

Petty complaints

Amos Robinson

2019

Shattered

I steadied myself on the railing of the fence and looked out over the bridge onto the railroad below. Chips of coal were scattered all over the tracks and the rail corridor; I could probably run the house on all that spillage, if I only climbed down to pick it up. The trouble was getting down to pick it up, though I had no moral aversion to the trespass. The corridor extended out to the horizon where it met the orange haze of the steel-mill sky. On either side of the corridor were steep weedy hills, thick with vegetation that hid the corridor from the surrounding streets. I left the bridge and took a side street, following the chain link fence that separated me from the quarry. I picked a sprig of wild fennel from beside the fence and held it between my teeth in the manner in which rural folk play with their wheat. I felt my phone vibrate from within my pocket. It was an ordinary phone (a Nokia), which I kept in an ordinary pocket (the front left pocket of my trousers). I bit off a piece of fennel and chewed it before remembering that people walked their dogs around here. I spat the remnants out onto the ground. The flavour of anise lingered in my mouth.

I started to scale the fence. The wire dug into my fingers and the fence provided no adequate footholds. My entire weight pressed the wire down into my fingers and I gave up. Realistically, the fence between me and the corridor was just too high for me to scale. My best bet, then, was to find or make a hole in the links of the fence so that I could go through the fence rather than over the fence. I considered my options. Finding a hole would have the advantage of me not having to make a hole myself. This was a great boon, as I lacked the tools required to make a hole. On the other hand, making my own hole would allow me to dictate the location of the hole. This act alone would be sufficient to qualify me as a conscious agent that can enact change upon the world. The concept of autonomy excited me and made me dizzy. I sat down. With my back against the tree, I got out my tobacco and paraphernalia (the front right pocket of my trousers) and rolled myself a cigarette.

How could I cut through the fence without the prerequisite fence-cutting tools? I lit my cigarette and pondered further. Perhaps I could hack through it with

my house key or the key to the bureau (front right trouser pocket). My phone buzzed, interrupting my deep state of cogitation. My cigarette was ruined by the distraction and I stubbed it out on the ground. I got up to find an existing hole.

I found a gap in the fence to slip through and walked down along the tracks. There was even more coal than I expected. I judged that I had gathered at least enough coal (back left trouser pocket, breast shirt pocket) to bake a potato, in the event that baking a potato was something I desired. One rarely bakes a single potato, however. I would probably be better off saving up until I had enough coal to bake a multitude of potatoes. Next time I would bring a sack which I could fill, rather than being limited by my meagre pocket space.

On the way home, I walked past Hamburger Chain. It was quite late in the evening and I had not eaten dinner. The youths were milling about in cars and on foot, yelling and laughing. I saw them doing all manner of unbecoming things. They dropped their rubbish on the ground. They dropped their disgusting and greasy paper bags on the ground. And the bags they dropped were sodden with sundry juices: hamburger juice, pickle juice, meat juice, onion juice, tomato juice, cheese juice, cola juice, “potato fries” juice, chicken nugget juice. One group, I saw, were all laughing at something. Perhaps it was a particularly phallic pickle. I do not know. I dared not get close to such puerile creatures. Inside the building there was a security guard but he did not do anything about this vile display. I would much rather eat a baked potato at home than have to observe this indecency.

I went further down the road, past Shopworths, and turned onto a quiet sidestreet. I thought about my baked potatoes and realised that even now, in my state of apparent adulthood, I had many unanswered questions on the nature of potatoes. What is the lifespan of an average potato plant? Man eats potatoes; but what do the potatoes eat? Presumably a potato is not a fruit; if not, what of the potato fruit itself – is it edible? I was getting to the bottom of something really deep when my phone started to vibrate once more. I could no longer concentrate on my potatoes with this device demanding my attention at every waking moment. I took the phone out of my pocket (front left trouser). The lit screen displayed several noisome communications, none of which I had any desire to read. I threw the phone down onto the asphalt of the road. Up the phone bounced, back up to the height of my head, then started to fall back down before bouncing a few more times further down the street. I went over to where it lay to better judge my handiwork. The abominable machine was completely unscathed. I raised my left foot, which is the slightly larger of the two, and brought its boot-shod fury down upon the phone. Again my efforts were for naught. The phone remained intact and its little backlit monochrome screen continued to mock me. I jumped up and down on the bastard a few times, barely able to keep my balance. Finally the case gave way and the screen went dark. After a few more stomps, I was satisfied. I picked up the scattered pieces and walked the rest of the way home. I was free.

In my room, I had a rather large copper bowl that sat upon the mantelpiece. I guessed that in some previous life it had served the role of a fruit bowl, as it was adorned with embossed figures of grapes, apples and cherries. Now, however, in its current incarnation, it served the role of coal receptacle, for I had placed the two fist-sized chunks of coal, along with the crumbs, in the bowl.

Otherwise, my room was quite sparse. I had an air mattress on the area of the floor that served as my sleeping quarters and in which I now laid. There was a desk in the corner and a five-wheeled chair. I often sat there to twiddle my thumbs. On the desk there were a few writing implements — pens and pencils and notebooks — that I assumed had been left by a previous tenant. Outside of work, I rarely have a need for such tools; my memory is impeccable. On the mantelpiece sat the coal in its receptacle, as I have already explained. The mantelpiece also contained a different variety of objects, depending on whether I was *in*, that particular phrase meaning that I was currently inside the house and potentially attending visitors; or whether I was *out*, meaning that I had left the house on the purpose of some errand. Perhaps, in the instances in which I were exceptionally lucky, it would not be an errand but a sojourn instead. In the cases in which I was in, the mantelpiece would also have sat upon it my *pocket things*, those being the various objects that should generally be stored within my own pockets in the event that I was out. The exact composition of these pocket things slowly evolved over time but the essence remained fairly consistent. In their current configuration they consisted of the following: keys attached to key ring; wallet; tobacco and paraphernalia, including papers, filters and a lighter; identification card, which proved my identity as an employee of the bureau; and mobile phone.

I studied my pocket things upon the mantelpiece and saw that my mobile phone had been deformed and rent into multiple pieces. The thing was a mess. I appraised the destruction that I had created. And I saw that it was good.

It was early enough in the morning that I was able to perform my ablutions in peace. My cohabitants with whom I shared this dwelling were still sleeping. I bathed without incident, save a few dry retches into the shower drain. I dressed, taking all my pocket things except for the mobile phone. This morning ritual of performing my ablutions and taking my pocket things was the usual manner in which I changed my state from *in* to *out*.

I generally had two transportation options to get from my house to work: I could walk to Waratah train station and thereupon catch a train to Civic and then walk to the office. I could also walk to the bus stop, catch a bus into town and then walk to the office. The two options had different costs and benefits which I had often weighed against each other. One: the walk to the train station was further. Two: the walk to the bus stop was closer. Three: the train moved smoothly with no unpleasant jerks and halts. Four: the bus was full of unpleasant jerks and dolts. Five: the air conditioning on the train was always too cold. Six: the socio-demographics of the particular route taken by the bus led to a lower incidence of bathing.

In truth, I probably had many more options than just catching the train or catching the bus. For example, I could also walk the whole way. I had faced similar decisions as a wee child on my way to the school. I had caught the school bus for the first few years. Mammy and I would stand at the corner, I half-wearing my backpack while we waited for the bus to come. Then the bus would arrive and Mammy would push me on. I found myself sitting on the bus with its windows nailed shut and the fumes coming up and entering my head, violating my senses. I listened to the youths squabbling over the cricket and eating their crisps. Then the bus stopped suddenly and I hit my nose on the metal bar. It didn't bleed but I knew that, inside me, the blood would have preferred to be outside my body than inside my body, just as the contents of my stomach would have preferred to be outside than inside, but it never came out even though I retched again and again, for I have an iron constitution and nothing comes out. Nothing ever comes out.

At some point in my development, Mammy stopped accompanying me to the bus stop. I do not remember the exact cause for this; perhaps it was a matter of my ever-increasing age, or it may have been a conflict of mammy's working hours. Whatever the cause, I did not argue against this change of routine. My bindings had loosened somewhat and I was now free to find my own way to the school. I chose then to walk to the train station — a different train station to the one I was now walking to, for I now lived closer to the city — and once at the train station, I would catch a train to the station closest to the school, whereupon I would walk to the school. This arrangement was strictly superior to the bus. However, eventually I was made aware that I was supposed to pay for train tickets. This troubled me: at the time I had no real source of income. Instead I chose to walk to school. The journey would then take around an hour but I soon learnt that by deliberately slowing my legs and performing a sort of shuffling motion, I could further extend the journey to two hours. This two hour journey gave me plenty of time to prepare myself for the day ahead. This suited me just fine for the rest of my time as a student, until it was suggested that I discontinue my studies. This suggestion was one that I relished.

The train arrived with black diesel smoke pouring out of the top. It was one of the Endeavour sets. I hopped on and went in to work. Now that I had an income I could afford to travel in style.

I sat down at my desk at the bureau. Someone had left me a thick pile of atmospheric readings to verify. The bureau had a national network of sensors and recorded all the raw data. We had sensor readings of the levels of various atmospheric gases, temperatures, rainfall and so on for the entire country. I worked in the atmospheric gas department. At a high level, my job consisted of taking the raw atmospheric gas readings and making sure that they were correct. We would get sent the readings from the sensors. Then I would read over these numbers to see whether they were correct or not. The raw numbers were seldom correct. Making them correct was where the real skill of the work — the art, I suppose — came in. We needed to find the right level of correction, to carefully

skirt the line between undercorrecting — in which case, the bureau would lose all credibility among those in parliament and most likely lose its funding for reasons beyond my appreciation — while also avoiding overcorrecting — in which case, the bureau would lose all credibility among the public and most likely lose its funding for reasons beyond my appreciation.

My approach was as follows. First, I would compute the daily average of the raw, uncorrected readings. This daily average was usually a bit higher than the government would like, so we needed to bring it down somehow. The trick was, then, to remove all the positive outliers before computing the daily average, but leave the negative outliers in. That way, the average was just a little bit lower than the raw numbers would suggest, and our funding remained safe. I had heard rumours that the temperature department had devised a more sophisticated technique for smoothing out the peaks and troughs, which used sinusoids to take advantage of the daily and seasonal waxing and waning of temperature, but the details escape me.

As I worked through my pile of readings, I heard the Canberra-phone ringing; it would usually ring several times over the course of the day. The office was arranged into several circular pods of desks with most of the desks accomodating two people, one on the inner side of the circle and one on the outer side. Some of the desks in the more populated pods had three people on the outer edge. None of the inner edges had more than one person per desk, as it was already quite hard to sit without bumping into one's neighbour at irritating frequency. In the middle of the pods was the Canberra-phone where one could be summoned to grovel to the department head at the head office. I sat at the inner side of desk number twenty in pod number three. I heard my desk neighbour on the outer side, Brenton Curcumin, break his pencil. I looked up and cursed inwardly. He probably didn't even realise that he had broken his pencil. As he continued to write, the splintered stub tore shreds through the paper. I knew that at the end of the day Brenton, or "Curco" as he was known, would submit this mangled document through the pneumatic tube to the head office. Then tomorrow the damn thing would end up on my desk for me to fix; or perhaps it would show up on Scampi's or on Merino's desk. All I knew for sure was that it would not show up on Brenton's desk. Yet somehow the Canberra-phone never rang for Brenton. I heard the pencil scratching against the paper. My hands began to shake and a bead of sweat trickled down my side. I could not concentrate.

I took my leave and went to sit in the bathroom a while. I sat on the toilet with my trousers down mainly for appearances' sake and waited for something to happen. I studied my hands, holding them out in front of me. They were *my* hands. At least I supposed that they were my hands. I had no real choice other than to believe that they were my hands. And even if they weren't my hands, then what of it? They seemed to obey my commands and had never acted against me by conscious choice as far as I was aware. Certainly they had acted against me by a sinister clumsiness, with a lack of dexterity and steadiness, but I suspected that these were as much my own failings as my hands'. Perhaps

if I had trained them better, spent more time cultivating their movements, then they would not betray me so. No, they were as good as my own hands, regardless of where they might have come from or what they might have done.

At the Lass I saw some people I knew. They were friends of mine — pub friends — for I knew them from the pub and we were all regular patrons of the same establishment. It was not that surprising then that I should see them there. Still, one wonders whether one would recognise these people — pub friends, or work friends, or school friends, or soccer friends, or cetera — in other circumstances. For example, would one recognise one's pub friends if they showed up at one's work while one was there, or if one's work friends showed up at the pub? Probably not. I have a hard enough time putting names to faces and faces to names as it is; without even the limited mental springboard of environment off which to launch my memory I would be without hope.

In this instance, however, with the right friends in the right environment, I was able to recognise my few pub friends. I ordered a schooner of brown ale and a handful of hot chips before sitting down with Frank at his table over by the cigarette machine.

“Hello Frank,” I said. “Tell me something new.”

I had known Frank for a little while now. He was usually fine company for an evening. Frank claimed to be a psychiatrist and relationship counsellor. I do not think that was true. As far as I understood it, psychiatrists were supposed to prescribe drugs but Frank had never prescribed me anything. At best he might have been a psychologist. Even that seemed questionable. At one point he had had business cards printed and he had given me one when we first met. On one side of the card his full name and his purported vocation were printed. It read: “Frank Wisdom, psychiatrist”. On the other side was his catch-phrase: “Let me offer you some Frank Wisdom”. I did not think that psychiatrists were really supposed to have catch-phrases and I had often told him as much. This was usually when I was in my cups and he was trying to offer me some Frank Wisdom to get me out of a certain predicament. It was kind of him to offer his services to me *pro bono* like that, I supposed, but it did make it difficult to have any meaningful conversations without him getting on his hobby horse.

Lately, however, Frank had discovered an interest in alchemy. He told me that he had recently dug up some clay from his back yard, which he had then used to build a small furnace. Some kinds of clay, he said, as well as some soils contained small amounts of iron. Often these clays and soils were red due to the presence of iron oxide. He had been able to extract some iron from the soil with the furnace and was using the resulting iron to craft small, coarse pieces of jewellery and other things. He reached into his pocket and showed me a nail that he had forged. It was black and roughly in the shape of a triangular pyramid. It looked as though it would shatter immediately if I tried to hammer it into anything. Who knew that you could get so much in your own back yard, he said.

Frank told me that he and some friends were having a barbecue on Sunday. They were going to smelt some iron then if I wanted to see the process firsthand. I thanked him for the invitation. I would like to see it but in truth I probably would not go.

There was a lull in the conversation and I looked over towards the bar. The Society of Friends was on the television. I had seen this episode before; it was the one where Chandler loses his inner light. During a moment of silent contemplation, Chandler is troubled by a lack of guidance. He looks inside but finds nothing. Disturbed, the Friends look everywhere for it: in the kitchen, on a subway car, under the El and at Katz's delicatessen. Phoebe takes pity on Chandler and tries to help by hiding a torch in his Quaker Oats. Chandler chokes on the torch and in his dying breath is able to commune directly with God. I picked at the last of my hot chips and went out to the beer garden for a cigarette.

Outside, I could smell something peculiar. Somebody was smoking a marijuana cigarette. I said "hello" and we shared an ashtray. I had heard that the publican used to be a member of the police but I had seen no evidence of this. I could not imagine him thrashing this innocent smoker. Perhaps that was why he had left the force. I stubbed out my cigarette and went to get another drink, my body and clothes smelling of marijuana.

Back inside, somebody had changed the television station to the evening news with Twiggy Mullane. The state premier Peter Halloween was threatening to pull out of a national water-management plan for the Murray-Darling; mining magnate Slurry Toto had bought the local soccer team; the groundwater barrier around the slag heap in Area One had almost finished construction and was to be unveiled at the end of the month; and the upper house was debating legislation that required all cats be given transgenic glow-in-the-dark implants.

When I got back from the bar, Frank was running his "Frank Wisdom" bit on a previously-unsuspecting interloper. I guessed that the poor fellow had come in expecting a drink and had instead received a lecture on the far-reaching consequences of transubstantiation on the human psyche and its effects on one's ability to form meaningful relationships with others. I sat and stared at the wall behind the interloper's face. His accent and manner infuriated me and he spoke too much; I think he was from the United States of America. I left after a few beers.

On my way home, I walked along Maitland Road and over the bridge by the rail corridor with the spilled coal. I had with me one of those thick plastic shopping bags from Shopworths: the heavy-duty kind that you could re-use a bunch of times. It was late by now but it never got that dark around here. I snuck into the corridor through the hole I had previously found in the fence and started walking along the train tracks. As I walked I picked out the nicest and biggest pieces of coal with which to fill my bag. I left the crumbs and any pieces smaller than a coin. My hands were sticky and black as pitch.

I continued along the tracks under the bridge where the road went over the tracks. Further along, the tracks crossed Throsby Creek. Throsby Creek was a creek in name but in fact it was more of a storm water drain; its bottom and edges were entirely concrete. At the crossing of the creek I looked down over the edge into the storm water drain. The drain was more or less empty, except for a drizzle of water at the very centre where there was a narrow channel through the drain. I imagined that this channel was where the keel of a boat would fit in the unlikely event that a boat were to travel through Throsby Creek.

Just past the creek I could see the back of the Tafe. I walked along, collecting the best of the coal. As I went past the Tafe, I recognised the brick semicircular building where my brother had studied certificate four in information storage and retrieval. I heard a train in the distance coming from up ahead and looked up. Soon, I saw the lights of a locomotive coming around the bend towards me. I scrambled back to where the train tracks crossed the creek. The loose stones on which the tracks had been laid shifted under my feet and it was difficult to move quickly. I got to the creek and I looked back towards the train. The train moved slowly. I had some time before it would reach me. I could not make out any details of the train itself due to the bright headlights. I guessed that it was a coal train heading to the port to be unloaded.

I tied the handles of the bag of coal together and dropped it down into the creek, closer to the edge to avoid the water in the middle of the creek. It was a short drop to the concrete bottom. I sat down with my legs dangling through the railing and slipped down to the bottom of the creek.

Behind me, I heard the train pass over the creek. The tracks started to hiss and then the whine of the engine came with a constant ghostly hum. The hum built up slowly and then subsided into a more coarse scraping of metal against metal, the rhythmic clack of wheel against track, and finally the shunting of car against car as the engine came to a stop further along. I saw now that it was not a coal train as I expected. Instead, it was a ninety-two class pulling tank cars for storing liquids and gases. I had never seen the port take anything other than coal; the *Railpage* forum would be excited to hear about this. I followed the creek upstream, passing under a few road bridges until I reached my street. I climbed up out of the drain and went home to sleep.

Bruised

I awoke to the sound of a door slamming somewhere across the hallway. The house vibrated throughout with all sorts of yelling and screaming; those particularly human sounds I had never gotten the hang of. It was dark in my room except for some slits of light that came between the curtains from the streetlights outside. I went to the mantelpiece to check the time but instead found a shattered mobile phone where an unshattered mobile phone should have been. I would have to

buy a new one at some point; my parents were probably worried. I wondered how many missed calls and messages would be waiting for me once I reconnected my Sim card.

My cohabitants were still quarrelling among themselves but I could not make out any of their words. Only the emotions came through. They were not pleasant emotions. I had made a mistake when I invited these two into the house. They had only paid a few weeks' rent in the six or so months they had been here and there was always some kind of drama. It was my own fault for being so naive. Most of my decisions turn out to be mistakes but I rarely realise until afterwards. I opened the curtains and the window and rolled myself a cigarette in the half-light. I grabbed my pocket things and climbed out through the window onto the porch.

It was too late to go into town so I walked towards the Royal Oak to see if it was open. The streets were empty except for an occasional car driving past on Maitland Road. Shopworths was shut and it was dark inside except for a few security lights.

Three youths waylaid me at the skate park to ask for a cigarette. I got my tobacco out of my front right pocket and started to roll one. As I was licking the paper, the girl made a face and asked what I was doing. I explained that the paper had some glue on it which you needed to lick in order to get it to stick. It is an ordinary part of rolling a cigarette; I have never seen it done in any different way. I handed the cigarette to one of the boys and they shared it between themselves.

I made to leave and one of the boys asked me why I was wearing a hat. I said, I do not know, my father gave it to me and I wear it out of habit more than anything else. He asked to wear my hat though he himself was already wearing a baseball cap. I pointed this out and he offered that we trade hats. He walked up to me and plucked my hat straight off my head and placed it on his own before handing me his cap – note that I say *cap* rather than *hat*, for a cap is not a hat in the civilised sense of the word. I was not fond of this new arrangement and I asked for my hat to be returned. He said that he would give it back in a minute. I acquiesced and rolled myself a cigarette while I waited. The three of them watched me as I smoked. I did not say anything further.

Once I had finished my cigarette, I told them that I had to be on my way and asked again for my hat to be returned. This time the boy and I traded back to our original configuration of headwear. I thanked him. I was about to leave when the boy walked up and slapped me in the front of my trousers with the back of his hand. I stumbled backwards in awe and confusion. The two other youths behind him were laughing at my pain. I partially regained my composure and continued backing away from them. They remained where they were. I walked home, humbled, with my testes chafing against my legs.

Back home, my cohabit's car was gone and the on-street parking outside the house was vacant. I climbed back in through the window. The house was quiet.

I had a dull pain in my bits. I did not understand what had happened or what I had done to offend these people. But I had trusted them to some extent. I had given them charity and humoured them and they had mistreated me. It was my own fault for being so naive. Most of my decisions turn out to be mistakes but I rarely realise until afterwards.

I decided to walk down to the Telecon store when I woke up. It was mid-morning. I was thirsty. I had not brushed my teeth since the evening before and my skin felt clammy despite changing into fresh clothes. I heard one of my cohabitants — I assumed that the other had left the night before — shuffling about the house, making tinkering noises and coffee smells. Not even the smell of coffee was enough to get me out there so I remained unwashed. Who knew how long they would be out there. Often when this sort of thing happened the one with the car took the pair's entire stash of marijuana with them. This seemed particularly spiteful and cruel as they could have just split the amount between them and called it even. It was especially cruel to me, who had to suffer this fool's petulant fits of banging and slamming cupboard doors and things.

Even this early in the morning, the cretin was already missing his marijuana. I do not know whether this irritability of his would count as a “withdrawal symptom” or as a “discontinuation effect”. Frank had told me that legal medications cause discontinuation effects, while addictive narcotics cause withdrawal symptoms. There is apparently some subtle distinction between the mechanisms of the two but it just stinks of puritanism to me. Not that I am completely averse to a little puritanism when it comes to my cohabitants spending all their money on marijuana instead of paying the rent. I do not know why they are still here. I wish I knew how to get rid of them.

The marijuana people have a term for smoking marijuana just after one gets up: *wake and bake*. For some reason that I have never understood, it is completely unacceptable to drink alcohol in the morning (except on Christmas day) but the marijuana people find it socially acceptable to smoke in the morning. My cohabit — the one with the car — even smokes marijuana before driving anywhere. And yet they seem to think that they are better than consumers of other drugs. They sneeringly look down upon tobacco and alcohol as “impure,” as though the fungal activities of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, brewer's yeast, were somehow artificial.

I left quietly through the window to avoid the moon-calf who was now watching television in the lounge room. Unfortunately there was no way to lock the window from the outside so I could not leave for too long. It was hot and the air was hazy. I crossed the footbridge over the creek and cut through the vacant lot behind Shopworths. The Shopworths car park was lousy with cars and the sun reflected off the windscreens and the white cars into my retinas. I walked over to the edge of the car park. There was a row of eucalypts that provided some shade. The dry leaves cracked underneath my boots and smelled like lemon.

The man at the Telecon store said that we had gone to high school together but I did not remember him. I would have told him he was mistaken except that he knew my name. He told me his name as well but I soon forgot it. He had dark hair and the corners of his face were covered in long and thick whiskers. They were some enviable corners. My facial hair never comes out like that; I do not know why not.

He guided me through the selection of phones. The new big thing, he said, were “screen phones,” which had large colour screens that covered almost the entire front face of the phone. The screens were touch sensitive so whenever you wanted to perform some action, you did it by pressing your finger on a certain part of the screen that was designated for that action. He showed me one: at the bottom of the screen was a small picture of a speech bubble. When he tapped his finger on the bubble, the contents of the screen changed to show the text messages function of the phone. He pressed the small picture of a pencil and a Qwerty keyboard appeared at the bottom of the screen. I tried to type something — just some placeholder text — using the on-screen keyboard but it was clunky and difficult as it lacked any sort of tactile response. I read back what I had written: *Loren Pisin dollar sit amet?* Gibberish. This “screen phone” fad would not last. People need real, physical keyboards with tactile response to be able to type on their phones. I asked him to show me the cheapest phone he had. It was a Nokia Ultrabasic, much like the one I had disassembled the other night. I paid in cash.

I left the store and looked around for a place to sit and do whatever needed to be done. There was a bus stop up the road out the front of the Shopworths car park. I went and sat down at the bus stop and started to open the packaging of the phone. I used my house key (front right trouser pocket) to cut through the plastic wrapping around the box. An elderly local was pushing a little trundler containing their shopping. They came and sat down next to me and I squeezed over to the edge of the bench. I took the Sim card out of my front left trouser pocket and inserted it into the phone. I inserted the battery and turned it on. The phone flashed and dinged and vibrated a bunch of times.

13 message(s)

I scanned through the list of received messages, checking to see who had been attempting to contact me. I saw a few from my line manager, one from Frank, some from my cohabit and a bunch of other ones. A sigh found its way out of my body, louder than I anticipated. The local looked over and appraised me. I hunched my shoulders together and stared intently at the phone. A drop of sweat ran down my side and soon evaporated in the hot dry wind.

Further along at the bus stop, a baby in a perambulator started crying. The young lady holding the perambulator scolded it saying “shut up you dick head”. Then she lit up a cigarette.

I could not concentrate here. I gathered up my stuff and started walking along Maitland Road. The tar on the road had partially melted and the bottom of my

boots attached to the road. By the time I had finished crossing the road, I had an extra centimetre of asphalt stuck to my boots.

Cheese puffs were on special according to the large cardboard sign on the window of Franklins. It was too early to think about those salty, cheesy, disgusting corn whatsits. Thanks for the cheese puffs Ronald Reagan, you dead fuck. I looked over at the Stag and Hunter across the road. I could go in, have a beer and sit peacefully while reading my messages. It might help me calm down a bit. Plus it's air-conditioned. I could even smoke in the pokies room in true luxury. I crossed the street and stepped out of the heat.

On the floor of the foyer there was a mosaic of tiles that spelled out my given name – “MAL” it read in all capital letters, written in hexagonal tiles that were each a bit bigger than a fifty cent piece. I had never understood why. I knelt down and touched the cold tiles. I could just lie here, I thought. I could lie down forever with this title to both name me and describe me. It would be an apt epitaph. I went to the toilets to wash my face. I felt a bit better.

I decided that it was too early in the morning to drink alcohol but now that I had come in I felt obliged to buy something. I ordered a ginger beer and sat down at a table out the back.

I read through the messages in more detail this time. It was mostly pedestrian stuff: Frank had invited me to a barbecue at his place out in Thornton; my cohabit had asked me to grab some milk; my line manager had scolded me for being late to work; and Scampi had warned me that my line manager was about to call. There was some spam too: advertisements for sleeved blankets for \$19.95; a Nintendo gamercise console for \$79.99; chips and gravy at Hamburger Haven for \$3.50; and some other less decipherable prospects. I hoped that I had missed my line manager's call as Scampi's warning was from a few days ago.

The phone gave a beep that startled me. I had not yet put it on silent. The screen showed that I had received a new message from an unknown number. The text read: **meet at hamburger haven today only** [sic!]. More spam. I do not understand why they could not get someone literate to proofread this stuff. Of course there is meat at Hamburger Haven. It is almost — *almost* — definitionally guaranteed that a hamburger shop will have meat. Even if a hamburger shop does not have meat, then it will certainly have something approximating meat, some sort of ersatz meat made of soy or wheat gluten. Furthermore, why would they limit themselves to selling meat on a single day? It seemed rather implausible to me that, were I to go to Hamburger Haven tomorrow, they would refuse to sell me one of their famous meat-filled hamburgers. Someone should report them to the ACCC for shonky advertising.

I finished my ginger beer and got up to leave. There was a copy of the Herald lying on the adjacent table which I flicked through: mining magnate and sports team collector Slurry Toto deeply regretted having to put the local soccer team into administration (SLURRY SORRY) and denied siphoning funds from the organisation to the party's electoral campaign (SLURRY SLUSHIE). There had

also been a small fire out at the coal port as a result of a gas leak (WARATAH IN BLOOM). Two demountable offices had been destroyed but nobody had been injured and the fire was now contained.

I remembered the coal I had collected and decided that I ought to have my own fire. I stopped by Franklins and bought a bag of potatoes and a roll of aluminium foil.

I waited until the early evening to cook the potatoes. It was a pleasant evening outside and there was little wind. I took the potatoes and the bag of coal out into the backyard. I had a few options of how to build my fire. There were some loose bricks hanging around and I could build a sort of wind breaker with those and build the fire inside a ring of bricks. I could also dig a little pit into the paltry lawn and throw the coal down into the pit. This was how I imagined one would cook up a Filipino box spring hog. Fortunately my potatoes wouldn't require as much digging as would be required to submerge an entire pig.

I had a look in the shed at the back of the yard. It was a little corrugated iron thing with a dirt floor. I had put a few tables in there to keep anything of merit off the floor. There was little of merit. An old inflatable swimming pool with a tear. Curtain rods. A few camping chairs. Milk crates full of empty beer bottles, some planks and a few small offcuts of plywood. A shovel. I grabbed the shovel and sized up where I wanted to make the fire pit. I chose roughly the centre of the yard, a few metres behind the Hills Hoist. I started digging.

The ground was soft and friable and it came up fairly easily. The little patches of grass provided some resistance as the shovel sliced through and made a nice tearing sound as I pulled the roots away, separating the interconnected tufts. The soft soil did not go so deep and about fifteen centimetres down the soil had a bit more clay to it. There were small rocks, too, which I had to work around to get out.

It was getting darker. Civil twilight had come and gone; it was now nautical twilight and soon it would be astronomical twilight. I went inside to turn the outside light on and grab a beer. My hands were filthy; I left a dirty black mark on the lightswitch.

I now had a hole plenty big enough to fit the amount of coal I had bagged. I scrunched up some sheets of newspaper and threw that into the bottom of the hole. Then I placed a little bit of wood on top and put some of the coal on top of that. Just for good measure, I grabbed some methylated spirits from inside to pour over the whole thing. I lit it up and watched. There was an initial burst of light and flames but it quickly subsided into darkness. It took a few more attempts and pours of metho to get it lit. Eventually I had a decent fire going.

I put some more of the coal into the pit then I started preparing the potatoes. I wrapped each potato in two layers of alfoil with a little bit of olive oil and salt and pepper, then set them aside in a pile. I took a camping chair from the shed

and sat down to wait for the coals to get nice and hot. I grabbed a beer from inside and rolled myself a cigarette while I waited.

I must have dozed off for a while. When I woke up, the fire had died down a bit but the coals were going well. I put the potatoes into the pit and shovelled some of the coals on top to cover them. It was a bit cooler now so I went inside to get a jacket. In the lounge room my cohabitants were asleep on the lounge, the television still playing the same repeats of the same four episode of the Society of Friends. They only ever watched their four favourite episodes. Right now it was playing the one where Monica and the Friends create an underground railroad to help enslaved African-Americans escape from the United States of America to freedom. I snuck past to my room trying not to disturb them.

The potatoes would take a few hours to properly cook so I settled back down on the camping chair in front of the fire. I played *snake* a few times on my new phone but soon grew tired of eating my own tail. I messaged Frank but he didn't reply. I sipped my beer and closed my eyes, listening to the crackling of the fire. Eventually I decided it was time to go to bed. I covered the coals with some of the dirt from the pit and went to brush my teeth.

After work, I headed to the Lass for a beer and to meet up with Frank. It was a short walk from the office, which was on King Street and overlooked the park. I walked up Hunter Street, past Civic station. A Central Coast train — V set, electric — was waiting at the station. It was a non smoking car. They were all non smoking cars. I looked in at Hamburger Haven as I went past, curious to see whether they were true to their claim that they would no longer sell any meat. Two youths were mashing buttons on the Street Fighter arcade machine. Between rounds they were taking deep breaths from milkshakes in large paper cups. At a table, there was a woman in dungarees picking absent-mindedly at some chips and the remains of a burger. She stared at me as I went past. Her eyes were small and intense. I averted my gaze and looked ahead. I saw no indication that the Hamburger Haven had stopped selling meat but I supposed that I could not be sure without asking the woman what she had ordered. It could wait.

I walked up past the teeny-bopper goth shop; the Asian grocer; the second-hand book and record shop where I had bought *Death of a Ladies' Man*, the Phil Spector and Leonard Cohen monstrosity; and the store. I turned right at the car dealership with the milk bottle shaped window and crossed the railway tracks. A few trucks came tearing up the street in quick succession. It must have been a convoy of some kind. I waited for them to pass before crossing the street. The last one had a message printed on its back: "You've been passed by one of Slurry Toto's Lorries. Sorry!"

I ordered my usual — brown ale and hot chips — and sat down at a table. Over on the stage, a man in a tasselled brown suede suit was moving amplifiers around. I saw Frank come in from outside, followed by a few other people

carrying instrument cases. I waved and he came and sat down next to me. I offered to buy him a beer but when it came time to pay I was twenty cents short. I said that I would just go use the ATM but the bartender told me to look up. Up above the bar, above head height, there was a wooden sill: it was a sort of lip. There were silver coins all over the sill, covering the thing. I reached up and groped around for a twenty cent piece. I couldn't find any quickly but took a fifty cent piece and put the change back up on the sill.

Frank said that he had been out at Port Waratah doing occupational consultations all day. The fire had shaken a few people up at the port, he said, and so the PWCS had hired some consultants to help out. I was impressed that Frank was able to get such a professional gig. I asked how he had gotten the job. He explained that he used a website for freelance mental health professionals called *psychr.com*. The website allowed professionals to outbid and undercut each other to give the consumer the best price. It was market forces in action. He got paid twenty-four dollars for today's work, he said, and that's with a generous tip from a particularly thankful port employee. I asked whether he knew how the fire had started and he shrugged. It was some sort of gas leak, he said. Maybe one of the trains was filled with gas and something had set it off. Nobody was hurt and there was not too much damage except for a few offices destroyed, so it didn't matter too much.

On stage, the band finished tuning up and introduced themselves. They were called *Total Xylem Flow*. The man in the tassels had a guitar and a mic; to the right was the bass player, whose eyes were completely hidden by her bright green shades and always faced to the singer or backwards, never towards the audience; to the left was a percussionist with a xylophone; and behind sat the drummer, hidden behind an array of toms and cymbals. They opened with the song *Anoxic Decomposition*. The bass came in first with a bit of a descending slide, then a jump back up and a few steps down. Then the drums joined in, slow and almost lyrical, focussing more on the different timbres and colours of each note than on rhythm or timekeeping. The xylophonist came in doing his Harry Partch thing here and there, while the guitarist was adding some heavily flanged power chords to fill it out.

The next song was about plant hormones and was called *Giberellin-X*.

In between songs, Frank asked me what I had been up to. I could not remember anything interesting happening since I last saw him. The band started again. The next song was a sea shanty about a marooned sailor forced to survive on nothing but algae sucked off the rocks of some windswept isle.

"I cooked some potatoes last night," I yelled over the din. "They are buried in the back yard."

"What? Buried?"

"Yes, I dug a sort of fire pit out the back and cooked them in there. I fell asleep though, and have not tried one yet."

“Potatoes?” Frank seemed distracted by the band.

“Well, I found some coal out on the train tracks. I wanted to use it.”

“You know where you can find more coal?”

“Where?” I asked.

“In your back yard. The whole of Mayfield’s chockers with it. Just start digging and you’re bound to find something.”

“Hm.”

The band finished their set and Frank went over to talk to them. I went to the toilet. When I came back, Frank was outside talking to the band so I went over to say hello. Frank introduced me: the fellow in the tasselled suit was named Christopher Aplomb; the xylophonist was Agent Chelate, a spotty youth who happened to be the son of local celebrity newsreader Twiggy Mullane; and the bassist was Urban Sluice, another psychiatrist who had sometimes worked with Frank.

“Well,” Frank said, “I hear Twiggy’s thinking about entering state politics.”

“Yeah, right,” Agent said. “Mum’s joined the party and is preparing to run. She’s trying to convince me to have lessons on public speaking. Elocution, that sort of thing. She’s hoping for preselection in Newcastle.”

“Is that why you use a pseudonym?” I asked.

“Nah, Agent is my real name, it’s mum that uses a pseudonym. Her real name isn’t really appropriate for television. But how did you hear this? It hasn’t been made public yet.”

“That comes under patient confidentiality,” Frank said.

“Frank is just being coy,” Urban said. “We were working out at the port today; you hear all sorts of things at the port.”

The drummer, J.B. Cramp, came back, and said hello. He said he was hungry, and would anyone like to go to Hamburger Chain?

“How many potatoes do you have buried in your back yard, eh, Mal?” Frank asked me.

We decided to head to back my place for a bit. We all piled into J.B.’s crampervan. We stopped off at the Shopworths to get a carton of beer and some sausages on the way. Agent got a sack of wine and I got a pouch of champion.

We restarted the fire and sat around waiting for the potatoes to warm up. I unwrapped one. It was hard on the outside. The skin had turned to leather but when I cracked it open the inside was soft and smooth as if it had been mashed in place. I gave it a dollop of butter. Frank put some of the sausages on the shovel, and then put the shovel on the fire as a makeshift frying pan. It worked

pretty well but one of them fell off when he took it out. The sausages had a nice smoky, sooty taste to them.

Agent hung his goon up on the Hills Hoist and gave it a spin. It slowed to a stop, pointing straight at Urban, who was sitting down on a chair in front of the fire. Urban got up and squeezed the yellow stuff into her wide open mouth. She then gave it a great spin and it landed on me. I had no choice but to sup from the font of sack-wine wisdom.

Soon we were all standing around the clothes line, taking turns to spin it on. It landed between Urban and Frank and there was a rowdy, good-natured disagreement about who it was closest to. Agent went to spin again and Frank dived for the sack as it swished past. It was real fun.

I went to check on the fire and poured the last of the coal on. I asked Frank whether what he had said about digging for coal was true. He said it was everywhere. The place is full of it. I picked up the shovel and started digging a coal pit a few metres away from the fire pit. I was a bit tipsy and uncoordinated but the ground was soft enough that it was not too laborious. I was getting thirsty when J.B. came over and thrust the goon sack into my mouth, saying it was my suck of the sack. I threw down the shovel and took a big deep drink then took it back to the Hills Hoist. Behind me, I saw J.B. pick up the shovel and he continued deepening the hole.

We continued in this relay fashion for some time; whenever one of us grew tired or had dug for a sufficiently long period of time, another would bring the goon and the two would trade places. Meanwhile, the rest of us continued to spin the sack. We were all quite disappointed when we finished the wine. Frank tried putting an open beer bottle in the peg basket and spinning that but it spilled out onto the grass immediately. I thought we might be able to somehow pour the beer into the sack but the idea of mixing remnant wine with beer put us off. I decided it was time to go to bed. I made a pallet on the floor for my guests to sleep on then headed to sleep myself.

I woke up at a quarter past nine. I was already late for work. I shuffled to the bathroom, careful not to move my head any more than was strictly necessary. I gingerly went through my ablutions: toilet, shower, brush teeth, dress. In that order. The routine was fairly well cemented into my muscle memory and I did not need to be conscious for much of it. I grabbed my pocket things and went to the front door. At the last minute, I decided it would be prudent to leave a note for my guests. I went back and left the note on the coffee table. I then went out the back door instead so that I could marvel at our work from the night before.

Out past the Hills Hoist, past the fire pit, was a big hole. J.B. Cramp was lying in the hole with a tarpaulin over the top of him as a blanket. The hole was almost two metres in diameter. At the edges it was twenty centimetres deep; in the centre it went to thirty centimetres deep. I was pleased with our progress. I

looked at the mound of displaced dirt and turned it over with the shovel, looking for any lumps of coal. There were a few black rocks but I did not see any coal. We would have to keep going. We would have to dig deeper.

The train ride to the bureau was trying. I felt nauseous and had to rush to the train toilet. The smell of the spilled, fermented urine on the sticky floor made my nausea worse but nothing came out. I missed Civic station and got off at Newcastle. I walked through the mall, past the old abandoned Hamburger Chain, past the broken escalators up to the food court where the milk bar used to be and past the empty department store building.

I got to the bureau at around half past ten and sat down at my desk. In my incoming tasks tray I had several reports to amend but if I concentrated on them I could probably make up for the time I had lost due to my late arrival. It would not be a great moral transgression if I could not make the five o'clock cut-off for all of them though. The reports would still be there tomorrow. Christ knows that *I* was not the one bringing the department average response times down. I saw Brenton sitting across from me, smiling to himself while he sharpened his pencils. He had them all: B, HB, 2B, 3B, all the way up to 6B... And he sharpened each one every day, even though the department standards clearly specified that we could only use HB or equivalent.

I took the top report out and started checking it over. It was an easy one. One of the few cases where the level of carbon dioxide recorded by the input sensors lined up with the government's position on the matter. I signed it off and rolled it up into one of the capsules then sent it on through the pneumatic tube. I made myself a cup of tea in the office kitchenette.

When I got back to my desk, the Canberra-phone was ringing. Merino went to answer it and came over to get me. Knobson from head office wanted to talk to me about something or other. I did not like Knobson. I always felt that he had some hidden agenda that he was trying to get me to play into.

"Hello?" I said.

"Mal," he said, though I had never given him permission to use such a familiar term. "What time did you get in this morning?"

"I got in at ten thirty. I was sick on the way in. But I feel better now."

"Yep. And what time did you get in the rest of this week?"

"I do not know. I don't remember."

"You've got to pull your head in, Mal. If you want to stay at the bureau, you really have to grow up. The important work that we do requires ... and commitment ... to make the world ... for future generations ... of pain."

I lost my concentration and waited for the appropriate pause in his soliloquy. He had obviously rehearsed this.

"I don't think I do," I said.

“What?”

“I do not think I will stay at the bureau any longer.”

I did not wait for a reply. I put down the Canberra-phone and walked back to my desk. I guess I had just quit my job. I tried my hardest to act calm but I half expected my legs to shake themselves out from under me as I walked. I was not sure whether anyone else around had heard the conversation so I just tried to go back to my report as usual. My face and arms felt damp and I wondered whether anyone else could see that I was sweating.

A bit later, my line manager came to visit me and asked me to come into their office. They wanted to know when I intended to leave and asked if I could please stay on for a few more months, just until everything settled down. Maybe, I said.

My probationary period had ended six months earlier so I was obliged to give at least two weeks' notice. I told my line manager that I would think about a longer notice period and let them know.

Scampi, Merino and I went to the pub for lunch and to celebrate my imminent release. We went to the Clarendon, which was just around the corner from the bureau. The Clarendon had two guest taps, where they brought in a keg or two from smaller breweries and changed them over whenever the keg went dry. Today they had an effervescent summer ale called *Salmakis* and an IPA called *Return of the Giant Hopweed*. They were both brewed by *Pissing Contest*, a Central Coast brewery. I had the summer ale with a dash of green ginger wine. It was light and refreshing with a hint of spice. It was perfect for my ailing stomach.

We went out the back into the beer garden. We always tried to sit at the tables just outside under the awning so that we were outside direct line of sight from the peering of the bureau windows. My fish and chips arrived. It was more food than I expected. I was pretty much full by the time I had eaten the chips and the salad. I barely touched the fish but peeled off all the crispy deep fried batter and ate it. The batter was the best part.

I had a sudden wave of clarity when I got back to the office. All my misgivings about the bureau, its management and its inhabitants remained but I felt that I would be able to articulate my concerns more clearly now. I sat down and finished my report. Brenton was scribbling away on a cobalt report (*Lemon Tree Passage*).

I tore a scrap of paper off my legal pad and wrote down a note. It read: *do not fuck up Lemon Tree Passage again*. I placed it in a capsule, wrote down the destination and walked over to send it off along with my finished report.

Brenton had already sent off his cobalt report by the time he received my note. He seemed confused at first, as though he had trouble deciphering the contents, and then he seemed to understand. I tried not to noticeably look up, pretending

to be absorbed in my report's contents, but I watched him closely out of my periphery. He took a burgundy form (manual recall) and filled it in and sent it off. When the cobalt report came back, he went through it slowly and carefully, marking out amendments on the report as he went through. Once he got to the end, the only parts of the report that I could see were completely blackened with pencil. He filled in a royal gala red form (original copy acquisition) and crossed out the heading on the cobalt report. The new blank cobalt report came and he copied the corrections over. I had won. Of the hundreds of days I had spent at the bureau, this one act, this one jotted note, was probably the most productive I had ever been. For no matter how many reports I had finished correctly, Brenton was always able to outpace me two or three times over in creating more work for the rest of us. He would plague us no more.

It was, of course, naive of me to expect any real lasting change from Brenton from a single note. But even the most ardent realists among us are certain to have bouts of naive optimism, those rare circumstances when we finally reach that transient peak of contentedness that we are always searching for in our cups and always overshooting.

I went into the kitchenette for a cup of tea. I finished the milk and put the empty carton into the recycling bin. The sign on the recycling bin said it was for "commingled recycling" [sic!]. The sign attached to the wall above, which described the allowed and forbidden items, used the slightly old-fashioned hyphenated form of "co-mingled". Co-mingled I could accept. Comingled was fine, too. But *commingled* simply would not do. If anything, surely it should properly be *cum-mingled*, as in *mingled with*. But such a spelling and pronunciation was quite ridiculous. I had raised this with my line manager once before but I had heard nothing more about it. As far as I was aware they had done nothing to rectify it. I went to the stationery cupboard and took one of every colour of permanent marker that I could find and fixed the recycling bin as best I could. Not satisfied with my simple textual correction, I continued drawing and added beautiful curlicues and fleurs-de-lys all around the text and on every surface to which the markers would stick.

I went back to my desk to work on my reports. The hooter gave a warning hoot at ten to five to tell everyone to send their amended reports in. I would have this one done in a few minutes. I finished it and sent it off and caught up with Scampi and Merino in the lobby of the building. Scampi asked if I wanted to go to the pub but I said that I was busy. I had not told them about my little excavation project.

I walked down to the train station. I got a text message as I was waiting for the train. It was from the same unknown number as before. It read:

fancy a hamburger at hamburger haven?

I am not usually susceptible to advertisements. I like to think of myself as somewhat immune to the baser desires of sex and consumerism. But there was something charming and honest about this primitive attempt to spruik burgers

to passers-by. Everyone needs to eat, after all. If consume I must, then consume I will.

I left the station and walked to Hamburger Haven. There was only one other customer, who was sitting at a table out of the way. It was still light outside but the bright fluorescent lights were harsh to my eyes and I heard a fly buzzing against the glass of the tubes. I ordered some chips and gravy and took a bottle of ginger beer out of the refrigerator.

Outside, people were walking past. They must have been on their way home from work or running grocery errands or meeting friends at the pub. The traffic had started to build up along Hunter Street and it crept along at a petty pace between light changes. It was peak time for traffic. A man walked past with a black cat perched on his shoulder.

I got my chips and sat down at a table near the window so that I could still see outside and watch the people go by. Behind me, I heard the scraping of chair against the floor and scrunching of paper. The other customer came to sit down at a table adjacent me. I could only just see their silhouette without turning my head. I looked over and saw now that it was the same woman I had seen here yesterday evening, dressed in the same dungarees, her pinpricks of eyes staring out into the distance beyond the cars and beyond the liquor store on the other side of the street.

“Welcome to the Hamburger Haven,” she said. “I am glad that you could finally make it.”

I looked over to reply but she raised her finger and pointed it out across the street.

“Were you aware that Mister Slurry Toto frequents that lair of filth?” Her voice was slow and measured.

“Pissmongers?”

“No, I’m not referring to the liquor store.”

I saw now that she was pointing at the townhouse next to the liquor store, which had a flashing light above its door advertising its street number.

“Is it a brothel?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s a brothel of the utmost debasement.”

“I have few positive opinions about Slurry but is it really so bad? Aren’t they consenting adults?”

“Yes, it *is* so bad. This is not an ordinary brothel. You can’t imagine the smell of putrefaction that emanates from this foul place.”

“Gulp,” I said.

A wide, well-built gentleman came out of the front door of the brothel now. He wore mirrored glasses and, despite his stature and frame, had somehow found a suit too large even for him. He wore no tie and his shirt was half unbuttoned to expose his chest hair and dewlap to the world.

“This is he,” she said. “We need to follow him.”

She stood up from her seat and I turned to face her.

“Hold on,” I said. “Who are you, and why am I here?”

“Are you not an agent of the bureau?”

“Well, sort of, but it —”

“Are you not the same agent of the bureau who trespassed onto PWCS property one week hence?”

“Come now, that was —”

“And are you not the same agent who committed theft of some two chunks of coal, in the very same sitting?”

“Really, I —”

“So you see, Mister Skink, you’re either an agent of the bureau, or you’re a very naughty fellow.”

This is how Knobson gets his revenge, then. I had no doubt that the petty bureaucrats in the department would have no qualms about sending the prosecution after me. Perhaps they would cover PWCS’ legal fees against me if it were a civil suit. They could probably even make it criminal somehow: they could trump it up as terrorism if they got really creative, or claim that I had caused the recent fire out at Port Waratah as an act of arson. I had no choice but to grin and bear this bizarre punishment.

“What now, then?” I sighed.

On the back of hamburger lady’s motorcycle she was able to explain more and introduce herself as we weaved through the traffic along King Street. Her name, she said, was Petrel Sorority and she was a fellow agent of the bureau. Unlike me, she was a *federal* agent. This meant that she was from the head office. Petrel had recently been flown in from Canberra to wrap up the Toto affair. The bureau had been keeping a close eye on the mining magnate and sports team collector since he bought his first coal mine six years ago. In the last six months, though, they had noticed suspicious readings from all the telemetry stations near his investments. It wasn’t just the atmospheric gas levels, she said; temperature, humidity, wind speed — even compass readings — had all gone out of kilter in the nearby stations.

We were heading east along King Street, following Toto's Coupé Muscato at a discrete distance. It was peak hour and traffic was heavy. We could have easily caught up with Toto by lane splitting through the traffic but we stayed back a few hundred metres, taking advantage of the privacy screen afforded by a plumber's white van. We passed the cinema on our right, outside of which a group of youths were standing around drinking cheap red wine from soft-drink bottles and smoking "durries," which I believe is another term for cigarettes in the vernacular of the teenagers.

"What makes you suspect Toto?" I asked. "I have read many reports. These station readings go out of specification all the time."

It was the timing, she explained. All these events had started happening around the time that Toto started work at Area One. Six months ago he had started a rehabilitation project out at the slag heap there. It was supposed to be a containment wall around the slag to stop it from entering the ground water table. It all sounds good on paper and he has approval from the Office of Environment and Heritage for it. But when they mapped out the anomalies, the most frequent ones were all concentrated around Area One.

We went over a hill and I held on tight, my arms around agent Sorority's waist. I was not used to this mode of transportation. It felt uncomfortably intimate to sit this close to someone I had just met. We followed him at a distance as he turned the corner. To our left was a concrete walkway, beyond which was the beach, full of tourists, loiterers and malingerers. Traffic had died down a bit so we pulled over to let Toto get further ahead. We probably looked inconspicuous enough parked among the tourists. We looked out across the sandy rocky froth into the Pacific Ocean.

Petrel reached into the breast pocket of her dungarees and pulled out a pair of binoculars, which she handed to me. I opened up my visor and looked through the binoculars. I lost sight of Toto's car as the road curved behind a building but he soon reappeared further along where the road curved back. He parked his car and got out. He started walking down towards the beach.

I pointed towards where Toto walked and Petrel navigated the motorcycle up next to his parked car. From the road, I saw him go down to the skate park that overlooked the ocean. He sat down at one of the benches. We waited. Walking up from the rocks, there came an older gentleman with grey hair, whose bulbous reddish nose took up more of the space in the lenses of the binoculars than was generally considered polite for a nose. The older man sat down next to Toto and passed him something in a brown paper bag. I handed the binoculars over to Petrel.

"It's Cleff McJoy, the entirely fictional lord mayor!" Petrel said.

"Gosh," I said. "What is he doing with that brown paper bag?"

"I don't know," said Petrel, "but it looks like they're up to no good if you ask me. Reach into that pannier there and get me the camera, will you?"

I opened up the saddlebags and pulled out the camera. I took a few photographs of the two of them speaking and shaking hands. I got a nice one of Cleff putting his hand on Toto's shoulder. They seemed to have a comfortable rapport with one another and I wondered whether they were more than business acquaintances. Perhaps they were friends. I envied them for their cool relaxed and confident demeanour, even in such a morally questionable situation. I guess this was why they were successful businessmen, while I was stuck at the bureau. They made to leave. Toto patted his breast pocket and winked at Cleff as he walked away.

We left before Toto had a chance to spot us. It was getting on twilight now and Petrel offered to drop me home. We rode through the streets towards the memory of sunset in a strange world of saturated colours. Everywhere I looked, I saw new and interesting blues and pinks and yellows. I have never understood why these particular shades never come out at any other time of day. It would not be twilight for much longer.

Petrel stopped the motorcycle on the road outside my house and I dismounted. J.B.'s crampervan was still parked out the front so she rode the motorcycle through to the back yard and parked it over by the fence. I opened the back door. Petrel detached her panniers and brought them inside and laid them on the floor in the lounge room next to the lounge.

Urban Sluice was sitting on the lounge watching the Society of Friends on the television. I had seen this episode before; it was the one where friend Phoebe wakes up to eat breakfast and finds a photograph of her naked elbow on a box of Quaker Oats. Phoebe cannot understand why or how her likeness is being used in this way. She telephones the Quaker Oats company only to be told that it is a new marketing campaign envisioned by a local marketing agency. The friends have to travel all over Manhattan to find this mysterious marketing agency and uncover the secret mastermind behind this devious scheme of grand theft elbow. The plot scrapes a bit thin in places but it serves mainly as a veneer for exposing a gritty depiction of life and crime in New York City in the mid nineties.

In the kitchen, J.B. Cramp was cooking up a mess of pottage. He had sliced up the leftover sausages and fried them with some mustard seeds. The sausages sizzled and the mustard seeds popped and the smell of sausage-stuff filled the air. Next, he thinly sliced a few onions and several cloves of garlic and put them in there to brown up. He waited until everything was properly brown, almost caramelised. Then he threw in some dry lentils, which soaked up the mustard-sausage oil. He sprinkled in some dry vegetable stock and cracked some pepper. He went hunting through the cupboards and pantry for anything suitable to add: he inspected the cloves, the bay leaves, the tartaric acid, the asafoetida, and the caraway seeds. Each of these items he carefully considered and dithered on for a while but ultimately decided against. Once the lentils were thoroughly flavoured, he threw in some butter for good measure and poured in a few litres of water. He covered the pot and left this mixture on the stove for the lentils to absorb the water. It was quintessential student food. It would be in fine company alongside other austerity favourites such as two minute noodles

with canned corn and toast sandwiches.

J.B., Petrel and I went out the back to talk and smoke while we waited for the pottage to thicken and the lentils to soften.

“Tell me, J.B.,” I said. “What is your lot?”

“My lot?”

“In life, I mean. What is your lot in life?”

“...”

“I’m Petrel by the way,” Petrel said. “I work with Malcolm.”

“Hi, I’m J.B.”

They shook hands. I must have forgotten to introduce them to one another.

“Is that your bike?” J.B. asked.

He pointed over at the motorcycle by the fence. Petrel nodded. I picked up the shovel and worked on the excavation a bit. J.B. and Urban had been digging all day while I had been out. We had made much progress. The unearthed soil sat in a big pile beside the pit and I half-heartedly sifted through it looking for coal. Nothing.

We ate our pottage while watching television. The Quaker Oats episode had finished and now they had gone back to the start and were playing the same episode again for the later audiences. I have never understood commercial television. I flicked channels. On the local news, Twiggy Mullane was officially announcing her candidature for the seat of Newcastle. She stood in front of a podium and delivered the message that she had been told to deliver. Behind her, I saw Agent Chelate looking stern whenever the content of the speech so required it and nodding emphatically all the while. I saw him almost smile a few times but for the most part he did an impressive job of playing it straight.

After the press conference was over, I went and did the dishes. I rinsed each item quickly to get off the most egregious of the surface offenders then I filled the sink up with warm soapy water. The water felt nice on my submerged hands. It felt relaxing. I took a plate and slowly wiped it with the sponge. It was clean now. I put the plate into the rack beside the sink so that it would drip dry. I treated the other items with a similar level of respect. One of the knives slipped out of my hand as I was wiping it. It clattered down into the depths of the water and made quite a din.

“Oops,” I said.

Oops.

Was that the neighbour? It came from out the back. It was a bird, perhaps. One of the cockatoos must have taken to mimicry. I had to try it again.

“Oops,” I said.

Oops.

It was not a bird. That was too deep for a bird.

“Oops,” Urban said.

Oops.

Was it electronic? It didn’t sound like a human voice.

“Oops,” J.B. said.

Oops.

I walked out into the back yard to locate the source. It was over past the Hills Hoist.

“Oops,” Petrel said.

Oops.

Over there, in the pit. It was coming from the inside pit.

“Hello,” I said.

Hello.

Look – it came from that rock. Down in the pit, buried into the side of the pit, was a rock. The visible part of the rock was about twenty centimetres in diameter. It had a hollow bit on the face of it, with weird channels and divets that reminded me of a human ear. I clapped my hands and it clapped back immediately, an octave lower and distorted. It must be some kind of strange sound wave interference: one of those geological formations that produces unlikely and unbelievable echoes.

I picked up the shovel and started excavating the rock. I dug below it a bit and around the sides. The shovel scraped against the black rock. When I was able to get the shovel underneath, I started levering it free from the ground. It eventually loosened after enough gentle prying motions of the shovel. Finally, it popped out of the ground and I picked it up to study it.

It was a roughly cube-shaped rock. Each side was about twenty centimetres long. It must have weighed around five kilograms. There were plenty of complex crevices, channels and crannies on each face. Most of the crannies were filled with the brownish black loamy sand. The surface was smooth and black where the soil had fallen off or had been scraped off. It was my *echo stone*.

I quickly brushed off as much loose dirt as I could and brought it inside to show the gang. As I walked into the lounge room, the stone started reflecting back the sounds of the television. The words of the news became a jumbled mess and the noise grew louder and louder. Petrel yelled out telling me to stop it. The words merged into indistinct syllables, then the syllables merged into indistinct frequencies and soon enough it was an almost constant hum of the room’s natural resonances. I saw Urban’s mouth move but I couldn’t hear anything she said

above the stone. Her eyes grew wide and she smiled. She picked up the keys to J.B.'s campervan off the coffee table and ran out the front door. Her footsteps reverberated across the room and through the stone, forming a kaleidoscopic feedback loop of rhythmic thuds and slaps of bare feet on tiled floor. J.B. ran after her.

I remained standing dumb in the centre of the room listening to a distortion of my own breathing.

Urban came back wheeling an amplifier and an instrument case through the door. J.B. followed behind carrying a theremin. Urban unpacked her bass and plugged in. The amplifier gave a loud pop and they started to play. I felt the sound coming at me from every direction.

After half an hour of serious noodling, all of our ears were tired. I needed to rest. I took the echo stone out the back and put it back into the pit. The ground was where it belonged, at least for now. I threw a bit of dirt over it; not enough to bury it completely but enough to dampen the sound a bit.

When I went back inside Urban was on the phone trying to get us a gig. I saw the black shadow of one of my cohabitants moving around in the kitchen. I went to bed.

Besmirched

“What is fun?” I asked.

“What?”

Petrel could not hear me over the wind. We were out riding on industrial drive, the boundary that separates bland suburban Mayfield from the factories, warehouses, paint manufacturers, steel mills, recording studios and, of course, the coal terminal. We went up, riding over a bridge that crossed the railway tracks. The road of the bridge was curved and I felt the inertia pulling my interstices to the left, while the motorcycle pulled the external parts of my body to the right. My arms were securely around Petrel's waist. To the right, beyond the other lane of traffic, the railway split off into several fibres like a length of splayed copper cabling. In the distance, past the trees and the parked coal carriages, there were a few tall red cranes with great cantilevers.

We had just been to the bureau, where Petrel had been on the telephone to head office. She had sent the the photographs of Toto receiving the brown paper bag through to head office and they had now given us permission to go and see Toto's work at Area One for ourselves. We were given strict instructions. We would go have a look from outside and perhaps take some photographs but we would not trespass. Above all, we would touch nothing.

We stopped at the lights and could talk more easily now.

“What’s fun?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Bowling?”

“No, I said. I don’t mean what is an example of a fun activity. I mean, what *is* fun? What is the essence of *fun*? What is it that makes some things not fun — like cleaning the toilet — while some things are fun — like a video game where you clean the toilet. And why do things start off as fun but once you get used to them, they’re not fun any more. Am I not entitled to a certain quota of fun? Do I not deserve one hour of assured fun per day?”

“Well, I think bowling is fun. . . ”

“Lawn bowls or ten pin?”

“Ten pin.”

“Okay. We can give it a go. I think there’s an alley on Maitland Road.”

It would be the weekend tomorrow and we should find something to do. Petrel had been in town for three weeks and had been staying at my house for one but other than a bit of riding around she hadn’t really seen much of the Newcastle life. I supposed that as her host I had a duty to entertain her and provide local knowledge, regardless of whether my host-age was voluntary or under duress.

We turned off the highway into the industrial estate. There was a storage facility just off the highway and we parked the motorcycle on one of the side streets just behind the building. Petrel rummaged through her panniers and pulled out her camera as well as two fluorescent yellow vests. She handed one to me.

“Hi-vis,” she said. “Makes you invisible.”

I put the vest on over the top of my t-shirt. Petrel handed me an aluminium clipboard out of her panniers. It was surprisingly heavy. It had a piece of paper attached to it: a table with names, weights, quantities, dates and something called a SKU identifier.

“Gee oh aightch oh aightch oh nine oh?” I read out aloud from the paper.

“It’s officious gibberish. It looks very complicated and official but if you turn it on its side, it’s actually just a picture.”

I turned the clipboard on its side. I had to squint a bit but there, in all its Ascii glory, was a text reproduction of Kandinsky’s line drawing of the *Reiter* in motion.

“Beautiful,” I said.

We walked across the road into the steelworks. At the entrance there was a boom gate with a little station attached to it. There was a guard sitting inside. A sign outside the station read “STOP: VISITORS REPORT TO SECURITY”. Petrel smiled and waved at the guard as we walked around the boom gate. He

waved back at us and went back to his newspaper. I waved and tapped my index finger on the clipboard, though he was not paying attention by this point.

We walked past a corrugated iron shed. It was large enough to fit several semi-trailer trucks inside. I heard the clanging of metal coming from inside. The massive roller doors were up but it was too dark to see much. There were sparks flying at the far end of the shed.

Further along there was a three-story brick building. It had tinted windows that covered the whole width of the building. The windows reflected the sky and I couldn't see in at all. The entrance to the building was unmarked. The doorway was set inside a brutal concrete architrave. The building reminded me of my high school.

We continued along the road. Past the buildings, on either side of the road was a flat clearing of dirt. There were patches of gravel here and there. Beside the kerb of the road there were some narrow strips of dry yellow grass but other than that and a line of trees off into the horizon, there was very little vegetation that I could see. Here and there, scattered about the clearing, were a few shipping containers.

We followed the road as it curved. We went over the level crossing of a rusty railroad track. Some distance away, there were a few backhoes and cranes moving soil around. I took a few pictures with the telephoto lens. One of the backhoes was excavating a deep hole, bringing the soil up and putting it into a pile. A bit further along, another one was taking soil and filling in the same hole that the first had just dug out. The soil going in was a rich dark red, while the soil coming out was more of a mottled grey, almost gravel. Over to the right, well away from everything else, were two demountable offices. A man wearing a high-visibility vest and dark glasses was standing outside watching the excavators.

The railway looped around and there was a long train of tank cars behind the excavators. I could not see their markings properly and could not make out their contents. The locomotive was one of the relatively new ninety-two class diesel-electrics. This class was almost exclusively used for hauling coal, so it was exciting to see it used for tank cars. I suggested that we take a closer look.

The man in the high visibility vest waved at us. He got in his ute and drove across the dirt clearing over to us.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," Petrel said.

I waved at the man and tapped the clipboard with my index finger.

"You're from the head office?"

"Yes, that's right," Petrel said.

I looked at the man. His eyes were hidden behind his glasses. My eyes were suddenly tired from the sun and the glare.

“We aren’t ready yet,” the man said. “You have to come back tomorrow. Didn’t you get my message?”

“Yes,” Petrel said, “but we just need to look around.”

“We can’t stop for you now,” he said, “we’ll be even further behind schedule.”

We were all silent for a moment. The man looked over at me. I looked down and tapped my index finger on the clipboard.

“*Ninety-two fifteen*,” I blurted out.

The man looked at me questioningly, then looked to Petrel for an explanation.

“It is ninety-two fifteen’s maiden voyage today,” I said, pointing over towards the locomotive. “I missed ninety-two fourteen last month because I had diarrhoea that day.”

Petrel looked over at me. She winced at the word *diarrhoea*.

“Oh, you’re gunzels?” The man laughed. “That’s fine, I’ll give you a lift over.”

We got in the ute and drove along the road, around and behind the dig site, to where the locomotive sat. It was still attached to the tank cars behind it. I asked the man if I could take some photographs and he said that was fine.

I took many photographs from as many viewpoints as possible. I tried, discreetly, to photograph as much as I could of the tank cars and excavators in the distance without attracting the man’s suspicion. I looked behind and saw that he wasn’t paying any attention at all: Petrel and he were still sitting in the ute, engrossed in conversation. I walked behind the locomotive and started photographing the tank cars directly. They were fairly ordinary cars for storing liquid. They were white and were completely unmarked, except for a few haphazard, irregular patches of grey paint. They didn’t even have serial numbers. The paint patches were in roughly the same area on each car and looked like they’d been spraypainted on. As I walked around the cars, I noticed underneath the grey patches that parts of it caught the light of the sun differently. I could see a triangle with some shapes inside it and a few smaller shapes that looked like letters but I couldn’t decipher them. I took photographs from many different angles to catch the different reflections. I got back in the ute.

“I have never been this close to a ninety-two before! It is a real treat for me to see one pulling something other than coal, as well. What’s in the tanks?”

“Oh, it’s just the liquid we use for mixing up the bentonite slurry. We pump it into the ground over there to make a wall around the Area.”

He pointed over at the excavators, one of which was dumping the red soil into the hole. I saw now that there was a black rubber pipe the diameter of a dinner plate running all the way from a pump near where we were, over to the excavators.

“One last thing,” Petrel said. “Will you pose for a few photographs in front of the train?”

He agreed. The man and I got back out of the ute and he posed in front of the locomotive. Petrel stayed in the ute and I made sure to take my time getting the perfect portrait. I got him to climb up into the cab and took a few photos of him sitting in the driver's seat. Then I had him hang off the railing on the side. I even had him take off his vest, in gross violation of workplace health and safety, and tie it around his forehead like a character in an action film about mental health issues suffered by veterans of the war between the United States of America and Vietnam. I suggested that he climb up onto the roof but he wasn't so keen on that. He started to get restless and I got bored, so I asked if I could get one last one looking out from the inside of the cabin. He agreed. I asked him to explain what each button and lever did. He confessed that he did not know as he was not a train driver.

The man gave us a lift back to the entrance and dropped us off at the boom gate. We thanked him for his time and walked back to the motorcycle.

I asked Petrel whether she found anything useful in the ute. She pulled out a piece of paper from the pocket of her leather jacket and handed it to me. It was the shipping manifest for the train, which had been signed and dated as received yesterday. I scanned over it. The sender was a company I hadn't heard of. The contents of the tankers was listed as water.

"Water?" I was incredulous. "Why spraypaint over the serial numbers and signs to ship water?"

"Why send water by train in the first place? The river's just over there. The groundwater's under us. The toilet's right there and I'll bet it's plumbed in. There's no shortage of water here."

"What do we do, then?" I handed the report back to her.

"We'll need to come back at night to get a sample. But first we develop your photos and have Canberra analyse them."

We got on the motorcycle and dropped the photographs off at the bureau. I placed the film canister into the pneumatic tube and sent it through. Petrel got on the Canberra-phone to give them an update. I went and sat on Scampi's desk to say hello while I waited. I asked Scampi what the essential tourist attraction was for Newcastle if I were to show Petrel some local colour.

I pottered around, playing with the various pieces of stationery on Scampi's desk, until Petrel got off the phone.

"What did Canberra say?" I asked.

"They'll analyse the photos over the weekend. We won't know until Monday. We can't do anything until then."

"Nothing we could do," I said. "It's the weekend."

On Scampi's suggestion, I took Petrel to see the Queens Wharf Tower. We walked up through the mall, which had just been reopened to public car traffic after

several decades of being restricted to pedestrian traffic. They had installed tactile bumps on the ground between the pedestrian walkway and the walkway-cum-road for the vision impaired. The bumps were quite slippery.

There was a mobile speed sensor attached to a screen, which displayed the current speed of any cars going through the mall and past the sensor. A gang of youths on skateboards were taking turns to skate past the sensor. The screen flashed as each youth went past:

SLOW DOWN
TOO FAST

We crossed the pedestrian bridge over the railway corridor to the Queens Wharf Tower and started climbing the steps up to the corona. When we got to the top, the metal gate to the observation deck was padlocked shut. Petrel rattled the gate but it was secured fast. I peered through the bars.

“Look,” I said, pointing into the distance. “There’s a big cruise ship over there. And that’s the lighthouse.”

Petrel nodded. We sat down on the steps and I rolled us each a cigarette. We smoked in silence as the sun approached the horizon. I watched the spent confetti of burnt paper and tobacco fall down through the cracks between the steps, dispersing into fine wisps of ash as the wind caught it in spirals. It would soon be Friday night.

We walked back to the bureau to where Petrel’s motorcycle was parked. Total Xylem Flow were playing at the Lass tonight. I suggested that we head there but Petrel didn’t want to leave the motorcycle unattended. We rode home first and put the motorcycle out around the back. My cohabit’s car was out the front. I didn’t want to go inside in case they were there. I asked whether Petrel needed anything from inside. She said she didn’t, just that she needed to put the panniers inside. I remembered that I had locked my window this morning, too. We had little choice but to go inside.

I put the key in the lock and opened the back door. I could hear indistinct voices from the television from here. I sighed and walked in. It was probably more audible than I had planned. I tried to sneak behind the lounge and through to my room. When I got closer, I saw that the room was empty and the television was performing to an empty audience. How sad. Television really is a two-way relationship and if the audience is unwilling to give the performer the respect it deserves, then so be it. The relationship ought to be terminated. I picked up the remote control and was about to turn the television off, when I saw a black shadow moving through the crack under the cohabit’s room. I decided to leave the television on, in case they were aroused by its sudden departure from this world. I ushered Petrel through to my room and she left her panniers on the ground.

We left the house and walked up to the bus stop. The next bus was not for twenty minutes so we started walking into town, following along the route the

bus took. We walked along, past Dangar Park with its palm trees that lined the street and not much else. I spent most of my time thinking of topics for conversation. The nice thing about being on the back of a motorcycle is that you do not need to speak very much; there is some sort of deeper connection there. Petrel did not speak much anyway, so it did not feel uncomfortable if I had nothing to say.

Going to the pub was different though. You needed a couple of different topics that you could pull out at a moment's notice. Previously I had contemplated taking scraps of paper with the seed of a conversation written on each and putting them in my pocket. The idea would be to take one out and follow the thread whenever it seemed like it was my turn to initiate small-talk. I called it *protocol seven*, although I was not certain that I had counted all of the previous protocols accurately. I had abandoned protocol seven before putting it into action, as I felt that the act of pulling out and reading a piece of paper was too unnatural to really work.

Protocol eight went along similar lines to protocol seven, except that in protocol eight I came up with a few short stories or anecdotes and memorised them, rather than writing them down. I guess I could talk about the comingled recycling debacle at work. That was usually a safe bet, except that Frank and Petrel had already heard all about that one. The great thing about protocol eight was that it didn't matter how inane and intensely boring the subject was. Most people are too thick to properly comprehend what other people say to them, let alone form their own opinions about the quality of the subject matter. Instead, they rely purely on non-verbal cues: eye contact, excited quivers in the voice, flapping arms. That sort of thing. You need to really ham it up too, because the minute they smell any boredom from you, they've made their mind up. This is why everybody likes talking to charity muggers even though they have nothing to say.

I checked the timetable at the next bus stop. The next bus would not be long. We waited under some fig trees at Islington Park. The ground was covered in fruit, out of which a slippery jelly seeped. Across the road, a woman was waiting on the street. I asked Petrel to tell me an anecdote, but she said that she did not know any good ones. The bus came and I dipped my travel-ten ticket in the machine. We rode in silence and I watched out for broken headlights on the oncoming cars.

At the pub, Frank asked me if I wanted to buy a boat. I asked how much. He shrugged and said that he would give it to me for five hundred dollars. I had never really thought about how much a boat cost before, so I didn't have any baseline to compare it against. Still, five hundred dollars seemed not exactly cheap but certainly affordable. I could spend five hundred dollars on a boat if I wanted to, I thought. I started to imagine the sort of freedom that a boat would give me. I could have my own sort of Huckleberry Finn moment as I travelled all the way up the Hunter river to Singleton. I could throw a net behind me and trawl as many carp as I could eat. I have never eaten carp before. I could also

travel in the opposite direction, down the river to the beach, and set up a tent there with a little campfire. Maybe I could even live on it if it were big enough. Sure, I could live on a boat.

“What kind of boat is it?” Petrel asked.

“It’s a tinny.”

“Is it as big as this table?” I slammed down my beer on the table as I felt the need to make it clear exactly which table I was talking about. Some of the beer frothed up over the top of my glass and onto my coaster.

“Bigger!” Frank said.

“Sold!” I slammed my beer three times, as if it were a gavel and I were the auctioneer.

“Does it have a motor?” Petrel asked.

“No, but it has oars.”

“What about a net for catching carp?” I asked.

“You can get nets at Shopmart. It’s open twenty-four hours. I could get you one right now if you want a net.”

“Do you have a trailer?” Petrel asked.

I knocked on the table twice more to excuse myself and went out the back to use the toilet. It was one of those portable toilets, though it hadn’t been moved in many years. It didn’t smell too bad for what it was, really, because there was a little flap in the bowl that was able to keep the majority of the smells underneath in the reservoir. Eventually when there was enough liquid in the bowl, it would weigh down upon the flap, causing the flap to flip down temporarily and the liquid to drop down. The flap would flip back up again once the weight of the liquid was gone. It was a common toilet hobby among the patrons to count the number of flips of the flap in a single session. There was a particular place, just a little bit from the back, where one could aim to achieve the optimal flipping pressure. Thirteen.

“We’re going fishing tomorrow,” Petrel said.

“We’ll take the boat out on the river.” Frank’s face beamed.

“Excellent.”

The pool table freed up behind us. I fed a dollar into the slot and the balls rumbled out into the feeder below the table. Petrel broke, then I potted one of the balls with more white on it. I call them the *more-whites* because they have more white on them. The other ones have less white on them, so I call them *less-whites*. It is a simple naming convention. Other people have tried to explain their own naming systems to me but I have never been able to understand them properly. They are all so complicated. What does it mean for a ball to be a *spot*?

Both of the groups have spots on them. The less-whites have white spots around where the number is. The more-whites have large white spots. No, *spot* is a terrible, ambiguous term, and *stripe* is just as bad. It is the same with *singlets* and *skivvies*. Where are the arms and where is the neck hole? Petrel had just potted her last less-white and was on the eight now. I watched her bend down over the table to line up the shot. I didn't quite understand where all her balls had gone. She stared with her tiny eyes, moving a fraction to the left, a fraction to the right, before committing to the shot. She sent the eight ball straight into its pocket. I felt that I had somehow not gotten my money's worth from the game.

I went and sat back down at the table.

"Why do you want to sell your boat anyway, Frank?" I asked.

"I never use it. It just sits there, lying against the garage, in the way. There's nowhere to take it out in Thornton, anyway."

I woke up early on Sunday morning. I performed my ablutions then went to the kitchen to make coffee. It was one of those dripolators that are so popular in the United States of America. The United States of America, by the way, is *part* of America, but it is not *all* of America. Many people seem confused on this point, particularly those from the country itself. These dripolators have a bad reputation because of the appalling coffee in the United States of America. The reputation of the coffee was well deserved but the reputation of the machine was a bit harsher than it needed to be. If you used decent beans they were thoroughly passable. After all, it is just steeping the grounds in hot water. At that level, you have to try pretty hard to mess it up. I used beans from the supermarket – the shrink-wrapped, pre-ground stuff. It was adequate. It was fine. It was sometimes even good if you had it with a cigarette. I rinsed the container and put a new filter in then measured out a few heaped spoons into the filter. Measured is not the right word. It was more of an eye-balling. I closed the machine and poured the water in and turned it on. It started to gurgle. Glug. Glug. Glug. The carafe filled up slowly and the smell of roast goodness filled the house.

Petrel was asleep on a pallet on the floor in the lounge room. I nudged her awake with my foot and gave her a cup of coffee.

"Hello," I said. "We are going fishing."

"What? Now?" Petrel groaned.

I did not think that that noise was very becoming of a lady and I told her so.

"I do not think that that noise is very becoming of a lady."

"I am not a lady."

We got on the motorcycle and met Frank at the boat ramp. He was waiting for us with his boat when we got there. It was a little aluminium boat, perhaps two metres long, with very little in the way of ornamentation. It had a decal of the serial number *SN250* on its side but it didn't even have a name. I did not understand our Frank sometimes. How could you own a boat and not give it a name? It seemed to me that a large part of the appeal of having a boat was in giving it a name in the first place. If I had a boat, I could give it all manner of names. *Old chum*, for example, to pick the very first thing at the top of my head. *Old chum* was a good name because it had a sort of double meaning. You see, some people will say *old mate* or *old chum* when they are referring to a friend of theirs. Some people even use the term to refer to non-friends. But in a nautical and fishing context, *chum* also has a different meaning: it is a sort of block of dead fish, pressed together and squeezed dry of moisture. In this way, calling a boat *old chum* is particularly apt, because a boat is both one's friend and is also a vessel for fishing. The harder I thought, I could find no name better than *old chum*.

The boat had one bar seat that went all the way across the whole width. Frank had put an esky underneath the seat. At the front, there was another seat where one could sit facing backwards. It was not a big boat but there was space to sit the three of us comfortably. On each side of the bar seat, there were two u-shaped plastic guards in which the oars could pivot.

We launched it off the boat ramp, off the trailer, and into the river. After some initial unsteadiness while we all found our appropriate seats, we managed to settle in. I took the oars and propelled us out into the centre of the river. I was surprised at how little effort it took to move us across the water. Under ordinary circumstances, I do not think I would be able to enact much movement on the three of us. Here, though, we glided across the muddy water with ease.

We went up the river a little bit and found somewhere quiet to sit. The bank of the river was brownish sandy soil which went up quite steeply. Up on the raised part of the bank, there were a few drooping trees with long thin branches full of leaves that reached down into the water. The air was still and cool.

Petrel reached under the seat and brought out some bait that she had bought at a service station on the way. They were little fish of some sort, half frozen. She threaded one of the fish onto the hook of her rod. The hook entered its head, going through its body and exiting at its tail. The little fish was curved into a most unnatural position and I hardly believed that any self-respecting predator would take it seriously as prey. Frank did the same with his own hook and cast off in the opposite direction to Petrel.

I had prepared my own bait by mixing flour and water into a firm dough. I had added some soy sauce at the last minute. I am not sure why but it had seemed like a fitting ingredient at the time. I had a little hand reel, which was basically just a large spool of fishing line with a hook and sinker attached to the loose end. It was a simple device, consisting of a disc about the size of those frozen

family meat pies you get from the supermarket, though the centre was hollow. I attached a chunk of dough around the hook and tossed it out into the river.

We waited for a while but didn't get any immediate attention from the fish below. Frank took out a deck of cards from his shirt pocket and we drew the esky out to use as a card table between the three of us. After a few hands, I brought up my line to check on it. The smoky-grey dough was gone but so was whatever critter had taken it. I replenished the dough and sent the line back out.

I asked Petrel whether there were many good fishing spots in Canberra. She said that she had gone out a few times but had not had much luck. Besides, none of her friends from the bureau down there were all that interested in fishing. When she first moved to Canberra a few years ago, she had rented a dinghy and went out on Lake Burley Griffin on her own. It had been a nice day, she said, but the weather had unexpectedly turned and she had sought shelter on one of the nearby islands. It was a small island with a few trees and some grass. She had huddled wet underneath the overturned dinghy for the next hour, waiting for the storm to pass.

"That's Canberra weather for you," Frank said. "Unpredictable. Got its own micro-climate."

I had never been to Canberra so I didn't know. Petrel continued her story. Eventually the weather cleared up and she was able to take a proper look around the island. There was a clearing in the middle of the island where someone had erected a canvas tent. Beside the tent a rudimentary fire pit had been constructed by placing rocks in a circle. Petrel called out and asked if anybody was in the tent. When she received no answer, she opened the flap and looked inside. There was a bedroll on a stretcher, a sack of potatoes and some water containers.

Petrel's fishing rod started to quiver and bow. She picked up the rod and started pulling it towards her with a gentle persistence while reeling the line in. The fish came up to the surface and was writhing, flailing around, splashing against the water. She pulled it up high and after a few tries managed to guide it into a bucket of water. It started to settle down in the bucket. It was an ugly thing with a terrible face. It looked like it had been trodden on.

"Flathead," Petrel said.

"That's a keeper," Frank said.

"What happened with the tent?" I asked.

"Nothing. I couldn't find anyone and rowed back to the boat rental. When I got back, they wanted to charge me for an extra hour." Petrel shrugged.

We had been on the water for a few hours now. It was almost noon. It was getting quite warm and the sun was beginning to bother us. We decided to call it. Petrel rowed us back to the boat ramp. I could feel the minute splashes of water coming from the oars, hitting my arms and face and instantly evaporating.

Petrel and I helped Frank load the boat onto the trailer and we all agreed to meet back at my place in a few hours. Petrel slipped the flathead into her panniers and we rode off.

When we got home, I went out the back and looked at the pit. While J.B. and Urban were staying, they had continued the excavation while I had been at work. They had managed to get down to half a metre or so, deeper in some parts, but they were gone now. I rummaged through the pile of unearthed dirt and clay that sat next to the hole. Nothing. I scratched the surface of the bottom of the pit with the shovel. There were lots of pebbles but no coal.

“We need some coal,” I said to Petrel. “To cook the fish.”

“Hmm. It must be buried pretty deep. Do you want me to go get some briquettes from Shopworths?”

“Yes, I guess so.” I sighed. “I had so hoped to use some of our own coal for this.”

We walked up to Shopworths and got some instant coal bricks, as well as some other boring things: milk and beer and asparagus and lemons and aluminium foil. As we were standing in the line for the checkout, a local came up behind us. She had a shopping trolley full of devon – those massive sausages that come wrapped in plastic.

“Are you waiting in line?” She asked.

“Yes,” I said.

We carried our shopping home in plastic bags. Petrel gutted and cleaned the fish and wrapped it in aluminium foil along with the lemons and asparagus. I started a fire out the back in the fire pit. We sat down around the fire and waited for Frank to come before we put the fish in to cook.

My arms were sunburnt from our time on the water and I could see that Petrel’s neck was red as well. The heat from the fire was enough to make my arms smart just a bit. When Frank came, we threw the fish in and let it cook for an hour or so. I complained to Frank that we had not found any coal yet and that we had had to buy the briquettes. Frank went over to inspect the excavation himself. He spent some time sifting through the dirt and eventually came back with a few small black specks in his hand. He showed me the specks and cast them into the fire. I was not particularly impressed.

After we ate the fish, Frank and I spent some more time digging at the pit. Frank remained convinced that the coal was just underneath us. If we only dug another centimetre, he said, we would find the seam. We would have more coal than we could ever desire, he said. Petrel went to bed and left us with our digging.

Interred

I awoke to the rumbling of a motorcycle just outside my room. I saw the shadow of Petrel's motorcycle go past my window, briefly blocking the sunlight that came through the cracks in the curtains. It was about nine in the morning. It must have been Monday.

I got up and started to perform my ablutions. On the back of my bedroom door I found a note from Petrel. She said that she was going into the office and directed me to meet her there. Fine. I went down the hallway to the bathroom to finish abluting, running quickly to avoid my cohabitants spying me through their open door.

I showered, dressed and collected up my pocket things into their corresponding pockets. I could hear my cohabitants laughing in the lounge. I considered going out the window but I did not want to leave the window unlocked all day while I was out. I decided to slip out the front door. I laid down on the ground in the hallway and inched myself along, using alternate motion of pulling my legs in to my torso, then extending my torso forward, to propel myself. I moved along in this wormlike fashion into the lounge and behind the lounge. My legs scraped along the floorboards but they were unable to hear me above the sound of the television. I was undetectable.

My cohabitants were watching the local news. They were playing a game they often played, where they would stick a picture of a cap on the television. It was one of those propeller caps where the propeller spins, though the propeller in the picture was stationary. Whenever a person or a cat or any image on the television lined up suitably with the cap, so that it looked like a person was *wearing* the cap if you withheld your better judgment for a minute, then they would laugh. Oh, how they would chortle. Just now, I saw Twiggy Mullane talking on the television. She was on the campaign trail, going around to the ugly schools and meeting the miserable little school children and playing handball with them. That sort of thing. Now that she had preselection, I didn't really see why she bothered; it was a safe seat. It had always been a safe seat. As the sole candidate for the incumbent party, there really was no contest.

I inched myself forward and out of the door. My arms, sunburnt as they were, chafed against the splintered wooden boards of the porch. Free at last, I stood up and started walking. I decided to take the bus to work rather than the train. This was not because I particularly wanted to catch the bus in and of itself. It was more that I was keenly aware of the fact that Petrel was waiting for me at the bureau. The bus stop was a good deal closer than the train station and so I figured the bus ride would be faster.

I got on the bus and walked up to the back. There were two spare seats: one next to an attractive, younger lady, and one next to a middle-aged man with piss stains on his trousers and nicotine stains on his teeth. I sat down next to mister piss stain in case the lady thought I was some kind of sex pest for sitting

next to her while there were other seats free. For all I knew, I *was* a sex pest, I just had not succumbed to my base desires or had the right opportunities yet. Mister piss stain's knee touched mine. I felt the burning filth from this frotteur contaminating my own knee through my trousers, running up my leg and all over my body, as if I were walking through some great stinking unclean mist. Mister piss rubbed his knee against mine and made a gurgling, coughing sound.

A seat in front freed up next to a more wholesome gentleman. I could get up and sit next to him. Or I could stand. Would mister piss be offended? Would the other passengers judge me as ungrateful? This mister, poor and wretched as he was, had kindly allowed me to sit next to him. He likely had little in this world apart from this seat. And what little he had, he had shared with me. No, I would stay and suffer and keep the wretch company.

I pushed my knee firmly against his. As much as it disgusted me, I had to assert some dominance. If the cretin derived some sick pleasure from this, so be it. Still, I could feel the fumes seeping into my clothes. It was probably all over the seat too: the seat of my trousers would now be well and truly soaked in the fumes. I do not understand how someone could allow themselves to smell this way. Perhaps he does not realise that he smells like piss. It is the only explanation. Now that I was contaminated, would I smell like this all day and not realise? Do I *always* smell like this and not realise?

I thought back. A lot of my social interactions with others and the general air of disgust that I often saw in others' faces could be explained by my smelling like piss. For example, when I was walking back to my table from the bar the other night, I heard someone sniffing behind me. That has to be a piss smell. Sometimes at the shops, someone will look at me askew with a side glance. Piss smell. And the other week, when I got assaulted by those youths after giving them a cigarette? Piss smell – they must have been aggravated by the piss in the tobacco.

I looked down at my piss stained hands, which had betrayed me for so long. The stain had become such an integral part of my hands that I could not see it but I now knew that it was there. Now I knew. I clenched my piss fist and vowed to make amends for my piss life and my piss nose and my piss face.

The man coughed again and I saw that he wished to depart from the bus. I stood up to let him pass. Perhaps we are not so different after all, mister piss, I thought to myself.

I met Petrel outside the bureau. She was waiting at her bike. She had the seat up and was doing something with a spanner but I suspected that she was just trying to look cool in her dungarees and denim jacket, holding her set of open-ended spanners. She did.

“Do you think I...?” I asked.

“Hm?” She kept tinkering with the battery connexions.

“No. Never mind.” I looked down at my hands. “I need some soap.”

I cleaned myself up in the work bathroom and came back down.

When I got back down, Petrel handed me the motorcycle helmet.

“We’re heading to Area One tonight but we have to wait until it’s dark. Let’s go shopping.”

I hopped on the back and we rode up Hunter Street. We parked a little bit further along outside the army surplus store. It was very close to the bureau; we really could have just walked. Inside, the store was poorly lit. All the clothes on the racks were the same shade of bottle green. We went straight to the trousers. Petrel asked what size waist I was but I didn’t know. She picked out a pair and showed me. It had more pockets than I had ever seen in my life. It was amazing.

“What are all these pockets for?” I asked.

“This one’s for your lighter. This one’s for lighter fluid. Here is your water bottle. That’s for a Fossington relay and there’s your tether wheel. Your belt goes here.” She pointed at each in turn as she explained its function.

I tried on a few different pairs and found a good fit. Next, we looked at the bottle green tactical vests. Again with the pockets. I did not bother asking what they were for this time. I also got a big heavy torch, a box of waterproof matches, a water bottle, and some new boots with zips on the sides. I looked at the broadswords and the plate metal cuirasses and the questionable flags but Petrel ushered me on.

We spent the rest of the day at Hambegger Haven watching the people go by and playing Street Fighter. I drank a banana-malt milkshake and the arcade game ate my last dollar coin.

We went back home in the evening to get ready. Petrel laid out the plan on the coffee table:

“This here tea towel is Area One and the coaster is the excavation.” She placed the coaster on top of the towel. “The train is this crease in the towel here. Here, the edge of the table, is the river, and that” — she pointed to the bottle of chilli sauce — “is the guard tower. There’s a building here. We need to go up here, around there, and so on, without anybody seeing us. We need to get up to the train and sample as much of the contents as we can. You can keep your sample in there.” She pointed to my empty water bottle.

“Finally, here are a few sappy bags. Whenever you get a chance, fill them up with soil or whatever. Try to get samples from a few places.”

I put the bags in my left knee pocket and made sure I had everything I needed.

We got on the motorcycle and rode up along industrial drive.

It was dark by now and the contrast between the orange glow of the night sky and the unlit road was only helped by the motorcycle’s meagre headlights. There

was little other traffic. We turned off by the storage facility where we had parked before and found a place to stash the motorcycle behind a tree, around the back of the building. I heard a truck going past on industrial drive and then it was quiet except for the rumble of machinery in the distance. The evening air was warm and humid; the southerly had not yet come.

We walked up towards the entrance, staying out of the direct light. My new boots rubbed against my heels, though I had worn an extra thick pair of socks. The boom gates were down and the area around them was lit by a few street lights. There was a gentleman wearing a high visibility vest and reading something inside the guard's station. On the horizon, I saw a halo of orange flood lights reaching out into the sky. That must be Area One.

We walked around the perimeter, past the guard's station and the boom gates, and along the barbed wire-topped chain-link fence. Petrel took a pair of wire cutters from the pocket of her dungarees and clipped through the fence. She held the hole open as I crawled through. The exposed wires scraped against my skin and my clothes. We walked up between two long buildings, massive corrugated iron sheds at least three stories high. The railway was to our left, which went towards Area One. We could not walk directly along it, however, because it had street lights spaced regularly along it. We kept a discreet distance from the tracks.

We walked along close to the outer wall of one of the sheds. In front of us there was an open roller door, out of which the light shone. Petrel signalled to wait at the door just out of the light. We waited a little while. I heard the noise of electrical sparks coming from inside the shed. The machinery rumbled on in the distance. Petrel pointed ahead and walked across the doorway to the other side. I followed across. We walked along some fat pipes that ran along the side of the shed. There were all sorts of wheels and levers and things attached to them. A sign said "no smoking".

At the end of the building there was a gravel road and a few parked cars and further along was another much smaller corrugated shed. We went over to a copse of trees to our right. Over on the other side of the train tracks, I saw a ute driving along. It turned and crossed over the tracks at the railway crossing. As the ute passed under the lights, I could clearly read the decal on its side in large lettering:

slurry toto
slurry co.

The ute turned around towards the car park. We were directly in its headlights. My shoulders tensed. Then it passed. The ute continued along and parked. The lights went off and soon after the driver got out. She was a young woman, about my age, with red hair. She went around to the tray of the ute and got out an orange vest and a hardhat, then entered the smaller shed.

We walked along behind the shed. There was a line of trees that roughly followed

the train line and the road. I could see the lights of Area One clearly now, the lights that flooded all of the Mayfield sky in a sickly, unearthly sodium haze. They were illuminating the excavators, the backhoes and the cranes, the few demountables scattered about and the train behind. We walked through the darkness of the clearing to go around the dig site and to loop around the back to the train. I knelt down and collected some of the grey dusty gravel in a zip-lock bag.

We ducked in the shadow behind a shipping container with thick cables leading into it. There was a low humming coming from inside. There was a row of such shipping containers, all alike. I peered out at the large gap between us and the train. It was partially lit with no sort of refuge to hide behind. Petrel made a sign of a crawling motion. I got down on my hands and knees and we slowly shuffled over.

Over in the direction of the excavation, I heard a car starting. The gravel stuck in to my hands. I saw a light swinging past – the headlights of a car turning in the distance. The headlights disappeared for a second and then they came back and started to get brighter. I looked over and saw a pair of headlights pointing towards us. They were getting bigger. I pointed over.

“Run!” Petrel said.

I rushed up onto my feet and started to run. My shambolic movements kicked up a cloud of dust and gravel that surrounded us. We ran back towards the shipping containers. My feet slipped briefly on the loose stones. We continued running over the clearing into the trees. We waited there a moment. My lungs were burning. I coughed up something. It made them hurt even more. I spat out some small flecks of muddy gravel onto the ground.

I could see that the ute had stopped over by the shipping containers now, its headlights still on. The driver was walking around the shipping containers with a torch, opening the containers and looking inside. Petrel started walking back towards where we had entered but I took her arm and pointed out towards the road. There were another two pairs of headlights over that way, coming in this direction. We turned around and went deeper into the thicket of trees, away from Area One.

We reached the other edge of the thicket of trees where we came across several railway tracks, all going in different directions. On the other side of the tracks there were a few big black hills. I could only see their silhouettes. They were strangely regular in shape and looked artificial. To our right, the tracks joined up into a single bundle of unified tracks. We followed along the unified tracks under a large road bridge with many lanes of traffic.

There was another road bridge in the distance. As we got closer I recognised that it was the main road, Maitland Road. I had been here before; this was where I had previously collected coal from. I found a hole in the fence and we slipped through to the road. We walked home. My feet hurt and my stomach

pined for something savoury as we went past Hamburger Chain. I thought about buying a whole cache of cheseburgers — hundreds of them — and storing them in all of the cupboards around the house. I had heard that you could store them indefinitely and they would remain as edible as ever. It seemed like a nice and cheap way to live. I would never have to leave the house again. I decided that I would wait until they were on special and fill the whole house with one dollar cheeseburgers.

We waited until the morning to collect Petrel's motorcycle, just in case the goons at Area One were still on high alert looking for us. In an attempt to remain inconspicuous, we left around eight so that we would meet peak traffic. I wore the least remarkable clothes I could find: blue jeans and a t-shirt with the word *hololologram* printed on it, with a psychedelic vision of an all-seeing-eye above it. The t-shirt had been a present from my mother. We walked through the park and up past the swimming pool then crossed industrial drive up to where we had stashed the motorcycle. It took twenty or so minutes to walk there.

We retrieved the motorcycle without incident. It was exactly where we had left it. It was far enough away from the compound that it must have looked like it belonged to a customer of the self-storage facility, which probably had twenty-four hour access anyway. There was nothing particularly different about the compound that we could see. They still only had one guard on duty and there was no more traffic than we had seen previously. They must have forgotten all about our infraction.

I hopped on the back of the motorcycle and we rode in to the bureau to drop off the few specimens of soil and gravel and dirt that I had collected. They would be sent to the head office. Petrel was on the Canberra-phone for a long time. Scampi was off sick and Merino was too busy to talk, so I filled in a few reports while I waited. The readings for Lemon Tree Passage were all over the place. I fixed it up and sent it off.

Petrel hung up the phone and came over to talk.

"We have to try again. They're going to analyse the soil samples but they don't have much hope. Even if it shows something's awry, it's unlikely they can pin it on Slurry. The place is a mess: it's been a slag heap for the last hundred years."

"Why do we need to sneak in? Can we not get a warrant? Force them to give up the slurry? We are the *bureau*, after all."

"No. We can't give them a chance to clean it up. If we get a warrant, you know who signs it? Cleff McJoy."

"Cleff McJoy, that crooked cretin."

"He's a fucking homophobe, that's what he is."

"He is the living embodiment of all that is wrong with Newcastle. In many ways,

such a character would be wholly unbelievable if he were not a real living human being. Also, I heard that he drinks from the toilet.”

“I heard he only drinks from brown paper bags.”

“You know what else comes in brown paper bags?”

“Yeah.”

“And then you set the bags on fire.”

“Yeah.”

“And leave them on someone’s door step.”

“Yeah. Oh!”

We left the office and went ten-pin bowling. We had to wait a few days before going back anyway and, in Petrel’s words, there was no point overthinking the whole thing.

At the bowling alley, they made us wear their special shoes. I guess they did not want our boots scuffing up their wooden floor. I threw the ball down the lane. It was surprisingly heavy. The ball went down into the gutter on the side and missed all of the pins. I tried again. This time was a bit better. The ball hit one of the pins, which in turn knocked another over. Alright. It was Petrel’s turn now. She picked up the ball and walked over to the lane, sending the ball down with grace and panache. She gave a debonair flick of the wrist as the ball left her hand. Seven pins. She got the rest in the next throw.

I tried again. I did my best to emulate Petrel’s style but I was a bit self-conscious. I thought that it might come across as flamboyant if I were to flick my wrist so I left that bit off. Still, it was effective: I got four of them on the first go, which was a marked improvement. I got another three on the second go.

It was a quarter to twelve. I asked if it was too early to have a beer and Petrel said no, but that we could only have one because she was riding. I ordered us each a beer, then went out the front to have a cigarette. I sat on the step by the entrance with my cigarette and my schooner of brown. The jacaranda tree across the street swayed in the wind. Every so often a gust would come and it would drop a new batch of purple flowers onto the ground. Slippery stuff; watch out for the bees. A truck came speeding past and then another two in quick succession. I saw a familiar message on the back of the last one: “You’ve been passed by one of Slurry Toto’s lorries. Sorry!”

I went back in and we continued our game. Petrel taught me to spin the ball so that when the ball hits the pin, the ball goes in one direction and the knocked pin goes in another. I tried but it just made it worse. The ball kept curving off too early and missing the pins. We finished our game and left.

Back home, I found my cohabits in the kitchen. They were making a meal of their own devising which they called *mashed potato salad*. It was a favourite

of theirs. Strictly speaking it was neither mashed, nor potato, nor salad. To make mashed potato salad, start with a packet of dehydrated potato powder and mix it up with hot milk and so on according to the instructions. In another bowl, mix up some jelly crystals. These can be any flavour: lime, raspberry, cola. Anything, really. Put the jelly in the freezer to set, then chop it into little cubes of jelly. Now give the jelly cubes a thick, heavy coating of sour cream. Take a deep porcelain dish: the kind you would use for a potato bake, say. First, lay down a layer of Jatz crackers – full fat, of course. Then put down the jelly with sour cream. It is very important that the jelly with sour cream is next to the crackers because all the salt is in the crackers. You can put down another layer of crackers at this point. You really can't have too many crackers. Next, put down a layer of the reconstituted potato mess. Add as many layers as you need to use up all your ingredients. *Alors, vous avez cuisiné la salade de pomme de terre purée. Qu'est-ce que vous faites maintenant? Eh bien, vous le devez manger.*

Petrel and I decided to go out for lunch instead. We rode into town and went past the harbour and the wharves at Honeysuckle then went down to the foreshore. I ordered hot chips and we sat down on one of the benches that overlooked the harbour. A ferry came over from the other side of the harbour and docked at the wharf. I watched the people get off. Then the people who were waiting to go over to Stockton got on. Everyone was on the ferry now but the remained there without moving. I wondered what they were doing. Petrel said maybe they were not scheduled to leave for a while. I thought perhaps the ferry had broken down.

Our chips were ready. Petrel poured vinegar all over them and we sat back down on the bench. The wind blew in my face and tears came from my eyes. I ate a chip but it was still too hot.

At the park, we took off our boots and waded through the pond. The leg-hems of my jeans were soaked, and I laid down on a sunny spot of the hillside to let them dry. I will just lie here, I thought, and I closed my eyes. I will just lie here with the taste of salt and vinegar lingering in my mouth and the grass bristling against the back of my neck. The sun came down upon me, enfolding me in its gentle warmth. In the distance, a ship blew its horn.

Petrel came over and nudged me in the spleen with her boot.

“It is time to leave,” she said.

In the morning, a strange reddish glow shone through the curtains into my room, creating distinctly visible shafts of light. I watched the tiny particles appearing as they floated into the light, then disappearing completely as they left it. The currents curled around and created patterns as the glowing flecks followed their predetermined and unpredictable paths.

I got out of bed and looked out the window. Everything was enveloped in a yellow-red mist in the half-light outside. The house across the street was barely

visible. I could just make out the fence. It was usually bright blue but was now completely devoid of colour. I climbed out through the window. Outside, I stood on the street and looked around. The road disappeared into a solid wall of orange-red. Behind the houses, the sun was higher in the sky than I expected. Judging by its position, it must have been at least nine o'clock in the morning, but it was too dark for that. The sun was a deep crimson and I spent a long time looking directly at it. It felt as though I were transgressing some law to look at it directly, but I continued. The air smelled like a construction site – like concrete.

I went back inside into the lounge room, where Petrel was watching the television. The television was filled with images of the red mist. It had affected the whole state, apparently. There were pictures of cars driving along some country town high street, their headlights shining yellow glare through the mist. Next, an image of the Sydney harbour bridge fading into the distance. The opera house with only one sail visible. Videos of crimson-tinted palm trees battling fierce winds on the foreshore. Apartment buildings being evacuated as smoke alarms were set off by the particles in the air.

Petrel turned to me.

“We have to go.”

I wrapped a tea towel around my face and we went out into the storm. We hopped on the motorcycle and rode straight into the engulfing shroud of haze. Everything was tinted crimson. I saw the glare of a blue light in the distance, hanging above the road. As we got closer, I realised that it was a traffic light tinted the wrong colour. The haze got thicker and I lost all sense of direction. I did not know where we were going or from where we had come. Not even the sun was able to serve its purpose as a navigational aid. We rode through street upon street, all alike, with all the same crimson-coloured buildings lining them and completely indistinguishable from one another. A car passed us with its yellow-orange headlights aimed a little high, casting tangible beams of light onto the road towards us. It felt as though I could reach out and pick up the beams if I wanted to. In the distance I saw the glowing numbers from a seven-segment display. It read 119.2. As we got closer I realised that it was a service station advertising its petrol prices.

We turned the corner and I recognised the building as the storage facility near Area One. Petrel rode over the railway crossing and up to the guard's station. The boom gate was open and the station was empty. We rode straight past the station and followed the road towards the excavation site. I felt the dust tickling the back of my throat. We rode slowly. The visibility was too poor to do anything else.

I thought I saw a slight variation in the otherwise-uniform colour of the haze. Perhaps it was the lights of the dig site. We kept following along the road. Another railway crossing came upon us quite suddenly and we wobbled a bit

over the tracks. We decided to leave the bike there by the road and continue on foot.

I started to take off my helmet. The wind blew the fine dust into my eyes. It stung. I put my helmet back on with the visor safely down. Tears were welling up in my eyes and my nose dripped underneath the tea towel.

We continued walking along the road. It was becoming difficult to see even the ground a few metres away. The road was covered in a thin layer of red dirt. Behind me, I heard Petrel coughing.

Over to the right, I saw the faint glow of lights. It must be the dig site. I looked behind to point it out to Petrel. She nodded and said something. I could not make out what she said. We left the road and walked towards the glow.

My head started to ache. The ground was uneven and the dirt shifted as I walked on it. It was like walking on sand. I have never enjoyed walking along the beach.

All that I could hear around me was the howling of the wind. The cold dusty wind rubbed abrasively against my bare arms.

I looked behind. I could see the silhouette of Petrel a few metres behind me. She was illuminated from behind by a red glow.

I coughed into the tea towel and tripped on a rock. I knelt down on the ground, coughing. Coughing. Breathing. The tea towel was damp against my face. Petrel patted me on the back and helped me up.

The orange lights ahead became more distinct. The one large glowing corona had started to split into many small points of light.

The fierce wind came up and under my tea towel. I tried to spit but my mouth was dry and filled with dust. It tasted bitter and metallic and it was strangely warm.

I took a step forward. The ground was not where I expected. I lost my balance and started to fall. I put my arms out in front of me. There was nothing there.

I was falling down into the crimson void. The air brushed against me, coming from all directions. I lost track of which way was down.

I hit the ground shoulder-first. My arm grazed against something hard with sharp, rough edges. I rolled downhill, end over end. The helmet thudded against the ground and rocks and I heard a loud scraping. I came to a stop at the bottom. I felt like I was lying on a bed of gravel.

I looked out through the scratched visor. The sky up out of the pit was completely red. On the ground, I could make out the grey-black gravel and rocks underneath a patina of dust. I tried to sit up but it would not happen. I groped around with my hands, trying to pull myself up. My hand came across one of the rocks and I picked it up to examine it. The rock felt lighter than I expected and it was pure

black. It was coal. My hands found another decent-sized rock and I looked at it. More coal. There was enough coal to roast a whole sack of potatoes down here. I could probably even run the house on all of this, if I could only climb back up. There is no rush, I thought. I closed my eyes and went to sleep.