there in the backyard while she was sitting on the throne. They said no-one knew she'd died for weeks, until one day the wind took her smell over the back fence and the neighbours came over to find out what had died in the out-house. Her skeleton was in there, they said, all rotted out, and eaten away by the rats.

He had nightmares about the old lady whose ghost was still supposed to be sitting on the dunny. The kids at school said you could see her out there when it was a full moon. He never went outside on a full moon. Never. He used to wee into the cracked green bath in the laundry instead.

When he was a kid, he used to think about Granny when he was scared. He used to think about her green dress that hung down past her knees and her garden full of roses. All he sees when he thinks about her now is a room in shadow, the slamming screen door. His feet running along the bitumen, the jar of buttons smashing on the road and that horrible, horrible sun rising over the expressway when he should've been eaten up by the dark.

Paul is shivering. He reaches down for his blankets, wraps them around him for warmth. His feet are freezing. Closing his eyes, he tries to count Jack's wheezing breaths.

The sound of the bell works its way into his mind. He's drifting, floating along on top of the ocean, legs dangling below like strands of seaweed. Above is a dark sky; the reflection of the moon ripples silver across the water.

The bell clangs, insistent, each peal sending a tremor through the water. Paul tries to swim but his legs are useless. His arms sway in the rhythm of the swell and the rest of his body feels limp and bloated. The tremors become more violent, one after the other after the other until the sea is transformed into a foaming, churning mass. He's tossed about on the surface, swallowing white water and trying in desperation to stay afloat. Nothing he does makes any difference. He has about as much control as a crumbling plastic buoy, set adrift and bobbing on surface of the waves.

"Hey, Paul."

There's a voice coming from somewhere outside him. Paul struggles against the pull of the tide.

"Wake up, kid."

Bright light is pouring in through the barred windows and Jack is watching him from across the room.

"Better get up, or you'll get in trouble for missing breakfast," he says.

Paul lies there for a minute, the room blurred beyond his half-open eyes, blankets caught up around his chin and wrapped tight around his body.

"Where're the others?" he asks, his mouth dry. He doesn't feel like breakfast. Doesn't feel like anything except getting so stoned that he passes out.

"Shower," says Jack.

Paul pulls the blankets free and gets up. "I hate this place," he says.

"What're you lookin' for, the palace of Versailles? There are worse places than this." Jack's voice is gravelly, sounds like he's smoked way too many cigarettes.

“No, I hate *this*,” says Paul, waving his hand. “All of it.” He picks up his towel and heads for the door. He’s too tired to explain.

“You got a death wish, eh?”

Paul turns around. Jack is standing over by the window and the light behind him is so bright he looks like a silhouette. He doesn’t answer, just leaves Jack behind in the lit up room and closes the door.

After breakfast, the Salvo with round glasses directs Paul into a room along with all the guys who don’t walk back up the stairs to the hospital wing. He recognises Tom and Davo, the other two guys he’s sharing a room with, and Jack. They have to do calisthenics. Push-ups, sit-ups. With everyone sweaty, and feeling like shit. Paul is next to Davo, who has tats covering both his massive shoulders. His singlet stretches and his stomach brushes the floor as he does the push-ups, arms bulging. Paul smells his sweat and edges away. He moves too far, too fast, and his foot collides with someone’s face.

“What the fuck’d you do that for?”

He turns around and sees Tom holding his nose. “Sorry, mate,” he says. “It was an accident.”

“I’ll give you a fucken accident.”

Paul rolls out of his way and is on his feet, standing among a room full of bobbing, sweating men, watching Tom’s long face rising from the floor.

“Put a sock in it, Tom,” says Davo, turning his head.

“Who died and made you boss?”

The Salvo with the round glasses is suddenly there, standing between the three of them. “You know the rules,” he says. “You’re violent, you leave. You want to stay,



you keep doing push-ups.” He stands there looking at them until Tom, and then Paul, drop back down to the floor.

Paul positions himself further forward, chooses Davo’s sweat over Tom’s long horse-like face, and watches the floor rising to meet him and falling away again as he finishes the push-ups. He feels stupid. Stupid, and angry. The angrier he gets, the faster he does the push-ups, until by the end, when the Salvo tells them to get up and head off for a group session with a counsellor, he’s exhausted.

He’s put into a group with Jack, Davo, Tom and four other guys. They’re led into a room with chairs set up in a circle. Paul finds that he’s sitting across from Tom, and doesn’t want to look up. Jack is beside him, and Davo’s off somewhere to the right. The counsellor running the session is the same guy who interviewed Paul when he first came in. Murray. He sits down next to Tom, introduces himself, and asks everyone else to do the same. They give their names, one after the other, going round the circle. The last to introduce himself is a guy called Hippo, short, skinny and wiry, who says he used to be a jockey.

Paul decides that he hates sitting in a circle. He doesn’t have anywhere to look except for the bare circle of floor created by chair legs and everyone’s feet. He doesn’t look up at Murray’s face when he starts talking, but focuses on his shoes. He’s wearing Dunlop volleys, and the laces are frayed.

“The point of these sessions,” says Murray, “is to build a supportive environment where you’re able to share some of the things that have happened in your lives. For this to work, you need to be honest. No bullshit.” He pauses, and then asks them all to think of a time when they’ve experienced physical violence.

They go round the circle, answering the question. They're wary of each other, crammed into this room with all their shit filling it like static, and no-one says much. Until they get to Jack.

"Yeah," he says. "When I was in jail I got beaten up pretty severe."

Paul looks up from the floor and watches him as he talks, his small leathery face and grey stubble, and feels sick. He starts to think that what goes on inside his head isn't that bad at all. When it gets to his turn, he passes. He can't think of anything to say. All that's ever happened to him is that Gary's knocked his block off a few times and he's had to lie about it to his mum.

He sits with Jack and Hippo during lunch.

"How'd you end up in the clink?" Hippo asks Jack.

Jack looks at him, chewing slowly on a mouthful of bread. Hippo has finished his whole sandwich before Jack finally swallows his first bite.

"Killed someone," he says.

"What was it, deliberate, accidental..."

"What do you think?" Jack asks, staring back at him.

"Just askin', just askin'," says Hippo. "You don't have to go jumping down my throat like that. Makes me nervous."

Paul finishes one sandwich and moves onto another. Even the lunches are good, here. That's it, he thinks. That's why he's still alive. Two things. The food, and the fact that he's too scared to top himself.

"What about you, Paul?" asks Hippo. "You ever been inside? Ever killed someone like old Jacko over here?"

He decides, in that moment, that he hates Hippo, and doesn't answer.

“Well? Have you?”

Paul looks at Jack. The old man has his eyes on his plate, and is still chewing his way through his first sandwich.

“No,” he says.

“You’re a good little boy, are you?” he says. “Mummy’s boy, eh?” Hippo bites into a third sandwich, his neck bulging as he swallows.

Jack looks up from his plate. “Leave the kid alone,” he says.

“Ah, so you’re sticking up for him now, are you? A murderer and a mummy’s boy. What a combination.”

Paul stands up, picks up his glass of water and brings it down to smash it into Hippo’s face. Just before it slams against Hippo’s forehead, Jack grabs his wrist and water spills over the edge of the glass. He tries to shake himself free, anger pulsing through his body.

“Don’t do it,” says Jack, quietly.

“Let me go!” He tries to wrench his arm away, but Jack’s grip is so firm his hand is starting to go numb.

“They’ll throw you out,” he says. “You hit him, and they’ll throw you out. You don’t want to get thrown out.”

Paul is still struggling.

“Look at me,” says Jack.

He looks up, and Jack stares into his face. “There are worse places,” he says.

The anger starts to drain out of him, out through his arm and hand. Jack lets him go, and his arm swings back to his side. The water in the glass spills out onto the table and runs off the edge into Hippo’s lap.

“You did that on purpose, you little shit.” Hippo stands up and takes a swipe at him. Paul ducks, grips his glass as a weapon and moves back out of reach. Hippo, water stains on his pants, jumps up onto the table and aims a kick at his face. A couple of Salvos who are eating at a table a few metres away push their chairs back and run towards the table. They grab Hippo, and pull him away.

Paul sits, tries to stop himself shaking.

“You get violent, you get thrown out,” says Jack.

He's so tired that night when he climbs into his bunk that when the lights are switched off he thinks the night is swallowing him whole, that he's slipping down its tongue and into its long sloping throat. He skids and slithers down into the shadows until he halts, suddenly. His whole body jerks back as though catching him from leaning too far over a cliff. His eyes flick open and he's awake. Too awake, lying there in the dark with his heart beating and Jack wheezing below him and Davo's bed-springs squeaking as he rolls over.

There's a thin line of light between the wall and the curtain covering the window on the other side of the room. From the moon, maybe, or the street-lights. Why is he still here? Why is he lying here in the dark in a bunk above an old man with a bung leg, listening to some guy with a beer gut and arms as big as his thighs stretch the springs on his bed? He rolls onto his back so he's facing the ceiling. It's close enough for him to reach up and touch it. Everything is too close in here. Tom's face, when he was doing those push-ups. Hippo's foot, aimed at his chin. Jack's hand, stopping him from smashing his glass into Hippo's grinning face, so Hippo got thrown out instead of him. What would be so bad about getting thrown out, anyway? He'd be no worse off than before, and he'd be able to make his own decisions, not be stuck here with a whole lot of guys who are even crazier than he is. He could leave. He could leave right now, get down off the bunk and walk out through the kitchen and no-one would ever know. He'd be gone in the morning and they'd never be able to find him. He could hitch up north, find his way to Mackay, live on the beach and eat coconuts. They gave him clothes from a Salvo's shop yesterday, so he won't have to walk through the streets in his red dressing gown like he would have if he'd left earlier. If he can just get to

Mackay, he'll be okay. Coconuts and fish. He'll nick a rod off someone and live on the beach, make fires out of coconut husks and share his fish with the donkey.

There used to be hoof prints on the beach in the mornings, curved rims of wet sand and shadow that marked the long flat stretch reaching down to the sea. Every morning he would go for a swim before school, and every afternoon when he got back. His mum bought cans and cans of braised steak and onions when they lived in Mackay. She piled them in pyramids under the caravan and made jaffles out of them in the fire with the jaffle-irons she kept in the boot of the car. The hot meat burned his mouth and he loved it, the sauce thick on his tongue. The donkey used to come up from behind, its long nose nuzzling into his neck, its wide teeth chomping down on the last of his jaffle. There was a fisherman who stood every afternoon at the north end of the beach in blue overalls, and every now and then gave him and his mum a couple of fish out of his bucket on his way back through the park.

Paul rolls over onto his side and stares out into the space between his bunk and Tom's. Tom's shape looks like a mountain range across from him, long and hilly and dark. If he can climb down from his bunk without them noticing, no-one will ever know. Not until it's too late, and he's gone. Out of the city and heading north. He sees himself hitching, standing beside the highway in the bush with the sun lighting up the trunks of the gums and glinting off the leaves. His arm's out, and a truck's pulling over and he's climbing up into the cab with the truckie, who looks like his dad. He's getting a ride all the way to Brisbane, where he climbs down out of the cab in the early morning, feels the warm, still air on his skin and gets another lift straight away, a truck going all the way to Cairns, which means he'll be able to get off in Mackay on the way. Then he's stepping down onto bitumen, waving to the driver as the truck pulls away, and walking across the grass onto the sand. He lies under a couple of coconut palms on

the far end where no-one will bother him, and sleeps, then swims. The water's so warm he stays in for hours. His skin's wrinkled and tender when he gets out, and the sun stretches it smooth again, his stomach grainy with sand. He reaches for a coconut and peels the brown skin off, tough and stringy, discarding it in long strips on the beach. Walking through the palms to the road he weighs it, round and heavy, in his hand, then cracks it open on the bitumen. He catches the last of the juice with his tongue before it leaks out onto the road, sticky, sweet, and thinner than you'd expect. Not thick like coconut milk you get in cans. For a moment he can taste it, feel balmy air on his skin, the warm road under his feet.

Paul starts to think it might be possible. He might be able to get from here to Mackay in a couple of days, out of reach of everyone, not having to deal with anything. He raises his head and looks around the room. Tom hasn't moved. Davo is breathing heavily, almost snoring, and Jack's wheezing is slow and regular. Everything seems clearer, more defined. The shadows at the end of Tom and Davo's bunk. Jack's breathing. The shift of sheets and the creaking of springs as Davo rolls over. He'll do it. Now, before he changes his mind and stays long enough to get beaten up, or for the cops to find him.

He sits up, pulls back the blankets, and reaches over to the foot of the bunk. The springs squeak beneath him, and he stops, listening. Everyone's breathing stays the same. He eases himself down the foot of the bunk until he's standing on the carpet. He pulls on his shirt. There's a movement in the bed next to him and he stands still, the shirt halfway over his head, as Jack rolls over. He waits for a moment, cloth brushing against his skin, listening as Jack's breathing changes. He draws himself against the wall, his arms caught in the shirt, and waits. The room is quiet, full of shadows and the muted sounds of the night, and all the while he's listening for Jack's breathing, waiting

for it to slow, to go back to how it was before he climbed down off the bunk. It doesn't. It stays the same, shallow and irregular, and his body shifts under the blankets. Paul lowers his arms so the shirt slips down over his shoulders. Even if Jack's awake, if he goes now, it might just look like he's going to the toilet.

He moves quietly to the door, turns the handle, opens it just enough so he can slip through into the brightly lit hallway, then shuts the door behind him. Everything looks strange, too bright. No-one is around. He walks along the hall and down the stairs to the dining room. Still no-one. He knows he can't get out through the front doors because they're locked at night. There's a kitchen door, though, that might be unlocked. The dining room is only lit faintly from the lights in the hall, and he walks through it to the kitchen. It gets progressively darker as he passes the sink, the benches, the cupboards. The tiled floor is cool on his bare feet. He sees a door on the back wall, reaches for the handle, turns it, and pulls it towards him. It opens. He sticks his head out into the night, sees the streetlights reflecting off the wet bitumen. It's been raining. The clouds overhead are being pulled apart, leaving gaps of blank sky behind them. No stars. The air is colder outside. Paul shivers. He pulls the door wider, moves out onto the steps, and eases it shut behind him. As soon as he's standing there, on the wet concrete step, looking out at the street, he can feel the building behind him as a kind of presence. A sleeping, hulking presence that has just shut its doors to him. He knows that if he leaves they won't let him come back.

He turns, tries the handle. It's locked. He stares at his fingers curled around the metal, and for a moment nothing else exists but this. His hand testing a locked door, the night pressing in on him, and a deserted street behind. No Mackay, no warm sand and sunset through the coconut palms. Just an empty wet street and a locked door in the dark.



He tries the handle again. Nothing. He looks back at the street, flat and narrow in the shadows. For a moment he panics. His breathing is too loud, is so violent it takes up the whole pavement as the rest of him shrinks. In, out, in, out. His head drumming with air. He has to leave, now. He doesn't have a choice. He thinks he hears a sound behind him and his ears strain for the noise, his eyes flick behind him and to the side, searching for whatever he hasn't seen. There's nothing there. No sound, no movement. Just the street, empty.

He starts to walk, head down, leaving the building behind. In the glow from the street lights he sees cigarette cartons and chip wrappers piling up in the gutter, a trickle of water passing around them, picking them up and floating them further down the road. The street curves in a dogleg, turning between old concrete highrises. He follows it, not knowing where he's going, thinking that if he just keeps walking he'll find the highway. Mackay: the caravan park on the edge of the green-blue ocean, the grassy bank that leads down to the beach. He tries to keep his mind on the sand, the fisherman, the matted fur of the donkey. He concentrates on colours. The blue ocean, the green grass, the brown coconut husks. They start to fade and he grasps for them, reaching out with his mind, trying to reel them in. They're slippery, though, flickering, evasive. He stumbles, catches the ball of his foot on a broken bit of pavement. He loses them, then, the colours. They flash beyond his vision and he's left staring at the grey concrete. He looks behind him and sees the curve in the street where he turned earlier. The building is invisible behind it, lost.

He comes to a T-intersection at the end of the street and turns left, passes the sloping entrance to an underground car park and a building that's expelling steam from vents above. He sees an old man leaning against the wall, wet, his eyes closed, a bottle half out of a paper bag lying beside his feet. He turns right down an alley, passes rows

of bins set out on the pavement. The smell of wet cement clings to him, and he can't see what's at the end of the alley. The streetlights have been smashed on either side, and it gets darker the further he walks. There is no beach or park or donkey anymore. He's lost, out here in a dank alley in the middle of the city. He can't do anything except keep walking and try not to think. So he walks. At the end of the alley he stops. There's no intersection. The alley is blocked by fence with barbed wire wound around the top. Paul starts to shake. He turns around. He has to keep walking. He moves back down the alley the way he came. There's a noise behind him, a bin lid crashing to the pavement, and he stumbles into a run. It's involuntary: his legs propel him forward towards the thin glimmer of orange he can see where the streetlights are still working. He reaches the intersection, gasping, and turns the corner.

Something heavy connects with both his shoulders as he turns into the street and he's slammed back up against the bricks. For a second he can't see anything, is disoriented and terrified.

"You leaving, are you?"

He hears the wheezing voice before he sees the shadow standing in front of him and for one crazy moment he thinks it's the same person who's been chasing him ever since he robbed that lady in the grey suit. Then he sees the leg, held out at an angle. It's Jack. For a minute he's relieved, and leans back against the wall. Then he's angry, his shoulders burning where they scraped up against the bricks.

"So what if I am?" he says, moving away from the wall.

The old man stays where he is, leaning on one leg. "You know where you're going?" he asks.

"What's it to you?" He's still afraid, the words spitting from him like chip oil.

"Do you know where you're going?" he asks again.

“Yeah.”

“Where? Down there?” he points back down the alley. “What’s at the end of that alley, boy?”

He doesn’t know what to say, tries to stop shivering.

“Go on, tell me. You’ve been down there – what’s at the end? What is there for me if I go down there? What’ll I see?”

“You can’t make me do anything.” He hears how lame it sounds, echoing out into the empty street, but he’s lost, has nothing to hang onto.

Jack hasn’t moved. He’s still standing there, watching him, his face in shadow. “I just want to know what’s down the other end of that alley.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“That’s what I just said, isn’t it?” He shivers. The wind is picking up, tunneling along the street between the buildings.

“And what are you gonna find when you get to this place, wherever you’re going?”

“I dunno,” he says, trying to picture the beach, the stringy husks of fallen coconuts. He can’t. It’s gone. He can’t hear the surf or feel the warm wind. All he remembers is the bin lid clattering behind him and damp pavement rushing past under his feet.

“Go on, tell me,” says Jack. “What’s so good about it?”

“I told you, I don’t know. Fuck!”

“You want to run away?” Jack points down the alley. “That’s where you’ll end up. There. That’s it. There’s nothing else.”

The wind is stronger, pulling at his shirt, moaning between the walls of the buildings.

“You know how I know?” says Jack. “I’ve done it before. This. The same alley. You know where I ended up? Here. Wherever I went I ended up back here. Looking down at a dead end. You want to go somewhere else? You go back.” Jack stares at him for a minute, then turns around and starts walking back up the street.

“Where are you going?”

“Back.” Jack doesn’t turn around, and Paul only hears the word because the wind threads it in his direction.

He watches Jack limp along the pavement through the steam from the vents and turn the corner. Paul turns in the other direction and sees that this street, too, ends in a dogleg. He takes a few steps towards it, away from Jack, then looks around. Nothing. He stares up at the sky and can’t see anything there either, no stars, no moon, no clouds, just a blank shape edged by highrises. The water in the gutter reflects the streetlight, shifting orange flecks rippling along the cement. He remembers drinking from the tap beside the surf club, the water glowing, sand itching his throat, salt shrinking his skin. Gasping for air as he broke the surface of the ocean, out there in the swell. Jack is right. There’s nothing here. Nothing but the wind passing over wet bitumen, and the inside of his own head.

He turns around. He walks, shirt flapping against his arms. Up the street, past the old man, past the vents. Around the corner. Around the dogleg. Along the pavement to where he can see Jack, sitting on the steps outside the kitchen door, smoking a cigarette. Paul stops in front of him. Jack doesn’t say anything, just keeps smoking.

“What if there’s nothing here, either?”

Jack reaches into his pocket and takes out a cigarette packet, opens it and pulls out the last one. He hands it and his lighter to Paul.

Sitting on the next step down, Paul lights the cigarette. The wet cement soaks the seat of his shorts. "We can't get back in, anyway," he says. "The door's locked from the outside."

Jack ignores him. "You stick it out, you do what they tell you, and you'll be okay," he says, flicking ash off onto his boot. The end of his cigarette glows as he draws another breath, tiny white flakes peeling away, falling into the wind.

"How do you know?" Looking at Jack, sitting on the steps with his bad leg resting awkwardly at an angle, he almost believes him. Believes that if he walks back inside and is able to stay here long enough, he'll be alright.

"I came out to get you, didn't I?" he says. "Now it's up to you."

"Why'd you come after me?"

Jack stares out across the street. "Shark bite," he says, and turns to Paul. "My leg. I needed a walk to stretch my bad leg." He's not smiling, but Paul can hear the change in his voice and for a minute he's with his dad again, a long time ago, sitting next to him on the couch listening to one of his stories, not knowing what was true and what wasn't. The fact that he tells stories that aren't true, that can't possibly be true, makes him trust Jack. He bullshits, like his dad used to. Not like Gary, who came across so smooth and then turned into a bastard when no-one was looking.

Jack stubs his cigarette out on the steps. "Now, you coming in, or not?"

"It's locked."

Jack stands up, awkwardly, and takes hold of the door handle. "Better put that thing out, or you'll set off the smoke alarm," he says.

Paul stubs out the cigarette. He stands, waiting. Jack pushes the door open, without turning the handle, then bends down and picks something up off the floor. Paul stares at him.

“What’s that?” he asks.

“Shh...” Jack steps in through the door and holds it open.

Paul walks in. The kitchen smells like the roast they had that night for dinner. Jack leads him through the kitchen and takes him through a different door, one that leads straight into the hall and bypasses the dining room.

“How did you...” he whispers.

Jack passes him a piece of tightly folded paper. “I chocked the door.”

*Hetty is in the kitchen eating lunch with Paul, who is sitting next to her on top of three telephone books so he's high enough to see over the top of the table. He's finished his sandwiches and is driving a matchbox car along the top of her newspapers. Hetty has also finished her sandwich, but feels like she needs something else to complete her lunch. She sits for a while, watching her grandson drive off the newspapers and up the wall, until the car is as high as it can go, his arm stretched to full capacity. Pickled onions, she thinks. That's what I feel like.*

*She takes the jar out of the fridge, undoes the lid and spikes an onion with a fork.*

*"What's that?" Paul asks. The car has come to a standstill, and he's staring at the fork as she shakes the juice from the onion back into the jar.*

*"A pickled onion," she says.*

*"Can I have one?" He's forgotten the car, which has started to roll backwards off the newspapers, and is in danger of falling off the table onto the floor.*

*"I don't think you'd like it," she says, bracing herself for the inevitable crash.*

*"I would," he says, nodding. The car tumbles from the edge of the table and skitters across the lino.*

*Hetty expects Paul to scramble off his chair to retrieve the crashed automobile, but he doesn't. He's too fascinated by the onions.*

*"Well, you can try one if you like," she says, fishing out another and tipping it onto his plate.*

*He picks up the slippery onion and licks it, his face scrunching up.*

*"You don't like it?" she asks.*

*He looks up at her guiltily, still clutching the onion in his hand. There's a silence, then he puts the whole thing in his mouth and bites down on it, eyes watering. He chews and swallows, chews and swallows again. "I ate it, Granny!" he says triumphantly, when he's finished. And then, "Can I have a drink of water please?"*

*This child has determination, she thinks, as she fills up his glass.*

"How are you feeling today?"

Hetty opens her eyes and sees the nurse, Rhonda, standing beside her bed. She is small and smiling, and has short dark hair.

"Well, thank you." She is surprised that her voice still works, that she can form the words. She tries to sound as bright as she can. My pickled onions, she thinks. When they let me go home, I'm going to sit at my table and eat onion after onion.

"The doctor will be around sometime this morning."

"Do you know when I'll be able to go home?" It is a struggle to sound normal, to string the words together so they flow on from one another, don't jerk back like a car when the clutch is let out too quickly. Kangaroo hopping. That's what it's called. She's kangaroo hopping her way back into speech. It makes her want to laugh. Her tongue is the clutch, her mind the accelerator. I need a service, she thinks.

"Not for a while yet, I'm afraid." Rhonda takes her arm. "I'm just going to check your blood pressure. Won't be long."

The band tightens around her arm, squeezes until she can hear velcro starting to pull away.

*Fish sizzles in the fry-pan, stray breadcrumbs popping in hot oil. Hetty slides a spatula under the fillets and turns them. Behind her, he's sitting at the table, eating bread and*



*jam. She can feel his presence, hear him breathing. He came back. She focuses on the golden brown, almost cooked fish, resists the urge to turn around and look at him, make sure he's real.*

*His eyes were bloodshot when she met him at the door and he was flushed. She didn't ask him where he'd been. It was enough that he'd come back. It took all her strength to let him go before, after he turned up on her doorstep with his schoolbag and his bike and asked to stay the night. In the morning, when he waved as he disappeared behind the carport, she had been afraid he would never return. She's not afraid of that anymore, not after the look on his face when she showed him Phil's guitar. She feels almost guilty, knowing that if he wants it, he won't be able to take it home because he'll have to keep it secret from Eva. Which means he'll keep coming to see her.*

*Hetty serves up the fish and drains the vegetables, sets the two plates down on the table. Says a silent thank you for the food and for the fact that he's here, sitting opposite her, not lost somewhere out there, alone. She's not going to ask him about home, she thinks. Not now, not ever. If he wants to tell her, he will. She's not going to bring it up.*

The pressure on her arm lessens, the velcro is unsnapped and the arm band removed.

"You're missing your garden, aren't you, love? You should get someone to bring in some of your roses." Rhonda starts to wheel the blood pressure machine out of the ward.

"How do you know about my roses?"

Rhonda is almost out the door now, and she sticks her head back around the corner.

"You've been talking about them a lot. Them, and your grandson. He must be a lovely little boy."

Hetty can't remember telling anyone about her roses. Annette, maybe. But not Rhonda. She can't remember telling her anything. Definitely nothing about Paul. She hasn't been talking to anyone about Paul. It worries her. She stares up at the ceiling and wonders how she could have been talking about her roses and about Paul and not remember. The ceiling above her is too white. Sterile. She likes having spider webs in the corners of the rooms in her house, so they can catch flies. If she was at home now, she'd be sitting at her kitchen table eating pickled onions. Lots of them, one after the other. And then she'd be going out into the garden to see whether her mulberries are ready to pick yet.

*Hetty stands alone in her backyard, near the mulberry tree. It is windy, the sky bright. She's sweating, standing next to a small potted mandarin and the hole she's just finished digging, holding a small box. She kneels, opens the lid and empties the ashes into the hole. They're light, and some of them get caught up in the wind. She picks up the mandarin, taps the pot to free the plant from the plastic, then tips it upside down into her palm and loosens the tangled roots. She sets it in the hole and piles dirt around the plant until it's packed into the earth. It stands there, small and sturdy, its leaves deep green and glinting in the sun. She touches one with her finger, the dirt on her skin making the leaf feel rough and dry.*

*Hetty is heavy and awkward as she stands and picks up the spade. She thinks of his ute smashed up in a gully, his guitar in the bottom of her cupboard, and his son, who is as lost to her as he is.*

"Hetty?"

She must have fallen asleep. Someone is beside the bed, but her vision is fuzzy and she can't tell who it is yet. Phil, she thinks. No, not Phil. It can't be Phil. Paul, then.

"Paul?"

"We haven't found him yet, I'm sorry, Hetty. We're still looking." It is Peter, setting his guitar on the ground beside the bed.

Now she can see him, sitting by the bed with his red curly hair and small, compact jaw, she doesn't know how she could have made such a mistake.

"I'm sorry, Peter. I must have fallen asleep. I didn't know who it was." She watches as he opens the case and takes the instrument out. He'd promised to come and play for her, she remembers now.

"Any requests?" He smiles, leans forward in the chair and runs his fingers over the strings. "Annette's bringing the kids in later – she's picking up some roses from your garden on the way."

"She is?" Hetty is so grateful to them both, to these friends of hers who have thought of everything. Music, roses. The only things they've forgotten are the onions.

"You asked her to bring some for you."

"Pickled onions?" Her mouth waters at the thought, and she has to swallow.

Peter shakes his head, looks down at the fretboard so she can't see his face. "No – the roses."

"Oh." Hetty can't remember asking for her roses. The bed sways beneath her and she feels as though she's treading water, gasping for air. Nothing makes sense.

"Is there anything you'd like me to play?" Peter asks again.

Hetty forces herself to concentrate. She must have asked for this, too. For Peter to bring his guitar. Stay afloat, she thinks. Don't let go.

*She remembers teaching Paul how to swim, standing beside him in the ocean pool with her hand just touching his shoulder blades under the water. He blinks up at her, scared, his body tense, and for the fifth time in a row water washes up over his face, into his nose. Hetty lifts him out of the water and sits him on the edge of the pool.*

*"I can't do it, Granny." He's coughing, water running out his nose.*

*"It's okay," she says. "It'll hold you up, how just have to relax." She can see that he doesn't believe her as he sits there shivering in the sun, water beading on his skin. So she improvises. "I'm heavier than you," she says, looking down at her swimsuit. "If it can hold me up, it'll definitely hold you up." She slides backwards into the water, arms spread wide, the water buoying her up. "See?" His face peers down at her, and she knows he is starting to believe. "Come on," she says. "We'll do it together."*

*He jumps back into the pool and she stands again, puts her hand once more under his back and feels him start to relax, his body floating on the surface of the water as she gently draws her hand away. She lies back too, then, aware of watching him in case he sinks, but floating too, next to him, like she promised. Lying there with her grandson beside her, finally afloat, her own mother's words echo in her head. She'd learnt to swim in this same pool, her mother's hand just touching her shoulder blades under the water, her voice muted as water slid into her ears. "Relax," she'd said. "Pretend you're on your back in the clouds, and let them hold you up. It can take your weight, you just have to trust..." She remembers the feeling of weightlessness as she finally let her limbs relax, closed her eyes and felt the water lapping against her cheeks, her mother's hand falling away and her own body spread out and floating like seaweed on the surface of the pool.*

Peter is playing, the chords washing under her, flowing up over her belly and rippling against her chin, her hair. Hetty lets him play. When he starts to sing, an old folk song she knows by heart, the words buoy her up, carry her with them like a current.

“The water is wide, I cannot cross over

Neither have I the wings to fly

Build me a boat that will carry two

And both shall row, my love and I...”

Paul wakes to the bell and the sounds of the others getting out of bed. He waits until they've all left for the shower, and then slides down off the bunk. Deciding to stay hasn't solved anything, he thinks, as he picks up his towel and walks along the hall to the bathroom. He's still stuck here two and a half weeks later, and it's taking everything he's got just to do all the things he's supposed to do and to stay out of everyone's way. Get up to the bell, shower, clear a spot on the steamy mirror, lather his face with soap and shave. Go down for breakfast and sit with Jack, who doesn't say much in the mornings. Try to find a clear space in the calisthenics room in a corner where he's not going to piss anyone off because he's getting in their way. Settle into pushups, his arms burning. Head off to a group session. Sit in that room with everyone looking at the floor or at the ceiling or down somewhere between the chairs, and saying things about their lives. Eat lunch. And on and on with every minute full of people until he's in bed and the lights are switched out and he's lying there in the dark listening to the others breathe.

That morning he doesn't say anything in the group session, just listens as Davo talks about how his wife took off on him because she reckoned he was addicted to his homebrew. After lunch Paul has an individual counseling session with Murray.

"How are you going?" Murray asks, smiling at him.

"I'm okay." He hasn't taken off yet, that's the main thing. He's still here.

"Still feeling sick?"

He shrugs. At least he's not vomiting after every meal anymore.

“You know the next stage of the program will be in Canberra?” says Murray. “At the end of the week, we’ll move you out of here, and you’ll spend the next six months or so in the rehab down there.”

“What?” He can’t remember having heard this before. He wasn’t paying much attention when Murray interviewed him that first day. All he’d been thinking about was being able to lie down.

Murray runs a hand over his beard. “It’s the best part of the program,” he says. “It’s more relaxed, you’ll be working for part of the day, there’ll be the same group and individual counseling sessions you’ve been having here, but there’ll be more time to think. It’ll be good – trust me.”

Trust you? Paul thinks. He doesn’t trust anyone.

“Here’s the address, if you’d like to let your family know where you’ll be.” Murray hands him a piece of green paper with a type-written address on it.

The world encroaches in on him as he takes the paper, reminding him that it still exists out there, that Granny’s buttons have most likely been ground to pieces by passing cars and that Ned has probably noticed he’s gone, that his rent’s due, that his mum will worry if she rings and he’s not there.

At the end of the session Paul walks out to the foyer, stands in the sun as it pours in through the double doors and looks out at the street. There’s a man in a suit striding briskly on the other side of the road, each step echoing across the bitumen, a woman with dreads and a purple skirt swaying past the open doors of the rehab, and an old lady walking her dog. Beyond the rooftops the blue sky is cut into a sharp-edged jigsaw puzzle piece.

“Paul.”

He turns and sees Jack's dark shape standing back down the hall at the entrance to the dining room. He looks back out at the street, at the sun glinting off parked cars and the patchy bitumen, a cigarette packet lying squashed on the footpath. Closing his eyes, he feels the sun on his face for an instant before he turns back inside the building.



He catches the train to Canberra at the end of the week with Jack, Davo and Tom. Paul sits next to Jack and watches the paddocks roll past. No-one talks much. The four of them stick together when they get off the train. Paul is carrying a backpack full of clothes he was given from the Salvo's shop up the road before they left. He stands there with nothing that belongs to him, dressed in someone else's clothes, waiting for someone he doesn't know to pick him up.

They're met by a Salvo who walks up the platform to greet them and takes them out to the car park. They drive for about fifteen minutes, mostly in silence, until they reach the rehab. It's a group of low red brick buildings, with a couple of scraggly looking rose bushes by the door to the reception area. The four of them are put in the same room. They're given sheets to make their beds with, and are told to meet in the dining room when the bell rings.

"What is it with bells in these places?" says Tom, shaking his pillow into its case. "Bell for breakfast, bell for lunch, bell for taking a bloody leak."

Nobody answers. They each have a single bed this time: no bunks. Paul makes his bed quickly, automatically, the way his mum taught him in all those places they lived up the coast. Hospital corners, smooth out the wrinkles. He can hear Jack limping around the bed on the opposite side of the room, Tom still grumbling about the bells. When he finishes, Davo is standing behind him, blankets and sheets still piled on his bed, watching.

"Bet you've been in the army, haven't you," he says.

"No."

“You sure? You make your bed like you’ve been in the army. Regimental. Corporal Paul. Want to make mine for me?”

Paul watches him to see if he’s joking, reads his face to see if he’s looking for a fight. Davo’s eyebrows are raised. His expression changes as he sees Paul’s face.

“Hey, it was just a joke,” he says. “I’m impressed, that’s all.” He shakes out one of his sheets.

Paul watches him half tuck the edges under. The bell echoes through the hallway as Davo throws his blankets on.

“What are we, bloody school kids?” mumbles Tom.

Tom leaves the room first, and Jack follows. When Davo gets to the door he looks back at Paul.

“You coming, Corporal?” he asks.

He follows Davo’s wide shoulders as he walks down the hall and they join the queue that runs in through the dining room door. They’re given spaghetti bolognaise for dinner. Paul sits down opposite Davo, next to Jack, and puts his plate full of bolognaise down on the table. He doesn’t know if he’s going to be able to eat it. Even the smell of it makes him want to be sick.

The guys around him are eating forkful after forkful, the spaghetti disappearing fast off their plates. Paul can’t help but lift up the top layer of sauce and check to see if there’s anything moving underneath.

Davo is talking to someone he’s just met. “You should see this kid make his bed!” Davo gulps down a forkful of pasta and a strand of it flicks across his cheek, leaving an orangey streak behind. “He’s like a bloody army officer.”

Paul wraps some spaghetti around his fork, watching the strands curl around on top of each other, soaked in sauce. “Piss off,” he says.

“Got the grumps, hey, Corporal?” laughs Davo.

Paul drops his fork on the table, grips the edge of it with both hands. “Fucken shut up, okay?”

Davo is bigger than he is, looming there in a mass of singlet and skin on the other side of the table. He lifts his hands, leans back in his chair and says, “Woah, never said I was lookin’ for a fight. Just havin’ a joke, mate.”

Someone sits down next to Paul and cuts across the conversation. “Good meal?” He’s a Salvo, a little guy in a bright uniform with a beard that takes up most of his brown face.

“Not bad,” says Davo.

He reaches across the table, shakes Davo’s hand, Tom’s, then Jack’s. “I’m Ron,” he says. He turns to Paul, holds out his hand. “Did you have a good trip?”

Tom chokes on his spaghetti, and Paul thinks, well, at least he’s got a sense of humour, even if he is an arsehole. He looks at Ron, at his eyes that are brown and laughing, the wrinkles creased into his forehead.

Ron starts talking to Davo and Tom. Jack is silent on the other side of Ron, and Paul is left alone. He tries putting one strand of spaghetti into his mouth, but as soon as it’s off his fork and is slipping, slimy, down his throat, he feels like he’s going to vomit. He stands, and picks up his plate.

“You feeling okay?” Ron asks.

“I’m not hungry.”

“I think there’s apple pie for dessert,” he says.

His stomach feels like it’s been hollowed out by an excavator. “I’m not hungry,” he says again, and carries his plate to the bin.

After breakfast the next morning, they're split into working groups. Tom and Jack are given work in the garden; he, Davo and a couple of other guys are sent next door to the warehouse to sort clothes. Lying on the floor are bags full of clothes that people have dumped in Salvos' bins around Canberra. Terry, the old guy who runs the place, points the two of them to a pile in the corner.

"Start there," he says. "You want to sort them into a women's pile, a men's pile, and a kiddies' pile. Anything that's soiled or beyond repair, put into a separate pile. You got that?"

Paul nods.

"You want anything, just give us a holler," says Terry. He walks off to another corner where two guys are sitting down on a couple of bags of clothes. "Hey!" he yells. "Get a move on, will ya? This isn't a bloody day care centre."

Paul opens one of the bags and tips the contents out onto the floor. Stripy green blouse: women's pile. Long brown corduroy pants: men's pile. Huge purple bra: women's pile. As he tosses it on top of the blouse, Davo reaches over and picks it up.

"How's that for a set of tits?" he says.

They keep sorting. Socks, trousers, skirts, ties, pyjamas.

"You got a girlfriend, Corporal?" asks Davo, holding up a pair of lacy black undies.

"No," he says.

"Too bad – could've given her a present." He laughs, and throws them onto the pile.

"You're sick," Paul says.

Davo grins. "You like it here?" he asks.

Paul shrugs. "I've got nowhere else to go."

"My wife made me do this," says Davo. "She took off one day, said she wouldn't come back until I stopped drinking. Stole my bloody twelve inch telly, my bike, my guitar, and walked out. Flushed all my home brew down the toilet before she left."

"Where'd she go?" He looks up at Davo, who is sitting on the floor with a pile of women's underwear between his knees.

"She took the kids and moved back to her parent's place." Davo throws a pair of jeans over onto a pile on his right. "She said that me doing this was the only way she'd think about coming back."

Paul drops a pink t-shirt on the kid's pile. "Did you say she took your guitar?" he asked.

"Yep. She nicked off with my bloody twelve string. She had to take that one, didn't she."

"You got more than one?"

"Sure do. I've got a Fender, a beautiful bloody Maton I picked up a while back, a couple of old acoustics, a bass, and that twelve string Vashti took off with." He shakes his head. "My favourite bloody guitar. She did that on purpose."

They've both stopped sorting, the piles of clothes spread around them like islands on the warehouse floor.

"Do you play?" asks Davo.

"Used to."

"Got a favourite guitar?"

"I've only ever had one."

"You didn't bring yours either, eh?"

“No,” says Paul, looking away. He sways there between piles of old clothes, leather suitcases, stuffed toys, stilettos with broken heels, and it comes back for him again. His life that he’s left hanging out there somewhere, its ragged edges flapping wildly where he’s torn them away. His dad’s guitar, leaning up against Ned’s wall. Pus seeping out of the soft skin on the underside of his elbow, the blood spattered kitchen lino. Granny, somewhere back there sitting in her kitchen with the lamp on, listening to the radio in her slippers and knowing it was him.

He sits in the warehouse and sorts clothes and listens to Davo ramble on about his daughters and his wife and his homebrew and feels like he’s caught there, dangling. Like he’s been hooked, swallowed steel and is out in the air gasping for breath. Flapping. Knowing he can’t undo it, can’t go back to that moment when it was all set out before him, beckoning, waiting just beyond his reach.

That afternoon he has a counseling session with Ron. He notices again how short he is and how clean his uniform looks, with creases ironed down the front of his trousers.

“So,” he says. “How’re you going, Paul?”

“I’m alright.” He’s still getting used to people asking him how he is all the time, hasn’t figured out how to respond. How bad is bad?

“Food alright?”

He shrugs. “It’s okay.”

“Food,” says Ron, “is one of the great pleasures of life.” He smiles, leans back in his chair. “One of mine, anyway. Big juicy steak, mashed spuds, candied carrots and a couple of scoops of peas. Perfect.”

Paul just stares at him. He wonders if he's trying to get him to eat more after he threw out most of his dinner last night. If it's some kind of moral lesson about how he shouldn't waste food.

Ron leans forward and looks him straight in the face. "Why are you here, Paul?" he asks.

Because Jack came and got him, he thinks. Because he believed it when Jack said he'd be okay if he came back. He doesn't know how to explain that though, so he shrugs, scuffs the carpet with his foot. "I don't know."

"What do you want?"

The question surprises him, and for a moment he can't think of anything to say. His life hangs in front of him, flat and bare and grey. Flapping like an old sheet pegged to a hills-hoist. The only things he wants he can't have. You can't go back and change what you've done, can you. Piece together a shattered jar and place it on a dark shelf, walk backwards out a screen door and replay his whole life until he's gone back so early he can't remember anything, and can start again. He can't do that, so what's the point?

"If I could have whatever I wanted, I wouldn't be here," he says.

"Fair enough," says Ron. "But that doesn't really answer my question. What do you want?"

"I want to change things," he says. "But I can't."

"What do you want to change?"

"I dunno – everything." He chews his thumbnail, bites it so he can taste the chalky ragged edges. He doesn't want to think.

"Tell me one thing," Ron says. "One thing you want to change."

“I don’t know!” He can feel himself starting to get angry. “The fact that I don’t have any money, that I don’t have anywhere to go, that I feel like shit. That good enough?”

“How does it make you feel, having no money and nowhere to go?” Ron asks.

“How would you feel?”

“Scared, probably,” he says. “Lonely.”

“Well, there you go.” The words are flowing over him like surf. He can’t breathe properly.

“Paul,” Ron says. “Look around you.”

He doesn’t look up, keeps staring at the carpet, which like the rest of the room feels like it’s moving, rolling like the sea.

“Look around you,” Ron says again, and waits until Paul does finally raise his eyes. “You have a place to stay,” he says, spreading his arms wide. “You have food to eat. Tell me what you want.”

“Yeah, but it’s not where I want to be, is it,” he says.

“Where do you want to be?” Ron asks.

“I don’t know, okay? I didn’t have anywhere else to go, and so I came here.”

“Why?”

“I told you, I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“The real reason, Paul,” Ron interrupts. “Why have you got no money and nowhere else to go?”

“Because I spent it all, didn’t I.”

“What did you spend it on?”

“You know...” He shrugs. “Stuff.”

“Why?”



“Because I needed it, didn’t I.”

“Why did you need it?”

“Because I felt like shit.”

“And what made you feel like that?”

“I don’t know – everything, okay? Everything.”

“Can you be more specific? Just one thing.”

All he can think about is his dad’s guitar. About handing it over to Ned and the horrible crackling of money between his fingers after the smooth wood of the neck. He can’t say it, can’t get the words out.

They go to an NA meeting that night. A bunch of them from the rehab, driven in a minibus to a church hall in the next suburb. They sit in a circle in plastic chairs and everyone else talks about their addictions. Paul doesn't say anything, just listens. The guys who have been through the twelve steps program talk about a Higher Power, and that believing in something greater than yourself is the first step towards recovery. Recognizing the existence of something outside yourself, even if it's just the rest of the group. It makes sense, he thinks, as he sits there listening to Tom talk about how he should really be at work right now, but that he'd been given forced leave because his boss thought he had some problem with cocaine. It makes sense because of course there are things outside yourself – he knows he's not the only person in the universe – but knowing that hasn't helped him so far. Actually, if he was the only person in the universe, he'd probably be better off than he is now, seeing as most of the crap that's happened to him in his life has been because of other people.

"I really don't have a problem with cocaine at all," says Tom, the words bursting from him in a volley. His hands shake from fingers to wrists, a spasm shudders up through his shoulders, and Paul knows he's lying.

After the meeting is finished there's coffee and tea and chocolate biscuits, and they're encouraged to find a mentor if they haven't asked someone already. Paul doesn't know what to do. He watches everyone else in the room. Most of them have split up into groups of two or three and are leaning against the walls, slouching back in their chairs, making coffee. He doesn't want a mentor. He can see Jack across the room, sitting by himself with his bad leg stretched out, holding a mug. He gets up and walks over to him through the scattered chairs.

“Got a spare smoke?” he asks.

“I told you you’re going to have to get your own supply,” says Jack. “You’re not allowed to smoke in here, anyway.”

“Ah, come on,” he says, sitting on the chair next to him.

Jack looks at him, his eyes hard. “You gotta learn to respect the rules.”

“Rules are fucked.”

“You break a rule, there’s a consequence,” says Jack. “There’s always a consequence.” He rests a hand on his twisted leg. “You know why I’ve got a bung leg? I broke a rule. You know why I got put in the clink? I broke a rule. You break too many rules, someone ends up dead.”

And then he’s back in Granny’s lounge-room, the glass jar cool in his palm, watching her shadow step out of the hall. Feeling her body bump against his as he ran past her to get to the door. What if she fell, when he ran into her? His gut clenches. Please don’t let her be hurt, he thinks. Please. He sees her lying there on the floor in the dark, because of him, and he suddenly finds it hard to breathe.

“You can’t escape it, either,” says Jack. “When you know you’ve done something wrong, a consequence’ll come knocking at your door regardless of whether it’s imposed by someone else, or inside your own head.” He looks at Paul. “You know the best thing to do? Accept it. You try to fight it, you’ll always come off second best.”

He can’t stop thinking about Granny, after that. What if she fell, if she’s still on the floor? If no-one’s found her? If she’s been lying there for weeks, after he took off? He could call her, he thinks. Call her number on the phone by the dining room and hang up when she answers, so he knows she’s okay.

He sits with Jack and Davo during dinner, but doesn't pay much attention to the conversation. He's thinking about the phone, about punching in the numbers and what he'll do when she answers. If she answers. He just wants to do it, now. He doesn't have any money, but that's okay – he'll hear her pick up the phone anyway, before it cuts out. He finishes the jelly and icecream they've been given for dessert. Davo's raving on about something. His wife's tarot cards.

He can feel Jack watching him as he takes his bowl back to the kitchen and walks out the dining room door. The phone is tucked into a corner between the dining room and the games room, where a couple of guys have started to play ping-pong. He hears the ball bouncing from their paddles to the table, over and over, until the rhythm is broken and someone yells in triumph. He stands in front of the phone and picks up the handpiece. Dials the number. Hears it ring. Once, twice. The phone is pressed so hard against his head that his ear starts to burn. Three times. Four. Five. He lets the phone ring out. He hangs up. Nothing. She might not be there, though. She might have gone out for dinner. She might have gone for a walk.

He has another counselling session with Ron the next day. They sit opposite each other in the small room, and Ron asks him how he's going. It must be a standard question, he thinks, that all counsellors have to ask.

"I'm okay," he says.

Ron smiles. His whole round face smiles, framed by the beard. "You're working over at the warehouse, aren't you?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"How are you finding it?"

“It’s okay. Davo found a couple of dirty nappies in one of the bags this morning – stunk the whole place out. Terry wasn’t too impressed.”

“I bet he wasn’t.” Ron laughs. “He treats that place like a castle. He’s a good guy, Terry. A bit crusty round the edges, maybe, but he’s got a good heart.” He pauses. “Do you have anything you want to talk about?” he asks.

“Not really.” He’s sick of talking. He’s meant to talk in group sessions, AA meetings, NA meetings – everywhere you turn in this place there’s another bloody meeting. And he doesn’t know what to say, because all he can think about is Granny.

“Okay,” says Ron. “Now we start the hard part.” He reaches over to the desk, picks up an NA pamphlet, an exercise book and a pen and passes them to Paul. “I want you do something called a moral inventory,” he says. “It’s basically a whole lot of questions that ask you to go back through your life and write down what’s happened to you, and what you’ve done.”

He flips through the pamphlet. Again, he’s thrust back into his life, into his existence beyond the walls of this building, the warehouse, the garden. He doesn’t want to answer any of these questions.

“There’s a reason why we get you to do this,” says Ron. “It’s the Fourth Step in the Twelve Steps program, which asks you to make a ‘searching and fearless’ moral inventory of yourself. It helps you to develop an honest picture of who you are – both the good and the bad.”

“What if I don’t want to do it?” he asks.

Ron looks at him, and in the silence before he answers, Paul listens to the squeaking of the fan and feels more and more uncomfortable.

“No-one’s going to force you to do it, but I’d strongly recommend it. I’ve seen enough guys come through here to know that it helps.”

That night he gets to the room before the others and flips through the questions in bed. The more he reads, the less he wants to do it. If he writes down all this stuff, dredges it up from the bottom of himself, he feels like it'll overwhelm him. Engulf him like the ocean did the night he didn't drown.

So that he doesn't have to choose a question, he shuts his eyes and opens the pamphlet somewhere in the middle, then lets the pen fall at random halfway down the page. It lands on a question that asks: 'What are the things I have never told anybody?' He sees Granny's face, feels the cold porch tiles beneath his feet, and throws the pen across the room. It hits the wall, falls to the carpeted floor and rolls under Jack's bed. He refuses to do it. No-one can make him answer that question. Not Ron, not Jack. He sinks down between his sheets, pulls the blankets up and lies there looking at the ceiling.

There's a noise outside the door, and Davo's big voice rings out down the hallway. Paul pretends to be asleep. He's sick of having to sleep with Jack snoring in the corner and Davo's bed creaking every time he rolls over and Tom complaining that his feet hang off the end of the bed and get so cold he's just waiting for the hypothermia to set in.

Jack comes in a few minutes later, and Paul hears him wheeze as he crosses the room. There are the usual sounds of the others getting into bed, and then a click and sudden darkness as the lights are switched out. Paul opens his eyes and looks up at the ceiling. He won't be able to sleep tonight, he can feel it. He rolls over so he's facing the window. He can't see anything outside because someone's let the blinds down.

He hates being shut in like this. It's like his mum, after his dad died, keeping the blinds closed so everything was in shadow. He hated going into her room when she was

like that. He went in to see her in the mornings before he went to school and she just lay there staring at the wall. She stroked his cheek and said to be careful, and that was it. Her eyes went dull and she kept looking over at the wall.

Why didn't his pen land on a different question? Why didn't it point to one that asked him to write down all the times he'd been hurt by someone else? He's got a whole list of those, stretching out behind him like a highway. A highway that started some place further back than he can remember, and just keeps on getting wider and uglier. A bloody great expressway with toll gates and exhaust fumes, blown out truck tyres and road kill. His whole life is like a series of road kill. One little animal after another, knocked down by crazy truckies on pills. It really is, too. The day after his dad left they drove north, and they saw dead animals all along the highway. He sat next to his mum in the front seat where his dad used to sit, sinking into the tower of pillows and towels which were piled up under him because there was nowhere else for them in the bursting car. He could see everything from there. He saw the hundreds of cars all lined up as they drove through the city. He saw the trains racing past on the tracks beside the highway. He saw the harbour as it flashed past between the grey metal supports of the bridge. He saw huge highrises with neon signs. He fell asleep and woke up somewhere past Newcastle, and that was where he saw the wombat, lying over on its side with its legs sticking straight out.

"Mum, look, a wombat!" he said.

"It's dead, Paul."

He turned his head to watch it as they drove past and the mound of wombat fur and stiff limbs receded into the distance.

"Why is it dead?" he asked.

“Because some idiot ran it over,” said his mum. “People do that – run things over that get in their way. Doesn’t matter if you’re a wombat or a person, people run you over anyway. Run straight over you because they just don’t care. All they care about is themselves.”

That’s it, too. She was right. No-one has ever really cared about him. Not his dad, not Gary, not even his mum. They all cared about themselves and left him to make things up on his own.

Paul starts to drift, the room closing in on itself, emptying its shadows into him. He rolls over, the blankets catching under his body.

There’s a dark road stretching away from him, getting darker as he feels his way along the bitumen. He can’t see anything. He hasn’t been able to see anything for a long time. Somewhere in him he knows what the light looks like but it’s been hidden for so long he doesn’t know where to find it. So he just keeps stumbling along in the dark. There are no stars. There is no moon. There are no reflections off the black bitumen stones. Just the dark. An endless, monotonous, terrifying darkness. He’s been here before. He feels like he’s been here forever.

He stumbles. Way, way off in the distance there is something that is not the dark. A faint grey shadow. Turning towards it, he immediately finds himself stepping off the road into dry grass. Snakes, he thinks, and steps back onto bitumen. He tries to stick to the road at the same time as heading towards the shadow, but the road veers away in the other direction. He stops. The air feels as though it’s pressing in on him, as though he’s holding the whole sky up and one day his knees will buckle and the whole thing will come crashing down. Turning towards the grey streak, he feels a pull from somewhere inside his gut. He thinks he hears a sound coming from behind him and turns around, but there’s nothing there. Again, he’s drawn towards the break in the shadows and a



note rings out, almost as though someone is tuning a guitar. His body strains under the weight of the sky. If it wasn't for the snakes, he'd step straight off the road and head for that one break in this endless darkness. There are bound to be snakes, masses of them, rustling through paddocks of seeding grass.

Paul takes one last look at the patch of sky that's beyond the darkness. As he does, he feels the tug a third time, tighter and stronger, and the note again, resonating. The sound hangs there, vibrating in his belly and ringing in his ears. His muscles are alert, tense, and the pull towards that small patch of grey increases until he can hardly bear it. The longer he looks at it, the more he wants to be there, to reach it and reach *beyond* it. The agony of standing on the road when he could be moving through the paddocks is excruciating. He stretches out a hand and feels for the tops of the grasses. Their seeded heads rustle against his fingers, waist height.

And he decides. He steps off the road onto packed dirt and into the paddock. The grasses close behind him and there's a moment of horror before he starts to run. Fixing his eyes on the faint grey ahead, he pounds through the paddock. His ankle buckles as he lands heavily on uneven ground; he stumbles, recovers, and keeps on running.

He knows he won't be able find his way back to the road now, even if he changes his mind. And so, as the sky slowly turns from grey to peach, and the paddock into individual stalks of waving grass, he runs.

*Hetty is sitting next to Eva, in the shade of a Norfolk Island pine. Phil is on the beach in front of them with Paul on his shoulders, watching the surf. Hetty is aware that Eva's hands haven't stopped moving since they sat, her slender fingers smoothing back her hair or tapping her leg, fiddling with the clasp of her bag. She's very attractive, Hetty thinks, with her small oval face and curling red hair, her blue-green eyes. She can understand why Phil fell for her. She's intelligent, too, Hetty can see that in her eyes, hear it in the way she talks. She's very affectionate with Phil, and with Paul – but there's something about her that has always made Hetty uneasy. The shadow of the pine is falling across Eva's face, and as Hetty glances at her, she is suddenly aware of what it is that bothers her about her daughter in law. Eva is staring at Phil and Paul with an intensity that reaches for them over the grass and sand. Her gaze is more than protective; it is possessive, vicious in its sense of ownership.*

*Hetty shivers, the breeze gusting around them, rustling the left-over butcher's paper from the fish and chips they'd eaten for lunch. She has an almost physical urge to break Eva's gaze, to free her son and grandson from that look in her eyes.*

*"How are you, Eva?" she asks. It's the first question she can think of.*

*Eva turns, smiles briefly. "We're okay," she says, tucking wisps of hair behind her ears. "Phil's been getting a lot of gigs, so Paul and I have been at home by ourselves a lot."*

*"Do you mind that?" Hetty asks.*

*Eva shrugs, looks back out over the sand. "Oh, I'm used to it," she says.*

*There's a thread of bitterness in her voice, and Hetty wonders whether Phil knows she's feeling like this. It's their relationship, though, and she doesn't want to interfere.*

*“I never knew my mum,” Eva says, playing with the edge of the butcher’s paper.*

*“So I want to make sure I’m around for Paul.”*

“Hetty! How are you?” It is Pat, her neighbour. She enters the ward with a flourish, carrying a bouquet of gerberas.

Hetty wishes she could pretend to be asleep, but it’s too late. She’s opened her eyes and Pat’s powdered face is bending down towards her to kiss her on the cheek.

“I’m fine,” she says. She’s been having headaches again, massive throbbing pains in her right temple. It can’t be right. But she wants to go home, so she hasn’t told anyone. She just keeps hoping they will go away.

Pat lays the flowers on the table next to the roses Annette brought her. “I’m so sorry Hetty, I would have come earlier, but my granddaughter just had a baby, and I flew up to Brisbane for a few weeks to see her. The whole family was there, the children all came one after the other to visit, and so of course I had to stay until I’d seen them all. You know what it’s like, with family. But I had no idea you’d still be in here! Did you get my card?”

Hetty looks up at the pile of cards Annette arranged for her. She can’t remember who they’re all from.

“Yes, thank you,” she says.

“It’s the one with the little cat on the front. This one, here. Isn’t he just delightful?”

The card has a bright pink background behind a tabby cat sitting inside a beret. It’s unnatural to take photos of animals like that, Hetty thinks, but it was a nice gesture, a nice thought. She doesn’t even know how Pat knew she was in here. Maybe Annette told her, when she was going to pick the roses?

“How did you know I was here?”

Pat pulls her chair closer to Hetty’s bed and leans in towards her. “Didn’t anyone tell you? I was the one who found you. Oh – it was horrible. Gave me such a fright. I woke up in the morning and looked out over the back fence, and saw your screen door swinging open. Right away, I had a feeling something had gone awry. A premonition. So I came around and knocked on your door. When you didn’t answer, I knew there must be something wrong. So I came inside, and then I saw you, lying in front of your armchair. Well, I rang the ambulance straight away, and I stayed with you until they turned up. You were unconscious, and I knew something terrible had happened. I couldn’t come to the hospital with you because I had to pack for Brisbane, but I rang those nice friends of yours, Peter and Annette, to let them know. So what happened? Did someone break in?”

Hetty’s head hurts. “I got up for a glass of water. That’s all I remember.” It’s not true, but she’s too ashamed to tell the truth. It was him, there in the dark. But she’s not going to tell Pat that. She’s not going to tell anyone. It’s starting to curdle in her, this knowledge that he broke into her house in the dark to take her money. He didn’t ask, didn’t knock on her door and tell her what he needed; he broke in to steal it. Stood there in the dark by the cupboard, a looming shadow across the floor, and knocked her over as he ran past her to the door. It hurts more than the headaches she’s been getting since she woke up that morning sprawled on the floor.

Pat leans further towards her, so close that Hetty can smell her perfume. She smells like the inside of an antique shop. “I brought you something I thought you should have a look at.” She passes Hetty a small newspaper clipping. The article’s heading proclaims “Woman found Dead”, and underneath it is a picture of police tape

stretched around a small block of flats. “It’s terrible – they found this lady in her unit, stabbed. Someone broke in through the window and tried to steal her jewelry.”

Hetty looks up from the article to Pat’s earnest face. She hadn’t even brought her the whole paper, so she’d have something interesting to read. Just the article, meticulously cut from the surrounding page.

“If it was a break-and-enter, you should really report it to the police. You never know what hooligans are around these days.”

The room closes in on her, small and tight. Hetty finds it hard to breathe as she hands the article back, her hand shaking. “I don’t need to tell the police. Nothing happened, I just fell over, that’s all.”

“What do you mean, nothing happened? Look at you! And something worse might happen next time, like it did to this poor lady. I don’t want to have that on my conscience.”

Hetty tries not to listen, after that. You and your conscience should have both stayed at home, she thinks. She watches Pat’s mouth open and close, sees small cracks appear in her foundation. She wishes there was some way of asking her to leave without being rude. She’s going on and on about her granddaughter and the baby. Shut up about your perfect family, she wants to say, and she can’t stop thinking about Paul.

*He’s standing in her kitchen, tall and so skinny his t-shirt hangs from his body, his arms poking out the sleeves like a wooden coat-hanger.*

*“Granny, you don’t mind if I take Dad’s guitar, do you? I’m moving out.”*

*He’s expecting her to say yes, she thinks. He’s standing in the doorway, holding the guitar like it is a part of him. She won’t see him again, if she lets him take it. It’s the only thing that keeps him coming back. It takes everything she has to say yes, to*

*watch him walk down the porch steps carrying the guitar, look back and wave with one long arm before he disappears behind the corner of her house.*

*When he is gone, she sits back down at the kitchen table, turns the radio on and opens the newspaper. Gets out a block of cheese and a jar of pickled onions. Unscrews the lid of the jar, stands up again to get a fork. Sits down. Spikes a round smooth onion with shaking fingers and chews it to pieces in her mouth. It stings as she swallows. The radio is a blur of sound behind her, the open newspaper a mass of columns and words.*

*Hetty leans her elbows on the table and holds her head in her hands. Her body is tense with grief. For Phil. For Eva, who stole Paul away from her when he was just a little boy, and never knew he had come back. For Paul, who is so young and so unsure. Who carries that guitar like it's more precious than he is. For herself, because she's let him go, and she doesn't think she will ever see him again.*

"Hetty?"

She looks up. Pat is standing now, her chair pushed back.

"Sorry?"

"I said I've got to go. My daughter's coming over tonight, and I promised her I'd cook a roast. It was lovely seeing you though, and I'm glad you're feeling better. You'll be home in no time, I'm sure."

"Thank you." Hetty watches Pat walk to the door, turn and wave.

"Bye!" She disappears, leaving the smell of her perfume still hanging beside Hetty's bed.

Hetty coughs. She hears the breath wheeze in her lungs and wishes she could have a cigarette. He did come back, she thinks. He came back, but not to see me. Her head hurts.

The next day in their group session, Davo starts to talk about his guitars.

“I miss my bloody guitars,” he says. “Food’s good, I feel okay, but I just can’t relax without a guitar. Paul’d know what I mean, wouldn’t you, Corporal?” He pauses for a response for once, and without thinking, Paul answers.

“I reckon I miss the surf more than my guitar,” he says. “But I don’t have a guitar anymore anyway, so I wouldn’t know.” As soon as he’s said it he wishes he’d kept his mouth shut.

“Didn’t you say...?” Davo asks.

“Yeah, but I fucken sold it, didn’t I.”

Paul sits opposite Ron. His exercise book is on the floor next to his chair.

“So,” says Ron, “How are you going?”

“I’m okay.”

“Want to talk to me about anything?” he asks.

“Not really.”

“Well,” he says, “can I ask you something?”

“If you want.”

“This morning,” he says, “in the group session, you said something about your guitar. You want to tell me about that?”

“It used to be my dad’s,” he says. There’s a hardness in his throat that feels like a pane of glass. If something hit at the right angle, it’d be gone. Shattered. Splintered into tiny pieces that’d rip straight into him. What kind of a person sells their dead father’s guitar? He’s a loser, a shit, just like Gary used to say. “You’re a little shit,

Paul,” he’d say. And all the time he was worried about his mum, shut up there in that dark room with the blinds down, staring at the wall. He’d go in there to watch her like he used to do after she’d fallen asleep at the table when they lived in the caravan in Emerald. She’d be sitting there in her pink dressing gown with her head down, her hair falling all over the table. He’d watch her because he was afraid she wasn’t okay. And if she wasn’t okay, what was stopping her from taking off on him like she’d taken off on his dad? If he did something to upset her, he might wake up in the morning and find her gone. So he’d lie awake watching her from his bunk, watching and watching until everything started to go fuzzy and he couldn’t stay awake anymore. She left him in his dreams. Every night she left him, and every morning he woke up in a panic expecting her to be gone.

“Paul.”

He looks up. Ron is still there, watching him. He looks like he’d sit there all day if he had to, just waiting for Paul to start talking.

“What do you want to know?” he asks.

“Whatever you want to tell me,” says Ron. “Whatever you’re thinking about. Have you answered any of those questions yet?”

“No.”

“Have you given them any thought?”

“Not really.” It’s a lie, but he doesn’t want to talk about anything. Doesn’t want to have to think.

“Well, while you’re thinking about it, you don’t mind if I take my shoes off, do you?” Ron asks, leaning forward in his chair. “My feet feel like they’re in a strait-jacket.”

Ron is stranger than he thought. He shrugs. “No – go for it. I don’t care.”



“You might when I take them off.” Ron unties his laces, pulls his shoes and socks off and wriggles his toes. “Ah... that’s better. I hadn’t worn shoes for years before I came here. Takes a bit of getting used to.” Ron’s feet are tough and callused, older than the rest of him. “So,” he says. “Want to make a start on those questions?”

“How come you didn’t wear shoes?” he asks, stalling.

“I hate them,” says Ron. “I’ve always felt like I’m locking my feet up, when I wear shoes. Better to leave them out in the air like they should be, I reckon. Give them a chance to grow properly.” He nods towards the NA pamphlet lying on the floor beside Paul’s chair. “So – have you got anything you’d like to share? Which questions have you looked at?”

With no shoes on, Ron looks less like a naval officer and more like a normal person.

“I did look at one,” he says. “I was supposed to write down everything I haven’t told anyone before.”

“And did you?” Ron asks.

“No.” He can sense Ron looking at him.

“You don’t have to show the answers to these questions to anyone if you decide not to,” he says. “I’m here to go through them with you if you want me to, and I’d strongly encourage you to do that, but no-one’s going to force you. The main reason we get you to answer these questions is for yourself, to help you get to know yourself better. Whether you choose to share what you’ve discovered with anyone else is up to you.”

There’s a silence. Paul sits there thinking about what he would say if he answered that question. Granny. Always Granny. He can’t get beyond her, can’t even remember if there are other things he could say.

He leaves the office when their session is finished feeling like shit. The scene has fixed itself in his head, won't leave him alone. The frailty of her body as it collided with his, that brief touch before the air thickened around him, the warmth of her nighty soaking into his side and congealing on his bare skin.

He lines up for dinner behind a bunch of guys he doesn't know well. They're laughing about something, swaggering. When his plate is filled with potatoes, pumpkin, soggy broccoli and layers of meat that poke like islands out of the gravy, he heads as far away from everyone else as he can. He sits on the end of a table, up against the window, and sees that Jack is sitting on the other side of the room, talking to Ron. A couple of minutes later Davo and Tom head towards him, Davo's plate piled high with potatoes. Damn it. He doesn't want to be around anyone.

Davo sits heavily to one side of him, and Tom pulls up a seat opposite. They're talking about a dream Tom had the night before.

"If my wife was still talking to me I'd get her to analyse you," says Davo. "She's into all that shit. Dreams. All that inner psyche stuff."

He wonders what Davo's wife is like: he has a mental image of her sitting in a fortune-teller's tent, wearing a long purple dress covered in sequins, thin fingers shuffling tarot cards. The image changes, and she's stampeding out of a brick town house with Davo's twelve-string under one arm and the last bottle of home-brew under the other.

"So. Your wife's a psychic," says Tom.

"Psychologist," says Davo. "But she does dreams on the side."

"Don't trust psychics."

"She's not a psychic." Davo speaks through a mouthful.

“Shrink, then.” Tom meticulously cuts a piece of meat and raises it to his mouth.

“What’d she have to say about you?”

“Not a lot.” Davo laughs, working his way down through the pyramid of baked potatoes. “She kept trying to analyse me but I’d never cooperate. Told her I was dreaming about blondes with big tits, just as a joke, and she didn’t speak to me for a week.”

The late afternoon light spills into the dining room and throws its glow on Tom’s face. Outside, there’s a rainbow. Paul, from his position near the window, can see it arching over the paddocks outside. One end is lost in dark clouds; the other reaches almost to the grass. He watches it as he eats, sees it grow so bright it seems almost solid. He looks away for a moment to load up his fork. They’re talking shit, Davo and Tom. Their voices grate on him, make him want to walk straight out through the window and leave everything behind. Davo is talking about his twelve-string now, going on and on about how he misses it more than he misses his wife. Paul hurries to get through his food, swallowing whole chunks of broccoli and pumpkin, and tries not to listen. The rainbow has started to fade, the sun disappearing in a blaze behind the hills.

“You get attached to your guitars, let me tell you,” says Davo.

“You play, don’t you, Paul?” asks Tom, wiping the corners of his mouth with a serviette. He’s placed his knife and fork next to each other in the middle of the plate, pointing neatly across the table at an exact right angle to his chest.

“Yep.”

“How long have you been playing?”

“Since I was a kid.” He keeps his eyes on his plate. On a mushy piece of pumpkin squatting beside the last of his meat.

“So, have you got a quiver of them like old guitar-man over here?”

Paul grips his fork, doesn't answer. Tom knows he doesn't have a guitar. He was there for that group session when he blurted it out. He's just being an asshole.

“You must have one, at least,” says Tom.

“Fuck off.”

“Well, that was unwarranted. Here I am, trying to be nice, like they all tell us to, and I get a boot in the face. You watch yourself, Pauly-boy, or one day you might insult someone who's not as forgiving as I am.” Tom is swinging back in his chair, arms crossed.

“I don't care how fucken nice you are, dickhead.” He's had enough.

“Are you calling me a dickhead?” Tom stops swinging on his chair.

“Yeah, well, you fucken deserve it.”

“You want to watch your mouth, kiddo,” says Davo.

He hears Davo's voice as if from a long way away. Tom's sneering face is opposite his, leaning in towards the table.

He doesn't even realise what he's doing until he's pushed back his chair so hard it bounces against the wall, and has picked up the edge of the table, heaving the whole side of it up so that all the plates slide across it and Tom's meal smashes onto the floor. Tom jumps backwards and the table crashes down. Paul kicks its underside and it vibrates against his foot, up into his leg. He's so angry he can't think properly, can't see anything except Tom's long face, the fallen down table and, beside him, Davo's bulk getting up out of his chair. When someone grabs his arm he tries to wrench it away, but can't. The hand is clamped around his arm with such force he's powerless. He feels himself being dragged away, the whole dining room erupting into laughter behind him. He's marched down the corridor and into the room he goes to for

counselling with Ron. When he's let go he realises who has brought him here. Ron, and another Salvo, who disappears as soon as the door is shut.

"What was all that about?" he asks.

"They were paying me out," he says. "Tryin' to get a rise out of me. So I gave it to them, didn't I." He can't stand still.

"You're angry, right?" he asks.

"What does it look like? Fuck!"

"You know what I do when I'm angry?" says Ron.

He shrugs. Who cares, he thinks. Who cares what you do when you're angry. You probably don't even get angry.

"Move," says Ron, waving Paul to one side, so the couch behind him is exposed. He walks over to the couch so he's standing directly in front of it. He stares at it for a moment, and then starts laying into it with his fists. His knees are bent, and he punches it with such force his shirt tightens across his back and sharp puffs of air squeeze out of the cushion. He doesn't say anything, just keeps hammering away at the couch. His face reddens, and sweat trickles down his forehead into his beard. His shirt sticks to his skin. Paul stands there watching him as he throws punch after punch at the couch. Like he means it, too.

After a few minutes he stands up and steps back, breathing hard. "You want to go for something you can't break. Not another person, and not a wall or a table, either." He points to the couch. "You want a go?"

Paul looks at the beaten-in cushions slowly puffing back out again. Well, if he's been given permission to hit something, he thinks, he'll bloody well make the most of it.

He aims a punch at the couch. His fist sinks into it, meeting its soft resistance, and he hits it again. He feels stupid, self-conscious.

“Go on,” says Ron. “Do your worst.”

Okay, he thinks, if that’s what you want, that’s what you’ll get. He punches the cushions again. He aims his fists down and starts to pick up a rhythm. The fabric is rough against his knuckles, and gives way easily. He sees Tom’s face floating there and bloodies it up with his fists. He keeps punching until his arms and shoulders ache and the couch sways before him. Tom’s face disappears and he sees Davo, Gary, Ned. The guitar. Granny. Granny standing there in the dark while he fumbled for the jar of money in the cupboard. He doesn’t stop, uses the pain in his arms, the burning in his chest to punch the image out. It won’t leave him alone. The harder he hits, the stronger it is, until he’s standing there in the room again, the jar cool in his palm, Granny’s shadow rounding the corner between the hall and the lounge-room, elongated over the floorboards in the faint light from the moon and the streetlight. His first panicked steps towards the door, that moment of contact with her warm body. It was hard enough to knock her over. He sees her now, falling through the darkness behind him, his footsteps and the slamming of the screen door masking the sound of her body thudding against the floorboards. How had he not seen it before, when he had the chance to turn around on the doorstep and go back, kneel down beside her and help her up? How had he not realised that she fell? He left her behind. He left her behind. He left her behind. He falls against the cushions, breathing in the dust caught between the back and seat of the couch, aching.

“Paul.”

He doesn’t move. All he can see is her thin body motionless on the floor, her nighty floating around it. Her glowing slippers.

“Paul, look at me.”

He digs his face further into the cushions, feels the dust sticking to his wet face. He cries out, his chest vibrating against the couch. When he sits up, the glare of the room makes everything look small and far away. Ron is sitting in his chair, waiting. He has to get it out.

“I knocked her over.” The words fall from his mouth and echo out into the room.

“Who did you knock over?” Ron asks.

“My granny.” His voice catches.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

It’s an effort to get the words out. “I broke into her house to steal her money, and she saw me. I didn’t know I’d knocked her over, or I would have gone back.” He can’t look at Ron.

“Do you know if she’s alright?”

“I don’t know.” He’s done it now. He’s told someone, let it out, and it’s there in front of him, what he’s done, taking up the space between him and Ron, shrouded in the shadows of Granny’s cupboard. He’s emptied himself of it and now he’s sitting here alone.

Ron stands, passes through the shadows and sits down beside him, the couch sinking under his weight.

“You’ve done well, Paul,” he says.

*He left you for dead. Someone is speaking to her, whispering in her ear. She doesn't want to listen, but it keeps going, smooth and insistent. He left you for dead. He ran into you, knocked you over, stole your money and he left you for dead. Go away, she wants to say, but her voice won't work, is stuck somewhere in her throat. And it's partly true, she thinks. He did break in, he did steal my money, he did run into me and knock me to the ground. But he didn't leave me for dead. How could he care about you, if he did all that? The voice asks. He doesn't care. He hasn't been to see you for months. Never once did he drop in to say hello after he took your son's guitar out of your cupboard and went to live with those friends of his. You don't know anything about his life. You don't know what he's doing, where he's living, who he spends time with. If he cared, he'd come to see you. He'd knock on the front door and open the screen without even waiting for your reply, knowing that you would welcome him in. He'd sit at your kitchen table and have a cup of tea, talk to you about his life, his passions, what he's doing and how he's going. He doesn't do any of that, does he? So how can you possibly think that he still cares? After all this time. After he stopped turning up to the guitar lessons you arranged for him, stopped playing music that drifted out over the lawn and gave you your family back, for whole afternoons at a stretch. Because you could hear Phil in his voice, couldn't you? Your son and your grandson together, in the music that rippled out across the yard.*

“Mrs. Taylor, are you awake, love?” Rhonda is standing over her, blurry and darker than she remembers.



Hetty tries to greet her but it's too much effort. The words refuse to form in her mouth; her throat constricts.

"You've got a bit of a temperature, love. Can you hear me?"

Hetty nods.

"I'm going to get the doctor to come and have a look at you, okay?"

Her head is heavy on the pillow.

*She can hear him practising when she is in the garden. The sound drifts out through the lounge-room windows and over to where she is picking beans. He's getting good. Peter has been teaching him the chords to old folk tunes, and Hetty hums along with this one as she reaches in among the soft leaves to snap off the beans. He sings louder when she's not in the house, the words sailing towards her over the brown lawn.*

*There is a ship, and she sails the sea*

*She's loaded deep, as deep can be*

*But not so deep as the love I'm in*

*I know not if I sink or swim...*

*He's not as good as Phil was, but he's getting there. He has the same love for it, she can hear it in the music, see it in the way he holds the guitar. Phil would have been proud of him.*

*The leaves of the mandarin tree are glossy in the sun. Sometimes she wishes she hadn't planted it, that she'd let his ashes fly out across the ocean instead. She couldn't bear to, when it happened. She didn't want to lose him altogether. Now, with Paul playing inside and the sound carrying across the yard, catching in the curling bean tendrils and beneath the leaves of the zucchini plants, she wishes she had let her son go, after all. Sent him off on the wind instead of clinging to him.*

She can hear the nurse's shoes squeaking on the floor of the ward. She opens her eyes, and there he is. Walking in behind Rhonda, coming around to stand at her pillow. It's Phil. He must be coming to take her home, she thinks. He's smiling, she can see that, even though her vision is still blurred. She tries to say his name. But then she notices how tall he is, and realises she must have made another mistake. It's Paul. He's come back to see her. He's standing there looking just like his father only taller and skinner. Where's your guitar, she wants to ask, but her mouth feels too strange to form all those words, so she just says his name, instead.

"Paul?"

"Her temperature's very high."

He bends over her. "How are you feeling, Mrs. Taylor?"

He morphs in front of her eyes. Blurs, and it's not him at all. It's the doctor. She feels an overwhelming sorrow. Sees the mandarin in the backyard during a storm, its leaves shiny with rain and whipped by the wind. Watches as Paul disappears around the corner of her house, carrying Phil's guitar. Rhonda and the doctor are talking to her but she can't keep her mind on what they are saying. The room fades, the lights twinkling like strange fluorescent stars. She is hot, but her feet are cold. She wants to vomit, feels her lunch rising in her stomach and tries to tell Rhonda, but her mouth is stiff like a rusted up ironing board and she can't speak. She moves her neck heavily through the air to the side of the bed, sees the floor below and feels her stomach convulse, her lips wet and sticky. It splatters on the floor, and she thinks that it's lucky the nurse is already here so she doesn't have to call someone to clean it up. She really believed it was him, coming back to her. Coming to take her home.

*Peter greets her at the door, carries his guitar over the threshold.*

*“Sorry I’m late,” he says. “Paul hasn’t been waiting too long, has he?”*

*Hetty hears her voice sound out into the hall, sharper than she intended. “He’s not here.”*

*Peter puts his guitar down. “Have you seen him since last week?”*

*“No.” She hates feeling like this. The house has been closing in on her all week. She’d forgotten how precarious her relationship with her grandson really is. He had been coming to see her at least twice a week since she gave him the guitar, and when he didn’t turn up for his lesson last week, she thought maybe he was sick. But twice in a row? She doesn’t have a phone number or an address, not even a street name. She doesn’t know if his mother has finally cracked and taken him away, a second time, or if he’s sick, or if he just doesn’t want to see her. And she’s ashamed, standing here in her hallway with Peter, who has been giving Paul free lessons for years, having to explain that she doesn’t know why he hasn’t turned up.*

*“Do you want some tea?” she asks. She doesn’t want Peter to go, not yet. The house feels too empty with just her and the radio in it.*

*They sit at the kitchen table while the kettle boils.*

*“Are you worried about him?” Peter asks.*

*“I am, I suppose,” Hetty says. “And I feel bad for you, that he hasn’t turned up. Maybe leave it next week, and I’ll ring you if he comes.”*

*“I did see him the other day,” Peter says slowly. “In town.”*

*“This week?”*

*“Only a couple of days ago.” Peter leans back in his chair. “He was with a kid I taught a few years ago. I didn’t like him much, to be honest.”*

*So he's still around, then. And he's not sick enough to be at home. Which means he just hasn't bothered to turn up for his lesson. Hetty gets up as the kettle starts to whistle, and realises she's shaking.*

*"I'm so sorry he hasn't turned up, Peter," she says. She hasn't felt this angry for a long time. Or this helpless.*

*"He's a good kid, Hetty," Peter says. "He'll show up eventually."*

There's the clang of a metal bucket, the smell of disinfectant, and Hetty thinks that someone must be cleaning up her vomit. There are voices above her but she can't distinguish who they belong to, and it's too much effort for her to open her eyes.

*Darkness. There are no stars, no moon. Everything is unfamiliar. There's a rustling sound all about her, wind brushing over paddocks of long grass. She shivers. The breeze is cold, wrapping around her bare arms.*

*Hetty feels a touch on her arm and someone takes hold of her hand, tentatively, as though they're not sure if she'll return the grasp. She wraps her fingers around until she can feel the hardness of knuckles beneath the skin.*

*The pressure on her hand increases. He wants her to come with him. Wants her to walk with him through this darkness. She can already feel it starting to gnaw at her, the cold from the ground seeping up into her ankles, across her feet.*

*Hetty hesitates.*

*The pressure on her hand is stronger, tighter. Heat is radiating through her fingers, her forearm, her shoulder, her chest. He's already walked this way, she thinks. He's just taking me where he's already been. So she agrees. Yes. I'll come. The*

*prickly, swaying heads of the long grasses brush against the soft underside of her arms as she lifts her heavy ankles and they start to walk, together through the dark.*

“We’re going to give you some antibiotics, Mrs. Taylor.”

The room shivers in a haze of heat. She wishes she wasn’t so hot and so heavy, that she could make sense of what is going on.

They're outside, sitting on the steps after they've finished work for the day, when Paul asks Jack how he ended up in jail. Jack doesn't answer. Smoke trails from his mouth. His bad leg is stretched out down the steps and his left arm is balanced on his knee. The skin is mottled, brown. They sit there in silence, looking out at the garden. Paul picks up a small jagged stone and rolls it between his fingers.

"Manslaughter," he says, finally. "I killed a mate."

"How?"

Jack doesn't look at him, keeps his face directed towards the fence at the bottom of the garden. "He left the pub before I did, passed out on the road, and I didn't see him there when I drove home."

Paul turns away. His hand has clenched itself so tightly around the stone that the skin has started to split.

"Consequences, like I told you," says Jack.

Fuck consequences, he thinks. He opens his hand and the stone clinks on the steps and skitters off the edge onto the grass. The garden is still in the afternoon light and two magpies are dipping their beaks, pecking at the lawn near the back fence.

The door behind them creaks open. Paul looks up and sees Ron standing there, holding the screen.

"Can I see you for a moment, Paul?" he asks.

Paul stands, wipes his hand on his shorts. The shadows of shrubs are starting to lengthen across the garden, and Jack is lighting up another cigarette.

"How's the leg, Jack?" asks Ron.

Jack half turns. "Still there," he says.

“Good to hear, mate, good to hear,” Ron laughs.

Ron leads Paul to his office and closes the door behind them. It looks somehow smaller than it did the night before, the couch familiar, standing there plump against the wall. At least he’s told someone, he thinks. At least someone knows and it’s not taking up so much space inside him that he can’t think.

Ron stays standing, doesn’t sit down like he usually does. “The cops rang,” he says.

Paul stares at Ron as the room shifts around him. His feet feel like they’re being sucked into the floor, like he’s walked too far out into the mouth of a river and the current is swirling up around his waist.

“How’d they find me?” he asks. He’s too tired to run anymore.

“Someone reported you as a Missing Person,” says Ron.

It takes a while for the words to make sense. So they don’t want to arrest him, then. Someone’s been trying to find him. For a moment, he’s not sure which is worse.

“The police gave me a number for you to ring,” Ron says. “They’ll let you know who’s trying to find you, and you can choose whether you give them your address or not.”

When Paul lines up for dinner that night after having rung the police, he has Peter’s phone number written on a slip of paper in his pocket. He doesn’t know why Peter is trying to find him. He thought it would be Granny, or his mum maybe, but Peter? He hasn’t seen him for years, not since he stopped turning up for his guitar lessons. Knowing the number is there, sitting in his pocket next to the yellow rabbit, he feels ill. He knows he has to ring the number, but he’s afraid. Doesn’t want to think about what

Peter is going to tell him. He's given two pieces of fish and a pile of vegetables, and sits down at an empty table by the window.

At the first mouthful of fish he is thrown back into Granny's kitchen, sees himself sitting at her round table picking at the remnants of a pan of fried flathead fillets, and Granny standing by the sink filling up the kettle.

"What do you reckon happens when you die, Granny?" he had asked. He'd been thinking about that ever since his dad died. What it means to be here, and then not. To be alive and then not.

She turned off the tap, plugged the kettle back into the wall, took two mugs out from the cupboard beneath the bench and spooned tealeaves into the teapot. "You go back to where you came from."

He can't remember if she said anything else. Can't remember whether she told him where that was, or if she just left it at that. You go back to where you came from.

Paul lifts another forkful of fish to his mouth and tries not to think. He looks up and sees Jack setting his plate down opposite him.

"You right?" Jack asks, as he lowers himself into a seat.

"Not really." He swallows, can feel Jack watching him, waiting for him to continue. "Someone reported me as a Missing Person."

"You know who it is?" he asks.

"My old guitar teacher. He's a friend of my grandmother's."

"Do you know why he's trying to find you?"

"I haven't rung him yet."

They eat for a while in silence, the rest of the dining room full of everyone else's conversations. Davo is laughing so loudly in the middle of the room that the sound reverberates off the walls.



“When I got out of jail,” says Jack, “I didn’t want anyone to know where I was.” He sits back in his chair, puts his knife and fork on the empty plate and pushes it aside. “Didn’t let anyone know for years. The next time I saw my family was at my sister’s funeral.” He finishes his water, sets the cup back on the table.

Paul waits for him to keep talking, but he doesn’t. They sit there quietly, Paul making marks with his fork in the smears of fish oil left on his plate. He imagines Jack, limping up to his family in a graveyard, knowing he’d never see his sister again. Jack’s figure fades, and becomes his own, standing in the wind with Granny’s coffin being lowered into the ground. He knows, then. As soon as he’s finished eating, he’ll ring Peter. Ron told him earlier that he could use the office phone.

He looks up and sees that Jack’s plate is empty, the old man staring down at the table.

“I’ll take your plate for you,” Paul says, on impulse. “Do you want dessert?”

Jack looks up, smiles. He’s got laugh wrinkles, Paul notices for the first time, like Granny’s. Creasing back from the corners of his eyes.

“Thanks mate,” he says. “I’d appreciate it. Shark bite’s playing up today.”

“You and your bloody shark bite,” he says, as he picks up the plates.

The dial tone purrs from the receiver as Paul sits at a desk in the office, staring at the phone in his hand. He tries not to think, and starts punching in the numbers. Holds the phone to his ear and hears it ringing out into space. One. Two. Three. Maybe he’s not home. Maybe it’s the wrong number. Four. The ringing cuts out, and he hears a voice on the other end of the line saying hello, this is Peter... and then there’s a silence, and he doesn’t know what to say because he remembers his voice and he remembers the guitar and he remembers Granny telling him how disappointed Peter was that he’d

stopped turning up for his lessons. As the silence lengthens, his earlier certainty begins to fade. He shivers.

“Hello?” Peter says again, abruptly.

“Hi,” he says. His voice won’t work properly, sounds like he’s about five years old.

“Who’s this?”

“It’s Paul.” He feels stupid. He remembers Peter’s brisk voice, his way of telling people what to do without waiting for a response.

“Paul? Oh – Paul! Sorry mate, I didn’t recognise your voice. You’re bloody hard to track down, you know that? What’d you do, try and pull a disappearing act?” He laughs.

Paul’s chest tightens. “Something like that,” he says. It’s too close to the truth to be funny.

“Look, Paul, I’ve got some bad news, I’m sorry. Hetty’s in hospital.”

He only half hears what Peter says after that. Something about Granny asking for him, and Peter going to Missing Persons because they didn’t know where he was. She’s in hospital. None of what Peter is saying means much to him. He just wants to know if she’s going to be okay. He’s aware that Peter has stopped talking, can feel the silence on the other end of the phone.

“Is she okay?” he asks.

“Well, that’s what I’m telling you,” Peter says. “She’s recovering from a brain hemorrhage.”

He’s too afraid to ask when she was admitted to hospital.

“She’s been asking for you for weeks,” Peter says. “If you’re not too far away, I can come and pick you up right now, if you like, and take you to see her.”

The thought of walking into hospital and seeing Granny lying there immobile on a bed, because of him, makes him recoil in horror. “I can’t,” he says.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

Paul grasps for the only excuse he can think of. “I don’t know if they’ll let me leave.”

Peter’s voice sharpens. “Where are you?”

He realises his mistake, then. If he tells Peter where he is, that’s it. No more hiding. He twists the phone cord in his fingers. “I’m in Canberra,” he says. “In a rehab.”

“Well, no wonder it’s been so hard for us to find you,” says Peter, after a pause. “But surely they’ll let you visit your grandmother?”

“I don’t know.” In the silence before Peter speaks again, Paul can hear his kids yelling in the background.

“Do you have any idea how long it’s taken us to find you?” Peter’s voice is raised, cutting through the sound of the kids, hammering down the line and into Paul’s ear. “Every time I visit, she asks for you. If you think there’ll be issues with you being allowed to leave, I’ll speak to someone. I’m assuming it’s not a prison.”

“No, he says, his gut clenching. “I’ll talk to Ron.”

*She is in a wide paddock, walking towards the sun. The grass around her rustles against her thighs, bowing over in long golden gusts as the wind runs its hand over the seeded heads.*

“Hetty?”

The paddock darkens, is caught up like a carpet about to be taken outside and shaken. Hetty struggles to open her eyes, feeling sticky and sick. He came back for her. He must be here, then, sitting somewhere in the room with her, his guitar propped against the wall, waiting for her to wake up. She can’t see properly, only the blur of white walls and her arm laid out on the sheet, a plastic tube emerging from the underside of her elbow. She doesn’t want to believe that she is still here, alone.

*Paul has the fry pan in front of him on the table, picking out the last remains of the flathead she cooked earlier. His fingers are slim and bony, like Eva’s. He doesn’t have Phil’s hands. Except for the calluses, from playing the guitar.*

*“You know your grandfather used to take your dad fishing, don’t you?” she asks.*

*He shakes his head.*

*“They used to borrow a rowboat from a friend of ours and take it out on the lake. They’d come back with a couple of buckets full, and we’d keep some for us, then give the rest away. Your dad could gut, fillet, and cook his own fish by the time he was your age.”*

*She can tell Paul isn't really listening. Or he's thinking about something else, looking down at the table. He picks the last crumbs from the bottom of the pan, but doesn't eat them.*

*Hetty gets up to fill the kettle. If he wants to know more, he'll ask, she thinks. There's obviously something going on in his head. Phil used to be like that. He'd clam up, go off in his head until he'd figured things out, and then he'd talk about it. She watches his reflection in the darkness of the kitchen window, sees him raise his head and glance towards her.*

*"What do you reckon happens when you die, Granny?"*

*Hetty doesn't answer him straight away. She watches the water flow into the kettle and thinks about her son, growing into the mandarin tree in the backyard. The space next to her in the bed, where her husband used to lie. The windy headland where she stood after his funeral, and the flock of terns she saw wheeling out over the ocean, diving for fish.*

*She turns the tap off and plugs the kettle into the wall. Your body decomposes, she thinks. It goes back into the earth, and part of you keeps living, flying out over the wild ocean with a flock of wheeling terns, or glinting off the tips of glossy dark leaves. She takes a couple of cups out of the cupboard beneath the bench and spoons tea leaves into the pot. You become a part of everything again, only differently. As she pours water into the teapot, she thinks the best answer would be to say that she doesn't know. She can hear Paul still picking away at the burnt pan behind her, and knows that he wants something more than that. Steam rises out of the teapot's spout, and she watches it disperse. What she really believes is that you go home. Wherever you came from, in the beginning, before you had shape and form. Home.*

*“You go home,” she says, as she pours the tea. “Back to where you came from. Whether that’s returning to the earth, or floating off up into space, I don’t know.” She pauses. She’s never told him the reason why she wanted to bury Phil out the back under the mandarin. Paul is looking at her, listening intently, and she finds that she’s too ashamed to tell him, to admit that she wanted to keep him in the backyard because she couldn’t bear to let him go.*

“We’ve found him.”

Someone is holding her hand. Annette. She’s brought more roses, too, Hetty sees, as she opens her eyes. The spindly ones, the late bloomers, by the back fence.

“Who?”

Her voice works again, and she’s not so hot, but she doesn’t trust herself anymore, thinks that it could be anyone sitting by her bed. The nurse, maybe. Or Margaret, or one of all those people who brought her cards, or Pat. She squeezes the hand, trying to make sure it really is Annette sitting there.

“Paul. We’ve found Paul.”

The bus is half empty, swaying through Canberra's wide streets in the twilight. Paul leans his head back against the seat and watches the trees slide past the window. He hadn't realised how alone he'd feel, seeing Ron drive off in the Salvo's van as the bus pulled out of the depot.

After the phone call with Peter last night, Ron came into the office.

"Well?" he asked. "How did it go?"

"She's in hospital," Paul said.

"Well, now you know." Ron sat in another chair next to the desk. "That's good.

You can stop beating yourself up about it and deal with it."

"How?"

"Go and see her."

"I can't."

Ron looked at him. "You can't?"

Paul thought about walking into a hospital ward and seeing her lying in bed, helpless. Why would she want to see him? She'd be better off forgetting about him, changing the locks on her doors.

Ron was talking again. "There are plenty of things you can't do, Paul, but this isn't one of them."

The bus reaches the highway and picks up speed, reflector posts blurring past the window. When he rang Peter back last night to say yes, he'd come, it was almost as if Peter had already arranged what was going to happen. Since there was only one bus from Canberra to Wollongong, and it got in after nine o'clock in the evening, he would

pick Paul up at the bus station and take him back to his place, where he could stay the night. And then he or Annette would take Paul to the hospital the next morning.

He's dreading walking into the hospital. He's afraid she might only want to see him so she can tell him how disappointed she is, how she knows it was him, and how she never expected that he'd turn out to be such a loser. He told her he'd wagged school once, when he turned up at her house in the middle of the day to play his guitar. She'd been listening to the radio: he could hear it as she opened the front door.

"Have a pickled onion," she said, as she poured him a glass of water. There was a jar open on the kitchen table, and a fork next to it. "Have you got the day off?"

"I wagged," he said, taking another fork out of the kitchen drawer. He stabbed an onion, and looked up to find Granny setting the glass of water down in front of him.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's a waste of time. I don't learn anything. I'd rather play my guitar," he said, in between chewing on the onion.

Granny stared at him. She was disappointed; he could see it in her face. He hated it. Swallowed the pickled onion too quickly and started coughing. Drank the glass of water with her still standing there, looking at him.

"Well, you have to make your own decisions," she said, picking up the jar of onions and screwing the lid back on. She turned to put it in the fridge and spoke with her back to him. "I can't tell you what to do."

He took his guitar out on the porch and stayed there playing until he couldn't stand it anymore, knowing she was inside with that look on her face. He left the guitar in the lounge-room, and went back to school.

He's not going to be able to cope if she looks at him like that. If she stares up at him from a hospital bed and says that it's up to him to make his own decisions, knowing



that he broke into her house and left her there without even stopping to make sure she was alright.

Paul leans back against the seat. The low hum of the engine is constant, and he can see a faint reflection of his face in the window of the bus. He leans forward until his forehead is touching the glass, and the image fades. Outside, stars are beginning to appear. If he can focus on the sky, the grey paddocks, and the dark outlines of the trees, maybe he'll be able to stop thinking. He can just make out the dark shape of a hill in the distance, and above it, two bright stars. They remind him of his mum.

One night when they were living in Townsville she'd arrived home from her job at the corner store and taken him to the fish and chip shop at the beach to buy spring rolls for dinner. They were sitting next to each other on the sand in the dark, licking oil and salt from their fingers, when she suddenly held out her hand, pointing at the ocean.

"Did you see that?"

He followed her hand down the beach towards the water. "No," he said.

She stood. "I think it's phosphorescence." She led him down the sand to the shore. "Look!"

At the water's edge the sea was glowing, rippling up onto the beach as though the stars were swimming together in a great pack on the rim of the ocean.

His mum bent down and picked up a handful of sand. "Watch this," she said, and tossed it into the water. It flew out in an arc, sparkling across the surface. She turned, her face shining bright as the ocean.

He started to laugh. He couldn't stop it rippling up inside him, as if the tiny, glowing sea-creatures had found their way there too. As he bent down to gather his own handful of sand, he heard her laughing as well, and they stood there on the shore

throwing great armfuls of sand into the water, watching the stars wave back at them from the surface of the sea.

It's one of his rare memories of her being happy. Paul draws back from the window and leans his head against the seat. He closes his eyes and starts to drift, lulled by the purring engine and the rocking of the bus.

Long grass rustles around his waist, against his arms. He's running through a paddock, his feet meeting mounds of grass, the ground uneven. It's dark, but the sky is changing colour overhead. A bright line of gold appears; the grasses around him turn from grey to straw-brown and the paddocks drop off into nothing somewhere ahead. He's breathing fast, his legs are aching, and he trips. He sprawls out into the grass and lies there on his side, his hip digging into something hard. Reaching beneath him to see what it is, he holds it up to the sky. It's a coin, flat and hard and glinting in the early morning light. On his knees now, he digs his fingers into the earth and uncovers a handful of coins. He digs again, and when he's moved a handful of dirt aside, there they are, hundreds of notes, layer upon layer. He keeps digging, unearthing fifties, twenties, tens: all densely packed into the earth. Crawling forward on his hands and knees, he tries to see where it ends. Finally, it stops. There's a definite break where the grass gets suddenly denser and the colour of the earth changes. He stands, knees and wrists aching, and sees that a few metres in front of him is a cliff. Beyond the cliff is the ocean, calm and bright in the early sun.

The light is so strong he has to shade his eyes in order to see properly. Below the cliff is a beach, with a small rocky path curving down to it. Pulled up on the sand is a green wooden rowboat. Even from this distance he can see that the paint is peeling. He's drawn to the boat, as though it is waiting there for him. He takes a step forward, into the thick grass. He's torn. If he leaves the money, he doesn't know whether he'll

be able to find it again. The tide is rising, he sees, as a wave washes up and splashes against the bow.

Maybe if he fills his pockets with the money, he could take it with him. Kneeling, he unearths a handful of notes and plunges them into his pockets. He turns around, sees another wave roll up onto the beach, reaching almost half the length of the boat. He has to be quick, if he's going to get down there in time. He'll just have to carry it in his hands. Bending down, he grabs two large handfuls of notes and tries not to think about the fact that he's leaving a whole paddock of them behind. He runs towards the cliff, sees the beginning of the path, and starts the descent. He holds his arms out to balance himself, clenching his fingers around the money. Almost at the bottom, he stumbles, falls, and rolls down the rest of the rocky path onto the sand. His fingers loosen, and money starts slipping from his hands. When he gets up, sand stuck to his lips, his arms scratched, he sees the money, spilling from his pockets and scattered all over the dunes. Further up the beach, the boat is almost floating, beginning to shift sideways as the water sucks back out.

He wakes, disoriented, as the driver changes gear. They're heading down the mountain pass, the road curving round on itself through rainforest, trees swaying darkly above. He swallows, his mouth dry. He can still see the green boat being pulled out with the tide. The money, swept across the dunes in the wind. He feels sick. Behind him, two women are talking about their grandchildren.

"I was totally unprepared for it, Jane. I just held him in my arms and – I don't know – something happened. It's different to when you have your own children."

"I know," says the other woman. "When I saw Alice, I couldn't imagine anything more perfect. Then I saw Ella – they're twins – and she was perfect as well! Both perfect, in different ways..."

“It helps that you don’t have piles of nappies to wash every day,” says the first, laughing.

Their voices are soft, muted by the engine of the bus. Granny used to talk to him like that, laughter marking the edge of her voice. He bends his head. There is so much warmth in the conversation spilling over the seat behind him that he finds it hard to breathe. Images throw themselves at him: Granny, standing at the door watching him as he walked down her driveway, carrying his dad’s guitar. Granny, sitting at her round kitchen table waiting for him to arrive for a guitar lesson, and her embarrassment at having to tell Peter that he hadn’t turned up. All those nights when he lay in bed worrying about how he was going to survive, where he was going to get the next lot of money he needed from, she was alone, not knowing where he was.

He looks up to see his reflection staring back at him from the bus window, and this time he doesn’t move forward to block it out. He looks at his narrow face, his clean-shaven cheeks that the Salvos insist on, his dark hair. She must have loved him, to take him in like she did, when he turned up on her doorstep that first time. And then again, red-eyed and smelling of pot, and she’d never asked any questions.

They’re in the southern suburbs of Wollongong now, heading towards the city. He used to drive around these streets with Ned and Josh, before Josh moved down south. Ned’s dad owned a used car dealership, and every now and then they’d take one of the cars for a spin. He looks up one of the streets on the left and sees that the metal curbside guard is still there, twisted and bent, not fixed yet. He did that. They came flying down the hill one night in one of Ned’s dad’s cars, skidded around the corner, slammed into the guard, sound of scraping metal, Ned swearing in the front seat, Josh silent in the back. He corrected, and they kept going down the hill, his chest pulsing, arms shaking, but his head so clear he felt like he could keep going straight ahead, over

the highway, the car growing wings, over the supermarket and the rest of the suburb and out over the sea. Ned grabbed the wheel before they got to the highway, and swerved the car around so they were heading back towards the city.

“Dad’s gonna be pissed when he sees that!” Ned laughed. “Give us a go.”

Paul slowed the car, pulled over by the side of the highway, and they swapped places. Ned driving, Paul in the backseat, Josh in the front.

“Reckon I can get from here to Corrimal without stopping at any lights?” Ned said.

“Nah, you’re too much of a wuss,” said Josh.

Ned didn’t say anything, but swung back onto the road. From the backseat, Paul watched the speedo climb. They went through green light after green light. Then an orange, a red. Another red. They overtook a truck, a couple of cars, and ran another red light, just making the gap between two cars driving on the cross street. When they pulled into Ned’s dad’s car lot in Corrimal, sliding across the gravel, Ned got out and did a dance, flexing his muscles. “Fucken told you I could do it,” he said.

Looking out the window, it feels like a long time since he left. The city seems smaller, flimsier, not quite real. Like he’s being driven through a stage set made of cardboard. The only thing that’s real is Granny, up there in the hospital on top of the hill. He could see her tonight, if he got off the bus at the train station, the stop before he’s supposed to be meeting Peter. All he’d have to do is walk up the hill and into the hospital. The bus is pulling up at the lights on the stretch of road just before the hospital comes into view, and now that he’s here, there’s an urgency in him to see her.

He looks up at the lights in the hospital windows as they pass, and decides that this is it. If he’s going to do it at all, it’ll have to be now.

When the bus pulls up at the train station he stands, files down the brightly lit aisle and down the steps into the bitumen car park. The night is still and quiet as he starts

walking away from the rumbling bus. He breathes in the familiar city smells of car exhaust and steelworks, eucalypts and salt air. Ron was right. This is something he can do. He can continue up this dark hill to the hospital and he can walk into her ward. He can say he's sorry, for all of it, not just for breaking into her house.

He reaches into his pocket for the cigarettes Jack gave him that afternoon, and lights one. It's as though Jack is with him then, walking up the hill, his bad leg swinging out beside him. When he reaches the hospital he stubs out the cigarette and climbs the steps two at a time.

Inside, the air is dry and cool. He approaches the reception desk and asks, before he loses momentum:

"Can you tell me what ward Hetty Taylor is in?" Her name sounds strange on his tongue. He's never called her that before.

The nurse behind the counter looks up at him. "Visiting hours are over," she says, tight-lipped.

"Sorry?" He hadn't thought about that. He hasn't come this far to not be allowed to see her, just because of visiting hours.

"Visiting hours are over," the nurse says again. "You can't just walk in anytime you want to."

"But I need to see her," he says.

The nurse's face is lined, her eyes tired. "I'm sorry," she says. "The best thing you can do for your friend is to come back in the morning. I can't let you up there."

"She's not my friend," he says, hearing his voice rise. "She's my grandmother."

"I'm sorry," she says again. "Nothing I can do, I'm afraid."

He can feel the anger building in him, and knows that if he doesn't turn around, right now, and walk away, he'll slam his fist down on the counter, or into the nurse's

small, pointed chin. Turning blindly, he heads for the exit. You were wrong, Ron, he thinks, as the doors slide open and he stumbles down the steps. I can't even do this. The street is dark and steep, and his feet slap down on the bitumen, following each other relentlessly.

A car roars past as he emerges from the tunnel under the train-line at the bottom of the hill. He hears the labouring engine, sees the dodgy green paint job lit by the one working tail-light, he knows who it is. Not this. Not now. Lowering his head, he wills the car to keep moving, up and over the hill and out of sight. It doesn't. He hears it slow, screech into reverse.

"Paul, ya wanker!" Ben has rolled down the window and his stubbled head is staring out, his elbow resting on the car door. "Haven't seen you for a while," he says, grinning. "Take off, did ya?"

*She sees the blur of a boy's face peering through the screen door in the faint light spilling out onto the porch. The face is vaguely familiar, tired and flushed, leaning forward out of the darkness from a lanky body too skinny for its height.*

*"Hi Granny," he says, his voice croaky at the edges, adolescent.*

*After all these years, here he is, standing there on her doorstep in the dark. She opens the screen and draws him into the house, closing out the night behind him. When he's inside she stares at him, taking everything in: his height, the shape of his nose, the length of his hair, the bruise on the side of his jaw. The little boy who used to follow her around the backyard on his tricycle, bumping into the hills-hoist and riding up with gift offerings of mulberries while she was hanging out the washing or watering the roses, has disappeared and in his place is this gangly, awkward stranger with a breaking voice and wary eyes. Hetty opens her arms and gives him a hug, closing her eyes against the reality of his new body, feeling for something she can remember of that open-hearted boy. She wraps her arms around him, taking in even his school bag.*

"Can I get you something, Mrs. Taylor? A drink of water?"

The kind nurse, Rhonda, is standing by her bed. They don't normally bring anything during the night, unless she calls for help.

"I'd love one, thank you," Hetty says.

Paul is coming to see her in the morning. She'll be able to touch him, know that he hasn't disappeared, hasn't crashed his ute down the side of a mountain somewhere. She'll tell him why she wanted to bury Phil under the mandarin, and how it's important to let people go. To watch them float up in the wind over the ocean and know that they



are free. You don't need to keep them in your backyard, she'll say, you need to let them go. She'll tell him that next time he needs something he should just come inside, turn on the light, and ask her. Don't go stumbling around in the dark, she'll say. Ask me.

"Here you are." Rhonda is back beside Hetty's bed, handing her a glass of water.

Hetty takes the glass and drinks, the water cool in her throat.

"Where did these come from?" Rhonda asks, reaching past Hetty to the shelf holding the vase of roses and all the cards she's been given. Her hand emerges holding a mandarin.

"Oh, they're from my tree," Hetty says. "Annette brought them in this afternoon."

"They look lovely." Rhonda turns the fruit over in her hand before putting it back on the shelf.

"Thank you."

When Rhonda leaves, Hetty looks over at the two mandarins, bright against the white hospital walls.

*Paul rides into the backyard while Hetty is staking the tomato plants, tying their slim stems upright with strips she's cut from an old pair of beige stockings. He leaves his bike on the grass and walks over to the mandarin tree. It's the first season it has fruited, and Hetty has been watching the two mandarins slowly grow and ripen. Paul touches one of the plump, reddy-orange fruit.*

*"What are you going to do with them?" he asks.*

*Hetty finishes tying the last tomato, and walks over to stand beside him. "Eat them, I suppose," she says.*

*He glances at her, and she knows they've both got the same half-guilty look on their faces. Is it right to eat fruit produced by your dead son, she wonders?*

*“Do you reckon it’s okay, to eat them?” he asks.*

*“I don’t think he’d mind, do you? You know your father, he wouldn’t want them to go to waste.” She reaches out a hand towards one of the fruit, and then pauses. “What about your mum?” she asks. “Do you think she’d like one?”*

*He looks away so she can’t see the expression on his face. “No,” he says.*

*There’s a silence, and Hetty watches the sun glinting off the deep green leaves. She looks at Paul, who has picked a leaf and is turning it over in his fingers.*

*“So would you like one?” She asks, finally. “We could have one each.”*

*The skin peels away easily, lies bright orange under the tree where they drop it. They look at each other, the two of them, as they both eat a segment, the bittersweet flavour filling their mouths.*

Hetty reaches over for one of the mandarins and weighs it in her hand, breathing in its scent. She’ll share them with him, when he arrives.

“What’s up?” Paul is thirsty, can feel the back of his throat burning up like bitumen in the middle of summer.

“You want a lift?” Ben asks.

“Nah.” He’s not getting in that car.

“Been down the coast, have ya?”

Paul shrugs. Just drive away, he thinks, watching Ben’s fingers tap on the outside of the car door. Now. Drive. Roll up that bloody window and put your foot down.

“Got a job for ya,” Ben says.

He’s not prepared for the rush of gratitude that flows through him, loosening his limbs. He sees the nurse’s small pointed face, lit stark under the fluorescent lights, and has already taken a couple of steps towards the car before he hears his foot crunch down on the gravel. The movement of his body towards the car feels inevitable, a stone dislodged and skittering down a long dirt driveway. He tries to slow down, puts his hands in his pockets, and there they are, under his fingers. Jack’s cigarettes.

“So, you coming, or what?”

The open window is dark, the lights glowing on the dashboard. Ben’s shadowed face stares out at him. Behind the car, a telegraph pole leans precariously to the right, and there’s rubbish in the gutter. Jack’s packet is the only thing that feels real.

“Piss off,” he says, before he has time to change his mind.

“What?” Ben’s fingers stop tapping.

“Just piss off, will ya?”

“What’s up your arse?”

He doesn't answer, just watches Ben watching him out the window. The cigarette packet crumples in his fist.

"I'm trying to do you a fucken favour." Ben guns the engine.

He's ruining Jack's cigarettes. His hand is clenched so tight around the packet they'll be twisted and crushed, tobacco spilling out.

"Ah, you're a fucken loser," Ben says, as he accelerates, the wind sucking the words back to Paul as he watches the glowing tailgate fly up the hill and disappear over the rise.

There's a half empty bottle of water by the side of the road and he kicks it, hard. Water spills from the lip, gurgling out over the bitumen and glinting in the glow from the streetlight. The trickle of water has leaves a dark stain on the road and Paul kicks the bottle again, watching it bounce across the street, empty. It clatters over the bitumen and rolls to a stop in the gutter. The telegraph wires swaying overhead are surreal, their shadows crossing his path. He has to get in the water. He feels like someone has shat on him and wiped it all over his face and arms, smeared it down his legs.

Climbing the hill, he heads down towards the sea until he can see the dark mass of ocean spread out in front of him. He walks north across the grass, then drops down onto the sand. He shivers as he takes off his shirt, pulls the twisted packet and lighter from his pocket and stuffs them into his boots. Leaving his clothes, he steps over a pile of wet seaweed and then onto damp sand. Water swirls around his ankles and sucks back out, the whitewash glowing in the cold light of the moon. The wind pulls at his hair and he starts to run, splashing through the shallows into the deeper darkness of the sea. A wave rolls towards him and he dives, opening his eyes as the shock of water rushes over his skin. He can't see the sand. Surfacing, he sees the ocean stretching out before him, and draws in a lungful of the night.

This is it. He can't go back. All this time, he realises, he's been holding onto a vague idea that if he couldn't get it together while he was at rehab, he could always come back, even just once, and feel his limbs relaxing, quiet descending on his mind, warmth coursing through him. He's not going to be able to do that, ever again. He knows this just as certainly as he knows that if he'd stepped inside that car, he would never have been able to look Jack in the eye.

He dives again. When Granny opened the door the first time he turned up, the light spilling out from behind her onto the porch, she could have turned him away, but she didn't. She held her arms out to him and as they closed around him, he had felt completely and utterly safe. Paul's lungs are aching but he forces himself to stay underwater, to feel the pain that's clawing at his throat, his chest. He sees himself as she must have seen him, a dark shadow standing at the cupboard door with the jar glinting in his hand, and the pain of it is so great that he lets his breath go, sways unseeing in the palm of the sea, and breathes.

Water rushes into his nostrils, cold and salty. He splutters, doesn't know which way he needs to swim to get out into the air, feels like he's closer to drowning now than he was that night he saw Port Kembla flaming from the shore. He could just keep breathing, he thinks. Once you get past the first breath, the rest is easy. Then he sees her, lying in bed, surrounded by white walls, watching the doorway. Waiting for him. It's enough to propel him upwards, his arms flailing, trying desperately to get to the surface. When his head finally emerges into the air he breathes too quickly, water choking into his lungs. He coughs, tries to keep himself afloat as water rushes out his mouth, his nose, but the dark mass of a wave peaks above him and carries him with it, sucking him down towards the sand. It churns above him, tossing him so that he loses all sense of direction, caught in swirling sand and whitewash.

*Hetty crouches down and smiles at Paul, who is holding onto the handrails at the shallow end of the pool.*

*“Can we go home now?” he asks, shivering.*

*“One more lap, and then we’ll go.” She looks out over the pool and imagines that for him, it must look a lot longer that it does to her, acres of it stretching out to the blocks at the other end.*

*“I’m too tired.”*

*“You’ve only got one more left.” It is hard, watching him hanging there in his blue goggles with goosebumps standing out on his thin arms, but she doesn’t want him to give up, wants him to know the satisfaction of finishing what he set out to do. “I’ll meet you at the other end,” she says. “I’ll walk along beside you, to keep you company.”*

*Her heart swells as he ducks down again and sets out to cover the length of the pool, arm over arm in the cold, breathing every second stroke. Halfway along the pool his stroke becomes less sure, and she wonders whether she has been too harsh, wants to pluck him out of the water and wrap him up in her own towel. But he keeps swimming, and she keeps walking beside him, the chill of the nor-easter rippling over the surface of the water.*

She can’t sleep. It feels like hours and hours since Rhonda gave her the glass of water. Her head is hurting, pain throbbing through her right temple.

He's out in the air, gasping, the wind blowing cold against his wet face. He chokes, water running from his nose, his mouth. His feet connect with the sand and he struggles for breath, the ocean swirling around his shoulders. Everything is blurred, surreal. The sea looks brighter than it should. Swell rises beneath him and he kicks up over it, treading water, heaving in air. Why would she wait for him, when she knew what he'd done? He breathes. Coughs up more water and breaths again, the night air flowing into his lungs. His arms are shaking, moving through the water as he struggles to stay upright. The sea shimmers around his hands.

He rises over another wave, sees it roll in and crash onto the shore in a glimmer of light. With a shock, he looks back at his hands, at the trails of silvery-green sparking just below the surface of the water. It's too bright to be a reflection of the moon. He closes his eyes, breathes. Another wave swells beneath him and he feels his feet leave the sand, his head bobbing safely out in the air. When he opens his eyes again, there they are: hundreds, thousands of tiny creatures, glowing. He can feel them now, in the soupy thickness of the water. The sky arches overhead, heavy and quiet, and his breathing slows, steadies. Bursts of light flicker from his elbows, his hands, his knees. He lifts a handful of water and lets it slip from his fingers, and for a moment he's one of them, a tiny creature suspended in the dark ocean, bright as the stars, so small, so insignificant in this vast space.

The night becomes so still it is almost a presence in itself. Surrounded by the ocean lapping against his shoulders, and thousands of tiny, glowing creatures, he loses himself. There's nothing but the cool salt air, the sea, rippling and alive, and the stars, scattered overhead like a handful of falling sand.

He's cold. A wave rises behind him and he forces his shaking limbs to swim until he feels the weight of it propel him forward, foaming around his body, his face. The shimmering whitewater takes him right into the shallows. He stands, and even though he's out of the water and walking up onto the sand, shivering in the wind, part of him is still out there, glowing.

Pulling his clothes on, Paul puts Jack's cigarettes back into his pocket and reaches down for his boots.

He feels clean and empty as he walks back up the beach. When he reaches the grass, cool and wet on his bare feet, he turns to look back. The phosphorescence is so faint from this distance he can barely see it.

He needs to find Peter.

He's thirsty. The long, empty streets take him towards the mountain. Peter's house is close to Granny's place, on one of the side streets. He walks automatically, taking each familiar turn until he rounds the corner into Granny's street.

There are still a few roses on the spindly bushes along the front wall, he sees, as he nears her house. He slows as he approaches the driveway, catching their scent in the wind. He shivers, his clothes still damp. He's lived this moment over and over in his mind, the stumble out the screen-door and down the tiled steps, along the driveway and out into the shadowed street, clutching the jar.

He can't help it. He turns into the driveway, the familiar cracks in the concrete passing under his feet, the roof of the carport creaking overhead. He can smell rosemary, clean and fresh, as he climbs the tiled steps. The door is locked. He reaches under a pot of thyme for the spare key and pulls it out, rusty and wet. Someone must



have been watering the plants. He inserts the key into the lock and has to work at it for a minute, jiggling the handle, before it will turn.

The house smells of dust.

“Granny?” He can’t help calling out. His voice sounds dull, as though the walls have absorbed all the sound.

He feels his way through the hall and into the kitchen, just making out empty vases, normally full of flowers, sitting on the sideboard. Her absence makes the place feel strange, alien. As though something has shifted and the house has grown its own personality, vacant and indifferent. In the kitchen he sees that Granny’s newspapers, which are normally scattered across the table, are now piled in a neat tower. Someone must have come in and tidied everything up.

He treads softly down the hall into the lounge-room. The shadow of Granny’s cupboard looms out across the floorboards. Moving over to the wall, he switches on the lamp, and feels a sense of relief as the room flickers into light. Granny’s bookshelf is in front of him: her volumes of Marx, Jung, Shakespeare. There’s a vase of faded roses on the sideboard, surrounded by dusty fallen petals. The cupboard is right next to him. He reaches up and swings open the door. There are the jars, in their long, glinting row, so innocent. Rubber bands, shells, lead pencil ends, cotton reels, nails, feathers. Then a space. Next to the space is the money. He’d missed it by one jar. Fifties, twenties, tens packed in tight, right to the top, and a layer of coins on the bottom. He reaches up, wraps his fingers around the glass and takes it down. Standing there in front of the cupboard, he weighs it in his hand.

The last time he stood here Granny was right there in the doorway, her slippers glimmering in the faint light. She would hate it in hospital, not being able to get out in the garden and make her pot of tea in the mornings, unroll the newspaper and switch on

her radio. Inside the jar, fifty cent pieces and two dollar coins glint in the light, and Banjo Patterson's face stares up at him from a ten dollar note pressed against the glass. He did that to her, for this?

The room is too silent for a moment, and he hears a movement outside. Footsteps, on the driveway beside the house. The crunching of gravel, and then the swish-swish of longish grass against someone's legs as they walk around the back towards the porch. He can't move, is caught in the still lit-up room staring towards the drawn curtains. The noise stops and the silence inside the house fills his ears, pours into his mind until he is sluggish, paralyzed. A cat yowls, so close it sounds like it is right outside the lounge-room window. He reaches out instinctively and switches off the light. The room descends once more into darkness and he stands there, the jar slippery in his fingers, listening.

There's a noise on the porch, the sound of a key sliding into the lock. Paul stares through the darkness towards the door, his eyes searching for the entrance to the hall. As the door creaks open and he hears heavy footsteps tread onto the floorboards in the hall, it's as if his mind splits into two. He falls into the chasm between the two halves, a tiny figure tumbling down through the gorge, grasping for handholds on the sides of the slippery rock face. He has to get out. He's holding Granny's money in his hand and somehow he has to get out of her house, away from the dark shadow of the cupboard, looming out across the floor, away from the footsteps striking the boards as they move towards the lounge-room. It takes a long time for his legs to start moving. He has a wild thought that this has to be a dream, can't be anything but a dream because it's only in dreams when you have to run but your legs fail you, are sucked into the ground by some invisible force even as you're willing them to move. The darkness breaks apart, and in the sudden flash of light he sees the fist heading for him before he feels it

connect with his collarbone and he stumbles backwards, wanting to get to the door but unable to keep himself upright, disoriented by the light. The jar slips from his fingers and he hears it smash, coins spilling out and notes floating up from the floor; he stumbles, trips over in the midst of the rolling twenty cent pieces and dollar coins, and feels the air part around him as he falls.

There's a half-folded fifty dollar note on the floor directly in front of his face. He can just see it lying there through the waves of phosphorescence sparking behind his eyes. He knows what he did, now. Really knows. He can feel it in his aching collarbone, in his skull hard up against the floorboards.

Just beyond the fifty dollar note is a small piece of yellow plastic. He reaches for it, pressing it into his palm, a trickle of blood running down his wrist as he tightens his fingers.

He can sense someone standing above him and he turns his head, sees the man's face silhouetted by the overhead light.

"Paul?"

It's Peter. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. He was going to walk to Peter's house, knock on his door, and apologize for not meeting him at the bus station. There's no hiding it now though, what he's done.

Peter's face is blurred. Paul unclenches his hand and sees that the rabbit button is covered in blood, the tips of its ears emerging bright yellow against the smudge of red.

“How’s your hand?” Peter asks, as he drives.

The long shadows of trees cast by the early morning light lie stark against the bitumen, the mountain rising behind into the clear blue of the sky.

“It’s fine.” Cold air rushes in through the wound-down window as the car picks up speed. Paul doesn’t know how to say thank you. For putting in all that effort to find him, for waiting at the bus stop and not giving up on him when he didn’t turn up. Even for punching him, for the bruise that’s darkening on his collarbone. And for this, for driving him to the hospital in his old, rattling Datsun with the guitar in the boot.

He’s glad of the hum of the engine, the wind rushing past the open window. Last night, when they were kneeling together on Granny’s floorboards, all he could hear was the sound of coins sliding against each other as they picked up the money and piled it into an empty jar.

Peter knows what he did. He hadn’t said anything about it last night, when he helped Paul sweep up the glass, wash off the blood and bandage his hand. He hadn’t said anything in the car on the way back to his place, or when he showed Paul the mattress he could sleep on in the lounge-room. But he knows. Paul had seen it in his eyes when they were facing each other on Granny’s floor, dropping coins into the jar.

The gear-stick squeaks as they turn a corner, and Paul’s seatbelt cuts into the bruise on his collarbone. The sun is shining straight through the windscreen now, lighting Peter’s knuckles on the steering wheel, the small hairs on the back of his hands. Paul squints, the sun so bright he can barely make out the hospital, waiting for him at the top of the hill.

*Hetty is watching the sunrise. She's standing on a cliff looking out over the sea, and all around her is the sky. The clouds are lit up, billowing grey and white and pink and peach. Behind them, pouring through them and onto the sea below is the brilliant new gold of the sun. At her back, the paddocks recede into darkness as if caught up and disappearing into a vast black tunnel. She came from there, from those paddocks, where the grey sky still hangs heavy and low over the waving grass. Until here she is. On the edge of a cliff with the sun rising over the sea.*

Her mandarins are glowing orange on the shelf among all those cards, and she can almost taste the sticky sweetness of a broken segment in her mouth, the slight furriness of the pith, almost feel the round weight of the second fruit as she passes it to him.

You don't need to keep the people you love growing in your backyard, she'll say. It's okay to let them go.

*Down on the sand, pulled up just above the water line, is a wooden rowboat. The boat is dark green, the paint peeling away from the gunnels. Light sparkles across the water, small waves wash up onto the beach, and Hetty picks her way along the path cut into the cliff. There's someone down there, walking across the sand towards the boat. Hetty calls out, and the tiny figure turns and waves, his arms swaying like antennae, his shadow stretching long and thin across the bright sand.*