

ONLY

"This novel perfectly and poignantly takes you into battle with men and horses at war, and captures the pain and beauty, along with the slivers of hope, carried by the mothers, wives, sons and daughters left behind."

JON DOUST

BIRDS



ABOVE

PORTLAND JONES

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About the Author

Portland Jones is a writer, lecturer and horse trainer who lives and works in the Swan Valley. She has a PhD in Literature, and her first novel, *Seeing the Elephant*, was shortlisted for the City of Fremantle Hungerford Award. *Only Birds Above* is her second novel and she has also co-authored a non-fiction book, *Horses Hate Surprise Parties*. She lectures at university and works with the Australian organisation HELP, a charity that offers ethical training support to elephant trainers across Asia. Portland has three children and is currently working on her third novel and another non-fiction book.

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P O R T L A N D J O N E S



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On the day the war ended Arthur rode the young horse for the first time, all shivery-skinned and taut with in-held breath. *Steady there*, he said. And again, *steady*. The dark ground going past him and the world no more than what he could see between two ears.

When he pulled up he laid his hand against the horse's neck, feeling the soft coat swirled with sweat and heat. And there, when he swung down from the saddle, along with the stab of landing in his thigh and the first few steps like he had hobbles on, was the familiar double tap of his heart and the feeling like a wire inside him. He closed his eyes and breathed the grassy, salt smell of the horse, taking each breath and holding it till his hands stilled and the blood in him slowed.

When he opened his eyes, the pollen-coloured morning was coming down through the trees, and the fine horse was quiet at the end of the reins. Sometimes, he knew, there were moments when he could remember without his heart going pullet-quick and shallow. Sometimes, he could press a feeling up against the cracks in him hard enough to fill them.

And sometimes no amount of anything would do it.



On the day the war ended Ruth woke to a sly wind under the old tin roof and the first of the daylight pinking the window. She pulled the blankets close around her and wondered if, in Sumatra, Tom could see the same sun rising.

There were letters after he left, and even parcels at Christmas. Tea chests packed with bright patterned fabric, teak carvings and bundled photographs. And the smell in the kitchen when they prised the lid off like

wood smoke and the once a year spice her mother had kept for Christmas cake. But that was before Pearl Harbor. After that, at the post office and the general store, people she barely knew would stop and ask after Tom with lowered voices. When Singapore and then the Dutch East Indies fell, they stopped asking, though she could feel their eyes follow her as she walked along the street. Even when it seemed to her that every week the name of a boy she'd known at school would appear in the lists of those lost, there seemed to be a special kind of pity left for her family. She could almost hear them as she passed. *First the mother and now the son, it's no wonder the father's like he is.*

Later that day, she hung washing on a wire strung between two trees. Two dresses, a blue shirt washed to almost white and three pairs of socks with darning-spidered toes. And afterwards, she let herself into her father's room and made the bed, smoothing the blanket with her hands – the smell of leather and shaving soap and the midday light clear through the bare window. As she was leaving, she noticed something under the bed and she kneeled down to reach it.

It was a small wooden box that she'd never seen before, lidless and filled with odds and ends. Just rubbish it seemed to her – a crumpled handkerchief, a cockatoo feather and a fragment of tile. A piece of quartz, some pumpkin seeds, some strands of black horsehair and a small piece of paper that might once have been a photograph. Things, she thought, that you might find in a jacket pocket on the first cold day of autumn or at the back of an old dresser drawer.

Underneath the scraps she found a photograph of Tom at eighteen with his back to the house and his hair in his eyes. She remembered the shirt he was wearing and the old belt that had once been their grandfather's. His long arms and the soft shadow on his top lip. She remembered the day that he left and how, that evening, the creaking of the old house cooling was loud in the sudden silence.

At the bottom of the box, underneath everything, was a photograph of a small, smiling woman in a long dress with lace at the collar. A tall girl standing beside her held a parasol with scalloped edges and, behind them, a long stretch of grass edged with white painted rails. Across the top was written *Helen and Anna, Helena Vale Racecourse 1914*. Ruth held the photo

with one hand, looking at her mother with thin eyes, like she was reading in the half dark.

Just then there was a knock at the back door. Ruth quickly pushed the box back into place and hurried out to open it.

‘Did you hear the news, Ruth?’ said Mrs Pritchard, filling the doorway with her bustling weight. ‘I wasn’t sure if you’d still got your wireless so I said to Mr Pritchard that I would come and tell you myself.’ She wiped her hands on an apron marked with grease and flour and said, ‘It’s wonderful news, dear, just wonderful. The war is over. It’s finally over.’

Helen often wondered why she had not felt the moment of her father's death. At noon that day she had stitched a flower onto a cotton handkerchief, pulling skeins of vein-blue thread through her hands, a song of bees and the sky through the open window of the schoolroom. At noon that day he had left the bookshop for lunch and, under the same sky, had fallen to his knees, his hands tearing the fabric of his shirt as his heart broke itself against his ribs.

They brought him home, cleaned and in the black serge suit he kept for church. Helen pictured him on Sunday mornings, his finger hooked down the collar front, too tight, and the starch scratching the thin shaved skin of his neck. He would wink at her and roll his eyes as her mother pecked lint from his jacket with dark-gloved hands, her heels clacking on the floorboards like stones.

She remembered him next to her at the piano, his hands soft on the keys and the smell of his shaving soap, sweet and warm.

'Ah, Helen,' he would say. 'You don't have to look far for the beauty in this piece, it's there, right beneath your fingers.' And some days the keys were just where she needed them to be and her wrists were perfect and he would sigh and she could feel him close his eyes beside her, smiling.

In the mornings, when she was small, he would share his breakfast with her – sips of black tea from his cup and toast, cut into squares.

One winter morning, still dark, with the wind hard behind the windows he said, 'Isn't this marmalade wonderful? You can taste the orchard in it.' And she had pictured tree limbs heavy with fruit above her head, the sunlight in the leaves and the brush of grass against her ankles.

Holding a dab of marmalade on the end of a butter knife, he said, 'It's amazing, isn't it? To most people this is just something to eat for breakfast, but really – it's a kind of miracle. In the spring the orange tree gathers up the

sunlight and stores it in her fruit. And here we have it, months later,' his hand on her arm and his kind eyes smiling. 'Sunlight in a jar.'

He passed the knife over and on her tongue she tasted the long days of slanting yellow light.

'There is joy to be found in everything,' he said. 'Even when it is dark,' and he waved his hand at the black glass of the kitchen window. 'There is always light somewhere,' he said quietly. 'You must remember that.'

Later, though her mother had tried to stop him, he began to share his morning paper with her, smoothing it out on the table between them. They would read and eat and he would point out things that interested him, tapping the paper with his finger, a piece of toast or the edge of a teacup.

'George, please,' her mother would say. 'The crumbs will go everywhere. And, what's more the girl will never find a husband if her head is full of current affairs.'

'Ah yes, Agnes, but that is part of my plan, dear. If Helen marries, I will have no-one to keep me company at breakfast and share my paper. So, she is to stay at home forever. And anyway, I have never yet met a man good enough for her.' And he would wink at Helen while her mother glared.

After his death Helen would say to people, 'My father died,' just to feel the weight of the words leave her mouth. She was sixteen and the fact of his death lodged somewhere in her body, cold and hard to breathe around. She felt like a dog circling in straw, trying to find a comfortable place to lie. Only she never could.

Her mother mourned in dresses of hard black crepe that were smooth across her bust and waist. Three days short of the anniversary of his death she folded them into boxes, paper between the layers and the petticoats bouncing up under her hands. Helen watched, the missing of him close up in the front of her throat and her mother's new dress an early summer sky with the blue still in it.

Nineteen months and five days after her father died, her mother remarried. Helen walked through their house as her mother packed their things into wooden crates padded with straw and crushed paper. The fresh-sawn wood was rough, the ends beaded with resin and she ran her fingers along the boards until their tips were black and sore from splinters. In her

bedroom she hoarded the sliver of sea that had always been hers. The corner of the window sea-coloured, and the afternoon wind in the lilac bushes of their neighbour's garden.

In the front garden Helen's mother waved and coughed as the furniture was loaded onto a dray. The sea wind in her skirts, one hand holding her hat on.

'I simply can't wait to leave here,' she said. 'The wind is enough to drive me mad, whining like a child.'

Her mother's new husband, Edward, lived miles from the coast in a house that looked out across the river. Silver gulls kited above the dark water and jellyfish quivered and washed ashore, their bodies dissolving on the river's edge. The house was new – threadbare lawn, short shrubs and a bright long street bare of trees. In the morning Helen would find the prints of small animals in the garden and her shoes echoed down the long brown hallway. She missed the pine-scented shade and the faintest smell of salt in the linen.

Edward owned a canning plant and the first automobile in the area. On Sundays they would drive around the water's edge, Helen on the buttoned-leather back seat, the crushed limestone road so bright she could still see it on the backs of her eyelids when she closed them.

One afternoon as they drove along the river he pointed to a row of wooden posts standing out of the water. The tide ebbed between them and cormorants perched to dry their wings.

'That's all that's left of a breakwater built by timber merchants to deepen the river,' said Edward. 'Their paddleboats couldn't get past that point because it's too shallow and it slowed down the timber trade, so they used convicts to sink those jarrah posts into the riverbed and fill the spaces between them with sticks and branches. They'd stand in the river filling baskets with silt and emptying them behind the breakwater – each man digging till he could only just keep his head above water.'

He slowed the car and Helen imagined the men working, their feet slippery in the weed and the water thick with silt on their skin. Edward laughed and the doughy middle of him pressed against the buttons of his shirt. 'At the end of the day they were often a man or two short, on account of the current.'

That night Helen dreamed she dug the riverbed for silt. The dark current spooled around her, mud-smelling and the brush of things unseen against her legs. The bottom of the river was pitted with gravel. She bent beneath the water, filling her basket and dislodging small, loose rocks that swirled around, settling slowly in her pockets and the cuffs of her jacket. With each basket she grew heavier. She stumbled and suddenly there was only water – her feet finding no purchase on the tide, her vision fractured by bubbles and her chest a wedge of pain. Then a cold sharp inhalation and she was sinking, the stones returning to their bed of silt. In her dream she opened her eyes to bronze shims of light through the water. And above her a cormorant with its wings held out against the sky.



Helen never grew to like her stepfather – the large house, the car, the heavy silk drapes and bone-china plates from England were, to her, just gaudy ballast for a man who already carried too much weight. On Sunday afternoons he would lead her mother to the bedroom, his thick hand curled around hers, and lock the door. Afterwards she found it hard to look at their faces, concentrating instead on the puckered skin above Edward's collar and the shiny buttons of her mother's new dress.

When her mother announced that they were going to travel to New South Wales to visit Edward's parents, Helen pictured weeks of claret-stained teeth and shiny waistcoats, and cried until she was sick. Eventually her mother, after alternating days of silence and shouting, agreed that she could stay home with her aunt and cousins instead. Helen packed her father's brown leather suitcase and, as Edward drove them to Guildford, ran her thumb along the rows of brass rivets, up and back, up and back, until her mother, who had been still and quiet for most of the drive, her shoulders tight beneath the muslin of her summer dress, turned around and shrilled, 'Oh for God's sake, Helen! Why must you always be so bloody difficult?'

Living with her cousins Anna and Richard was never dull. They were loud and they fought, like siblings do, and they had friends, it seemed to her by the dozen. There were parties and picnics and on Thursdays they met at Mrs Taylor's house with a dozen others to knit socks – the muffled percussion of

the needles and balls of khaki wool at their feet. But though her days were full, each night she dreamed of the river, feeling herself flattened beneath the weight of tannin-coloured water, her body heavy with pebbles. In the mornings when she woke to the thin early light chinking in through the curtains, the dream seemed so real she could almost taste the brine on her lips.

After she had been in Guildford for a month it was decided that they would all go to the races. Helen wasn't sure if she would enjoy it but as they pulled into the Helena Vale siding and she saw the people shoulder to shoulder on the grass – the curve of the white running rail, bright dresses and the ladies' hats like a field of fabric flowers against the thick turf, she felt a lift in her chest.

Her cousin, Anna, grabbed her by the hand as they pulled in to the racecourse siding.

'Come on, Helen. We'll miss the whole thing if you don't hurry up!'

'Oh, you do exaggerate,' said Helen. 'I'm fairly certain we won't miss much by walking. Unless it's not just the racing you want to see,' and smiled gently at her cousin.

'Seeing the boys in uniform is a small compensation for the months of boring conversation that I've had to put up with. War, war, war – so dull and I never want to hear the words "Kaiser Wilhelm" again! Really, Helen, nineteen fourteen is a terrible year for us both to turn eighteen. But at least now I can muster a small degree of enthusiasm for the war effort.'

'You are terrible, cousin,' giggled Helen.

Anna shook her head. 'Not at all. I'm simply being patriotic,' she said.

Helen followed her cousin, skirts jostling, through the crush of felt hats, sunburnt faces and uniforms, some with the crease marks still on them and the dusty green of freshly fallen leaves. It seemed to her as though every second man had already joined up. The crowd was three-deep at the fence and cheered as the starters in the first race turned for home.

Anna pulled her until they were both at the rail. Helen saw the horses galloping, their shiny skin, and the riders bent up high on their shoulders. Their hoofbeats felt like a kind of music in her chest – the skin on her arms tight and the back of her neck all shivery with sound. Then they were gone

past in a blur, the glint of metal at their heels, and the smooth grass pocked and dotted with clumps of upturned turf.

She had always loved horses. When she was small her father would lift her up so that she could stroke the grocer's pony as he passed and she loved the coarse fur and the warm smell, after, on her hands. As she watched the racehorses jog out to the track with the sun in their coats she thought how different they were to the grocer's pony. They skittered and their snatched-up legs were corded with muscle, the taut skin fine and glossy. They moved like water across the ground and she imagined the heat of them.

'Isn't it exciting?' her cousin said and Helen nodded.

'They're so beautiful.'

'Yes, they are rather lovely aren't they,' said Anna who looked towards a group of young men in uniform, then turned to Helen and winked. 'Oh, look over there,' she added, waving. 'There's Mother and Richard. I wonder if it's time for lunch yet?'

After lunch there was another race and then another. Anna made Helen pose for a photographer. 'We might be in the social pages,' she whispered as they smiled for the camera.

It seemed to Helen that her cousin had friends in every corner of the grounds and she moved between them – dragging Helen behind by the hand or shooing her along in front. By mid-afternoon she was tired of new faces and of smiling. She answered questions about the end of school and helping her mother at home and nodded as men with khaki cuffs and badged felt hats talked of the future – training, shipping out and the adventures to come. For Helen the future felt like an unopened room at the end of a hot day – she could never quite get a full breath in but the heat made it hard to care. She imagined a kitchen window, a dusty new street somewhere, visits to the grocer and an apron barely ever dry. She would press shirts and starch collars and complain about the price of fish. She supposed that when it came she would find the beauty in it and pride at the whiteness of a cloth or her face reflected in the back of a spoon. But for now it seemed an empty road – a stretch of never-ending sameness as far as she could see.

After a while she drifted away from her cousin's kindness and followed the border of the crowd around, listening to the edge of conversations and

the afternoon breeze across the grass. She stood and watched the horses in their stalls, tied in place, and the smell of manure and the dust from under their feet. Out the front was a grass area where the horses in the next race were walked, waiting. She liked the percussion of their teeth on the bridles and the swing of their brown satiny tails.

As the horses went out for the last race the stalls emptied of people and she walked along in front of the horses, wishing she was bold enough to stroke their necks or feed them some of the long stalks of grass from beside the path and feel the whiskery weight of their muzzles in her hand.

In the last stall stood a tall brown horse with hay in his mane and small pinched eyes. It looked to Helen as though he reluctantly held up one of his legs for the blacksmith, bent over beside him.

‘C’mon Bill,’ the man muttered with the shoe in his hand, the nails ready in his mouth. ‘If you keep pulling your shoes off the least you can do is let me nail them back on.’

The horse wrinkled his nose and jerked his leg away.

‘Don’t be a silly bugger,’ the blacksmith said, stroking the horse’s shoulder. ‘If you just settle down it’ll be over quicker.’

Bill snorted then stared into space with his ears against his neck as the nails were tapped into his hoof. When the shoe was in place, the blacksmith stood up and rubbed the brown horse on the neck.

‘Bloody hell, it wasn’t that bad, was it, mate?’

Helen noticed that his thick leather apron was buckled over a uniform and that there was a khaki felt hat sitting on a hay bale next to the stall. As he straightened up he saw her watching and smiled.

‘Pardon my language, Miss. I didn’t see you there.’

‘Please don’t apologise,’ she said. ‘I’ve never been to the races before and I was enjoying looking at the horses.’

He reached over and stroked the horse’s neck. ‘They’re alright, aren’t they,’ he said.

Helen smiled back and noticed that he was older than her, his blue eyes crinkled at the corners and creases in the tanned skin of his neck. He unbuckled his apron and picked up his hat.

‘But I’m biased, I suppose. I was a blacksmith till two months ago. Till I joined up.’

‘What regiment are you with?’

‘The Tenth Light Horse.’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘So where’s your horse?’

‘She’s in Guildford. But for the moment us blokes are stuck a couple of miles away at Blackboy Hill, learning about soldiering. Funny thing is, what we mostly do is march.’ He reached over and pulled some hay from the horse’s mane. ‘Do you live round here?’

‘Not usually,’ she shook her head. ‘But I’m staying nearby with my cousin for a few months while my mother and her husband visit relatives in New South Wales.’

He picked up his hat and brushed the hay from it with his hand. She noticed that he was shaped like the horse. Long back, straight, and the sinew showing in his arms.

‘Well, Miss. I best be off. I’ve got to get back for dinner.’ He smiled. ‘If I was a betting man I’d be putting all my money on mutton stew. It’s kind of a one-horse race though – we’ve had it every single night for the past two months.’ And rolled his eyes.

He settled his hat onto his head. ‘It’s been a pleasure,’ he said.

‘Unlike the army dinner, apparently,’ grinned Helen. She held her hand out to him. ‘Mr ...?’

‘Sorry,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Bit of a drought on manners around here. I’m Arthur Watkins.’

‘And I’m Helen Chisholm. Nice to meet you, Mr Watkins.’

‘I save my afternoons off for race meetings, Miss Chisholm, so I might see you at the next one.’

‘That would be nice,’ and she turned and waved, calling over her shoulder. ‘Goodbye! Enjoy your stew.’

She could hear him laughing as she walked back towards the crowd.

At the next race meeting Anna was shadowed by William Landsdale, a young naval officer whose sister had been in her class at school. He talked to

her in a low voice and his shoulders were broad beneath the seams of his uniform and he touched her hands and Helen found it easier to drift into the crowd than start a sentence and know that no-one was listening to the ending.

In her pocket was a letter from her mother, the paper thin like onion skin. She opened it and read again. In her mother's perfect hand the words *totally unencumbered* and *finally able to enjoy each other's company* and *starting a family of our own* looped elegantly across the page. Helen had the feeling she was dreaming, her body cold and the dark tide at her back. She shivered despite the hazy summer sun.

'Good afternoon, Miss Chisholm,' said a voice beside her. 'Are you alright?'

She nodded at Arthur though her throat felt clogged with silt. He cupped her elbow lightly in his hand and led her to the stables. Once she was sitting on a bale of hay he carefully wiped the rim of his canteen with his sleeve and offered it to her.

'Can I fetch someone for you?' he said and she could feel him solid beside her, his long legs bent and the veins in the backs of his hands. He took her handkerchief, a small flower stitched on washed white cotton, and held it to her forehead and his hands were sure.

She closed her eyes. 'My father died,' she said. 'Four years ago today.' And she was crying then with her face against his shoulder and the smell of soap and warm sun on wool between them like a promise.

Years later, she realised, it was that moment that changed everything. He led her back home that afternoon, offering his hand stepping up onto the train. She liked the way he turned his hat in his hands when he spoke to her, his fingers on the brim and his quiet voice. And standing next to her, his boots on the ground like they were meant to be there. Six weeks later, when they heard his regiment was leaving for England, they married – the fifteenth couple of the day and every single groom there in uniform.



Arthur reined in the pony and opened the gate. Half curls of loose wire hung from the metal frame, and white ants, in mudcoloured hills, made their

homes along the sagging fence line.

He nodded. 'Needs a bit of work, I know. It's been hard going since my parents. Since I've been on my own. But once this war's over, I'll get on top of it. I've got plans.'

He smiled quickly and swung up beside her on the trap. His hands were kind on the reins, he clucked the pony and she watched the way his fingers curled and the flat bones of his wrists.

'You could play the piano with hands like yours,' she said.

'I don't know about that, I've never had much of an ear for music. But when we breed some nice horses, I'll buy you a piano.'

'Then I can teach you.'

'Well, you can try.'

'I'd like that.'

'So would I,' he said. His eyes were blue, like the early morning sea – still, with the light clear down to the sand. He smelled like warm skin and shaving soap, and the trap bounced up the track and his thigh was against hers.

The house was small and clustered round with fruit trees, the grass growing thick between and the leaf shadows shifting on the whitewashed wall. He jumped down from the trap and held out his hand for her.

'I have to see to the pony, but you go on in. There's water out the back and wood too, for the stove.'

She watched him walk away and pushed open the door. The house was low and had settled on the ground unevenly, the doorframes slanting and gaps where the ceiling met the walls. But it was clean, and the hard-packed floor was swept, and the water when she tasted it was cold and sweet. She left her bag by the door and found mugs and a lidless tin of black tea. The windows were smudged with late afternoon light and dust. Passionfruit leaves like small hands pressed against the glass.

She walked outside, stepping through the thick stalky grass and saw him leaning up against the gate. He was watching the pony graze and she stood beside him.

‘I haven’t been home for a few months. Not since I joined up,’ he said. ‘I sold the horses, sold the hay and locked the house up. The neighbours have got the use of the paddocks while I’m gone and the house, well it’s stood for forty years, I expect it’ll still be standing when I get home.’

The pony cropped the grass. ‘My parents loved this place,’ he said. ‘They thought they’d never have kids. Then I was born when they were both past forty. I was their only one,’ he said and squinted into the slanting light. ‘If they were disappointed about that, they never let on.’

‘In the end, they went in the space of three weeks. It’ll be three years last June. Dad was first. He’d always had weak lungs and that’s what got him. Then Mum not long after. She was healthy, but her heart broke I reckon. With Dad gone, there was nothing left for her here.’ He rubbed a rust spot on the gate with his thumb. ‘And it’s not a tragedy. They’d had their time. It’s just, sometimes I miss them.’

Helen pushed a strand of hair behind her ear as a cool wind shuffled the grass.

‘Once they were gone it felt like there wasn’t anything holding me here any longer. Joining up was the right thing to do and like everyone says – it’s a chance to see the world. But, since joining up I’ve started to think that maybe this is the part of the world that I want to see the most.’

She put her hand on his arm and he touched it with the backs of his fingers, gently, like he would a bird.

‘Anyway, I didn’t think I’d get to see the old place before I shipped out. So today is a good day in more ways than one.’ He smiled at her and turned the thin metal band on her finger.

‘I’ll get a better ring, I promise. Once this war is over. I’ll do better.’

‘It’s not important,’ she said. ‘Just come home safe, that’s what I want.’

‘I want that too, more than anything.’ He put his arm across her shoulders and drew her close. ‘I’m not frightened, but I don’t suppose I’ve had much to lose, till now.’

He was warm and she leaned in against him, the solid edge of his body against her ribs and the weight of his arm. He bent his head and she could feel his breath in her hair and her throat tight and in her stomach the whirl of small birds flying.

He cleared his throat. 'Well, Mrs Watkins, I'm parched and that bread and mutton won't eat itself ...'

'Oh,' she said. 'I started making tea but I decided to come out and find you instead.'

'And I'm very glad you did. But it's getting dark now and I don't want you to catch a chill. Go on, back inside with you.'

Later, after she washed their plates, they sat together at a wooden table. The candle made an island in the shadows, and he touched her hand.

'I wish I could have taken you out for tea. But I have to keep my head down. My mates are covering for me and my sergeant's a good bloke, but if the brass realise I'm missing it won't go down too well. I'll be fined at the very least.'

'That's okay. We're lucky to have this time. Just the two of us.'

'Yes, we are,' he said and smiled. He stood up and, taking her hands, drew her to her feet. 'It must be nearly time for bed. Would you like to change?' Helen wiped her hands down the sides of her skirt. She nodded and her mouth was papery.

He opened a door. 'This was my parents' room,' he said. The bed was made with a woollen blanket pulled down tight, a yellowed picture of an English garden on the wall in a frame, the edges curling where they had been clipped from a magazine. She changed into her nightdress and climbed into the bed, settling into a hollow made by years of someone else's sleep. Not long afterwards he knocked and let himself in, slipping into bed beside her. She could feel her own heart beating and she closed her eyes.

'It's alright,' he said. And he reached out and stroked her hair softly and his voice was low. His hands were slow on her arms and she could feel him breathing. She wriggled closer to him and pillowed her head on his shoulder.

'That's right,' he said. 'Sleep now.'

When she woke, the window was dawn-tinted and he held her, his belly at her back, the heat of him in the blankets. She turned within the circle of his arm and studied his face in the half-light, the fine skin across his cheeks and the lighter creases beside his eyes. She reached out and touched his chest

and felt the smooth flesh there and the rhythm of his ribs. His breath had the night in it still and she breathed him in, the warm smell of him and hair on his arms the colour of corn husks. He pulled her closer without opening his eyes and his hands were light down her back and his leg across hers. She pressed her face to his chest, all fingertips and skin and her breath shallow in her throat like she was running into the wind.

2

On the day the war ended Arthur scattered grain for the hens from a battered saucepan. It was late afternoon, the birds bustling behind him with sharp eyes and the rooster at the back with the falling sun, brassy, on his wings. He flicked the last of the wheat into the air and watched as they flurried for the scraps.

On the path to the house he met Ruth coming out.

'Mrs Pritchard's just left,' she said and he saw that her cheeks were pink like she'd been running. She smiled. 'The Japanese've surrendered, Dad. The war is over.'

Arthur blinked, slowly.

'Tom can come home, Dad. Maybe soon.'

'Yes,' he said finally, standing still on the path with the saucepan in his hands.

'Don't you see,' said Ruth smiling. 'It's over. It's finally over.'

Arthur nodded, not trusting his voice and his heart against his breastbone at the thought of his son. And nearly thirty years between the two wars like they were nothing.



In the summer of 1915, the 10th Light Horse rode across the bridge into Fremantle, four abreast. The leather hard-rubbed and smelling of oil, and the sun on the buckles like they were gold-plated. Arthur reached down to stroke the little mare's neck and her pricked ears swivelled back for an instant, small and sharp-rimmed. She was quick beneath him, her dark coat like molasses in the sun. A band played out in front and, in his chest, the sound of a thousand hooves on the ground.

In the harbour he watched as the horses were lifted onto the ship. The curve of their bellies in canvas slings and their legs skittering beneath. He helped fit the harness around the mare, pulling the material tight across her chest and smoothing his fingers between the canvas and the thin skin of her flank. Watching as the chains tightened and her feet lightened off the ground. Her shadow spidered across the bales of straw and bags of oats waiting to be loaded and a shudder at his feet as the *Mashobra* rubbed up against the wharf.

Then it was done and the motors turned. He cheered and waved with the others and the paper streamers stretched and stretched and broke. The crowd at the dock waved and cried and the sun slipped down into the sea as they made their way out into the ocean.

For two days they followed the coast – low scrubby hills in sight and seabirds, the silver colour of ripples, fishing in their wake. Arthur tied his hammock near a porthole, rocked in the gentle swell and slept with the wind on his face. Then they turned seaward – the swells grew shadows and the birds flew back to shore.

The ship rode the deep seas like a drunk. Wallowing in the troughs and her back end loose like the wine was still on her tongue. After ten days Arthur missed the land and the silver birds and feeling hungry. He lost so many meals over the side that he gave up trying to eat when the sea was up. The other blokes played cards, but Arthur was sickened by the cigarette smoke and the patterns on the cards made him dizzy. At night the wind blew the sea in through the porthole and air was wet and smelled like fish.

Arthur spent his days with the horses who rocked and swayed, their gaze turned inward. Despite daily brushing their coats dulled and their skin slackened. They missed the sand, he knew, and their hooves in the grass – the speed of running. Each afternoon the men laid mats across the deck and walked the horses round. After three weeks at sea they hardly needed holding and their legs dragged runnels in the matting. One night they were told they were headed to Egypt, not England, and Arthur was glad because it would mean less time for the horses at sea.

By the start of the fourth week, twenty of the two hundred horses on the ship were sick. Their heartbeats were bird-fast and thin in the hollows of their jaws and their nostrils gaping. The men unpacked the sling, tying it to

the top of the stalls and winching the sickest ones up to take their weight. The horses slept suspended, their heads down and their thin necks outstretched and swaying.

In one week six horses died. It took eight men, yelling and pulling, to drag each body to the edge of the deck. Arthur touched their still-warm skin and imagined each one alive and afternoon-drowsy, dry grass past their fetlocks and the smell of artesian water on the breeze. He wouldn't watch them falling into the sea, their long necks loose, slender legs flailing. Even the biggest men turned away then and were silent.

After four weeks at sea, there was land, flat-edged and feathered against the horizon. White-sailed fishing boats in the harbour and a dry wind on his face. Alexandria. He rolled the word around his mouth and smiled.

When they unloaded the horses they rocked like they were still at sea. Hocks and knees loose and their necks hanging from their bodies like they were pegged there. Their ribs were lines of shadow in the midday light. They marched them to the station, passing camels padding silently through the dust, as tall as two horses and a smell like cattle yards in the sun. They loaded the horses onto the train to Cairo, where the rest of the light horse was waiting.

In Cairo the tent lines ran across the sand like furrows. They took the horses into camp, shambling, two in each hand and the heat pricking up the sweat on their coats. There was no hay for them in the camp and no grass either. Just sand and chaffed-up barley straw the locals called tibbin. Arthur let it run through his fingers and coughed and spat the dust out of his mouth.

His sergeant said, 'There's no oats till next month. Till then, it's tibbin or starve.'

There were no trees, so they buried sandbags to make the horse lines but Arthur was pretty sure they weren't going anywhere. It was enough to get them to the water – a two-mile round trip twice a day, through scratchy paddocks ringed by irrigation ditches. The locals drew a crop up out of the dust with wooden ploughs behind their butter-coloured cows and water that they coaxed out of the Nile.

The horses got stronger as each day passed, and fattened. Two weeks after they arrived Arthur threw a saddle on the little mare – he needed an extra blanket to pad her withers but she would have had him off if he hadn't been ready. There were forty-two horses in the troop and they all needed shoes before they could be ridden. Arthur's ears rang at night from the sound of the hammer on the anvil and his wrists ached from bending the steel.

Not long after his first ride, the 10th Light Horse regiment marched to Mena Camp where the infantry were stationed. Two pyramids behind the camp were mountains made with blocks. He'd seen a picture of Egypt once in a book, the pyramids with jagged sandstone edges against the sky and giant, tea-coloured shadows on the sand. Here the shadows were small, squinting things and the light was honed and sharp behind his eyes. The Sphinx, with its crumbling face and forelegs outstretched, seemed bigger than in the photo – half a furlong at least from nose to tail and three or four houses tall.

'Bloody funny lookin' dog, that,' said a man called Ernest and Arthur laughed.

The regiment formed up in four-man sections – ten sections to a troop, four troops to a squadron, three squadrons to a regiment. A man in long boots and breeches spoke to them. He was holding a leather riding whip and he tapped it on his leg as he spoke. Only the first five rows of men could see and no-one in the back half could hear what he said. There was talk all around Arthur and he stood, with the pyramids at his back, the smell of sweated-in wool and the sun through the felt of his hat.

'What's happening?' one of the men said.

'Dunno? I can't hear a bloody thing.'

'Shhh, boys! What did he say?'

'The bloke in front just said something.'

'Did you catch it?'

A man a few rows down turned around. 'They reckon we're shipping out soon. Not all of us though and not many horses.'

'Some poor bastard's gotta stay behind to feed and shoe 'em, I suppose.'

‘Are we going to Europe?’

‘Nah mate, some other bloody place.’

Someone else turned. ‘Turkey, I think he said.’

‘Where the hell’s that?’

He raised his hands, palms upward. ‘Not in Europe.’

‘You beauty! We’re gonna to fight the Turkeys.’

The man in front turned away, holding up his hand behind. ‘Hang on, I can’t hear. It’s a funny-sounding place.’

‘Doesn’t really matter as long as we get to fight.’

‘Yeah, let’s go!’

He turned around again and smiled. ‘I got it. We’re shipping out next week. We’re going to somewhere called the Dardanelles.’

Arthur missed the colour green and the sounds of birds. But his days were short with most of the regiment gone to the Dardanelles and him in Cairo with thirty horses to feed and water.

On Christmas Day they had fried fish for dinner, plum pudding and a holiday. He thought of Helen in her best dress with her hair all smooth and her Sunday shoes with the buttons on the side. And the sound of her voice and the feel of her cool fingertips on his skin.

That night the wind shuddered through the almost empty camp – Arthur dreamed of the orchard in winter and woke disappointed to a bright, sharp dawn through bone-coloured canvas.

Not long after that, the rest of the regiment returned from the Dardanelles. Arthur, coming back to camp with a mob of just watered horses, saw the dust before he saw the men, marching in. He pulled up and waited.

‘Where’s the rest of them?’ Arthur said to a man that he recognised. Whose eyes were yellow and the skin of his cheeks pitted like hail-ruined fruit.

‘They’re not coming.’

‘What, they’re staying over there?’

‘They’re gone, mate.’ And laughed like a bone was stuck in his throat.

When the regiment returned, Arthur counted the losses by the number of horses left riderless and to him it seemed that one from every two was gone. The men that came back had newly issued boots and their faces flayed by the Turkish winter. During the day they trained, riding for miles, the horses fit like thoroughbreds beneath them. And they smoked and talked around the billy like the men that had left and their hands were strong on the reins. But at night in the bell-shaped tents the returned men slept hard, like splinters, their limbs rigid and the air at the backs of their throats. In their dreams they dug in blindly, the ground stony beneath their sleeping fingers and they sobbed for the Turkish hills now honeycombed with graves. One night a man pissed himself and Arthur woke to the smell of stables and the edge of his blanket wet and sour.

There were four men to a section and Arthur was the oldest man in his. He liked Joe best – who had grown up on the back of a horse and could keep a long thin leg on either side of just about anything that cantered. Joe could shoot a bully-beef tin off a sandbag at two hundred yards, but he didn't boast and his words were careful. His dad came home from the Boer War with tuberculosis, so Joe left school at twelve to run the farm. When the mail came he'd make a neat pile of the letters from his mum and five sisters, tapping the edges straight and touching the top letter – smiling to himself and opening each one slowly like they were chocolates and he was making them last.

Ernest was a small and twitchy man. Arthur thought he lived too close to his own skin and everything bothered him more than it should. The heat, the flies, the windborne sand would set him on edge and his hands would leap and flutter like tethered birds. Ernest rubbed his spurs with grease to make them shine and stuffed paper in the toes of his new boots because he had the feet of a child but wouldn't admit it. He could make the quietest horse roll its eyes and reef the reins and Arthur had to do some fast-talking at the horse lines before he found a mare with enough draft blood in her to put up with him.

Herbert was just nineteen and worn down to the bone. He had a wet, rattling cough deep in his chest at night and at reveille would rise tired and pale. In the mornings when they shaved, stripped to the waist, his hands would shake and Arthur could see his ribs sprung round his chest like

horseshoes. Arthur thought that the best of Herbert had been left on the beach at Gallipoli, but he could ride and shoot and he hoped a few weeks of warmth and sunlight would set him right again.

Arthur had never been much of a reader but when the mail came he read each of Helen's letters over until he knew the curve of her writing better than his own. He could see her at her cousin's house in Guildford, the oak table brought from England and the heavy curtains stiff-skirted like fancy ladies' dresses. In February a letter came dated December first. As he opened it a small photograph slipped from the paper folds and landed in his lap. Helen, with a small baby in her arms. He sat on an empty fuel drum with his boots in the sand and the clink and shuffle of the horse lines behind him. And the Egyptian sun warm through his hat and on the brown skin of his arms.

There was a feeling in him then like he'd got the crop in – stacks of hay to the rafters and sacks of oats, heavy with sweetness, in between. Or like watching the first good rain of autumn rolling in from the coast and the sound of it like a creek on the roof and the ground swelling beneath his feet ready for seed. A deep breath in and a feeling too big for just smiling.

He smoothed the letter out on his thigh and followed the words along with his finger.

'Dearest Arthur, We have a daughter, born on the 15th of November. I have called her Ruth, for my father's mother,' she wrote. 'And Emily for yours.'

'Ruth Emily Watkins,' he said aloud to himself and nodded, feeling a small shiver go through him at the size of it all.

He squinted at the photo of Ruth's blanket-bound face and Helen's careful hands around her. Helen seemed smaller somehow and already older, the hair pulled tight from her forehead.

'She is a lovely baby,' he read. 'Though I am often weary. Mother has yet to visit, but she did send her cook up with a gift. Which was kind of her.'

He held the photo up, shading his eyes against the desert light and studied her face again. She was thinner, he was sure of it, and dark-eyed, though smiling.

‘My cousin has been wonderful and my aunt also. They are generous with their time, though poor Anna is terribly worried as William’s ship was torpedoed in the Atlantic and he is missing. We are all optimistic though and praying for some good news soon.

‘It is hard here without you though not, I am sure, nearly as hard as it is for you over there. I think of you often and look forward to the day when we will be together again. Your loving wife, Helen.’

Arthur slipped the small photo into the pocket of his shirt and folded the letter along its creases. He looked around carefully then held the paper to his face and breathed. He imagined rose-scented powder and freshly washed linen, but there was only the smell of his own hands – the burnt-hair stink of hot iron on horses’ hooves.

The next day he wrote to Helen. No matter how carefully he wiped his hands on his trousers they still rubbed dirt into the paper and the ink blotched with sweat. ‘Dear Helen,’ he wrote slowly. ‘Ruth is a very healthy looking baby and I am proud of you both.’ He sighed. He felt as though he were carving each word from wood. He wanted to say that he missed her till it hurt, till his chest felt ruffled and his eyes stinging like he’d rubbed sweat into them. That at night when he woke he thought only of her. And that one day he would build her a room filled with light and in it a piano and on the wall real pictures with glass in front of them. ‘You look a little thin,’ he wrote. ‘My mother would give the nanny goats raw eggs with their grain as she said it helped their milk come in. I wonder if you could try the same thing for yourself.’

He read it back and shook his head.

‘Hey, Arthur,’ said a voice behind him.

‘Yeah?’ he said and swung around, squinting into the sun at Herbert.

‘The captain’s mare’s sprung a shoe.’

‘Alright. I’m just finishing this and I’ll be there.’

‘They’re saddling up now. He’s wanting it sorted right away.’

‘Shit. It’s probably a hind one too.’

‘You’ve got it. No-one else is game to touch the bloody bitch. He says it’s got to be you because you’ve got the special touch.’

‘I dunno about that. I’m probably just the only one stupid enough to have a crack at it.’

‘Well, whatever the reason, he told me not to come back without you.’

‘Okay. I’ll sign off,’ he said waving the letter and his pen. ‘And come directly.’

Arthur scratched his chin and wrote. ‘Well, cheerio, old girl. They’re calling for a blacksmith at the horse lines and that’s me. I hope you’re feeling better soon. Your loving husband, Arthur.’



Reinforcements arrived from Perth in early February and on Sundays there were races at Ghezira and games of cricket on the hard sand outside the camp. The wives of British officers cheered from the sidelines, faces shaded by parasols and skirt hems reddened by the dust.

On the last day of February they marched to Helmieh and onto a train for the Suez Canal. The horses travelled nose to tail, snuffling the air through the open windows as the train rattled on through the night. In the troop carriage Arthur pillowed his head on his saddle and shifted his hip on the hard wooden floor. Beside him Ernest twitched the edge of his blanket and patted his pockets down for smokes.

‘Well, here we go,’ said Ernest as he rolled tobacco and paper into a tight tube. ‘Looks to me like we’re on our way to round two with the Turks.’

Arthur touched his pocket, feeling the thin photo paper through the wool of his shirt. ‘I reckon you’re right,’ he said.

Ernest struck a match against his thumbnail. ‘The captain said there’s a battalion or two of Turks out in the desert.’

‘Sounds about right,’ said Arthur. ‘Apparently they’re going to try and take the Suez Canal.’

Ernest nodded. ‘It’s funny, you know,’ he said. ‘I don’t hate the Turks. When we were over on their turf, they had a big push. Thousands of them came at us, bloody great herds of them. I was in the trench and it was just fire and reload, fire and reload all bloody day. And when the magazine jammed, someone would pass you up a fresh weapon and off you’d go again.’

He paused, watching the smoke rise. 'At the end of the day there were so many dead that you could have walked on a carpet of dead Turks from our trenches to theirs. And the wounded, you could hear them calling. It was enough to send a man mad.'

Ernest smoked in silence. Arthur listened to the steel wheels on the tracks, the floor rocking gently beneath him.

'They called a truce ...' said Ernest. 'A Turkish captain with a white flag and a blindfold walked across no-man's-land so they could get to their wounded and bury the dead.' He shook his head slowly. 'How's that for courage? And then for a whole day there was no firing. The sun shone, we climbed out of the trenches and there we all were in a wheatfield full of dead bodies and weeds.'

'We swapped smokes with the other side and had a bit of a laugh too. They're just blokes, you know, blokes like us. Course, we couldn't talk much on account of them speaking Turkey, but you can make yourself understood if you try. The next day when the truce was over we picked up our guns and they picked up their guns, and we all spent the next six months trying to kill each other. And a lot of the time we succeeded.'

Ernest rubbed his cigarette out on the carriage floor and pulled the edges of the blanket close around his legs. 'But you know, you wouldn't give five quid for the country we fought over. Hills and bloody rocks everywhere. It's a hard country, that, and it takes hard men to farm it. I know I wouldn't want to. And now we're off to the Suez Canal. Which as far as I can see is just a big old salty river through the middle of a desert. Not a lot of good to anyone. And, I know it's a shortcut to somewhere for ships or something, but it's not a shortcut to Australia, is it? So what good is it to us, hey? All of us here and all those Turkish soldiers, we should just say to the generals, "Listen boys, seeing as you want it so much you can fight amongst yourselves for that bloody great ditch. We're going back to our families. Where we belong."

While Arthur was away at war, Helen's mother sent wooden crates of belongings to her daughter. They had arrived, unannounced, with her cook as a chaperone – steel-rimmed and stencilled in dark paint along their sides. Helen had watched the buggy up the drive, dipping in the corrugations and the toddler on her hip with brambled baby hair and fruit-stained cheeks.

As he stepped down onto the gravel, the cook had cleared his throat and wiped his hands on his thighs.

'Good morning, Mrs Watkins,' he said and cleared his throat again. 'I've some things for you here. From your mother.'

In silence she had watched him come across the dusty grass beside the house.

'She thought that you might like them,' he said rocking from foot to foot as though the grass was sharp through his boots.

Helen lifted her chin and pictured her mother in the big house by the river, spotless gloves and the papery rustle of her skirts. Her mother kept words at the front of her mouth, like they were hard, and spoke of England as home, though she'd never been there. Helen pictured her saying 'blacksmith'. Two syllables and both of them dirty.

Her mother had yet to meet her grandchild though Ruth was almost two. The gift she had sent at Ruth's birth was a small silver spoon in a box padded with blue satin. Helen recognised it from a cabinet in her father's house where it had lain beside a photograph of someone long dead. When the sun was shining she could convince herself that her mother had thought to pass it off as new. When she woke in the middle of the night she knew that she hadn't.

Helen had pointed to a corner of the verandah and, without speaking, walked into the house closing the door firmly behind. Later, when she heard the buggy tyres receding she had opened the door and seen the two wooden

boxes stacked against the house and had left them there, so that by the time Arthur returned from Egypt they were dusty and draped with web and he, worn thin and sleepless, had not thought to ask her what they contained.



In 1919, on Arthur's first night home from the war, the daughter he'd never met fretted at the long-armed stranger and wailed from her bed while Arthur listened to Helen humming tunelessly in the other room and watched the lamplight on the curtains cast ugly valleyed shadows on the wall. The ceiling sagged and, on his plate, two mutton chops leaked a thin and bloody juice.

Helen had dubbed his work boots but they were stiff from lack of use and the cracked leather pinched his toes. In his father's shaving mirror he looked ten years older – the skin of his neck loose like elbow skin and white creases deep beside his eyes. The old shirt that Helen had washed and pressed for him hung from his shoulders like a flag and a gap at the corner of his mouth where the army dentist in Cairo had pulled a rotten molar. The sound of it breaking away from his jaw had been like a whip crack and the gum was still pulpy beneath his tongue.

At the dock Helen had been smaller than he remembered. He had circled her arm with his rein-calloused fingers as they pushed their way through the crowd, the child on her hip and her hair coming loose in the Fremantle wind. His hand felt heavy about her fragile wrist, the fine bones small and close beneath the skin.

In the space of a breath he was back in Megiddo, riding through a days-old battlefield with his collar turned up against the cold and the smell of spent shells and dead horses all about him. They rode in their sections, four abreast, a long winding column of horses and men. On a charred wagon at the side of the road they noticed a tawny eagle perched – the copper-edged sheen of feathers and the scythe of a curved open beak. Arthur remembered the small hawks at home riding the midday heat as it rose, slipping the thermals and hovering with the edges of their wings held out against the sky.

'Game little bugger, isn't it,' said Joe, who was riding next to him and Arthur nodded.

As they rode closer they saw that one of the eagle's wings was slumping loose, the flight feathers dragging helpless and small, sharp-ended edges of bone showing through the skin. Arthur spat on the ground and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Herbert, riding at the opposite end of the section to Arthur, pulled his sword loose and jerked his horse out of line. Arthur heard a whistle and the soft suck of blade on flesh.

'Herb hits it to the boundary for a six,' said Ernest. Herbert spurred his horse back into line and Arthur watched him wipe the blade clean on his horse's neck, back and forth along the mane like he was whetting the blade.

Arthur blinked and Helen was beside him again. He smelt salt and tarred boards warmed by the sun, a laughing crowd topped with hats and bonnets and the sun-washed lightness of the sky. He looked around to say goodbye to the others but he couldn't see them in the crush. The ground felt slippery, his legs still at sea. And the people in their coloured clothes made his hands sweat and he couldn't see the horizon for the cluster of warehouses, malignant with shadows.

When he got home, he walked around the empty horse yards, past weeds and wild oats, half the rails fallen down and the nails loose in the timber. The tin was off the shed in places and his old saddle green with mould. The third time round he swore and pushed his hat to the back of his head. *You're a bloody fence walker*, he said to himself, thinking of the flighty horses that never settled but, instead, walked dusty trenches alongside fence lines. *Sit down*. But there were ants in him somewhere, it seemed, his skin twitchy and his foot tapping out a rhythm of its own.

Not much later, while he was fixing rails into place with a pair of old pliers and a roll of fencing wire, he heard the gate of the house yard scrape closed and a voice calling out for him. He looked up and saw their neighbour, Mr Pritchard, walking down the paddock.

'Hello, son,' he said and Arthur saw that in his hands was a parcel loosely wrapped with newspaper. 'I bet it feels good to be home.'

Arthur watched him approach and arranged his face into a smile.

'Hello,' he said and paused. 'Yes, I'm home.'

Mr Pritchard took the parcel in his left hand and held his right out to shake. Arthur stepped forward and took it. When he stepped back he felt dampness on his palm and he looked down, seeing it smeared with rusty juice.

Mr Pritchard nodded. 'Oh, don't mind that. It's fresh and a bit bloody still.' And he held out the parcel. 'Here. I don't expect you've had good quality mutton like this for a while. Would have been all goat and camel where you've been, hey.'

Arthur looked down at his palm and his breath was in and out of him, quick like bellows.

'Here, son,' said Mr Pritchard again. 'It's for you,' his full hands in front of him.

Arthur swallowed and took the parcel, feeling the heft of it and the warm blood leaking through the paper. He nodded. Mr Pritchard watched as Arthur stood, staring at the parcel in his hands.

'Yes, there's blood, isn't there,' said Arthur nodding, the back of his throat all quick and vinegary. Silence stretching between them like afternoon shadows.

Mr Pritchard looked around, took a big handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face, then folded it carefully and put it back in his pants. He looked at Arthur a little longer and cleared his throat. Arthur looked up slowly, straightened and squared his shoulders inside his shirt.

'Thank you,' he said finally and pushed the parcel towards the older man. 'It's just, I'm busy you see, fixing the yards. So, do you think you could give this to Helen?' he said and nodded firmly. 'If you don't mind.'

Mr Pritchard took the parcel. 'Sure son, I'll do that,' he said and his face was creased. 'It's good to have you home. Don't work too hard though, after what you've done, you deserve a break.'

Arthur nodded, and watched as the other man walked away, out of sight, up the hill. And then he pivoted on his heel and rushed to the water trough, holding his hands under the weedy-green surface of the water, scrubbing them together until his boots were wet and his shirt was soaked to the elbow.

Later that night, in bed, he held Helen's warm body close to his. Her red flannel nightgown and her small feet cool against his shins. He ran his hands up the curve of her back, her hair against his face and his dick like an empty sock between his legs. His face was hot with shame and he turned away from her, his knees at the edge of the narrow bed.

At midnight he woke from a dream of galloping to the sound of his own voice sobbing and he lay on his back while his heartbeat slowed, listening as Helen breathed beside him – too quiet for sleep.

In the morning she served him breakfast while Ruth played on the floor.

'Was it very bad, Arthur?' she said and her face was pinched about the eyes.

He looked at the smooth curve of her neck and her small white hands.

'It was what it was,' he said, pricking the yolk of the egg with his fork. Watching it run yellow on his plate and his teeth pressed tight in his jaw.



Two years later, on a day when the first showers of autumn greyed the sky, Helen walked to the yards with the new baby, Tom, in her arms. Arthur nodded without looking up from the rope he was splicing.

She cleared her throat. 'Mrs Pritchard was over yesterday,' she said. 'She says to remind you that there are services on the twenty-fifth of this month for returned soldiers.'

'Did she just,' said Arthur.

'There's one in Guildford,' said Helen.

Arthur looked up at her, the morning sun making a crown of her hair. The baby's small hands on her arm, her thin-featured face and the faded checks of her apron.

'No,' he said and turned back to the rope.

'Perhaps you would see some of the men that you used to know.'

Arthur shook his head and stood up. He looked at the horses grazing in the paddocks and the morning light was spiky in his eyes and made them sting.

'It's the twenty-fifth of April,' she said. 'Anzac Day.'

‘No,’ he said again, putting down the shaking rope and taking a breath. ‘Not this year. And not the next one. Or the one after that.’ And wiped his hands on the back of his pants.

Helen was quiet. He could see the breath in her and she blinked quickly.

‘If you could just talk about it, Arthur,’ she said wiping her hands on her skirt. ‘Maybe it would help.’

‘Help what, Helen?’ He heard his own voice rising.

She stared at the ground and Arthur saw a tremor in her shoulders.

‘Just help,’ she said without looking up.

He shook his head and turned away from her, his heart behind his ribs like a dog at a fence. Some days in the yards, in the dust and the rolling sound of the horses’ wet breath, there was a kind of stillness. That first ride on an unbroken horse with its back up under him like a paling fence and its heartbeat going quick against his leg. All of him in his eyes and his hands, no room for thinking or the memories that woke him each night. Just quiet in the middle of him, and still, like having his head underwater.

And then there were days when the sun on a dark-dappled coat or the smell of oiled leather made his mouth dry and his stomach heavy with fear. He kept his hands in his pockets to hide the shaking and his leg ached and there was a burning up under his ribs like salt in an open wound.

If he let himself think about it, the surprise was that it didn’t get easier. When he lost his parents, the hardest nights had been the first. The slow days afterwards wrapping around him, layering themselves between the light and the ruined skin feeling inside his chest. And the firsts. The first Christmas and the neighbours all smiling like nothing was missing and his good jacket too hot in the church and his boots too tight. Then their birthdays coming and going and him all alone in the small house with the pictures in their frames curling at the corners and the kerosene light over everything like a stain.

But this was different. He was thin-skinned too often and twitchy. His chest tight like there was wool in his lungs or water and he could never get a full breath in. And dreams that were thick like old sump oil, like he was falling. Like he was falling each night inside himself and there was no end to how deep he could go.

On the train from Guildford to Claremont, Ruth had spoken to the woman sitting opposite.

‘I’m eight years old and my brother Tom is four,’ she said.

The woman smiled at Ruth and her eyes were light blue, short brown hair like rabbit fur curling under her hat.

Leaning across the aisle towards her she said, ‘That’s nice. And what’s your name?’

‘My name is Ruth Watkins,’ she said. ‘And my brother’s name is Thomas Watkins and my mother’s name is Mrs Helen Watkins and my father’s name is Mr Arthur Watkins.’

‘Well, it’s nice to make your acquaintance, Ruth Watkins. My name is Mrs Campbell.’ She held her hand out and she reached across and shook it carefully. ‘And where are you headed, Ruth?’

‘We’re going to the Royal Show,’ she said. ‘Do you know about the show? It’s a long way away. You can get biscuits there, not homemade ones. Proper, real ones like they sell in the shop.’ Ruth smiled. ‘Mum says we might be able to have one if we’re really, really good.’

‘You know,’ said Mrs Campbell and her face was thoughtful, ‘if I was given a choice of being really good and getting a biscuit or not being good and having no biscuit, then I’d always choose being good.’

‘I expect so,’ said Ruth. She swung her brown-dubbed shoes above the floor and nodded, watching the houses pass the window and the morning sky high up on the glass.

‘Also,’ said Ruth, as she remembered. ‘We’re going to the show because my dad is there, riding on Peggy and Blue, in the hurdles and the high jump. There’s prize money. My dad says Peggy is a good horse but Blue is a slacker, though fast, and my dad rides horses all the time even though his leg hurts when it rains on account of the war.’

‘Well goodness me. You wish him luck from me, won’t you, Ruth.’

Ruth nodded. ‘Where are you going? Are you going to the show too?’

‘I’m going to help a friend because she’s been unwell.’

Ruth nodded and looked down the train to the back of her mother’s head, small and the hair pulled tight and shining. ‘My mum gets sick sometimes and Dad says I have to help her. I can light the fire all by myself. And collect the eggs. But not when the rooster is around because once he chased me and I dropped all the eggs and Dad yelled and said I was soft. And I didn’t get a boiled egg for supper, just bread.’

Mrs Campbell blinked. ‘I’ll tell you a big secret, Ruth,’ she said. ‘When I was a girl I was chased by my grandfather’s rooster and to this day, I’m still quite scared of them. So, I keep a long stick out by the hen house, and if our rooster even so much as looks sideways in my direction, I give him a little tap on the head and I say to him, “I’m much bigger than you, silly rooster,” and that seems to work. Maybe you could try that?’

Ruth thought about it for a while, shifting her weight on the wooden seat, the scratch of her good dress and the smell of warm wool in the close-packed train.

‘I think I could try that,’ she said.

The train slowed for a station and Mrs Campbell stood up.

‘Goodness me,’ she said. ‘I’ve been enjoying our chat so much I almost missed my station. Have a wonderful day at the show, Ruth. Enjoy your biscuit.’

Ruth waved through the glass till Mrs Campbell was too small to see and thought about sticks and biscuits, until her mum turned around from her seat ahead of her and said, ‘Next stop is ours, Ruth.’

Ruth held tight to her mother’s hand as they walked from the train station to the show. They followed a gravel path along the railway line, deep in the resinous shade of pine trees – picture-book pointy. Tom hummed to himself a little bit. Ruth could see his small face and his blond hair. She liked the grown-up sound her shoes made in the gravel.

At the show there were more people than Ruth had ever seen in one place and cows being led with ribbons of felt around their necks and small calves running beside. There was coloured bunting snapping in the breeze,

shopfronts painted every colour and the hot salty smell of popcorn cooking. There were ladies with umbrellas bright as birds, and rough wooden crates filled with oranges. Ruth saw some sheep jostling in a yard and a dog barked.

Ruth's mother said gently, 'Close your mouth, Ruth, or the flies will get in.'

'Well, I never,' said Ruth because that's what Mrs Berry next door said when her tabby cat chased a jack rabbit through the house, knocking over a pile of clean washing and sending a big jug of milk flying. 'Well, I never!'

Her mother laughed and gathered Ruth into the soapy smell of her sleeve.

On the main arena a black-and-white dog chased three sheep into a pen. People stopped to look at new cars, shiny smoke-blowing machines and a display of photographs. In a big brick building Ruth saw cakes with coloured icing and scones laid out on a plate. There were pens full of white goats with the sunlight pink in their ears, straw-lined crates of ducks and a man in a funny hat who juggled wooden clubs.

They stopped to look at tables covered with creamy fleeces laid out in a row. Ruth thought they looked like sheep without the stuffing in. They were so soft and the smell of them like the cream her mother used on sunburn. A man with a tall black hat smiled at her, pulled a small tuft of wool from the fleece and presented it to her with both hands and a wink.

The day got warmer and Ruth's usually bare feet began to rub inside their shoes. Tom whined. The sun was in her eyes like sand and all the colours of things and the smells and the people walking past were making her tummy feel light. Her mum squeezed her hand and stopped by a shop stand that had a sign with letters of gold on a deep blue background.

'A small bag of biscuits please,' she said and took some coins from her purse.

Ruth carried the bag carefully. They sat on some grass in the shade by the main arena and their mum passed them both a biscuit. It was shiny with sugar crystals and light golden, like butter. Her mum showed her how to snap it in half along a pressed line and she held both halves, one in each hand – her heart filled up to the top with a feeling that made her want to

smile and smile. She looked over at Tom and he laughed, licking crumbs from his lips, one half of the biscuit in his hand. She took small bites and still, it was over too quickly, each golden mouthful melting sweetly in her mouth and the final crunch of sugar between her teeth.

She looked at her mum on the grass, her legs tucked beneath her and the thin soles of her good shoes showing. She held the last bit of biscuit out in her hand.

‘This is for you, Mum.’

Her mother looked at Ruth with her head tilted and her eyes in the shadow of her hat were like green glass, her teeth catching a corner of her bottom lip. She leaned over and put her hand on Ruth’s shoulder. It seemed to Ruth as though breath and words competed for space in her throat. Her small hand was warm through Ruth’s shirt.

‘Thank you, Ruth. I’m proud of you, but it’s your biscuit and I hope you enjoy it.’

Ruth put the last bit of biscuit in her mouth. ‘Mum,’ she said. ‘One day, me and Tom will build you a house made all out of biscuits. Only you won’t live in it, because that would be silly, you’ll just eat it. As much as you want. Any time of the day.’

‘And a bath full of honey,’ said Tom.

‘And you would have a piano and lots of books and dresses too. They would be real, not made of biscuits, because they wouldn’t work otherwise. But you’d have them and all you’d have to do all day is play piano and eat biscuits.’

Her mum smiled at her though her lips didn’t turn up at the corners and her eyes looked funny like she was going to cry. ‘We will eat biscuits together every day,’ she said. ‘All of us, even the chickens,’ and they all laughed and her mum took her hanky from her bag and wiped her face like she did when it was hot.

Ruth lay face down in the shade and watched an ant climbing a stalk of grass. She wondered if ants went to heaven when they died, like puppies and grandfathers did. She thought about it for a while, but the grass was cool under her cheek and the leaves of the peppermint tree made slow shifting patterns on the ground.

Her mum put her hand on her arm. ‘Look Ruth, look Tom – there’s your dad. Out on the main arena, up on Peggy. Goodness me she looks in high spirits.’

Ruth sat up. At the end of her hand she could see Peggy, jogging sideways shaking her head and her dad deep in the saddle with the reins in one hand. There were other horses too, a black one and a grey, some bays and a light chestnut.

The horses lined up and the ribbon dropped. Ruth couldn’t see for the dust, but the galloping hooves made her heart skitter as the clods of dirt flew out behind. Then it was over and Ruth could see Peggy, her head up, dark sides heaving in the air.

‘I think she won,’ said her mum. ‘Isn’t she a good girl.’ They watched the horses jog back, the men in a bunch and the sound of their voices carrying across the grass. Her mum shaded her eyes with her hand. ‘Peggy looks very pleased with herself, I hope she gets a good pat and a brush back at the stables.’ Ruth watched her dad. He was smiling, showing his teeth and nodding, his hat pushed to the back of his head. Peggy’s teeth were showing too, the bit sliding in her open mouth and her dark ears pressed against her neck.

Ruth said, ‘When we get home I’m going to give Peggy a big pat, because she’s so clever.’ Her mother smiled but Ruth could see she hadn’t really heard. She was used to that, though. Her mother stared at the men on their horses and her face looked like it did when the cat brought a bird into the house – its wings beating against the floor and its bright feathers spoiled with blood.

Later, they walked back to the train station. Tom scuffed his feet on the path and his face was pink and cross. Ruth was allowed to sit by the window and she pressed her hot face slippery cool against the glass. She listened to the rails pass by beneath her feet, slowing and speeding and slowing – the train gently rocking and the afternoon light coming in all golden beneath her heavy eyelids.

One of Ruth's favourite places was by her father's forge with the sooted walls close around her and the throaty smell of dirt burning. It was dark in there and warm when the garden was silvered with frost and the air so cold that just walking made her eyes wet. She liked the sound of the hammer on the orange hot steel and the way the sparks fell to the floor. And the shuffle of the horses' feet and the sounds of men's voices.

The men held the bridles and her father worked the steel. Bending a hoof-shaped curve and holding it out with one eye half closed like he was drawing a bow. Ruth liked the heavy horses best, their hooves as big as upturned pails and their slow eyes glassy in the low light. And the harness ponies too, their short tails twitching and the soft, small muzzles she could cup in both hands. The hot shoes against the hoof made grey smoke with the taste of singed hair, and Ruth's mother would sigh at her when she came back into the house – the smell in her dress and in her long, brown plaits.

Once, a damp-faced man in a waistcoat that was checked like kitchen curtains paid Ruth a penny to hold his horse while it was shod. He twitched at the bridle and pulled a watch on a long chain from his pocket and Ruth saw how under his arms his shirt was wet with sweat and the horse was still but with a thin rind of white round the eye. Ruth took the penny and the bridle, reaching up to tease the thick forelock out from under the brow-band, her fingers over the dried-grass feel of yesterday's sweat in his fur.

The man squinted at Ruth. 'Maybe the girl's going to be a blacksmith,' he said and then laughed until his face went red and his belly jiggled, Ruth thought, like the goat's udder when she ran bleating for the feed bucket.

'Mmm,' said Arthur from below the horse's roan shoulder with the plate-sized hoof between his knees.

Outside in the yard the buggy rested on the ends of its shafts, the wooden-spoked wheels and brass fittings on the harness. Ruth read 'Mortimer and Sons' in curly red writing along the side, and Mr Mortimer's pipe smoke hung yellow in the still morning air.

'Or maybe,' said the man, looking at her bare feet and the hem of her skirt dark with dirt, 'she'll just marry one.' And her father shrugged and drove the nails *tap-tap, tap-tap*.

When he worked at the forge, her father kept the long nails in his mouth. Instead of words, Ruth thought. Silent while the other men spoke and only afterwards, when the new shoes were shiny under the hoof, did he reply, as he wiped his forearm across his face and unbuckled the heavy leather apron. And Ruth, still amongst the hanging tools and lengths of steel laid up against the tin wall, would listen as they spoke to him. The weather, the price of hay and what's good in the last on Saturday. She hoped, every time, that he would talk about the war, but that talk was just for some men – narrow-eyed and quiet men with lines in their faces like pressed seams and their hands on the horses sure and easy. Sometimes then her father would sit on the edge of a wooden crate to speak. *Megiddo, Beersheba, Magdhaba*. And she would press herself into the shadows to listen, her heart quick with distance and the burning of an Eastern sun.

Afterwards, as he pocketed their coins, her father would look at her standing quiet by the forge and he would blink quickly and his shirt was dark in the creases of his back. And she knew, from the way the coins rattled in his hand and his shoulders bunched like river stones beneath his shirt, that she could never ask him to speak, just for her, the terrible poetry of the places that he'd been.

Her mother, though, would worry at her father's silence like a dog on a rabbit carcass. Like she could tear it apart, Ruth thought, and underneath find all the words that he had been keeping safe from her. At mealtimes in the small kitchen, she was shiny-faced and her voice high as she spoke and smiled at them in turn. Her hair fresh combed like a newspaper advertisement for a new brand of soap or a tonic. Perfect. Except for her quick hands twitching and pleating the edge of her apron beneath the table.

Once, when Ruth was small, she'd overheard a woman at the general store tell another, in a voice like an unoiled hinge, that her mother was soft. As though her mother was stealing something from them as they wide-hipped their baskets, their broad, red hands and their boots showing beneath their hems.

Ruth didn't think that her mother was soft. Though her hair smelled like lavender, she was just elbows and collarbones to hug and, inside her, a jumpy kind of never-stillness, her fingers marching on the arms of her chair or her

foot tapping the air. Ruth knew that her mother cried for every sheep slaughtered and could not take the old hens' heads when they were done laying, but rather, would pick her way across the paddocks with them under her arm and leave them with Mrs Pritchard who would return them gutted and plucked later in the day. And the ducks too – at Christmas time and Easter, her mother would carry them, plump, across the paddocks, crying softly and stroking the arch of their downy necks – with their wide orange feet and their blinking, currant-coloured eyes.

When Tom was just learning to walk, the three of them had stayed at her mother's cousin's house in Guildford, where the gardens around were filled only with flowers and the river, slow moving, at the bottom of the street. One night after dinner Anna had taken Tom from her mother's arms and with a gentle hand in small of her back pressed her towards the piano. 'Play for us, Helen, please,' she had said. 'You have always played so beautifully.'

Her mother shook her head *no* but Anna was insistent, poised on the rug and the many small buttons of her dress like copper in the lamplight. And so her mother had played, softly. Ruth lay on the rug with her head on a small satin pillow, watching the hem of Anna's dress swaying as she rocked Tom, the black silk sheeny like peacock feathers or the stiff wings of Christmas beetles. She heard the music getting bigger, each note over the top of the last until the room rang with sound, her mother's back bending in time and the tapping of her small slippered feet on the pedals.

It was late. Ruth closed her eyes and fell asleep, half waking once when the music stopped. Her mother was at the piano but had stopped playing. Her arms were across her chest and she was sobbing, her small body shaking and Anna's arm across her shoulders. Ruth wanted to sit up but the long day was heavy on her limbs and the pillow soft. The next time she woke it was to Anna helping her into bed.

The following day her mother did not come down to breakfast. Anna took them to the park for lunch. Ruth liked the sandwiches with their crusts cut off, and the sound made by the big wheels of the baby carriage through the fallen pine needles on the pavement. By the river she found a glittery white stone that Anna said was called quartz and she took it home carefully in her pocket to show to her mother, but when she looked around the door of the bedroom at her, she was sleeping. For three days her mother lay in the

bed, her face the colour of chalk and her eyelids like bruises. Ruth threw pebbles into the river and drew patterns with a stick in the tide-wet sand. With shoes and stockings wet to the knee she stamped her feet and watched her footprints fill with water while Anna rocked Tom in the carriage, her hands smooth in kid leather gloves.

On the fourth day the doctor came, in a dark suit and a small leather bag in his hand. His shiny shoes were firm on the polished wooden floors and the cuffs of his shirt starched like white card. Ruth heard him speak to her mother in the voice adults used when they bent down to speak to children and he clapped his hands and ordered the drawn curtains opened. From the bottom of the stairs Ruth heard him say, 'It's nonsense of course. There's nothing wrong with her at all – she's perfectly healthy.' And then Anna's voice, soft and the words hard to hear. The doctor replied, 'Fresh air and plenty of activity, Mrs Landsdale. You must not pander to the moping, no matter how hard that seems,' and he laughed drily. 'I'll let myself out,' he said with finality and Ruth heard the door close behind him with a stout thud.

The next day her mother was dressed and at the table for breakfast, the bodice of her dress puckered like it had been made for someone bigger. Ruth hugged her tightly around the waist, her face in the hollow of her mother's belly and her breath shallow with relief. Anna arranged roses in a vase and she smiled and made plans for the day in a bright, loud voice. Later, when they had cleared their plates, swept the crumbs from the table and wiped the smears of jam from Tom's face, Ruth saw for a moment how the morning light came in through the glass, bright and glinty on her mother's soft hair and the pink flower pattern on the teapot like a painting.

Her mother stood up to pour the tea, her small face the colour of milk and her lips pressed thin against her teeth. As Ruth watched, the pot in her mother's outstretched arm began to shake as though she was scattering seed. She cupped her elbow with her other hand, but still the lid rattled on its rim and tea in dark gouts welled from the spout making puddles on the cloth. The half-filled cups were in their saucers like boats and even Tom stopped teething on his rusk to watch.

Finally, when the pot was empty, her mother placed it carefully back on the table and sat down. For a moment there was quiet. The puddles on the table steamed and sepia rivulets of tea dripped onto the tiled floor. Anna

cleared her throat and took a half-filled cup. 'Thank you, dear Helen,' she said and smiled into the air. 'I do enjoy a cup of tea in the morning. Don't you?'

When her father arrived, impatient, a few days afterwards, he was driving a young bay horse that shook his harness and pawed at the ground. Anna tucked a blanket round her mother while her father held the bridle with his back to the cart. Her mother's eyes were closed on the long ride home and Ruth sat beside her father, the sunlight hard on the crushed stone road. The horse was fresh at first, veering around puddles and potholes in the road, but he settled quickly and Ruth watched her father's hands, his fingers blunt with work and the dirt cross-hatched in the creases, but he held the reins in his palms like they were silk.

After a while her father passed her the reins, closing his hands around her small fists and she felt the steadiness in his arms and, at the other end of the leather, the young horse chewing on the bit.

'Here,' her father said quietly.

For three miles Ruth looked out through the pointed brown ears at the road stretching up ahead and held the reins until her arms were sore and her eyes stung from the glare. When she pulled up at the front gate her father took the reins from her and she climbed down to open it. She scrambled back up onto her seat, so tired that the breath fluttered a little in her chest, like her voice would shake or she might cry. Her father looked straight ahead and clucked the horse forward through the gate.

Arthur rested his foot on the shovel and looked around at the Egyptian desert. Withered ridges of bleached limestone and the sand plains in between – blown and ruckled like the surface of the sea. To him, it seemed a land with its bones exposed.

When the order had come to dig in, Joe breathed through his teeth and shook his head.

‘Sounds a bit bloody familiar, doesn’t it?’ he said.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Ernest. ‘We just spent six months digging in at Gallipoli, for all the good that did us.’

‘Someone ought to tell ’em that we’re the light horse,’ said Ernest. ‘Not a bunch of bloody rabbits.’

Earlier that day they had ridden across the Suez Canal on a pontoon bridge that shuddered beneath the horse’s hooves and rode low in the water like an old barge. On the banks, Bedouin women watched goats nosing the weeds while children with thickly matted hair played at their feet. Arthur reckoned he could just about throw a rock from one side to the other, but it was deep and the water black beneath the bridge.

In their sections, four abreast, the light horse came across, the sky thin and clear above them, blue all the way to the horizon. Arthur wished for a moment that Helen could see him, could see them all – just boys most of them but straight in the saddle and the horses’ coats smooth polished. They touched land and cantered across the Sinai sand in tight formation, so tight he could hear the clink of stirrup irons touching and the little mare skittish beneath him. Arthur’s chest was big and tight, like he was bigger than himself, like someday someone would write about this moment and it would mean something.

They made camp a few miles east of the canal in sand finer and deeper than a dry riverbed. The sand was like water to dig – trenches filled and the

desert surface flattened as soon as they rested on their shovels. And the flies, as thick as mist over everything and mad for any dampness. As the days went on they learned to manage the sand, holding it out with planks and sandbags as they dug. Deepening the trenches plank by plank, their eyes red with grit. They learned to turn their boots out every morning for scorpions, black and thick as a man's thumb.

'Two days of bloody agony if that fella gets you,' Joe said as he tipped one, tail up and curved like a bow, onto the sand.

The horses suffered too. Over one hundred degrees every day, winter-cold at night and tied in the horse lines with a back leg tethered. They never liked the tibbin much – dusty and not enough grain to make the dust worthwhile. The little mare fretted at her nosebag till Arthur tipped cold tea on top of the chaff to settle the dust. After that she neighed for it and stamped, licking the sweetness from his fingers and the billy too if he let her.

Supplies came by camel from the railhead, announced by dust that rose like smoke on the horizon. Then the plaintive songs of the cameleers and finally the lines of camels – dung-splattered legs and twelve-gallon cans of water strung either side. The camels lay in their lines outside the camp to be unloaded, groaning and wheezing like old men bending over. And the cameleers amongst them, singing, their blue *galabiehs* rustling as they walked.

'What do you reckon they're singing about?' said Arthur as they unloaded.

Joe thought for a while. 'I reckon they're singing "I hate bloody camels"', he said.

In May, the winds came like solid walls of sand and heat. In the valley where Arthur grew up, the summer winds were hot and burnt the grasses yellow. In the paddocks closest to the hills trees grew westward with their backs to the wind and people shook their heads and prayed for rain. But the *khamsein* made twilight out of noon, uprooted grass and flew the heavy canvas tents like kites. They bailed their trench as if it were a boat, using shovels and hats and even their cupped-together hands – breathing and swearing through fixed teeth. No match would light and at teatime they sat in the bottom of

the trench and ate cold bully beef from the tin while the sand rained down around them.

One night Arthur slept wrapped in a blanket in the trench. Around midnight the wind dropped and he woke in sudden silence, too dry to spit and his legs half buried, stiff with cold. The dawn, when it came, was fish-belly pale and lasted all day – the sky like dirty water. Arthur found his saddle half buried and it took him an hour to comb the sand from the little mare's coat.

Every few days the winds would come and, in the days between, the air so dry and hot Arthur had to open his mouth to breathe. Their section pulled camel train escort duty, ten slow miles to the railhead, the sweat dripping off him before he'd even finished saddling. Halfway there his water bottle was too hot to drink and the sand so silver-bright he had to ride with closed eyes and trust the little mare to find her way up and down the dunes.

Training took most of their days – drills, shooting, riding. Like playing at being soldiers, thought Arthur, with live ammo. They'd pull up for a feed and the only shade for miles around would be their own or their horse's. Or come home at night by compass bearing with the whole desert dark and still. Some nights there wasn't enough moon to see the ridges of the dunes and more than one man was saved from a spill by his horse baulking at the edge of a drop. On the best days they'd ride to where the sides of the canal ballooned into a lake – a great flat sheet of water ringed with sand. And at lunchtime they'd strip the saddles off, and their clothes, and laugh like children, the horses' bellies and their bare feet in the water. The little mare's wet back was slick like fish skin and she shivered sideways at the sudden cold. Arthur laughed and grabbed a double handful of her mane. She shook her head and her ears were small and sharp at their tips like lemon leaves.

One day a British staff car pulled up at the lake as they were swimming, with its desert-yellow paint job and a thick-barrelled Lewis gun mounted to the bonnet. Arthur saw two men with stiff caps and shiny shoulders climb out and watch, shading their eyes against the sun. They picked their way through the sand on spit-polished boots and headed towards the Australian major who was lying in the sand with his hat over his face.

Their driver got out of the car and lit a cigarette.

Ernest kicked his big draft mare out of the water and trotted up to him. 'Nice truck, mate,' he said smiling.

'She's okay,' said the driver. 'I'd rather a Rolls, but I s'pose the tin lizzie's alright.'

Ernest laughed. 'I've been in a car once,' he said. 'Pretty bloody fast it was too,' and nodded. 'But I've never driven one meself.'

The driver looked up at him and the anvil-headed mare, with legs like a piano and ears the length of a tall man's shin. And Ernest on top, as white as a baby round his middle and naked but for his hat.

'Well we're even then. I've only been up on a horse once in me life. And it was pretty bloody fast too. Didn't end well, as you can imagine.' He lit another cigarette and passed it up to Ernest. The two men smoked for a while, watching the sun on the water and the horses and men dozing in some scrubby shade.

'You boys in the cavalry have got it alright,' said the driver, holding his collar away from his neck for a moment. 'Wish I could get me kit off and go for a swim.'

'I've gotta say,' said Ernest, 'right at this very moment, it's not that bad.'

'It's no fun carting these two about,' he said pointing to the two officers. 'They don't go in for jokes much.'

'Yeah,' said Ernest nodding in their direction. 'If you're short some gear at the end of the day, check up the old fella's backside. He walks like he might have something up there. Maybe a couple of somethings.'

'That's good advice, that is,' the driver grinned. He dropped the end of his cigarette on the ground and toed it with his boot. 'Where are you chaps off to next?'

'We dunno,' said Ernest. 'They reckon the Turks'll push for the canal. So, we're dug in and ready. Most of us here are pretty keen to have another go at 'em.'

The driver looked up at Ernest. 'Another go? You were at Gallipoli then?'

'Yeah.'

'I was in France, so I missed that one. Didn't realise they'd sent the cavalry to Turkey.'

‘We’re not cavalry, mate,’ said Ernest. ‘We’re the light horse. We’re mounted infantry. Just foot soldiers really, only we don’t march to where we’re going. We ride.’

‘What do you do with the horses then?’

‘Three men fight and one man takes the horses back.’

‘So, which one of you blokes gets that job?’

‘Arthur holds the horses,’ said Ernest, nodding in his direction. ‘Or he will, I should say, when the time comes. You see Joe’s the best shot out of the four of us, so he’s gotta be in the thick of it. Herbert lost two cousins at the Nek so he’s got to get a chance to even the scoreboard and me, well to be honest I’m not much of a horseman. So, it’s got to be Arthur,’ said Ernest. ‘And besides, the horses would follow him anywhere.’

‘Good luck to you boys then.’ The driver nodded at the approach of the English colonels. ‘Looks like I’ll be leaving soon.’

Ernest lifted his hat and kicked the big mare into a slow trot. ‘Thanks for the smoke,’ he called over his shoulder as he bounced back to the rest of the section.



When Arthur was a boy his father had kept bees in a stack of wooden boxes made from packing crates. The wood so rough it was like mallee bark, the paint peeling off and a small peaked roof at the top like a tiny house. His father would nod at the flurry of small insects flying around the entrance to the hive and say, ‘If you could be a bee, Arthur, what kind of bee would you be?’ And Arthur would smile, though later, when he was older and mostly grown, not as widely and sometimes not at all.

There was always a Mason jar of honey on a shelf in the kitchen, dark as tea, scraps of broken comb settled at the bottom and the smell, when he opened it, like early summer. From the wax, his mother made candles and furniture polish for the one piece of furniture she owned that wasn’t homemade – a small dressing table that had been her mother’s, brought from England. Arthur was barefoot often enough to be wary of the hive, especially for those few weeks each year when the clover flowers were tight with bees and the paddocks hummed. He hated the sharp barbed sting but

dreaded more the next-day tightness at the bottom of his foot and the fat-skinned itching that kept him up at night. His mother kept an old sock in her small medicine chest and Arthur would run it like a saw, back and forth, across his foot – his face broad with satisfaction like a belly-scratched dog.

His father, booted, who never cut across the paddocks late for school, was gentle with the bees, swiping them carefully from the surface of the water trough and setting them down on the ground to dry. In the sunlight, the small pulpy clumps would slowly stiffen into wings and antenna and the black bodies furred and banded yellow. ‘Today is not the day for swimming,’ he would say as he scooped them from the water. ‘Today is the day for making honey.’ Despite the stings, Arthur could never walk past a trough without checking the surface for drowning bees, though if his father was around he scooped brusquely as though removing dirt or rotting leaves.

On a Sunday in November, if the season had been kind, his father would collect the honey. It had to be a shirtsleeves day and windless, to lessen the shock, his father said, of opening the hive. ‘The queen doesn’t like it if her eggs get cold,’ he would say, and as a child Arthur had pictured a hen-sized bee, broody and terrifying. On harvest day his father was restless in church, galloping his fingers on his pants leg and watching the leaves outside for signs of wind. Afterwards, still blinking in the sun, he would bring the pony and trap around to the front of the church before Arthur’s mother had even opened her mouth to sip at her tea.

After lunch his father would prepare for harvest in the kitchen, draping a length of muslin over his head and tucking the ends into his shirt collar. He would pull his socks carefully over the cuffs of his pants and tie off the gaps between his gloves and his sleeves with strips of old cloth. With his featureless face, limbs pinched at their ends and his chin a gather of puckered fabric tucked tightly into his shirt, he looked just like the scarecrow Arthur’s mother had made to keep the parrots out of the orchard.

Outside, his father would take a rusted pail half full of packed-down pine needles and light it, casting a thick white smoke all around himself so, as he said to Arthur, the bees would think there was a bushfire and ignore him as he came to rob their hive. Years later as he was riding through the streets of Damascus, Arthur saw a priest walking, stately, up the steps of a white church, slowly swinging a smoking brass capsule at the end of a chain.

Walking with his father's steady tread, the smoke rising around him and the same quiet face of a man absorbed by the task ahead. Arthur had inhaled deeply, hoping to catch the smell of pine at the back of his throat, but the incense was sweeter and smelled like cloves. Still, as he turned in his saddle to watch the priest, Arthur wished he could sit alone on the hard wooden pews of the church while the rattle of shod hooves on cobblestones faded away and the smoke rose around him in ever-thinning curls.

Arthur and his mother would watch from the house as his father harvested the honey. Swinging the smoking pail in wide measured arcs around the hive, the slowly spun cocoon of smoke making stone-coloured shadows on the ground. His father would prise the boxes apart with a knife and lift the heavy frames out, holding them to the light, an angry crown of bees around his head. When he was done he stacked the boxes again, his gloved fingers blunt but gentle as they brushed the bees away.

His father would bring the smell of pine needles and sweetness back into the house with him as well as a chipped enamel basin full of honey and wax. Batting away the bees that struck at his head and closing the door quickly behind. Without rushing he would unwind the muslin and take off his clothes until he was standing in the kitchen in just his trousers, his feet bare and his shirt in a pile at his feet. He was not a big man but there was heft in his shoulders from handling the reins and the old leather of his belt worn thin as paper. Arthur's mother would comb his body for stings, her face close and her fingertips careful on his skin. Tracing the lines of his ribs and his back, her hands up in front of her face almost, Arthur thought, as though she were praying. And his father, his straight back welting from the stings, would close his eyes and drift the backs of his fingers through her hair. On the other side of the room Arthur would dabble a spoon in the honey, pinching off bits of comb to chew while a handful of bees cast themselves against the kitchen window like pebbles.

There were no honey harvests after his father got sick. And not long after that both his parents were gone and the bees went untouched at the back of the garden. The winter before the war, a dead branch fell across the hive in a storm. Arthur saw it the next morning, the long tunnels through the wood drilled by white ants and a sodden clump of ruined wax and drowned bees.

Later that day he saw that the bees left alive were leaving, a low-pitched humming and a cluster of insects the size of a man's head tightly flying. Arthur watched them go and thought of his parents, three years gone, and the back of his throat was tight and hot with missing.

And then, one day, when he'd been home from the war for a handful of uneasy years, the horse he was riding threw a shoe. It was a thoroughbred, silk-skinned and tender on the gravel, so he got off to walk it home. Down the gravelled road beside the house where the marris were in flower, yellowing the grass below and the smell of them the faintest toffee in the air. Arthur listened to the crunch of hooves in the loose stones and the hum of bees busy in the stalky blossoms and for a moment then, with the fine horse at the end of the reins and the sun on his face, the inside of him was still.

As he walked past a wide-girthed tree he noticed that from a crack in the trunk there were bees, coming and going and the smell of honey, faint and sweet. It was less than a mile from where his father's hive had once stood, and he wondered if this was where his father's bees had landed, on that cold morning so many lives ago, before the war. He stood and watched them for a while, feeding out the reins so the horse could crop the weeds along the fence line. And he thought of his parents and decided that his father would be pleased.

And that afternoon, as he walked past the trough, he bent down and scooped a bee from its surface. 'Today is not the day for swimming,' he said quietly, placing the small sodden insect on the ground. 'Today is the day for making honey.'

In Tom's earliest memory his father was a shadow. Long, dark and finished with leather boots cracked across the toe. The shadow fell across the floor where he was sitting and brought with it the smell of outside and horses. His mother stopped singing and the dog, who had been brushing the floor with his soft bristled tail, trotted off with ears held low.

Later, much later, he realised that his father was a man that other men admired. He rode at picnic races, boots rammed home in the irons, hat low over his eyes and his horse, fretful beneath him. Men would call out to him and wave their hats, smiling. Tom would sneak into the betting ring so that he could watch as the horses jogged back after their race, their mouths dripping spit and the sweat rubbed to foam on their necks. Tom would watch the ground for dropped pennies and the sweat that slipped from underneath the horses' bellies.

There were always horses. Grazing the stubbly paddocks that ringed the house and in the rough wooden yards, their sharp hooves churning the ground to dust. He liked the way they would edge their heads sideways through the rails for the held out stalks of wild oats and the hollow sound of their lips as they mouthed the air.

Every few months his father would run in a mob of brumbies, their hooves wild in the gravel, his father's stockwhip swinging, and beside him rode a dark stockman from the station where they'd caught them. After travelling for weeks on empty bellies, the horses were racks of ribs and sharp-hipped, though still wild. In the yards they would wheel and churn, their bodies pressed together and the fear sweat in their coats and in the rolled wide edge of their shiny eyes.

For the first few years of Tom's life his mother would not let him down to the yards while his father was breaking in the brumbies. From the house they could see the dust rising and his mother would draw the thin cotton curtain across the window and pull the door closed.

One morning, just after his tenth birthday, his father pushed the door open with his boot.

‘Tom,’ he said. ‘The horses need water.’

Tom put his book down and looked towards his mother but she turned away – small, her shoulders hollow beneath a faded blouse.

It was summer and he hefted a pail with two hands, its rusty edge against his shins and the lumpy gravel hot beneath his bare feet. The trough in the yard was empty and as he poured the water through the fence the horses crept forwards, their coats dulled and salted with dried sweat. They sucked the water through closed lips and he reached his hand out through the rails to try and touch their faces.

He saw a black-and-red cockatoo feather caught in a clump of barley grass. His father hated the cockatoos – every year flocks of them arrived and settled in the marri trees, chewing the honky nuts to nubs, dropping branches in the paddocks and the sound of them like old ladies coughing. But his mother loved them, she said she imagined them as widows with bright red petticoats underneath their black dresses. Tom picked up the feather and stuck it in the waistband of his shorts to give to his mother.

Later, he watched as his father entered the yard with a rope looped over a stick stripped of leaves. The horses crowded the corner, snorting. His father lunged at them. Three times the rope bounced off a brown back and fell to the ground, but on the fourth it settled around the neck of a bay filly. The brumby felt rope on her skin for the first time and ran, fear blind, her body hard against the rails. His father ran behind her, braced against the rope with his heels skidding up dust, one hand at his waist and the other low at his hip. When she steadied, blowing, his father threw a loop of rope around a post and tied it off.

Unable to run, the filly thrashed against the rope like a river bream, shaking her body from side to side, heaving the air with an open mouth. The muscles in her haunches bunching and twisting and her matted tail in the sand. He could hear her suck the air in hard. Her nostrils wet and the white edge of her tipped-back eyes. Tom’s fingers were tight on the bucket and he watched the filly wear herself out against the rope with his heart beating hard in his throat.

Sweat drew dark lines down the horse's flanks. Tom stared at the rope, willing it to break, but though it creaked and twanged, it held. As he watched, the filly's haunches crumpled, her head held up by the rope and her front feet scrabbling for purchase. She swam in the air for a moment, twisting on the rope, and he could see the wedge of her belly and the fine, tawny fur. In her open mouth her tongue was grey and swollen and his own chest hurt with each struggling breath that she took.

Eventually the filly was still with her head snubbed tight against the post. His father walked across the yard with his stockwhip looped over his shoulder and Tom breathed, easing the pail from where it had dug into his leg. Beneath the hat his father's eyes were flat and dark like well water. Tom waited for him to pull the knife from his belt and cut the rope. He counted the seconds between the horse's sawing breaths and willed him to hurry. Then his father stepped back a pace and swung his whip up in an arc, bringing it down on the horse's back with a crack that raised a thick welt on the wet hide. Again and again he swung the whip and the brumby, with the veins like a map across her shoulders and her nostrils wet and terrified, scrambled, heaving and found her feet.

His father turned his back and the filly stood, shaking, with her head tied hard to the post. Tom could see the dark raised lines of blood on her back and the trembling of the muscles in her fine, strong legs. He could smell the sweat on her and the wet dung churned to mud by her hooves. His mouth filled with saliva and he felt sick, his stomach in his throat.

Later, his father strode off to fix a fence and Tom filled the bucket with water and let himself into the yard. Holding it out ahead of himself so that the filly could see he shuffled towards her, talking softly. 'It's alright, little filly,' he said. 'I've got a drink for you. It's hot today and you'll be thirsty.'

She watched him come with eyes gone glassy from looking. Head high and her ears on him like they were watching too. She snorted and he stopped. Clutching the pail to his chest with one hand, he dipped the other into the water and let the drops roll silver off his fingertips. 'It's okay, filly. I'm not going to hurt you, I promise,' he said, his heart big in his chest.

Her nostrils twitched, smelling water and he took a step closer. With a move so small he would have missed it if he wasn't hoping, she stretched her nose toward him. He curled his toes into the gravel and pulled himself a

little closer. He leaned towards her, holding the bucket in front of his body, the weight of water making his outstretched arms tremble. The filly moved her lips like she was chewing.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ he said. ‘You’re thirsty, I know you are.’

He stepped towards her, almost close enough to touch the flinching skin of her shoulder.

‘You can drink now, it’s okay,’ he said.

Slowly the filly stretched her head towards the bucket. He breathed slowly. The warm grassy smell of her, the sky big above him, and empty.

The filly moved her head toward the bucket and the rope tightened around her neck. Shaking her head, she flung herself back against the rope, the air sawing in her throat. Tom jumped backwards so fast that he stumbled and dropped the bucket. He backed away and the filly fought. Up close she was too big. The dust was in his eyes, and her neck wet and slick where the rope had cut it.

‘Steady, girl,’ he said, and his voice was small. His arms hurt and the falling bucket had scraped his shin. ‘Please. You’re hurting yourself.’

Hocks bent deeply and the great muscles of her haunches bunched, the filly flung her body backwards with her mouth held wide and her ears flat against her neck. He could see the fine skin rubbed to blood by the rope and the long, ragged knots in her mane. She fought the rope till she fell, her head held tight to the post, front legs limp and crumpled beneath her.

‘Come on now,’ he said. ‘You’ve got to get up. Come on.’

The filly’s eyes closed and her breath like something heavy being dragged over gravel.

‘Come on. You can do it.’

His mouth felt sandy, his voice fluttery, high. He moved closer to the filly and followed the rope with his hands, back to the post. He tried the knot but his fingers were small and the rope wouldn’t move. He climbed the fence and balanced on the top rail of the yard, but he couldn’t see his father and the filly’s breath was in his ears and her tongue was purple in the corner of her mouth.

He climbed down and ran around behind her. ‘Come on!’ he yelled and threw his hands in the air. ‘Get up! You’ve got to get up.’

He reached over and slapped her rump with his hand. 'Get up. Get up.' He tried again, slapping her rump hard, but she was indifferent. Eyes closed, breath like a saw biting green timber.

'Don't be stupid. You're going to die if you don't get up.' And he slapped her again and kicked her with his bare feet, his own breath sobbing in his throat. 'Get up, you stupid horse. Get up before you die.'

He turned around to look for his father and saw the stockwhip hanging on a nail by the yard gate. He rushed over and grabbed it, unfurling it as he ran back to the filly. He swung it wide and the lash landed in the sand and he swung it again, this time harder. The filly flinched as the leather bit into her skin and he swung again and again. His voice high and sharp in his ears and his nose running salt down past the corners of his mouth.

'Get up, get up, get up,' he yelled. And he whipped her off the ground till she stood, shaking. Then he hung the whip back up and let himself out of the yard. Breathing hard, laying air down over the jagged, aching place in the centre of his chest.

As he walked back to the house he was suddenly cold, his face and palms wet with sweat and his hair stuck to his head like the coat of a swimming dog. He bent over, eyes closed, hands on his knees and vomited his breakfast onto the weeds beside the path.



Tom sat in the shade and wound a strand of cobweb round his finger, feathery with dust and studded with specks of insect. His mother's hands were up and down the washboard with a cake of brown, mutton-smelling soap, rubbing and raising thin bubbles to the surface of the hot water. Her sleeves were pushed up past her elbows and, beside her, a pile of just washed clothes dripped from the back of an old chair. Beyond the verandah the cape lilacs drooped beneath their blossom, vibrating with bees.

Tom was twelve years old and newly bruised. A wet, soft swelling rose on his cheek and the back of his hand was baby fat and tender. He could still feel the iodine, sharp like lemon juice on his broken skin, despite his mother's cooling breath.

‘I didn’t do anything, Mum,’ he said. ‘He just ran up and hit me as we were walking home from school.’ He touched his cheek with gentle fingers. ‘He’s a bad egg, that Duncan Pratt.’

Helen sighed. ‘Some people will learn to hate for no reason. And some will find joy in the simplest things. My father could find the beauty in a jar of marmalade.’ She smiled. ‘And others, well they just complain about the peel.’

‘Duncan Pratt’s family is too poor for marmalade,’ said Tom. ‘His dad’s only got one eye and shrivelled-up lungs because of the war, and his mum smells funny because she works at the tannery.’

His mother was quiet for a while. She scrubbed the clothes and her face was shiny in the steam. ‘It seems to me, Tom, that life has already given that child more than enough weight to carry without adding your hate to the pile.’ She smiled. ‘And anyway, in my experience those who sow anger, reap unhappiness. You don’t want to be that kind of person.’

Tom pulled the cobweb from his finger and wiped his hands on his shorts. He could smell the honey in the blossoms and the sun in the long grass.

‘When a person reaches a certain age,’ said Helen, ‘the sum of all their thoughts can be seen on their skin. Time writes the truth on your face, Tom, just as clear as you can write on a page. The spoiled child becomes a woman with lines across her lip. The angry boy, a man with deep creases between his eyes.’

Tom thought and the dog slept in the shade of the verandah.

His mother piled the wet clothes into a basket. She said, ‘A person can say whatever they like, but if you look at their face when they are thinking or asleep you’ll see who they really are.’

Tom looked at his mother. ‘When you’re thinking, you’re beautiful,’ he said.

Helen bent down and stroked his cheek, then hefted the heavy basket onto her hip and stepped out onto the grass. Tom wiped his hands on his shorts and stood up, watching her cross the yard.

‘Beautiful,’ he said softly. ‘And sad.’

One afternoon, after a lunch of cold fish and black tea, the men were told to saddle up for a long march.

‘Where are we going?’ said Ernest.

‘Into the desert. We’ve gotta empty some wells, apparently,’ said Herbert.

Ernest spat on the sand. ‘Haven’t they got anything better for us to do?’

Arthur nodded slowly. ‘Even Jacko’s got to drink, I s’pose.’

‘Or not drink, if the brass have their way,’ said Herbert.

‘They must be hoping he’ll get thirsty and leave,’ said Joe.

Ernest laughed. ‘Yeah, he’s gonna say, “This is an outrage, comrades. There’s no water for my bath. I’m going home.”’

‘Maybe,’ said Arthur, ‘he’ll realise this is the worst holiday he’s ever had and march straight back to Constantinople.’

‘Well, I’m with Jacko on this one. This is definitely the worst holiday I’ve ever had,’ said Ernest.

‘Hmmm,’ said Herbert. ‘Mum sent me to me cousin’s place one school holidays because she thought the country air would do me good. Pissed with rain for two weeks and all I did was work like a dog up to me armpits in freezing bloody mud.’

‘Yeah, but no bugger was trying to shoot you,’ said Ernest.

‘Yeah, when ya put it like that,’ said Herbert, ‘it was bloody luxury, wasn’t it?’

They set out in the dusk and rode through the night. Long, winding trains of men and horses and behind them the camels clinking and shuffling through the sand. The chill came with the dawn. They blew on their fingers and rubbed their arms, picking their way through steep-sided wadies and crags of limestone quilled by the wind.

Travelling light meant breakfast was a hatful of tibbin for the little mare and, for Arthur, hardtack. He crushed the stony biscuit to rubble in his mess tin with the edge of a horseshoe and tipped a swig of water over to soften it. It chewed like pea gravel – gritty and tasteless, but he was hungry. In twos they lugged drums of water from the camels to the canvas troughs and watched as the horses drank, each swallow a ripple in the velvety skin of their necks and their breaths ruffling the surface.

By midmorning they'd reached Wadi Mukhsheib, a cluster of goats and a circle of Bedouin tents ringed by rocky hills. Here, chipped from granite, were underground cisterns filled with water. They worked in shifts, four men to a pump. Arthur, stripped to the waist and the sun hot on his skin, watched the clear water rush out and onto the sand.

'What about the poor buggers who live here then?' he said to Joe on the other side of the pump. 'What are they going to live on?'

'We're gonna leave them enough to get them through to the next rains,' said Joe, sweating.

'Bloody hell. Better hope the rain comes on time.'

Arthur watched a Bedouin woman carrying a small child on her hip and thought of Helen and the good grass in the paddocks at home, the deep rustling shade around the house and the red loam edges of the kitchen garden.

'Poor buggers,' he said.

Through the night and into the next day they worked, swapping places and snatching sleep when they could. When the cisterns echoed and the sand was deep with spilled water they packed up the camels and rode out again. Another night ride, another dusty Bedouin settlement. Their hands blistered from pushing the pumps and nothing in their bellies but smoke and army biscuit.

Four days later, as the shadows lengthened, they rode back to camp.

'Ah,' said Joe dismounting. 'I feel like my grandfather on a cold morning. He was always on about his rheumatics. I thought he was just looking for a way out of the milking but, god, if he felt like this no wonder the old bugger didn't want to squat in the dirt with his hands round a cow's tit.'

‘Yeah, me arse is sore, me hands are buggered and I’m so bloody hungry that even a tin of bully beef is looking good right now,’ said Herbert.

Arthur rubbed the stubble on his cheeks with a dusty hand. ‘I reckon I look like twenty miles of bad road,’ he said. ‘But, I don’t know about this business, you know. There were women and children in those camps.’

Herbert shrugged. ‘Yeah and in Turkey there were farmers, and in France there are whole towns of people.’

‘It’s a war, mate. Not a family picnic,’ Ernest said, rolling a smoke. ‘You’ll get used to it.’

As the weeks went past, Arthur felt the other army pressing closer. Out past the frontline on patrols they often saw traces of the other men. Date seeds spat out on the sand, a well-chewed strip of waxy cheese rind and, in the dark sand around a shallow waterhole, the ground churned to mud by many narrow, unshod hooves.

It seemed to Arthur that every second night he was woken by distant gunfire. He would pull the blanket tighter around himself – the rough wool against his cheek and the smell of cooking fires gone cold. With one finger he’d touch the small photograph in his pocket, thinking about the warm familiar hollow of his own bed, the night-time scritch of a dog’s paw on the verandah and the sun-dried smell of his pillow. While above him the foreign stars arranged themselves in nameless constellations amid the sounds of other men loudly sleeping. And he felt then as small as a man could be and almost unbearably far from home.



The order came from an officer who galloped into camp on a horse that was black with sweat. There were clots of dirty lather along the horse’s neck and its flank was welted from the spur.

‘Saddle up boys,’ the captain said, ‘and make it snappy.’

They had listened for two days to something big to the east of them and watched the clouds of dust and smoke gather, heavy bellied, on the horizon. Arthur thought of the fires that every few years swept up the hills behind his house, the oystery light and the soft grey ceiling of smoke. There was the

smell of burnt earth here too and an extra sharpness that he could taste at the back of his throat. In their lines, the tethered horses shifted and rolled their eyes.

Arthur ran his hands over the little mare's dark coat, checking for sand and easing her skin with his fingers before tightening the girth. He teased her forelock loose from beneath the bridle and pulled at the saddle blanket to straighten it.

'Anyone would think she was your bloody missus, the way you fuss,' said Ernest.

'His mistress more like it,' said Herbert.

'I wouldn't have a bloody mistress if my wife looked like his,' said Ernest. 'Show us the photo of your wife again, Arthur. Go on, be a good lad.'

'Now, now, boys,' said Arthur. 'You heard the captain. It's time to saddle up.'

'That's right,' said Joe. 'Get going. Oh, and Ernest, don't forget to pull that saddle blanket clear of Maud's wither. If she pulls up with a bloody great saddle sore you'll have to ride bareback.'

'With all that bouncing, Ern, you'd be two stone lighter for sure,' said Herbert. 'Which would make your missus pretty peevish, I reckon.'

Out of camp and towards the dark horizon. Arthur let the conversation go round him and the sounds of the battle getting louder like a summer storm with the lightning almost overhead. The 303 rounds strung across his chest grew hot in the sun, and the horses' legs were chalked white from the dust. They were stopped by a large English colonel with maps in his hand and a pipe, and the spice-woody smoke that rose around him made Arthur's stomach feel thick and oily. His mouth was dry and he wondered how the others could talk and laugh like they were still back at camp.

Their regiment gathered in a dried creek bed under the spidery shadows of date palms until they were joined by another regiment and four teams of heavy horses with guns behind.

'Eighteen-pounders,' said Joe. 'Must be pretty serious then.'

'They're turning it on for us, mate,' said Ernest and winked. 'They heard the Tenth was here.'

‘They can’t risk a repeat of the fuckin’ Nek, that’s all,’ said Herbert.

‘Yeah, be a bit of an oversight on their part to lose the other half of the bloody regiment,’ said Joe, ‘wouldn’t it?’ And laughed, though he wasn’t smiling.

Moving out at a trot across the sand, hundreds of horses strung out in a line and the guns clanking along behind. Arthur’s scalp was tight and hot beneath his hat, his feet deep in the irons. Beside him Joe and Herbert were silent and Ernest too, with an unlit smoke between his lips. Through a maze of rocks and wind-flattened dunes they rode, with the sky getting darker and his heart going fast and hard like a pony.

And then they were out in the open and at the curve of the earth he could see muzzle flash and smoke. Bursting clots of fire and the sound like hail on a tin roof. They heeled their horses into canter, fetlock-deep and pitching in the sand, the little mare tugging at the reins despite the going. Through her ears he saw the plain littered with large rocks that he realised, with a clench in his guts, were the bodies of horses and men. There was the smell of dead things in the sun, a terrible sweetness and the taste of iron.

They were ordered to charge for the lee of a small sandhill about two miles up ahead. And they galloped, the horses quick beneath them like a flood. Across the open ground, bent low over the withers. The sand before them ricked by shells and bullets. Arthur sensed men falling, but he was yelling and yelling and spurring the little horse on – his hands scrubbing her neck and his quart pot bouncing wildly on the saddle dees. The wind like salt water in his eyes and the horses mad with running.

At the base of the hill they pulled up. The others dismounted and Arthur gathered up the reins, breathing hard. He wheeled the little mare around, dragging the other three horses behind him. Back across the open plain he rode, choked with dust and his heart going hard enough to sicken his stomach. The horses snorted wetly as they cantered, their necks mapped with veins and their eyes white rimmed – jostling and wild, swinging the stirrup irons against his shins. Two on the left of him and one on the right, just like they’d practised. Around the shell holes and the charred things he couldn’t look at, with his shoulders up around his ears as if his collar could protect his neck from shrapnel.

When he reached the shelter of a rocky outcrop, Arthur pulled up and slid from the little mare, stroking her neck and his stomach just up under his collarbones. He leaned there, feeling like he'd just run five miles in boots, sucking in breaths till he didn't have to, till his heart slowed and his stomach settled back into his belly. There were others there from the regiment and a field ambulance with two men lying still under a blanket of flies on the back. Arthur loosened the girths and tried to drink from his water bottle but his hands were shaking and the water tasted like bile.

Later, as he checked the horses over he wondered for a moment why his saddle was wet until he realised, with a sudden stab of shame, that he'd pissed himself and never even noticed.

Night fell and the battle continued. In the greyness of dawn they passed around some field glasses, taking turns to peer into the thick smoke and shake their heads. There was no water for the horses and the sweat dried to crystals on their skin. When he drank from his own small bottle they nuzzled his hands, whiffing their soft breath at him until he had to turn away.

The sun rose and the heat made the air hard to breathe. Arthur squatted under the broad belly of Ernest's mare, his water bottle empty and his body sore all over like he'd had a fall. All day they waited. Coarse smoke and the noise against his ears like deep water. He rested his head in his hands, breathing the horse sweat instead of the battlefield, the heavy stink of smoke and blood drying in the sun.

And suddenly, at the close of the day, with the heat sideways in their eyes – there was silence. No gunfire, no artillery. The order went around to saddle up.

'This lot have surrendered,' said the captain. 'We've now got three hundred Turkish prisoners to feed and water, so let's get going.'

Arthur's tongue was dry like fired clay. He felt the blood thick inside himself and his heart chugging hard to push it. His fingers were slow on the buckles and he had to blink to see, but when he swung up on the little mare she tossed her head like she was ready and he smiled and wished he had a hand spare to stroke the long, game curve of her neck.

They picked their way across the plain, past the low hill and back towards the Turkish trenches. Arthur saw his first enemy soldier – lying with his face in the sand and a hole black with dried blood and flies where the rest of his head should be. And after that dozens more until he no longer looked but tried to breathe shallow. The horses snorting at the smell. They skirted the trenches and sandbag walls, around the curls of sharp wire and the blackened pits left by shells. Arthur saw guns in a pile, some with flags of light cloth on the barrel, and behind them Ernest, Joe and Herbert watching a clutch of Turkish soldiers in a bunch.

‘Is this all that’s left then?’ he said as he rode near.

‘Yeah,’ said Herbert, nodding, and Arthur saw his face was old and he licked, with a dry tongue, the dark-brown fissures of his lips.

‘The Ninth outflanked them. No chance to resupply, so they ran out of ammo,’ said Ernest, face stubbled and the rims of his eyes red like a welt.

‘It was pretty hot for a while,’ said Herbert. ‘Could’ve gone either way.’

‘Yeah, it was on for young an’ old. And if you look over there, you’ll see their German sergeant,’ Ernest said pointing. ‘When the bullets ran out I reckon he wanted them to charge. Just bayonets.’

‘Across the open ground?’ said Arthur and looked up the long slope to the hill. ‘It would have been suicide, surely.’

‘Yeah, that’s why he’s got a Turkish bayonet between his ribs,’ said Ernest, like it was the best news he’d heard all day.

That night they rode to a creek bed camp where the camel trains waited with water for the horses and the cooks stirred hot stew over campfires. Joe, grey with tiredness and his face pinched, had been quiet the whole ride but offered to help Arthur water the horses. They stood together at the trough while the horses drank, firelight on their sides and the smell of mutton fat cooking.

Joe rubbed his hand over his face and sighed. ‘You know, when we’d been in Turkey for a few months I copped a bout of dysentery. It took me pretty hard – shit and blood coming out of me in even measures. So they took me out to a hospital ship for a week of nurses and two meals a day. By God those nurses were the most beautiful things I’d ever seen,’ he said. ‘Anyway, I

came good after a while and they sent me back to my unit. Turns out something big was going down the next day. Something real big.' Joe spat into the sand.

'So, the next morning, just after four, we all lined up in the dark at the Nek, waiting in a trench while the artillery rained down a storm on old Jacko. And then the shelling just kind of stopped and there was this weird silence and no-one seemed to know what to do. So after about ten minutes of to-ing and fro-ing by the brass they sent one hundred and fifty of our men over the top. The Turks were well dug in not fifty yards away. They were supposed to be further back of course, hiding from the shells, but there was some kind of cock-up with the timing and the ten-minute gap gave them time to get themselves settled back in. Hell, they had so much time they could've had a fuck and a smoke afterwards if they'd wanted. Half of our fellas didn't even make it over the sandbags. Just like shooting fish in a barrel for the Turks – one hundred and fifty men, all dead within seconds.

'And then, because that went so well, they sent another lot of men, and then another and after that another. What a bloody disaster. The bodies were three deep on the sandbags, maybe even more. And some of them fell back into the trench and we couldn't move them, so we stood on them.

'Me, Ern and Herb, we were there, waiting to go in the next lot. Most of the fellas wrote home. I s'pect Ern wrote to his missus and Herb's got a girl too, but you know, I've been on the farm my whole life and there's not a lot of time for socialising. So, do you want to know what I was thinking when we were waiting in that trench? Crouched there in the dark, stinking like shit and vomit? I was making a deal with God. "If you're up there, Jesus," I said. "I promise I'll live a good life once this shit is over – church and everything, but please don't take me before I've had a chance to kiss a girl." And then, just before Herb, Ern and me were going to hop the bags, they called it off.' Joe rubbed his face again. 'And so we went back down the hill, leaving over half the bloody regiment dead behind us.'

Beyond the date palms at the side of the camp the darkness was solid – an edgeless expanse of land and sky.

'When we eventually got off the peninsula and back to Cairo, a few of the boys were keen to check out the brothels but there's no way. Not me. I've

got a deal with Jesus and I'm not going to stuff that up. I mean, you wouldn't throw away a good-luck charm, would you?'

They walked back to the horse lines at the edge of camp, deep shadows and the desert night coming in cold at the edges.

'I don't go in for drinking much,' Joe said, 'but tiredness talks like whisky, doesn't it.' He put his hand on Arthur's shoulder and his thin face was creased and dry. 'I'd appreciate it if maybe you could keep that story under your hat. I'll never hear the end of it if Ern and Herb find out.'

Though Ruth was not the tallest in her class, by the time she was twelve she could look her mother in the eye without taking her heels from the floor. And could circle her wrist – thumb to fingertip, with space to spare. Ruth thought her mother like a splinter of glass, sharp and small, or a shard of stone. She was quick and she shone, her hair smooth like birds' wings, speaking French words in the kitchen and singing in a voice like an instrument that Ruth had heard once on a phonograph – the sound of breath blowing, shivery and light. Until she wasn't and then, her eyes red-edged and her hands all wooden and jerky like puppets. And her breath thick and her hair coming out of its bun like it was blowing indoors.

Their house was old with doorways aslant and brick walls buckled by the years. The curtains had shrunk and faded and in summer when the easterly winds blew in dry off the rocky scarp, a percussion of loose tin played on the roof. Ruth watched her mother through the cracks, sometimes dusting or folding but sometimes sleeping, even in daylight. On those days if her father was gone away or working late outside, Ruth would feed Tom herself. Putting an egg on to boil and toasting the day-old ends of the bread on the hob. And later, if her mother was still in bed, as the day ended she would chase the hens into their pen and tip a tinful of lupins, smooth skinned and hard like boiled sweets, into the nanny goat's trough.

She knew, somehow, that it was because of the war that her father didn't say much and her mother cried and slept the afternoons away. Mary Richmond, who went to school with Ruth, had a nose that bent like a hock and in winter her lips were slicked shiny with snot because of the war. Because her father smelled like a dirty milk churn and his breath like windfall apples in the sun. And Jim Smith's dad who had just one leg and a scar on his face that made his left eye look like it lived in a tent. Who sat on the porch smoking while his mother laboured like a man to put bread on the table. And Anna's husband, William, who was now just a silver-framed

photograph on the mantel in a tilted hat and navy uniform and two pairs of polished shoes unworn at the back of the closet.

Ruth had come to think of the war as a dark and faraway place. A place that made big men – the kinds who had their pictures in the newspaper – angry, but small men like her dad and Mary Richmond's, smaller. It was a place that took things and never gave them back. Uncles, legs, brothers, words. Ruth knew that she must never ask about the war because only big men talked about the war. Small men mostly shared names amongst themselves, with eyes pinched like they were looking through smoke. But Tom didn't know that. He was small and he made sticks into guns and whistling noises with his lips like bullets. One day, sitting at the table for lunch with corned beef and cold boiled potatoes on their plates, he asked their father for a war story. Arthur stared at him across the table, his eyes hard and black at their middle. Ruth felt her tummy roll around behind her belly button and her face hot like she'd been sleeping in the sun. But Tom kept on chewing, his lips half up in a smile.

Arthur said, 'You want a war story, Tom? Here's a story for you,' and put his knife and fork down carefully beside his plate, wiping his hands on his trousers, one by one. 'While we were in Egypt two blokes that I knew went walking along the shore and they found a mine that had washed up overnight. It exploded. Me and the others helped clean up what was left of them. The biggest bit we found was a thumb.'

And in the silence he picked up his cutlery and continued eating, his eyes on the wooden table beside his plate like he was trying to read the grain.

Tom liked books and pictures and singing in church, but Ruth liked things that she could feel with her hands, like horses and goats. In the two-roomed schoolhouse, she shifted around on her hard chair while Mrs Kearney's voice went on and pencils squeaked down slates. She hated the smell of the schoolroom – like a fog of dried spit, bruised fruit and sweat that grimed as it settled. She could smell it as she climbed the three stairs to the schoolroom in the mornings and in the paper every time she turned the pages of a book. When Tom was old enough he would bring books home from school to read, but Ruth didn't like the way they smelled. She liked the

smell of trodden-down grass, and the sun on the sheep yards and the thin, sweet honey of the marris flowering.

One day, in the shade of the tank stand, Philip Williams tried to kiss her. He had to jump because the top of his carroty head reached only to her ears and she saw his freckled lips open like a fish and she laughed and punched him away with a strong hand in the middle of his chest. After that his eyes were like bits of old bottle glass when he looked at her, even though they'd often walked home together throwing pebbles at fence posts and she was sorry she'd ever let him win.

The next day when it rained at lunchtime, with the whole class clustered together under the eaves, he'd said in a loud voice, 'Ruth Watkin's mother is crazy and she's crazy too.' And Ruth felt like she'd breathed hot porridge and wished that instead of helping him back to his feet under the tank stand she'd kicked his thin white shins and gobbled a spit at him the way she practised when she was all alone.

Ruth decided she didn't ever want to get married. Some nights she heard her father yelling in his sleep, the words hard to hear through the walls but his voice as if he was falling. If the nightmares woke Tom, he would tiptoe to her bedroom and wriggle under the covers with her. The bed was worn to a hollow and she would lie on the edge as though half in a furrow, while he pillowed his head on her shoulder and his fine hair like a cobweb on her face. And she would wait for sleep to claim her, lying still, the cold coming in under the edges of the blanket and her neck cramped.

Boys, it seemed to her, could do what they liked. In summer she watched them, dunking and bombing each other from the smooth boulders along the riverbank, shirtless, while she paddled at the edge, cross in a long skirt and blouse. She could ride as well as any of them, she knew, and had long since graduated from the shambling old pony that even her mother could drive to almost any horse that her father had in the yards.

Sometimes, after the nights when her father's sobs threaded themselves through her dreams, he would wake her early with a brief hand on her shoulder and she would stumble into the dark, buckling her boots with cold sluggish fingers and find, in the grey predawn, two horses tethered and waiting. She would swing up and follow him, down the driveway and along the creek bed, the horses skittering at shadows and their breath steam rising

with the ground until the paddocks finished and the scrub began. Up the narrow cattle tracks on the scarp, the kangaroo thorn sharp through her trousers. Disturbing rabbits and small birds as they went, feeling the horses scrabbling, steep, through the pea gravel, their shoulders big and the reins slack on their necks. At the top her father would rein in and they would let the horses blow as the sun rose, pinking the valley below them, until they could see their house – the small roof and the horse yards and the darker loam of the orchard behind.

Her father never said anything to her but looked silently down into the valley with a face like a stomach-ache.

Afterwards, Ruth knew enough to wipe the dirt from her fingers onto her shirt and yawn as though she had just risen. At breakfast time the oatmeal was hot and salty with a small melt of butter in the centre and a teapot with a wire handle in the middle of the table. Her father ate and drank in silence and quickly, following each mouthful of porridge with black tea. Ruth had to eat politely or her mother would frown and her bowl was almost always half filled as her father's back disappeared out the door.

It was Ruth's job to feed the cats that lived half wild in the hay shed each morning. Meat trimmings and old milk on a dented tin plate that rocked as they ate. They jostled and hissed, snarling at her and each other, and later, when she went back for the plate, she found small fur scraps like dandelion fluff on the ground. The toms had broad heads and thick necks ridged by scars and smelled like the back fence of the local hotel. Ruth was brisk with them and scattered them with her boots if they hissed at her, but they frightened her mother, who once had tried to tame them. Even the kittens would claw a dab of mutton fat from between held-out fingers faster than a blink, leaving nothing but a thin white scratch that slowly beaded blood along its length.

Her mother's dog, Beau, was wary of the cats. Sometimes he followed their plate out to the sheds, but even with drool ribbons dangling on his bottom jaw, he never chased them from their meal. Instead he watched them with sideways eyes, cocking his leg on a fence post or sniffing a clump of capeweed and only ambling off when he was sure they had finished.

Her mother loved the dog, Ruth thought, as though he were a child. He trailed her like a stepped-in hem but would roll in the damp edges of dead things and afterbirth until he smelled so bad that even she could no longer touch him. Then she would shower him in buckets with the special soap she kept for herself until his patches were white and he smelled like lavender. With a thick scarf of fur around his shoulders and a fringed tail, he looked like a small sheep dog. But he had the bowed legs of an occasional table or a much smaller dog and his head was flat across the top as though he had run into something.

Her mother had found him and his litter mates dumped on the roadside on the wettest day of the year. Though she knew she had been in school at the time, Ruth had heard the story so many times, she could almost see it. Four inches of rain and the cart wheels sinking well past their rims and thick mud to the horse's knees. And there, on the side of the road where the gravel thinned and the weeds spread sideways, was a chaff bag. Not something to notice usually but her mother saw it move and she had grabbed at Arthur's arm so hard that he had reined in the horses before he had realised why. The other pups were still and cold, their milky eyes stiffly open but Beau, though weak, sucked at her finger, and when she heard him whimper over the wind she knew, her mother said, that he would live.

For weeks she fed him on nanny goat milk, warmed through and dripped from the edge of a rag. When he was small he slept on her lap until he grew so long that his head dangled beside her knees. Some evenings, then, they would lie together on the rug beside the fire. Tom on his stomach with a book between his elbows and Ruth with her head on the dog's back looking up at the cobwebs in the rafters, surrounded by the smell of dog and the sweet clean scent of her mother's soap.

On an autumn day that was apple crisp and cloudless, Arthur realised that he had been home from the war for seven years. He wasn't one for anniversaries but as he counted the years gone past on his fingers, he breathed out hard through his nose, feeling like something had been taken from him. *It is what it is*, he said to himself. *It is what it is*.

The day before he had sold a wall-eyed brumby mare for a pound more than she was worth and had smiled to himself at the roachy back of her jibbing down the driveway. Afterwards he'd made tea in the kitchen, stirring in extra sugar. Still warm for the money in his pocket and the washed blue sky at the corner of the window. And had cut himself a thick slice of cake and spooned some curdy cheese on the top of it, almost whistling for the sharp goat smell and the cream on his tongue.

Helen was round the side of the house, young Tom at her heels, prising the lid from a wooden crate. Arthur had carried his tea and cake out the garden gate and, from a sawn-off stump had watched a family of magpies haggling over insects at the grassy edges of the garden.

As he was draining his mug, Tom came running through the garden. Just waist-height, short pants, no shoes and wearing a man's jacket that reached below his skinny knees. Arthur blinked hard. Like a greatcoat meant for a much larger man, the jacket gaped, the fabric was dull and earth-coloured. And as his chest rose, he was back in a village in Palestine and he could smell smoke and burning, and the tea and cake curdled in his throat. He could hear men laughing and goats bleating and his heart was under his collarbones and it was cold all around him, like the sun was suddenly gone away.

All the months and years were gone away too. He was back there, in the dry desert shadows and the firelight, his hands wet with sweat and his mouth wide for each breath.

Arthur pitched to his feet, the mug falling from his hand onto the grass and his knees lamb-loose. He strode across to Tom, watching his small, laughing face – and he caught the jacket by the collar, swiped it off and threw it to the ground.

‘Don’t you ever,’ he yelled. ‘Don’t you.’ Shouting, and the veins in his neck and his mouth all hot and spitting. ‘Just don’t.’

Arthur saw Tom’s lip shake and his cheeks suddenly white as he backed away. And he saw the wool of his sweater fraying thin at the collar, his blue eyes glassy with fright and the jacket on the grass at his feet. But his heart was going hard and his stomach heavy between his hips.

‘Helen! Helen!’ he shouted and he marched up the grass, his hands all around him and his thighs heavy with the fear going out and his fingertips burning.

Helen was on the verandah with the crate unpacked at her feet and he saw men’s clothes and a photo in a frame and pages of lines that he knew were music. He looked at her, a shirt held up to her face and her thin shoulders bowed.

But the feeling was in him like burning, like salt in his lungs and he wanted to hit something or run away.

‘For godsake, Helen. What’s going on?’

She looked at him and her cheeks were hollow with hurt and he saw the stalk of her neck drooping like a flower too long in a vase.

‘My father’s things,’ she said and her voice was very small. ‘My mother sent them, when you were away. I don’t know why I thought today would be the day to go through them. I just don’t know.’ She turned away holding the shirt against herself.

He was high up on the anger, like bodysurfing, and he couldn’t stop. ‘Why would you let the boy wear that jacket?’

‘Why?’ she said through the sadness. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Tom, he was wearing that jacket and it ... And I mean.’ And then he was down the other side of it and he looked at her and she looked at him, the shirt in her hands and he could see that she’d been crying. He was suddenly tired and he knew that there was something he should say and he opened his mouth and closed it again and licked his papery lips.

'I don't know, Helen. I can't explain it,' he said turning away across the grass.

'Arthur,' she said. 'You could try. At least try.'

'You wouldn't understand,' he said over his shoulder.

He walked slowly till he was out of sight and in the long grass behind the yards he sat down. So tired the ground shifted under him and his legs were bloodless. He was empty.

Christ, he said to himself and shook his head. There were gaps in the fence of him and the stock slipping through them one by one.



The 10th Light Horse had marched the last thirty miles to El Arish at night, the brigade strung out like beads, on a road made of rabbit mesh pegged to the ground. The horses making quick time, necks swinging and the light clink of their shoes on the wire. The camels shuffling through the sand beside them – fat-footed, the thick, goaty smell of them strong in the dark cold air.

The night was navy blue and moonless. Arthur turned the collar of his new coat up against the cold and swapped his hands from rein to pocket every few minutes. The wool was coarse against his face. He smelled the lanolin still faintly in the cloth and remembered the smell of sun on the sheep yards and him still in short pants, plucking creamy tufts of fleece from splits in the jarrah rails. His father's hands were big then, and broad across, the backs of them notched and seamed with work. He remembered them sharing sandwiches in the shade and he smiled in the darkness and could almost taste his mother's nubbly bread soaked through with mutton dripping.

The major ordered them to remain cigarette-less and silent. The town, when they reached it, was a dark huddle of buildings between a set of low sand dunes and the sea. They fenced themselves along the ridge in single file – the briny wind and their weary horses standing cock legged in the sand. Arthur shifted on the stiff leather seat of his saddle, worked his toes inside his boots and yawned. He could sense the men and horses stretching away

on either side of him, but the pre-dawn darkness was solid as a wall and he could barely see the little mare's ears.

He closed his eyes and listened to the hiss and rustle of the sea. The next time he looked, he could see light feathering up behind the hills to the east, the ridgeline black and the darkened silhouettes of men on horses. The dawn arrived in citrus streaks and the men on either side of him appeared one by one. Grey at first and later, as the sun broke from behind the hill, fully fledged with colour. Hundreds of horsemen in a ring around the town and the horses blowing clouds of cold morning steam with barely a bird to break the silence. He felt a shiver in his belly.

Below them the town seemed built from dice, the houses boxy and flat roofed with small square windows set deep in the stone. He could see a minaret rising above the town and a rock-edged well. Cooking smoke rose and with it the local spice, like earth on his tongue or the smell of rain on a hot summer paddock. A small boy rode a donkey across the sand. One of the horses neighed and the boy looked upwards, still, with his teeth showing white in his open mouth. Then he drummed his heels against the donkey's ribs, his limbs like kindling, and the ewe-necked donkey shambled off across the sand.

Beside him Ernest whispered, 'Gone to tell his mum, I reckon. She'll probably give him a hiding for telling lies.' And he shook his head, smiling. 'But I swear it's true, Mum. There's five hundred men on horses surrounding the town.'

As the sun rose, the village woke. The people looked up, along the ridge at the horses standing and the horsemen with rifles at hand and the sun at their backs. The women went to the well with babies in their arms or at their feet, watching the hills. The men, dark-haired and robed, leaned in doorways smoking, looking, silver daggers on their belts. And Arthur looked down at them and in the morning light the houses below seemed small and the people like dolls, or drawings done in ink.

'Check out that fella,' Ernest whispered, pointing to a man with a white cloth turbanned about his head. 'I reckon he's the mayor, or something.' And he nodded. 'See, he's got a bigger dagger and a nice clean hat to make him look important.'

Just a little while later their lieutenant rode into the town and was met by the same man. 'Told you so,' said Ernest. 'It was the hat that gave him away.'

'Looks like the Turks have already pissed off,' said Herbert, who was next along. 'Except for that poor fella,' he said and pointed to a Turkish soldier, barefoot and tied to a palm in the square.

'That's a house-warming gift, that is,' said Ernest. 'Just to prove they never collaborated with the Turks.'

'Yeah and if the boot was on the other foot,' said Herbert, 'it would be one of our boys they'd be giving to the Turks.'

'Still, this looks like an alright place to camp and not a single shot fired to take it,' said Arthur. He pointed to the fishing boats drawn up on the beach. 'Maybe they'll even give us some fish for tea. It'd be a nice change from bully beef and biscuits.'

In the late morning they made camp in a grove of palm trees, as big around as a man's waist. Supplies arrived by camel train and the canvas tents rose like mushrooms after rain. Local men with baskets of sticky dates and dried fish came to trade. Arthur bought three oranges and the sharp sweetness scoured the inside of his cheeks, the juice sticky on his hands.

The horses were worn thin with travelling and they slept in their lines in daylight, stretched out like they were pegged to the ground while the camp went on around them. Arthur hated to see them looking poor, their flanks hollow and the hipbones sharp beneath the skin. He scrounged for extra feed and took them to the canvas troughs between feeds, scratching their bony shoulders as they drank. Craving grass, some of the regiment's horses had begun to eat sand. Arthur had seen them die from it, tight with gas and groaning, so he watched theirs like a mother and kept the nosebags on them long after they'd finished eating.

Joe could nail a decent shoe on if he tried and Herbert could do it if he had to, but Ernest had two left hands on the hammer and no patience to learn. So Arthur kept their section shod, happy at the forge with the flat-edged nails in his mouth and the smell of hot hoof and steel. He was never easy with a rifle and, though he had bagged rabbits for his mother as a boy, he never liked it much for sport. Joe could break his rifle down and clean it in the dark, but Arthur knew horses and he was happy with that.

His dad had worked the country with a pair of heavy horses. Arthur would take lunch out on his pony, watching the tines roll through the loam and the long straight furrows scrolling back across the paddocks. His father's hands were always quiet on the reins and the team would skirt a stump with just a word, their short tails swinging in unison. On cold winter mornings, they snorted at shadows, lifting their knees like circus horses and his father would rub their necks and talk to them like his own father had done until they settled into their collars, the traces running straight and true behind them. His dad would say that the horse is always smarter than the man who holds the reins, and Arthur knew that fact to be true.

With just a day for rest the regiment saddled up again and rode for Magdhaba. They followed the beds of dried-up creeks along, hooves ringing on the loose stones – drawing the dust up out of the ground like smoke. The Turks were well dug in around the town in trenches and redoubts ringed with wire. Arthur left Joe, Ernest and Herbert in a gully and took their horses back to the scant cover of a copse of palm trees and thornbushes behind a low hill. All day he heard the sound of heavy fighting, and the little mare shook her head up and down, rattling the bit against her teeth.

In the afternoon they were ordered to bring the horses back up to the front and they mounted, dodging the shells and keeping their heads below the top of the ridge. In the narrow gully where they gathered, the horses stirred and jostled, bumping each other and the sweat on their shoulders like a stain. The rest of the regiment fell back and mounted up. The order came to fix bayonets. Arthur's hands were slick with sweat and slipping on the barrel. He swore. Joe leaned across his horse's neck and helped him fix it into place.

'It'll be okay,' said Joe and his long face was kind.

Arthur felt the hard press of Joe's horse against his thigh. He took a breath.

They lined up and the order came to charge and they yelled and spurred the horses, up over the sides of the gully and the shrapnel like grey rain around them and the smell of the battlefield in the front of his face like a fist. He was over the little mare's neck with the rifle in his hand, so fast he could see the black flash of her knees beneath him. The ground was rough with

rocks and potholed. He jammed his boots home in the irons and gave the mare her head. They galloped at a trench and he felt her wither lift as she jumped and landed running. The pale oval of faces below him a blur and the sound of his own voice, yelling. Over another trench and then buildings, coming up fast, and narrow streets paved with rock.

They pulled up. He couldn't see Joe and the others so he stayed with a group of men from his regiment, catching their horses as they dismounted. In the stony streets, the noise was bigger than he could ever have imagined and he had to keep his mouth open to ease the awful pressure in his ears.

Around him the men fought like baited dogs, their lips drawn back from their teeth. Yelling and blood to the elbow from the bayonet. He saw men die. Men he'd shared a billy with, crumpled and bleeding. And others still fighting. He watched as Don, whose wife sent him sweet biscuits in a tin, cut a man's throat with his bayonet and then shot him in the face.

And, near the end, with the last of the light cutting sideways through the clouds of smoke, he saw a soldier stagger from a building, with his hands across his belly and silvery loops of gut like sausage casings slipping through his fingers onto the street.

Arthur wasn't a praying man but he prayed then. Not for his own life because he saw, in a single sharp moment, that one man's life meant nothing amongst so many. And that death was not a matter of right or wrong, good or bad, but simply chance. A mistimed step, a single bullet turned by the wind, a sandbag only partly filled. No. He prayed that if he made it home he could turn his back on the war. That one day, when all of this was over, the silvery light of afternoon reflected in the eyes of his children would not forever summon the sounds of men dying and the dark and terrible smell of blood.

On the Cottesloe pier, dried fish scales gathered in the cracks between planks, shimmery in the morning light. The smell of baitfish and tar. Helen, who was nine, held her father's hand and watched the water beneath the boards, listening to her best boots on the planks and the rustle of her Sunday skirt. Her mother's blue parasol floated like a buoy above the crowd ahead of them and Helen held her father's hand in both of hers.

Helen noticed a gull floating beside the pier and smiled at the perfect white dome of his chest and his dangling orange legs. When she looked back down the pier towards the shore, it was doll-house small and the water shadowed beneath them a deep and sullen green. She held her father's hand tightly as three boys ran past and the vibrations of their running steps shook the planks beneath her feet.

The *Zephyr* was snug against the end of the pier. There were two decks filled with passengers and a narrow gangway over the water to cross. Helen's father went first with both hands behind his back so she could hold them. The water was a long way down. Helen imagined falling, legs over arms, fast enough to suck the air out of her and the sudden shock of cold against her skin. She shivered and her father said over his shoulder, 'Can you see Aunty Elizabeth or Anna and Richard yet, Helen?' But the boat was crowded with adults and all she could see was linen and serge, belt buckles and pleated cotton.

Her cousins, when they found them on the top deck, were arguing, so Helen closed her fingers around the hem of her father's jacket and watched the pier shrink as the *Zephyr* moved out to sea. Behind them a drift of engine smoke and a slow dwindling wake. Ahead of them, Rottnest Island – a shifting mirage of low sand patched with grey-green scrub.

Even though the day was warm, on the ocean a cool wind pulled her hair out of its ribbon and she was glad, for once, that her mother had insisted she carry a shawl. The sea was early-morning still, just the swell drawn across it

in lines of deeper blue. The deck fell and rose in graceful gentle arcs and Helen imagined that this must be what riding a horse was like, an easy rolling and the wind pricking your skin.

The island rose out of the ocean in hazy shades of limestone, low, and the curve of the bay like open arms. Helen smiled for the light through the shallow water, so clear she could see the ridges in the sand left by the tide. And the abundance of blue. They walked down the jetty to the island and the crowd around her seemed drab and poor amongst so much brightness.

Aunt Elizabeth had brought a picnic and they spread the cloth on a bed of fallen pine needles. There were sandwiches without crusts, cakes iced in pink and white, and lemonade in a glass bottle with a rubber stopper. Helen felt her chest tight with happiness, her cousins beside her and the clean smell of pine cones in the sun. As they were packing up their lunch they stopped to watch a pelican land on the bay, the impossible largeness of its wide, grey wings and diamonds of sea spray beneath its feet.

They walked up wooden steps to a lighthouse resting on the edge of the island. Her father pointed out to sea and said, 'Next stop Africa.' And here, on the west side of the island, the water did seem deeper and more endless. Helen was glad she couldn't swim and wouldn't bathe with her cousins who were already on the sand in their woollen swimming costumes, splashing each other and kicking up sand.

Helen looked down at the rock pools close to the shore, fringed with reef, and imagined mermaids with sinuous tails swimming, their hair drifting like kelp behind them. She pictured them parting glittering shoals of fish with their smooth hands and gliding silently through water as clear as new glass. When she lay on the bottom of her bath, the world was quiet and, if she opened her eyes under the water, the edges soft and silver. At school, or when her mother yelled, she sometimes imagined herself as a mermaid, gently rocked by the cool tide, her skin like pearls and the endless silence of the ocean.

'Did you see any mermaids when you were bathing?' she said to her cousins who were shivering on the sand.

'Mermaids?' said Richard. 'There's no such thing.'

Her cousin Anna pushed her brother. 'Richard ...' she warned.

‘What?’ said Richard. ‘Mermaids are just for babies, like fairies and Father Christmas.’

‘Richard!’ said Anna. She smiled at Helen. ‘We didn’t see any mermaids at all. But I wish we had.’

Helen looked out to sea, feeling the sharpness of tears under her eyelids. ‘It’s okay, Anna. I know they’re not real,’ she said.

Later, they all walked to the salt lakes, the reflections of seabirds sharp on the still surface and the heavy smell of rot and stagnant water. Then back to the settlement where they played on the shoreline, heaping the wet sand into piles and smoothing it with their palms. Because of the mermaids, Richard found a shell and gave it to her, the inside as smooth and pink as baby’s cheeks. Helen took it without smiling, wiping it carefully and wrapping it in her handkerchief to keep.

Just as they were packing up for the trip home, Helen heard a clinking sound like a horse in harness and the soft thud of many bare feet on the ground. She looked up. A group of Aboriginal prisoners were walking back to the Rottnest prison for the night. An overseer with a sunburned face walked beside them, a long whip curled in his hand. Three across they walked, shackled from neck to neck and even from a distance she could see the steel collars rubbing the soft skin raw. They were thin and worn, the bones of their shoulders showing and their ribs like barrel hoops above faded cotton trousers. They were broken inside she could see, their eyes already dead.

Helen felt her chest constrict and she looked up at the adults on the beach, the breath in her sharp and hard. Her mother frowned, pulled a fan from her bag, snapped it open with a quick wrist and turned away, fanning. Her father was across the wet sand quickly and he took her shoulders and his jacket smelled like home and she closed her eyes and tried to breathe around the pain on the dark men’s faces and the sadness that settled inside her like a seed.

The breeze came up on the way home, pulling the sea to peaks and the narrow boat pitched and Helen kneeled at the rail, crying. She was sick as they entered Fremantle Harbour, leaving a long pink and white slick on the sea. She closed her eyes against the cold wind and saw the men walking, and

her own neck felt tight and sore. Her father stroked her hair and above the sound of the engine turning she heard the clink of chains and the soft thud of many bare feet on the ground.

‘It’s alright,’ he said kneeling, holding her head against his chest. ‘Everything’s going to be alright.’

But she knew, for the first time, that he was wrong.



Helen picked up the blanket from the floor like she did every morning before breakfast. Folding it over and laying it across the bottom of the bed as if ready for a cold evening, and not for her husband, who slept each night on the wooden boards of their room rather than beside her.

The smell of him was in the blanket and she held it to her face for a moment. Cut grass, hard work and shaving soap. She breathed it in and shivered a little with the wool against her skin. He’d been home for twelve years and yet he seemed further away now than when he’d been in Egypt. At least he’d written then. Not much, or often but there were words. Dirt smudged, hurried and the pen unfamiliar in his work-hard hand. But words.

The last letter had come from Egypt just months before the war ended. She had opened it standing outside the post office and she remembered how the pen strokes pierced the page. The nib through the paper in places and the ink blotted and smudged with rain. Just *Dear Helen* written over and over. In the folds of the letter there was sand, powder fine, that trickled out as she opened it, falling at her feet and the white grains dusting the worn brown leather of her shoes.

In 1915 when she’d waved him goodbye at the Guildford station, he had looked at her like there was nothing else he wanted to see. With his blue eyes on hers and the crowds pressed hard around them, he had run the backs of his fingers slowly along her arm and her breath was shallow, her stomach tight.

In 1919, on the day he returned, he had taken her wrist in his hand and shuddered, his eyes everywhere but on her face.

Helen sighed and smoothed the blanket across the bottom of the bed.

When he first came home they had shared a bed and sometimes, just sometimes, in the close dark, in the silence of night and the satiny touch of skin against skin, they had found the ease that was once between them. One night, more than a year after he'd returned, when she was pregnant with Tom and her belly was big, her breasts veined and heavy, he had unwound her long hair from its bedtime plait and held it to his face like he was praying. And she remembered how, in the light of the half-moon, his eyes were so glassy that she had wondered for a moment if he was crying.

Then, when Tom was still small, she'd felt again the early morning sickness, the quick-rising dizziness and her underclothes like they were starched against the tenderness of her breasts. One night she'd taken his hand and laid it against the gentle rise between her hips and he had fallen asleep there with his hand fanned out across the new life inside her, his face against her neck and his fingers twined in her hair.

But that life, like the one after it and the one after that, had ended in thick clots of dark red blood that doubled her over and soaked the folded squares of fabric that she held between her legs. The third time, when the bleeding seemed endless, she had sent Ruth for Mrs Pritchard, stout and calm, who had rubbed her back and torn more old sheets for the blood and waved Arthur away at the door, *nothing for you here, son*. But Arthur had seen her, doubled over in the kitchen, her skirt bloodied, and had bent down and gathered her in his arms. He whispered softly, like he did to a frightened horse, his breath against her cheek and he laid her on the bed. And she remembered how his face was grey and shone with sweat and how, though the day was fine, he had shivered like it was raining.

That night he had taken the spare blanket from the cupboard and slept beside the bed. And he had done it every night since. In the first winter, with the drafts under the door and the old house creaking and damp, she had waited for him to come to her, had reached down from the bed and touched his shoulder, but he had just pulled the blanket tighter and turned his face away.

Helen turned her back on the bed and, in the kitchen, began the bread. She scooped flour from a sack into a bowl and worked it to dough. Then up-ended it onto the kitchen table, folding and pushing until it bounced beneath her fingertips, the surface smooth. She put it into a pan, covered it

with a damp cloth and carried it outside to rise. She remembered when this had seemed a little like magic. The firm, square loaves, brown and hollow sounding, hot from the oven and the smell through the house every afternoon. But now, it was just another chore and she was heavy and at night she dreamed of the dark river, her chest cold like the water was already over her head.

On the verandah, by the water tank, where Arthur stood to shave each morning, was a small mirror wired to the wall and his razor hanging on a bent nail beside. She paused to look at her reflection and frowned, sallow in the glass and lines starting beside her mouth.

The mirror was old and the silvered back peeling off in places – leaving gaps in her reflection, and she moved her face, watching as first one eye, then the other disappeared. Still watching her face, she pulled the pins from her hair, shaking it out so that it hung beside her cheeks in thick curtains. With her long hair loose, her reflection filled the mirror and she frowned.

She reached for Arthur's razor, testing it for sharpness on her thumb as she had seen him do. In the mirror it looked like a knife in her hands. Then she gathered a handful of her hair and pulled it tight, drawing the razor back and forth an inch from her head until the hair came away in her hands. The hair at the back of her head was harder to cut and she nicked her scalp when the razor slipped, looking at the smear of blood on the razor for a moment before carefully wiping it onto her skirt.

When she was finished the pile of hair at her feet reached her ankles. Dark-brown hair in thick strands, half curled. She toed the pile with her shoe and hung the razor back in place on its nail. The back of her neck was cool above her collar. She ran her fingers through her tufty hair. In the mirror her face was smaller without the hair around it, and if she stepped back she could make more of it disappear into the dark places in the glass.

Jerusalem was shadowed when they entered, sewer-smelling. They rode through the narrow streets, ragged and cold, breathing shallow and the suck of greasy mud under the horse's feet.

'This is where Jesus died,' said Herbert.

'Dysentery, I bet,' said Ernest pulling a face at the smell.

'You silly bugger,' said Herbert. 'Don't you remember Sunday school? He was crucified here. Dragged his cross through these streets and died on one of those hills.'

'Yeah I reckon the nuns managed to beat that much into me. But I'm telling you, if I had to stay here for any length of time, I'd bloody well nail myself up,' said Ernest and held his arms out wide. 'Here mate,' he said in a high voice. 'Pass us up that hammer and some of them big, long nails. I've had enough of this freezing cold shithole. Stoke up the stove for me, Daddy, I'll be home tomorrow.'

'Don't talk like that when you meet my mum, will ya?' laughed Herbert. 'She's bloody handy with the strap when it comes to blasphemy.'

'Well, it's not blasphemy to say it's bloody cold,' said Joe. 'I've got smaller balls than a mouse right now. And the locals don't seem too overjoyed to see us either.'

'That's because they were hoping to get conquered by men with much bigger balls,' said Ernest. 'Not us shrunken little fellas who are obviously in need of a bath and a good feed.'

'And I don't suppose they're completely convinced that we're going to be here for good,' said Herbert. 'The hills around us are still bloody full of Turks, and well dug in they are too. This isn't over yet, is it?'

'There's a bit yet to come, I reckon,' said Arthur. 'But I think we'll be right when we're in Jerusalem. Neither side wants to see it shelled, so it'll be the poor bastards outside the walls that'll cop it tonight.'

Two days later they left the city behind and made their way into the stony hills. Climbing and scrambling up the steep paths in single file, dismounted in places and the horses skating along behind, their shoes picking sparks off the rock.

It began to rain, a cold sleeted drizzle that continued day and night. They followed the Turks through the hills, watchful and ready, but their hands were raw from falling on the slippery rock and the horses' fetlocks soft like bruised apples from the strain of always climbing. Down on the plain, the wagons sank into the mud and though the big horses strained into their collars, flanks welted from the whip, there were nights when they camped without food.

Arthur rolled himself in his groundsheet and tried to sleep with his head pillowed on the sodden leather of his saddle. His guts were tight with hunger and the marrow of his bones ached with cold. Ernest, small and lightly fleshed, took it the hardest. His lips were always blue and it seemed to Arthur that his skin shrank, drawing tighter to his skull and his eyes sitting deep in their sockets.

One night as they were trying to sleep, Ernest began to laugh.

'What's up mate?' said Arthur.

'Do you know what the date is?' said Ernest.

'Sometime in December, I reckon,' said Joe after a pause.

'It's Christmas Eve, you bastards,' said Ernest. 'Merry fucking Christmas.'

'Merry fucking Christmas to you too,' said Herbert. 'Our third Christmas away from home.'

'Christ what I wouldn't give to be back there now,' said Ernest and coughed. 'I never thought I'd miss it. But, oh god. I miss it.'

'There's lots of things I miss, and don't get me wrong, I can't wait to get out of here,' said Joe. 'But Christmas ... I'd take any other day. All those songs and stuff at church. And you've got your jacket on even though it's one hundred degrees in the waterbag.'

Herbert laughed. 'And that aunt that you see once a year who gets into the port and kisses you and her beard's longer than Arthur's after a two-week stint of not shaving.'

‘No boys, you’re wrong I’m afraid,’ said Ernest. ‘There’s nothing like Christmas,’ and to Arthur it seemed like he was smiling in the darkness. ‘Tomorrow morning back at home, the kids’ll wake up early and get into their stockings. And the missus will lie in bed and listen to them laugh. Then she’ll get up and get the lunch ready before church – put the bird in a tray and the peeled potatoes in a bucket with a lump of coal. She’ll put a beer in the ice chest for her dad, and get the sherry glasses out for her sister and herself and rub them up all shiny.

‘At church the girls will have their good hats on and, let me tell you, the singing never sounds as good as it does at the Christmas service. And for once the sermon won’t make you squirm in your seat, it’s all peace on earth and, from where I’m sitting, that doesn’t seem like such a bloody terrible idea.

‘By lunchtime, it’ll be hot in the house, what with the oven on and all the people in it, but the missus’ll have it looking just nice with cards strung up on the mantel and a branch or something that she’s decorated with the kids.

‘And later on in the arvo when it’s cooled down a bit, they’ll all go down to this flat bit of sand by the river and they’ll play cricket and the dog’ll get the ball and everyone will yell and chase it, but it won’t matter, really. Because everyone’s too stuffed from lunch to run around much.

‘And, I fucking promise you, boys, that when this is all over I’ll never whinge about any of it ever again. I’m going to sit at that table and lick my plate clean – all the gravy and the scrag ends of the bird and the pudding afterwards. I’ll lick it up and I’ll sit there in that hothouse with my hands on my belly and I’ll drink a beer and watch the kids with my missus next to me and I’ll be the happiest man in the whole bloody world.’

Arthur shifted his hip against a rock and smiled.

‘Christ, that sounds just beaut,’ said Joe.

‘Sure does,’ said Herbert. ‘Sounds to me like we’re going to have to hope your wife is happy to have a few more banged-up diggers at the table, licking her plates and drinking her beer.’

‘She’d love that,’ said Ernest. ‘She’ll reckon you boys are bonzer. Like I do.’

Herbert sighed. ‘Now we’ve just got to convince the rest of the world to quit on this bloody war so we can all go home.’

Arthur went to sleep that night with mud in his ears and his feet still wet inside his boots. When he woke up, the dawn light was sharp over the hills and he saw on the plain below them a wagon slipping through the mud on its way to their camp. Later that morning when it arrived there were hot meals for all of them and a rum ration that burnt its way past the cold, leaving him light-headed. But most importantly, after four months of nothing there was mail – four envelopes with Helen’s careful print and a parcel with some wobbly knitted socks and a lopsided scarf in navy blue wool.

He held it to his face knowing that the last thing to touch it were her hands. Rubbing his thumb over the rough yarn and smiling at the gaps and the knots in the stitches. He saw her pale hands and the smooth wooden needles that had once been his mother’s. And suddenly his face was hot and his eyes stinging like there was a cold wind in them. He coughed and walked over to the horse lines, draping his arm over the little mare’s back, feeling her warmth through his coat, against the heavy beating of his heart.



Being shot, Arthur thought later, was like being kicked by a horse. The speed of it and your own weak smallness. He was running, firing and then all of a sudden his face was in the sand and his fingers round his leg like a rabbit trap. Panting, *oh god oh god*, trying to see through the smoke haze with the Turkish twelve pounders like a hammer in his head and the cold-water pain-sweat down inside his shirt.

And then the order came to fall back and he picked up his 303 and ran with one hand on his thigh and there was blood in his boot and with his fingers he could feel the edge of something meaty, hot and wet. But his foot worked and he ran, through the sand, up over a ridge back towards the horses.

Joe steadied the little mare by the bridle as Arthur mounted and waved him away, out past the cactus hedges and the trampled, shell-holed gardens till he could see the long lines of men and horses in haphazard lines heading away across the plain.

He caught up with the field ambulance after a couple of miles. The thick briny smell of it – he couldn't look, the broken men weeping, calling out, and the thick-legged horses straining to turn the wheels in the sand. Camels with cacolet stretchers strapped either side jolted along behind and Arthur, reining in the little mare, his heart going all funny and his head full of air nearly wheeled her away, but the blood was still coming out between his fingers and his boot seemed full of it and he had started to wonder just how many bootfuls of blood there were in a man.

The convoy halted and a British medical officer climbed down from his seat, smiling. His face was splotched with blood, his sleeves rolled back and his arms to the elbow caked with brown. Arthur noticed small lumps of meat caught in the thick hairs of his arms and watched as he drew on his cigarette, his lips around the scab-coloured end of it.

Arthur dismounted and swayed on the sand, the flies like a crown around his head.

'Ah yes,' said the man in an officer's voice, waving his cigarette, gesturing for Arthur to come closer.

The officer turned to the groaning men in the cart behind him. 'I say, keep it down a little, chaps,' he said, and then turned back to Arthur. 'It's always their mothers they cry for,' he shrugged, his brown seamed palms held upwards. 'Always their mothers. When really, what good is your mother when your leg's been blown off? Just a glorified scratch,' he added, pointing to Arthur's thigh with his cigarette. 'All rather superficial, nothing to write home about I'm afraid. Some muscle, some subcutaneous fat and a bit of skin absent without leave. A spot of carbolic acid and some gauze and you'll be back to your best in no time.'

Arthur gasped when the antiseptic splashed his thigh, like a bee sting or a paper wasp and a hot sick feeling in his throat. 'Keep a hold of your balls there, son,' said the officer, shaking his head. 'It's just a scratch.' And he climbed back onto his seat beside the wagon driver who cracked a whip on the hip of the lead horse, rocking the wagon like a boat through swell.

'By the way,' said the officer as they jolted past. 'If the wound goes black or you can't feel your toes, that would be poor form. Poor form indeed.' He turned away from the wind to light another cigarette, cupping his hand around the small flame. Arthur stood in the sand, the blood drying to

cardboard on his breeches. 'Off you go then,' said the officer waving his hand. 'Off you go.'



Ten months later they rode from Saronia to the springs of Lejjun in twenty-two hours with dry canteens and only tibbin for the horses – hard now like thoroughbreds, all of them, and the men too after so many years of war. Two full nights without sleep, just empty plains and the stars piled up high around them. Arthur rocked in his saddle like the rest, fever dreaming with his eyes open – the shadows of ancient cities rising up out of the dust and into the dark. He saw city walls and castles, chalk white and silent. Ghost trees in rows, their boughs dragged down with smoke-coloured fruit. And then a cough from a man behind or someone would spit and they were gone, just night shadows and his eyes gone dry from staring.

They made Nazareth at dawn and watered the horses. The little mare, as tired as she was, still pinned her ears at a passing camel, wrinkling her nose and her eyes like almonds. Arthur laughed and scratched her neck, slipping the nosebag over her head.

'Okay,' he said. 'I'm not that fond of them either.'

'Talking to yourself again, mate,' said Ernest.

'To the mare,' said Arthur, giving her neck another scratch. 'She speaks less shit than you blokes.'

'Yeah, alright but can she sing like me?' He walked off singing, his dry voice like a log being dragged over gravel. 'It's a long, long way to Tipperary ...'

Arthur lay down in the shade with his head on his saddle and slept. He was used to two nights of nothing and then the heavy sleep like fainting. Hearing the camp go on around him and the light sliding under his eyelids but the hours of lost sleep holding him under like a fist. He used to wish for home but home was too faraway now. What he wanted most was shade, a full canteen and a canvas sack of oats for the mare.

When he woke the sun was high above him and his mouth dry like he'd swallowed lime. Joe was squatting on his heels beside him with a mess tin full of stew in his hand.

‘Rise and shine, mate. We’re off to Jenin this afternoon.’

‘No rest for the wicked, I s’pose,’ said Arthur, stretching.

Joe snorted. ‘Yeah but we’re not. So where does that leave us?’

‘Still on our way to bloody Jenin by the sounds of it,’ Arthur said.

Joe spooned stew into his mouth and chewed. ‘I gotta say. Those bastards in the mess tent have been working their magic again. This goat stew tastes like a camel’s arse.’

‘Who called the cook a bastard?’ said Arthur, smiling at the old joke.

Joe spoke around a mouthful of stew. ‘Yeah, but who called the bastard a cook?’

The way to Jenin was flanked by paddocks ploughed and ready for seed. The horses travelling side by side with the afternoon light like spokes through the clouds. Two regiments cantering in formation, the heavy horses behind and the big guns bouncing across the uneven ground. Arthur forgot he was tired as the little mare shook her head, blowing, and the yards went by below him.

Cantering in, Jenin looked like every other town. Square buildings, their white walls shaded by date palms and the smooth, bald dome of the mosque. On the major’s word they charged, nearly three hundred men yelling with their swords in the air, the speed of them, and their shadows across the broken ground like giants. Arthur saw that the setting sun was at their feet and the fiery dust rising up all around.

The Turks there were already half beaten by malaria and dysentery. Arthur heard machine-gun fire to the west, but mostly he saw men with worn-out boots and grey faces raising their hands in surrender. They chased the Turks like cattle into the town square, making piles of surrendered weapons on the way. And pulled the Hotchkiss guns from packhorses, setting them up around the square with their muzzles pointed at the ever-growing mass of prisoners in the middle.

The sun slipped away. The square was so full of men Arthur couldn’t see across the middle.

‘Someone bugged up their counting,’ said Ernest as they trotted around the mob in the gathering dark. ‘Less than three hundred of us blokes for

what do you reckon, three thousand prisoners?’

Herbert lit a cigarette, leaving the reins looped across his gelding’s neck. ‘Yeah, we’re a bit outnumbered.’

‘Lucky we’re the light horse,’ said Joe. ‘And not some other mob of gutless bastards.’

‘Too right,’ said Ernest.

‘At least the Turks know we’ll feed and water them when we can,’ said Arthur.

Ernest spoke with a cigarette on his bottom lip. ‘Yeah, they’ve got the arse out of their pants alright. Looks like they haven’t had a decent feed for weeks.’

Joe laughed. ‘So don’t anyone breathe a word about the quality of the cooking round here, or we’ll have a mass breakout. It’s better than starving ... But only just.’

‘And let’s hope they can’t count in the dark,’ said Herbert. ‘And that the reinforcements will be here by the time the sun comes up.’

‘Gonna be a long night, I reckon,’ said Arthur.

The prisoners, seeing that they outnumbered their opponents, yelled and heaved at the boundaries of the square. The men rode back at them, swinging the horses wide like they were drafting cattle, the smell of dysentery and sickness all around. With hats pushed back, they swung their hobbles in their hands and the horses’ chests like prows through the mob, firing shots into the air until, at last, there was quiet.

As the sun came up the reinforcements arrived, cantering into town, the sound of their hooves on the ground like a wave breaking.

Ernest smiled. ‘I’ll tell my kids about this one day,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell them how their dad and his mates, outnumbered ten to one, captured a city and all the soldiers in it without losing a single man.’

‘Ah, they’ll probably think you’re full of bullshit, Ern,’ said Herbert.

‘Yeah like I did when Dad used to start on about the bloody Boer War. Christ it was boring,’ said Joe.

‘Nah, I reckon they’ll think I’m alright,’ said Ernest.

‘When you tell the story,’ said Joe. ‘Will you make it twenty to one? You know, just for effect?’

Ernest laughed. ‘Too bloody right I will. Maybe make it fifty to one while I’m at it. Can’t have them thinking their old man’s anything less than a deadset hero, can I?’

Helen knew it was over. The sadness had rotted her from the inside – dark, and now only just below the surface of her skin. She didn't feel as if she could ever smile again or feel the breath hot in her chest or laughter rising in her throat like bubbles. She looked at Ruth and Tom, sturdy in their remade clothes and their bare feet and the softness still on their skin, and all she felt was sadness. And she was so tired that even breathing seemed an effort.

In the kitchen she cut thick slices of yesterday's bread, spread it with dripping and wrapped it in a clean cloth. She brushed some lint from Tom's shirt with her hand and tucked away a strand of Ruth's hair and watched them walk down the road to school, the sound of them fading as they rounded the bend. Arthur was gone too, into town for nails and a new rope. She heard the rooster outside and the birds and the pulse of slow blood in her ears.

She wiped the stove and swept the floor, raising dust from the hard-packed floor and feeling the slide of her hands on the broom handle, rubbed to polished smoothness by her skin. The dog waited, smiling, outside the door and she walked out and kneeled beside him, stroking the smooth felt of his head and gently tugging his long ears.

'Stay,' she said standing up, and he wriggled and waited, watched her leave and then followed at a distance with his tail down.

She let herself into the shed, past the sinewy cats and the smell of mice and damp. Behind a pile of hessian sacks she had hidden a tube of cloth that she had sewn, now filled with gravel and the ends closed with careful stitches. She rolled it up, took it into her arms like an infant and sighed, the weight of it solid against her. Out of the shed and through the paddocks with the shadows of clouds ebbing across the grass. The dam when she reached it was still full with winter rain and the water milky with clay.

For a moment she thought that she might cry. For the just-washed shine of the dew on the grass and for the looping flight of three pelicans on their

way to the river. But her chest hurt like it was caving in, and her eyes were dry. She wound the tube round her waist, twice around, and tied the edges closed. Feeling the weight of it settled there, with her hands she bent down and filled the pockets of her apron with pebbles from the rim of the dam. She stood on the edge for a moment, breathing, the courage in her there and ready. Her hands barely shaking. She stepped out of her one good pair of shoes, worn down at the heel but the leather too good to be ruined. And took a last look down the gentle slope to the Pritchard's place, the jacarandas thick with early flower and the sun on the backs of the grazing horses and the cockatoos by the haystack. And stepped into the water feeling the shock of cold on her feet and the silt slick and murky.

The water was heavier than she thought it would be and it was dark around her as she sank. The weight tugging at her and the pain of it in her chest almost as bad as the emptiness and she opened her mouth to cry out but there was only water, just water. And then she was gone.

The dog had followed her through the paddocks, dropping in the long grass as she stood on the edge of the dam, his head at a tilt and his tail barely moving. He watched her step into the water and ran to where she had disappeared, backwards and forwards, yelping and barking at the surface of the water and his paws churning the edge to mud.

Arthur heard the dog howling, hours later, when he returned from town. The mud was worked up high on the dog's short legs and he ran the edge of the dam, his eyes on the water. Arthur reined his horse in and he saw the dog before he saw the shoes, neatly placed in a pair with their toes pointing to the dam. And his face went cold and a darkness closed in on him that no horse could ever outrun.

In 1945, a week after the second war ended, Arthur stood at the forge, bending hot steel to a hoof-shaped curve, the heat on his forearms like sunburn. Over the sound of the hammer and the crack of coke burning he heard Ruth's voice.

She ran into the shed.

'Dad,' she said and waved a flimsy envelope in his direction.

He nodded. 'You're not at work then,' he said.

'No,' and she shook her head. 'I had to go to the post office on my way and there was this there. It's for you.'

He put down his tools and wiped his hands on his pants. Then looked at them, smeared black and greasy.

Nodding at Ruth. 'You open it.'

Ruth picked at the edge of the paper with morning-cold hands and took out a small sheet of card, letting the envelope fall on the ground.

'It's from Tom!' she said. 'Here, look. It's from Pekanbaru, Sumatra. It says he's a prisoner of the Japanese. He hasn't written anything, it's just boxes, but he's ticked one that says "I am well and being looked after". And his signature is at the bottom.' She studied the card, smiling, looking at both sides carefully. 'It's dated third February nineteen forty-five,' she said. 'It's taken six months to get here. But still, six months ago he was alive and well.'

She sighed, took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes. 'I was sure it was going to be bad news.' She took a slow, ragged breath in and lowered her face into her hands, the letter forgotten at her feet. Arthur saw that her shoes were polished and the small neat stitches of her let-down hem.

'You'd best be getting back to work,' said Arthur.

Ruth straightened her shoulders. 'Yes, you're right. I must be getting back,' she said wiping her face and pausing. 'Maybe,' she said bending down

and picking the paper up from the ground. 'Maybe Tom will come home in time for Christmas this year. Wouldn't that be grand.'

'Off you go,' said Arthur.

When he was alone he picked up his tools. But the handles slippery with sweat and his arms shaky like all morning he'd been lifting oat sacks. He thought about Tom the last time he'd seen him, just a boy and thin, the heavy leather suitcase that had belonged to Helen's father big in his hands. At Guildford they had waved at him through the train window, watching as the carriage left the station, his pale, pinched face at the window and Arthur ashamed to feel his own eyes hot with held-back tears.

If Arthur had known that the world was about to fall apart, he would never have let Tom go, but when Mr Mortimer, a thick, wealthy man that Arthur thought little of, asked if he knew any lads that were good with figures to do the accounting for his business in the Dutch East Indies he had suggested Tom. And then later, in the kitchen, had told Tom he was going.

'You'll leave on the next ship,' he had said. 'With a contract for five years,' unable to look at the boy or at Ruth who was silent at the table. 'You can do the books. You've always been better with figures than anything else.'

Regret rode at Arthur like a spur. It wasn't the boy's fault that he was so much like Helen. His quick hands and his eyes. The way he held a mug of tea, the way he paused before he spoke. And his face when he thought that no-one could see, like he was bruised inside.

The warehouse by the Padang dock was small. From his desk Tom could hear rubber tyres and pony hooves on macadam as *bendis* made their way to the dock. Cargo ships bumped sluggishly against the wharf and the afternoon air was tobacco scented and dense with unshed rain. He had been in Sumatra since 1938 and, even after three years, it was still strange to him, but known, as though he could hum the tune but didn't know the words.

A month after he'd arrived – tired and every other day his stomach sharp and watery from the sambal that came with every meal – he had walked along the dock at lunchtime hoping for a breeze, wondering what Ruth was doing a thousand miles away. In the tiered shade of stacked crates he saw a man leaning, eating his lunch from rolled banana leaves.

'Hello, how are you,' he said and Tom smiled to hear English spoken.

'Alright, thanks,' said Tom sticking out his hand. 'My name's Tom. Pleased to meet you.'

The man had smiled, his brown face creased. 'Kadek,' he said and nodded. 'I am happy to meet you too.'

And that day and almost every day since they had eaten lunch together, swinging their legs over the oily harbour, watching small fish flit between the sunlit water and the shadows of the wharf.

When Tom had been in Sumatra for six months, Kadek had invited him to spend a night in his village. They had chugged out of the harbour in Kadek's small wooden boat, the smell of the fishing boats behind them and the water smooth like ladies' satin dresses. Tom had turned his face to the sun.

'It's beautiful here,' he said and Kadek smiled widely.

'Beautiful sometimes but then sometimes not beautiful,' he said. 'Here, bad things happen often. Volcanos, mudslides, earthquakes, big waves ... That's why there are so many good Moslems in this country.' He laughed

with his wide face tipped to the sun. 'We're always looking over our shoulders for death.'

Tom laughed too, looking back at the shore and the jungle-covered slopes tumbling down to the sea.

'I will tell you something about this country,' said Kadek. 'When I was a boy the earth shook like never before and afterwards there came a giant wave. Taller than the biggest masjid in Padang. It took whole villages, like they were just leaves, out to sea. Many, many people dead. Not all the villages though, just some. Our village, praise be to Allah, was safe. A few boats lost and some buffalo washed away but otherwise we were very lucky.'

'Lucky, unless you are a buffalo, I suppose,' Tom said.

'A year later, as he did every day, my father left our small house in the dark to catch fish for our family. He caught just one fish that day, but it was so big and so fat that it was enough for all of us. He gave it to my mother who cut it on the shore, like she did every day. Only this time,' Kadek took his hands from the tiller. 'When she cut it, from the stomach fell out a gold ring! My father took the ring to the city and he sold it. Then he sold his small boat and with that money, and the money from the ring, bought a bigger boat. With the bigger boat he caught more fish, then he made more money and with that he sent me and my older brother to school.'

'But think! That fish, that big juicy fish that we all so much enjoyed eating, had grown fat on the bodies washed out to sea by the giant wave. So much eating, eating, eating that he ate the ring too. Like you and me swallowing a fly with our lunch.'

'So, that is Sumatra you see. Good and bad,' and he waved a circle with his hand. 'Bad and good. Both together.' He paused. 'My father has two sons that bring money home each week. So now he has extra rice every night and sometimes,' Kadek smiled and held his hands out from his belly, 'he looks a little like a mother monkey. And he owes it all to a dead person and a fat, hungry fish. Praise be to Allah.' He laughed with his eyes closed until his cheeks were wet.

It was only now, after three years that Tom thought he was beginning to understand.

He checked a crate of imported apples, brushing the sawdust from their skins to bring up the shine. They were heavy in his palm and smelled of home – crisp light and sapwood, the crush of loose gravel underfoot. There had been days when the smell of home would hollow out a wedge beneath his ribs. Achy, unfillable and hard to breathe around. And broken nights that followed, when the air pressed on his face and the sheets were clumped beneath him. He waited out the dark then, listening in his bed for the muezzin's call, his watch loud on the nightstand beside him.

When he was done sorting apples he cupped his hands about his face and breathed the smell of his skin. There was resin there and sunlight and he pulled it in, filling his lungs and the middle of him round with air and painless. He smiled and wiped his hands on the back of his trousers before sitting down at his desk and smoothing open a ledger.

Two weeks later, in the ballroom of the governor's mansion, the lanterns hung like coloured paper gooseberries. Tom eased his collar and moved to the balcony, waiting for the breeze. He leaned against the wooden balustrade and watched the familiar crowd – linen suits and faces the colour of just risen cream. He was sweating and he wasn't sure what any of them could be saying that they hadn't already said and he hoped that the party wouldn't drag on into dancing. He took a drink from the tray of a passing maid and listened to the voices and the exhalation of the sea across coral.

A small woman he'd never met joined him on the balcony. She fanned herself, looked out towards the dark harbour and turned to him.

'You'd hardly know there was a war on,' she said.

He held out his hand and she shook it, her hand light in his. Her name was Alice, she said, and she was in Sumatra working as a nanny. Tom thought that her hair was the colour of oats and when she spoke her voice rose and fell like water running over stones. She told him about her parents' house by the river in Perth and he said, 'It's a funny world, isn't it? I grew up not twenty-five miles from you.' And they looked at each other and laughed some more and he saw that her eyes turned upwards at the corners. The beginning of the evening breeze touched the lanterns, rocking the shadows and the tamarind branches at the far edges of the garden.

For a moment then he thought he felt the rum, high up in his chest, but he realised that it was just the warmth of her small hand in his and the light on her hair. He hoped, suddenly, that the party would go on until late and that the maids would push back the chairs and tables, leaving the middle of the hall for dancing.

As the moon shifted across the sky, they listened to the band play, smelling the salt of the harbour and the heat leaking out of the dark ground. They danced and talked and, at the end of the night, as he walked home he thought about the sound of her voice while holding in his hand a small piece of paper with an address scribbled across it.



The truck was old and Tom eased the gears with his fingers, slow through the traffic and the rain holes in the road. It was steep to the harbour and the tar thinned to lace in parts, the edges crumbling down the hill. Trees darkened overhead and monkeys in the undergrowth like tailed shadows and the occasional flash of small sharp teeth. Alice sat beside him with a picnic wrapped in banana leaves and tied up in a cloth between them. He glanced across at her and smiled. They'd spent every Sunday together since August and it was the beginning of December and he still couldn't look at her enough.

They rounded a bend and there, cupped by mountains, was the giant blue of the harbour. Fishing boats in parrot-bright flocks ranged along the shore and further out, where the deeper sea seemed painted, cargo ships rode at anchor. There were islands too, small and tumbled over with jungle, a thin froth of beach at their edge. He drove around a group of *bendis* with rough-coated ponies dozing in their harness, drivers squatting by the roadside and the cigarette smoke coming in, sweet, through the open window.

They drove slowly down nubbled roads to a small village by the harbour. Roosters with sunset-coloured tails scratched at the sand and a dog, her belly fringed with teats, barked from a doorway. Tom stopped the truck and they walked past the close-set houses to the edge of the sea.

On the sand an old man gutted fish into a basket and the small, falling scales caught the light like fool's gold. A pair of gulls hustled for scraps with arched necks and wide beaks showing yellow, while in the bay, fishing boats painted red and blue lay at anchor – each one twinned by its reflection on the glassy surface of the water.

They saw a man mending a fishing net and Tom waved.

'Here's Ari,' he said. 'He is Kadek's uncle and he's going to take us out to the island.'

As they chugged across the harbour Alice held her hat with one hand and let her other skim the surface where the smell of salt and diesel mingled. Sunlight glassed the water. Her fingers made a wake and when she lifted them, beads of silver ran from the tips. The sea was clear to the bed and shadows shifted, deep-green against the sand. Tom watched her face and the wind in the edges of her hair.

As they got closer to the island they could see mangroves tangled up along the shoreline, over boulders and the briny dappled shade. Further along they found a small beach and the boat nosed in and ground ashore. Tom held his hands out for Alice as she stepped onto the sand.

'This is it,' he said. 'Ari says he'll take the boat out fishing while we have our picnic on the beach.'

They watched the boat head back to sea, the old man hunched at the tiller and the sound of the motor fading away. Tom spread the cloth on the sand and they ate and talked, watching small birds bobbing at the tide line. Tom told her about his family and the light was in the water like opals and behind them trees climbed a rocky slope to the centre of the island.

'Do you miss your mother?' asked Alice.

'Yeah, I do,' he said and paused. 'It's a way of remembering her I suppose.'

Alice nodded, her arms around her knees, eyes half closed against the glare.

'Kadek told me a story once,' he said. 'I think I understand it now, though I wasn't so sure at the time.' Tom looked out at the horizon – a thin seam of darker blue across a domed sky. 'In the mountains there are still people who practise the old ways,' he said. 'They pray to the land and their

ancestors. And they weave a cloth so beautiful that Kadek says it can make grown men weep to see it.

‘They burn their dead in those villages, it’s part of their religion. Then, when someone dies they take the ashes and wrap them up in a piece of that woven cloth. Everyone who loved the person takes a turn to carry the ashes on their back, so that for months the cloth and the ashes never touch the ground.’

A light wind creased the water and Tom pushed his hair back from his face. ‘It would be a heavy burden at first I suppose. But the ash gradually works its way through the cloth and the bundle gets lighter and lighter until one day it’s empty. And though the cloth is marked with ash and the dirt of the fields and the sweat of each person that’s carried it, to them it’s more precious than when it was first made.

‘When the last of the ash has gone the people celebrate with a big feast because it means that the time of mourning is over and the dead person’s spirit is free to move on to the next world.’

Alice moved closer to him and he could feel the warmth of her skin through the thin cotton of his shirt.

‘I think,’ said Tom, ‘that what Kadek was trying to say is that there comes a time when it’s better to let the sadness go. I think about that a bit. And remind myself that, like the cloth, I’m changed, but not ruined.’

Alice rested her head on his shoulder, her loose hair against his cheek.

Later, when Tom heard the sound of the motor, he stood up and offered his hands to Alice, still sitting on the sand. She pulled herself upright and the light falling all golden between them and the sand like powder beneath his feet. He kissed her and she closed her eyes and her lips were warm.

As they chugged towards the shore Ari, a basket of small fish at his feet, pointed to the west where storm clouds hung in thick dark clots.

‘Just in time,’ said Tom and the wind came in, picking foam off the ripples and the sea turning dark beneath them. Alice’s hair blew up around her face and she laughed and held her palms upward as the first drops of monsoon rain fell around them. Tom smiled into the wind. The air fluted through his chest, high and light. He felt like he was flying.

Later that day they drove home on terraced streets arched with overhanging branches and the bay deep and blue below them. Tom stopped the truck outside a large store.

‘I hope you don’t mind. I have to let Peter know when the next shipment is arriving.’

‘Of course not,’ said Alice, smiling.

As they climbed out of the truck, an older man hurried out of the shop and into the shadow of the verandah. He wore a loose white shirt and his hairless head was smooth and tanned.

‘Hello, Peter,’ said Tom.

The man rubbed his chin. ‘You haven’t heard then?’

‘Heard what?’

‘The Japanese have attacked America.’

‘The Japanese?’

‘Yes, a very terrible business. In Hawaii. They say many ships have been sunk and men killed.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘Yes, and it’s just been announced on the radio that we are all at war with the Japanese now.’

Tom turned to Alice and took her hand in his.

‘Goodness me, that’s terrible.’

‘Ah but there is even worse news. Japanese soldiers have landed at Kota Bharu in Malaya. They are invading and I don’t think the British can hold them to the coast there. They want all of Asia for themselves.’

‘How far will they get?’

‘Who knows? They say the British troops in Singapore will stop them, so we must keep on hoping. Because if Singapore falls, then we are next.’

‘I’m sure this will all be brought to an end very quickly, especially now the Americans are involved.’

‘Yes, I don’t want to spend my days looking north, waiting for the Japanese to come over the hills.’

In the small village the tin cans strung along the rice paddies rang like tiny bells.

‘It’s to scare the birds away,’ said Tom, pointing at twine pegged out across the fields. Small boys with mud-stained feet worked the string lines, rattling broken cans and flagging strips of coloured cloth to keep birds from the ripening crop.

‘It’s a shame they can’t think of something similar to scare the Japanese away,’ said Alice.

‘Three weeks after Pearl Harbor and they’re already halfway down Malaya,’ said Tom. ‘It all feels very serious, doesn’t it?’

‘I had a telegram from my mother on Friday ordering me to book my passage home.’

‘She’s probably right,’ said Tom. ‘As much as I don’t want to say it.’

‘But surely the British will hold them at Singapore, won’t they?’

‘They say they will,’ said Tom. ‘But I suppose we just have to wait and see.’

‘And until then,’ said Alice, ‘we’ll just have to enjoy ourselves as much as possible,’ and Tom saw that above her collar her neck was a very faint pink and he felt his own cheeks suddenly warmer than the day.

‘So let’s go and have a look at this waterfall,’ she said. ‘The one that you’ve been telling me about.’

Behind the kampung, hills gathered shadows and in front, the open sweep of the sea. They walked along the narrow banks of the paddy fields – the grass worn thin along the tops and hard from the passage of feet. Rice grew from the mud like pin feathers, and fawny-coated cows grazed the banks. Dusky-smelling goats strayed along the paths, foraging on stilty legs.

They came to the edge of the rice paddies and the path narrowed, winding through jackfruit and tamarind trees, the flat-leaved grass between and the sounds of the village fading. At the base of the hill the scrub was thick and the shadowed path slippery with last night's rain. Tom felt the sweat on his back and against his hips where his belt pressed.

They climbed in silence, all their breath for walking – just the sounds of small things quickening through the undergrowth and the soles of their shoes sucking out of the mud. They climbed through a clump of cassia trees and Tom breathed deeply, feeling the sweetness, thick, at the back of his throat. At a place where the path thinned and levelled he paused and tilted his head to the faint sound of water over stones.

The waterfall was bright and fast, the silver current sweeping down the hillside, foaming and curling into rock pools, their edges fringed with swaying underwater plants. Along the pebbled creek bed ferns grew, their growing tips clenched tight like baby's fingers. Tom climbed down to the water and turned to offer his hands to Alice.

'Oh, it's lovely,' she said, pulling off her shoes and wading into the river, her skirt held up above her knees. Tom sat and watched her. The light was on the water and in her hair, her cream cotton skirt and her face shiny with sweat. Her hands were quick and the gentle curve of her neck above her collar. She hummed a few bars of a song that he had heard before and Tom felt the joy in her with a sudden, unclenching kind of rush in his chest, the centre of him hollow and his face all hot, like he was going to cry.

He waded into the river, feeling the pebbles underfoot and the fine velvet of the waterweeds.

Alice turned to face him, and he held his arms out as though to dance. She smiled, stepping into him. Their feet were slow on the stones of the riverbed, the current tugging her skirt and the linen of his trousers. Tom felt big with her hand in his and the sun on his back like armour. He was sure, perhaps for the first time, and warm through despite the clear river running, cold, around him.

Later, they sat on a smooth, flat rock to dry and watched jewel-bright dragonflies and the leaf shadows on the water. 'Lovely,' said Alice, hugging her knees. Tom was quiet, the newness in his chest so big and the blood in him all bright and fizzing at the edges.

She smiled at him and Tom saw her small, white teeth against her lip. The words were too big in his mouth, and his breath too. So he smiled and took her hand and the water flowed past them, clear like air and making music with the rocks that only they could hear.



Six weeks later, in a *warung* by the sea, a dented radio hissed louder than the cooking oil. Through the sound of hot fat and static Tom heard bombs falling on Singapore and the grave voice of a BBC announcer. Alice pushed her bowl away and shook her head slowly.

‘That’s it, isn’t it?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he nodded. ‘Singapore is bound to fall now and Sumatra will be next,’ he said and touched her arm. ‘There’s a ship leaving here in five days. You’ve got to be on it.’

‘Will you come?’

He shook his head slowly. ‘I got a letter last month from Mr Mortimer. He’s sure the Japanese will want us to keep trading. After all, it’s in their best interests.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m not sure. But my father got me this job. If I left here he’d probably turn me away at the gate.’

‘Surely not, he’s your father.’

‘He’s a hard man.’ Tom shook his head. ‘And bitter. My mother must have loved him once, but I’ve never been able to work out why.’

Alice rested her fingers on the back of his hand.

‘My father doesn’t speak,’ said Tom slowly. ‘He used to use a hot iron to burn the horn buds off the baby goats, so they didn’t grow. And I’ve always thought that maybe that’s what the war did to him. Burnt something inside of him so that it didn’t grow. So he stopped feeling. Mum was the opposite, she felt everything,’ Tom breathed and pressed his fingertips to the middle of his chest. ‘Every little thing,’ he said. ‘At her funeral the reverend said that she’d died because heaven needed her. Well, I was fourteen, I needed her more.’

‘Dad didn’t understand of course. I couldn’t stop crying and he couldn’t stand it. That’s not how men behave, is it. They put their shoulders back and they go shoot things, get in a fight or get drunk and then everything’s alright. Well, that didn’t work for me. I wasn’t the sort of man he wanted for a son. Which is why, I suppose, I ended up here. He couldn’t wait to wave me out the door.’

‘You know,’ said Alice carefully. ‘Things might be different now. You’ve been gone three years. People change. Sometimes they even surprise you.’

Tom smiled at her. ‘You’re nice,’ he said. ‘But I’m not holding my breath.’

‘So you won’t leave?’

‘No. But now that the Americans are involved this war will probably be over quickly. You might be back here by Christmas.’

‘I hope you’re right,’ said Alice.

‘If you’d like,’ said Tom. ‘We could take one last trip. To the mountains. I’d hate to think that you’d left without seeing them up close.’

‘Oh, yes please,’ said Alice.

Tom smiled back but inside him was a tight pinch like he’d been running.

They left Padang before dawn the next morning when the mountains were still draped with cloud and shadow. The headlamps of the truck lit a yellow circle of fog and the wipers squeaking back and forth as they climbed with their backs to the town. Tom’s hands were careful on the wheel, feeling the road slick with mist and the leafy shadows deep and wet. Alice sat curled up on the seat, hugging her own arms against the already cooler mountain air, still morning drowsy.

The road was steep and they rose as the sun did, swimming up slowly through the clouds. Turning and turning again. Sometimes through the forest they could see back the way they had come, the road a gravelled ribbon looping down the slope towards the sea.

With the sun above them they stopped to let the engine cool. Tom cut slices of dragon fruit with a blunt knife and they laughed at the sticky sweetness on each other’s faces and the feel of their teeth through the cool

white flesh. Later, in a sprawling town, they stopped for fuel, giddy with the smell of it and the high, clear air.

Alice wound the window down as they drove and rested her arms on the edge of the door, watching the land slide by and waving at the children on the side of the road. Local houses, like boats, seemed to sail across the fields of sugar cane and corn with their steeply curved prows to the wind. Tom turned off the highway and the road dipped, curving backwards and forwards down the mountain. At a bend in the road Tom saw clouds below them and a glimpse of blue through the overhanging trees.

The lake, when they reached it, was harbour-sized.

Alice turned to Tom with wide eyes. 'It's like a painting,' she said.

'It's nice isn't it,' said Tom, slowing the truck. The lake was walled with mountains and in that almost windless hollow the water shone jewel blue. Rice fields in terraced strips clung to the foothills and beyond them the mountains staggered steeply all the way to the sky.

Tom turned down a narrow dirt path and stopped beside a small wooden bungalow.

'This place belongs to Peter. He used to bring his family here to escape the heat. But he left for England three weeks ago, so he gave me the keys.'

Alice got out of the car and stretched.

'And of course,' said Tom quickly, 'there are two bedrooms.'

He looked at her. The afternoon sun on her face and the washed cotton of her favourite sundress.

'Of course,' she said, and smiled, watching a fisherman paddling a wooden canoe through the shallows.

From the pebbly shore, the growing evening shadows tinted the lake to uniform blue. In the branches of a banyan tree, a family of macaques arranged themselves for the night and they heard a mother calling her children in from the fields. Alice kissed him and he closed his eyes, tasting the fruit, still faint, on her lips. Through his lashes he could see the last of the light on the water and the dark, secret folds of the mountains behind. She came to him that night. The wind slow outside his window and the tamarind branches scraping, black, against the glass.

He heard her bare feet on the tiles and he sat up in bed, pulling open the edge of the mosquito net and swinging his feet to the floor. She stepped into him, her face against his neck and his arms fitting into the bend of her waist. Her hair smelled like soap and a kind of long-forgotten warmth. He was suddenly hollow, his breath too hot and the mountain air too thin to breathe.

When she kissed him she was narrow in his arms, light. Her hands on his face, her breath in his mouth and the dark satin hollow of her throat.

She left her nightdress on the floor and the flesh of her belly was smooth and taut. He could smell the warmth of the day between her small breasts and in the fine soft hair under her arms. Her mouth was wet and his hand in the arch of her back. Later, he remembered the first shiver of her skin against his and the inside of her elbows where the skin was palest.

She tasted of summer. Like rockpools in the afternoon sun – the warm water clear as air and the light, hot, in his eyes. She was sun-tight skin, a westerly wind through pine branches and soft filigrees of kelp against the reef. When she lifted her hips to him the bones were hard beneath his thumbs. In his hands she moved like water, cowrie smooth and briny and her hands in his hair. She kissed him, and he felt her teeth on his lips and the bed smelling warm like black, fallow paddy fields, ripe for rain.

The 10th Light Horse saw Damascus for the first time from the top of a rocky hill. Laid out in olive groves and fields of barley, the white buildings crowded and jumbled together like pebbles. Through the city ran a river and out into the hills around, winding between deep gorges and steeply weathered cliffs. And on the roads, in haphazard lines and in groups, on foot, on lurching wagons or heavily loaded camels, were Turkish troops leaving the city. The long lines of men were dirt-coloured and plodding – along the road, beside the river and away from the city that Arthur had been dreaming of for months.

For weeks they'd been riding after the Turks on short rations and little rest. Fifty miles or more per day and for ten minutes out of every hour and a few cold hours just before dawn they lay down in the sand and slept with the reins looped around their boots. Sometimes Arthur would wake and find the mare asleep beside him, with her legs folded and her nose resting on the sand. He was hollow with exhaustion and the days of fighting – his ears rang with gunfire and he ached where his bones pressed against the ground at night.

And there below them, finally, in the place where they had thought that they would make the Turks pay for friends lost, and time, children grown and wives left waiting – the Turkish army was retreating. He touched his chest where the small photo lay in his pocket. The paper was scuffed to suede now, Helen's face blurred and ghostly. He felt the paper through the fabric of his shirt and waited to feel something, but his head ached and the sharp light on the hills hurt his eyes.

Ernest checked his big draft mare. 'Look at that, boys,' he said pointing to the winding trails of men leaving the city. 'After four hundred years the Turks are leaving Damascus. It won't be long now till the war's over.'

'Do you really think so, Ern?' said Herbert.

‘Yeah, I do. They wouldn’t be leaving without a fight if they weren’t already buggered.’

‘And then what?’ said Herbert and his face was scalloped with tiredness.

‘And then,’ said Ernest, ‘then, we’ll chase them some more, they’ll surrender and we’ll all go home.’

Joe laughed. ‘I’ll believe that when we’re standing on the dock in Fremantle,’ he said.

‘Me too,’ said Herbert.

Arthur shook his head. ‘I thought they’d dig in here and fight it out,’ he said. ‘Let’s just hope they don’t decide to take a stand somewhere else instead.’

‘They’re finished, mate,’ said Ernest. ‘They’re done in.’

Herbert said, ‘I reckon you’re right. But they’re still Turks. Those bastards would fight with the last breath in their bodies.’

‘We’re the biggest mounted army in history,’ said Ernest benignly. ‘Bigger than Napoleon’s, bigger than Hannibal’s. What are they going to do? They’re fucked now.’ He rolled a cigarette and lit a match on his thumbnail. ‘I’m not saying the fight’s completely over. But I am saying that once we’ve got Damascus there’s no doubting the end result.’

‘Well, I vote that we all believe you,’ said Arthur.

‘Yeah, but if Johnny Turk has a rush of blood and flogs us all the way to Tripoli, it’ll be your shout, Ern,’ said Herbert.

‘And you bastards can each buy me a pint if I’m right,’ said Ernest. ‘And not a pint of beer either, you tight arses, a pint of bloody rum.’

The next morning the major woke them in the dark and they saddled up in almost silence, just the clink of metal shoes on stone and a dry voice gravelly with sleep. Arthur tightened the girth and stroked the little mare’s neck. From his saddlebag he got a twist of paper filled with sugar, unrolled it, knocked some grains into his hand and offered them to her. Then he tipped the same amount into his own mouth, crushing the small grains with his teeth and a small melting sweetness at the back of his throat.

‘Not much of a breakfast,’ he said to the mare. ‘But it’s better than nothing, I suppose.’

He picked up the reins, swung into the saddle and the others moved into place alongside him – Joe on his left and Herbert and Ernest on his right. They let the horses find their own way in the dark, surefooted despite the miles on their legs and the rest of the regiment stretching blackly in front of them. All night they'd listened to the Hotchkiss guns rattling and echoing relentlessly from the tops of the cliffs and Arthur had pictured the dirt-coloured soldiers in their ragged, plodding lines and the steep walled gullies around the city, like the traps they built to catch brumbies back home. And had shivered on the sand, listening to the tide of lead going out.

At the head of a deep gorge, the column halted, a quarter of a mile of men and horses quiet in their sections. Arthur looked ahead. In the open the stony road was light enough to see, but the cliff shadows were too deep for the faint light of the stars and the front of the column dissolved into a gorge. After a few minutes word came back down the line – the road ahead was blocked with Turkish bodies and Damascus would wait while the road was cleared by another regiment.

The sun was tipping the edges of the hills as they finally rode through, lighting the surface of the fast-running river and the hundreds of Turkish bodies laid in lines along the grassy bank. Like harrowed fields the rows of dead men caught the sunrise, neat, and the light was like honey where it touched their bodies. To Arthur it seemed as though they were sleeping there in their ranks, quietly on the riverbank. A rest stop on their way home, letters in their pockets and their thoughts turning with finality, after years of fighting, to farms and fishing boats. He wanted, for a moment, to lie down beside them with his thoughts leaching slowly into the loam – his head in the grass and the river at his heels, cool in the early morning air and the silence of ancient rocks around him.

But beside him Herbert coughed and spat, and Arthur felt his own breath in his lungs and under his hand the smoothness of the little mare's neck. And he breathed in and turned his face towards the rising sun.

Out of the gully ran a long road, curving through fields and gardens and the rich, red soil showed where the grass had been grazed to the ground. Arthur smelled last night's rain on freshly turned dirt and he was sixteen and home again, hoeing weeds in the orchard with his mother, his body big and sullen with recent growth. At the end of the last row they both laid

down their tools and stretched and she reached out, caught his hands and held them up against her own. His mother had had big hands like a man, square-knuckled and broad from work, but his were longer by almost a knuckle. She wasn't one for touching or crying, but she held onto his hands and when she looked at him her eyes were bright. And, in a moment so brief he wondered afterwards if he had dreamed it, she took his hands to her lips and kissed them. They were stained with dirt and sweat, but she kissed them and he could still remember the feel of her skin and the way she closed her eyes.

He shook his head free of the memory. With the city gates in sight the order came to draw swords and in moments they rose like silver weeds around him. They nudged the horses into trot and he felt the mare gather herself beneath him, her front legs light on the ground.

'You'd think after all this time you could control that thing,' laughed Joe as the little mare swung her quarters with anticipation.

'She's alright,' said Arthur. 'She's just a bit keen, is all.'

Then the order came to charge and they raised their swords and they yelled and spurred the horses forward – four hundred horses and he felt the sound of it in his chest, beside his heartbeat and the speed of it and the light raucous on the metal. The wind plucked tears from his eyes, faster than his breath, faster than the shadows of clouds racing across the open ground. Between the gravelled earth and the early morning sky with the dust rising around them and the reins held fast in his hands. Arthur waited for the sound of guns but none came and the city walls rushed towards them and then they were pouring underneath the narrow gateway and the horses snorting wetly down their nostrils.

They slowed once they hit the paved roads of the city, but the horses were hot with running and they shook their heads, stiff foam on their bits and their sweaty shoulders flecked with white and mapped with veins. People crowded the edges of the streets as they cantered through, and Arthur saw thrown flowers crushed beneath the horse's feet and, in a blur, arms outstretched offering fruit. They passed a double-storey building and from the wrought-iron verandahs women trilled like caged birds and lifted their veils as they passed.

They pulled up outside a big building with wide stone steps, milling and stamping till the horses settled, their swords resting against their shoulders but their hands still tight on the grip, eyeing the people pressing around them. There were people of every kind in the square – covered Arabs, their drab *galabiehs* brushing the ground, men in suits, shopkeepers with aprons high around their waists, white-veiled women and men with round-topped hats.

Arthur watched as a group of dismounted officers climbed the steps to be met by white-robed men with grave faces and he saw how the officers' boots were dusty on the marble steps and, behind him, the people fell silent.

The horses bunched and thronged in the square, still blowing, and Arthur found himself beside the major who nodded at him and said, 'Not quite what you'd expected, is it?'

'No, I was expecting a fight,' said Arthur and shook his head. 'Not that I'm complaining.'

'Yes, it could easily have been another Beersheba,' said the major. 'And luck was on our side that day.'

'Looks like we've got luck on our side again,' said Arthur.

'Yes, you're right. And the townspeople are probably feeling pretty lucky too. Apparently they were told by the Turks that we might burn their city to the ground.'

'Well that explains the flowers and the fruit then,' said Arthur.

'Absolutely. I suppose it pays to keep the conquerors on your side.'

'So what happens now?'

The major smiled. 'We'll head out shortly. Lawrence and his Arabs will be along soon to take possession of the city, I believe. And there's work for us to do elsewhere. We've got to finish the Turks now – seize the railways and the ports so they've no way to resupply.'

'Home by Christmas?'

'Not quite. But we're a lot closer than we've ever been before.'

The officers returned to their horses and the crowd behind them cheered. 'Looks like we'll be on our way then,' said the major and nudged his horse towards the front. Soon they were marching through the city streets,

people waving and Arthur took some dates from a man who, with tears streaking his cheeks, took handfuls from a wooden box and gave them to the soldiers passing.

Arthur saw the way the horses filled the narrow streets and the sounds of their hooves on the ground like music. There was not much that shined about them, but he wouldn't have traded places with any shopkeeper that they passed with their trays of ripe fruit and hessian sacks spilling beans onto the floor, their pockets heavy with coins. His heart was big then for the sound of a thousand hooves on cobblestones, for the men on either side of him. For what they had done, together, and the flag of a young country just climbing to her feet.

They rode out of the city gates and into the bright fields. Herbert said, 'Will it be hardtack and bully beef tonight do you reckon?'

'I expect so,' said Arthur. 'Why?'

'Because,' he said, 'I'm fucking starving and I'm down to my last biscuit.'

'I reckon I've got extras,' said Joe, and Herbert nodded, yawning.

'You'd have thought they might have pushed the boat out for the blokes that took Damascus after four hundred fucking years of Ottoman rule,' said Herbert. 'A hot meal would've been nice.'

'A little bit of fucking gratitude,' said Ernest nodding.

'Keep dreaming, boys,' said Joe. 'This is the army, remember.'

Alice watched Tom on the dock as the ship drew away, the deck vibrating beneath her feet and silt bubbling through the shallow water. He grew smaller, his shoulders squared against the sun, lean, and the colour of him fading slowly. Eventually the background took him – the low stone buildings and the hills behind, but she kept looking until the ship cleared the lee of the headland and picked up the long lines of south-running swell.

The Dutch navy ship was too small for her cargo of planters' wives and infants. Irregular towers of trunks and packing crates filled the narrow passageways, children cried and the cabins were filled with the smell of day-old milk and ripe bananas. On their first night at sea Alice was told there were no bunks for passengers without children, just a grey wool blanket and some space on the deck.

That night the stars were bright across the sky. Alice lay in the shadow of a lifeboat watching the dark coast go by and the lights of small fishing vessels. At dawn they left the jungled slopes of Sumatra behind and nosed through the dark-green swells of open ocean. Alice stood at the rail and watched the shoreline dwindle. She felt halved somehow and her breath hurt.

'You have left someone behind, no?' She turned. A man was standing at the rail, his lined face chalky in the early morning light.

'Is it that obvious?' she said, and smiled.

'You must forgive me for being so forward.' He bowed very slightly. 'You looked so sad and I am an old man and forget my manners sometimes.' He held out his hand. 'Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Willem Berman.' His hand was soft like chamois and the bones close beneath the skin.

'Alice Evans.'

‘So, Alice, we will say goodbye to Sumatra together,’ he said and sighed. He leaned a dark wood cane against the rail and Alice noticed that his hands were unsteady. The coast dwindled and they stood, watching the mango-coloured light pick shadows off the growing swell.

The ship carved a bower of foam from the heavy sea. Alice gripped the rail and the deck shifted beneath her feet.

‘I think the captain’s in a hurry,’ she said.

‘This is not the place to be idle, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘Too many Japanese ships around here lately. So, we run, like a dog across a busy street.’

‘Is it dangerous, do you think?’

‘For certain there are dangers. But we are headed for the port of Tjilatjap, south of Batavia, and there we will meet up with other ships. We will all travel together to Australia and we will be safer like that, I think.’

‘Gosh, I hope my parents don’t know we’re in danger.’

‘No, I am sure you wouldn’t want to worry them.’

‘Well, yes I was supposed to leave Padang over a month ago and ... well, I just couldn’t. So, I expect they’ve done enough worrying.’

He smiled at her and shook his head. ‘I’m sure they will forget all their worrying once they see you.’

‘I hope so,’ smiled Alice.

They watched, standing at the rail, and eventually the dark smudge of coast disappeared, shrouded by distance and sea spray.

‘Well,’ said Willem, his voice small. ‘That is that.’

Alice laid her hand on his arm, the skin dappled with age and thin.

Willem shook his head slowly. ‘I have always found that goodbye is the most difficult thing to say,’ he said and Alice saw that his eyes were yellowed like old linen.

She nodded, feeling the salt settle on her skin.

They crossed the Sunda Strait and saw the coast of Java for the first time later that afternoon. Alice thought she smelled wood smoke and warm earth. The troughs between swells shallowed and the water fading to a lighter jade as they slid along the coast, between the shoreline and the open ocean. The crew worried westward, searching for foreign ships on the

horizon. Alice saw them swapping watch, their hands were quick and their heads like seabirds turning side to side. She watched the black-sand beaches to the east, the pyrite glitter and the breakers falling whitely.

At midday the next day they reached the port of Tjilatjap where the last fleet to leave the Dutch East Indies had gathered. Alice watched the anchor as it dropped, feeling the sun through the thin cotton of her dress and the deck still beneath her feet. In the harbour, the big ships nosed the tide like schooling salmon. She saw naval ships and merchant vessels, and between them the smaller boats distributing passengers and supplies. At the back of the ship she found Willem sitting on a pile of rice sacks, the porpoise curve of his back and his cane across his knee.

‘Will you sit with me a while, Alice?’ he said and patted the sack next to him. ‘We can watch the end of a once great empire together.’ He waved his knobbled hand at the land around them. ‘The Japanese are coming and soon the Dutch East Indies will become the Japanese East Indies.’ His lips made a thin line. ‘Or, as the Japanese tell it, the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Or some such nonsense.’

As the day faded the big ships began to leave the harbour. Alice heard the engines turning over slowly and the heavy metal sound of the anchor chain grinding in.

‘I heard the crew talking earlier,’ said Willem. ‘They are going to sink the smaller ships and the damaged ones. With dynamite. So the Japanese can’t use them.’

A little while later they heard the scuttling charges, like underwater kettledrums. The ship rocked and Alice felt a heel of pressure in her chest, her mouth papery with surprise.

‘You see,’ said Willem pointing to a small fishing boat heading towards them. ‘We wait to take the demolition crew, that is why we are the last to leave.’

She smelled machine oil and a burnt bread smoke, sweet and faint.

As they left the harbour Alice watched two smaller ships slowly sinking, listing and falling like slow stricken fish. Their once snug hulls and the clean scrubbed decks falling into a spreading slick of oil and the evening sea.

‘Oh,’ said Alice, her own heart tilting, heavy, ‘it really is the end, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Willem and sighed. ‘Fifty years I have been here and now this is the end.’ His voice was threadbare, thinner than the breeze.

‘My wife and I left Holland and came here because we thought we could help,’ he said. ‘Back then the hospital in Padang was a filthy place where people went, not to heal, but to die. In the villages the women had their babies in the mud and their children died from dirty water and infections. But my wife could enter a kampung and within minutes the women were her friends. She was a midwife. They would tell her things, they would bring their babies to her. I was the one with the medical degree but she was a much better doctor.’

He pushed some thin strands of white hair from his forehead and sighed. ‘God never gave us any children of our own. Maybe he didn’t see her when she held the babies in the village,’ and shook his head slowly. ‘So gentle.’ Willem shifted on the hessian and looked out at the water. ‘One day, many years after we had given up hope for a child of our own, she took my hand and pressed it to her belly. There was a lump there, like an orange, and many small ones beside.’ Alice heard the air, thin in his throat. ‘Can you imagine it ... The worst of God’s bad jokes.

‘I kept working after she died – to stop then would have been to give up all that we had gained. But now I have left and the grass will grow tall on her grave and even those that she saved will forget her.’ He shook his head. ‘You must forgive an old man’s ramblings, Alice.’

‘There’s nothing to forgive, Willem. She sounds wonderful.’

Alice felt the swell lift them as they headed out to sea. She could see the lights of the other ships dipping and rising. And sometimes the pale moon high behind the thickly clotted clouds.

They sat together in the dark until the wake of silver bubbles rising behind them was all that was left to see.

Three days later there was land to the east of the ship, a strip of red sand and a hot east wind that flattened the sea. The crew smiled and laughed and the captain came to the rail and nodded easily at the passengers ranged across the deck.

‘We have reached Australian waters,’ said Willem as they watched the horizon grow solid. ‘You are home, dear Alice. And everyone celebrates with you because the Japanese ships will not follow us this far.’

‘What will you do,’ she said, ‘when we arrive?’

‘I have a cousin in Perth,’ he said. ‘I will not be begging.’

‘And we will stay in touch.’

‘Of course. Who else will listen with such patience and grace to the stories of an old man?’

It was another three days before they arrived in Fremantle, gliding into port between flat, sand islands and the pine-studded coast. From the rail Alice saw her parents through the crowds on the dock, her mother’s Sunday hat and the shiny skin through her father’s thinning hair. From the deck they seemed smaller than she remembered. Her mother looked up at the ship with a handkerchief in her hand and Alice squared her shoulders and touched her slept-in skirt.

She helped Willem down the steep gangway to his waiting cousin. He hugged her goodbye and she turned to leave. ‘Elise,’ he said to her, catching her hand and nodding, the tendons tight beneath the thinness of his skin. ‘Her name was Elise. It seems important that you should know that.’

‘Elise,’ she said and held his hands with hers. ‘I won’t forget.’

It was only as she turned away that Alice realised she had never told him Tom’s name.

The letter was postmarked Darwin, the handwriting familiar, and Ruth sighed.

‘Anything else for me, Mrs Potts?’ she asked.

‘No, love. There’s nothing yet,’ said the postmistress, adjusting her glasses. ‘I expect the Red Cross will be doing their best.’

‘I know,’ Ruth nodded. ‘I’m impatient, that’s all. It’s been two and a half weeks since the war ended.’

‘Well at least there’s some news for you from your young man in Darwin,’ said Mrs Potts nodding at the letter in Ruth’s hand.

Ruth smiled politely with her lips over her teeth.

‘You mean Philip? He’s not my young man. We just write.’

Mrs Potts smiled. ‘Oh yes.’

‘Yes,’ said Ruth squaring her shoulders. ‘We were school friends, as you know. Just friends.’

‘Well, that might change now that the war’s over. Wars and weddings go together like ham and cheese,’ she said. ‘It’s the danger you know.’

‘I’m pretty sure there hasn’t been much danger in Darwin for a couple of years. The last Japanese attack was in forty-three,’ Ruth said. ‘Though I suppose there are crocodiles.’

‘Well, still, he’s been defending his country, hasn’t he?’

‘Yes, he has.’

‘And all you girls who have been working ... well, I expect the men coming back from the front will want their jobs back, won’t they?’

‘I’m not sure Mr Stevens at the brickworks will want a soldier as his secretary.’

‘So, you’ll be staying there then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah, just you wait. At the end of the last war, when the boys came home they were just about snapped up by girls at the dock.’

‘Yes, well maybe Philip will be, Mrs Potts,’ and she smiled politely, ‘but not by me.’

‘We’ll see, won’t we dear. This time next year, you’ll probably be expecting.’

Ruth backed out the door of the post office and waved the letter in her hand. ‘Goodbye, Mrs Potts, I’ll see you on Monday.’

Ruth rode her bike to the brickworks, the letter in her pocket. She tried to imagine Philip at his desk in Darwin, an officer now, the fans turning and the heat, but she could only picture him at school – a tear in his pants and the freckles on the backs of his hands. She only wrote back because she remembered him as the boy who would stop in the middle of a running race to tie his laces and whose pebbles were always wide of the mark. And who once had tried to kiss her, open-mouthed, in the green shade beneath a water tank.

She forgot the letter as she typed at her desk and kept the accounts with the numbers in perfect rows down the ledger. Out in the yard the men nodded at her and smiled as she tallied the trucks rolling in and the piles of bricks stacked on wooden pallets. At the end of the day she knocked on the manager’s door.

‘I’ll be off home now, Mr Stevens, if there’s nothing else?’

‘Yes, your dad will be wanting his tea, I expect,’ said Mr Stevens, his grey eyes big behind his glasses.

‘And the chickens and the goats and the cats too.’

He smiled. ‘The whole farm will be waiting for you.’

Ruth smiled back. ‘Everything except the horses. Dad always sees to them.’

Mr Stevens cleared his throat and straightened the papers on his desk. ‘Have you had any more news from Tom?’

‘Not since the last lot. We’re just waiting and keeping our fingers crossed.’

‘There’s a very good chance it’s going to be good news. I mean, even the Japs can’t ignore the Geneva Convention.’

‘Yes, that’s what I keep telling myself.’

Mr Stevens nodded. ‘You just have to hope for the best, Ruth.’

‘Yes, that’s what we’re doing. I mean, that’s what I’m doing. Dad, as you know, doesn’t say very much.’

Mr Stevens looked at her and lifted his shoulders.

‘I just want my brother back,’ she said. ‘That’s all.’

‘And you’ll get him back, I’m sure, Ruth. Now, you get off home or you’ll be late and your dad will have things to say about that, no doubt.’

Ruth laughed. ‘Dad having things to say? There’s a first time for everything I suppose.’

As Ruth rode home she remembered the letter in her pocket and opened it, spreading it over the handlebars, ducking her head to read and the wind ruffling the corners of the page.

‘Dearest Ruth,’ she read. ‘Well, the war is over at last and those of us who have served our country well are looking forward to finally returning home.’ Ruth frowned and kept reading. ‘I am proud to say that I have done my part to keep the wheels of the Second AIF turning – quite literally actually – as I am now in charge of ordering mechanical spare parts and fuel. All jokes aside though, while being in a combat zone gives a man little time for deep thinking, it does bring a degree of clarity to his thoughts.’

Ruth blew through her lips like a horse, her brows drawn together. She pushed a strand of hair from her eyes, the letter like a flag beneath her hand, the front wheel in the weeds at the edge of the road and the sound of the tyres in the gravel.

‘I expect to be demobbed soon and as much as I am looking forward to seeing my family, I am most looking forward to seeing you again, Ruth. I know that the correspondence we have shared through these troubled times has drawn us closer together and I look forward to soon making you a big part of my life.’ Ruth’s legs slowed. ‘When I have most needed courage, Ruth, it was our friendship that I drew on, picturing us in happier times, your pretty smile and your modest laugh. Until we meet again, I remain your loving friend, Philip.’

Ruth pedalled her bike on the gravel, breathing hard. At home, she hefted the heavy gate with her hip and wheeled the bike through. Down by

the yards she could hear the ringing of the hammer and knew that her father was still at the forge. She leaned the bike against a verandah post, folded the letter back into her pocket and walked around the back of the house to the kitchen garden.

She always thought of the garden as her grandmother's, though she had never met her. She often felt her shadow there in the now neat rows, espaliered vines and leafless winter almond trees. It was her grandmother's hands that first had hewn the beds from the ground and turned the soil over. That had strung the wire and planted the vines – tamping the posts in with her booted feet and dabbling her hands through the crumbling loam.

Before the second war, on a Saturday morning in the first spring after her mother died, Ruth had stood behind the house in the ruined garden where the grass grew rank and the trunks of the old fruit trees were climbed by weeds and choked with grey wood – seeing the faint lines of the old garden beds along the path, domed beneath the grass like graves.

She had looked back down the slope of the property, past the house, to the yards and the paddocks still green and thickly covered. She had breathed the early morning sun on dew-damp ground and the trace of wood smoke rising thinly from the kitchen. A dog barked and she had heard a magpie family's early song, breathing carefully round the sadness, her feet in the long grass and the light through the fruit trees making shifting patterns on her arms.

She knew that in the shed by the forge, behind the door was a rusted hoe and a light shovel, their cobweb mantle a blanket knit from dust. And between a blackened oil drum and a wooden crate of hinges was a flour sack half filled with brown paper folded into squares and filled with seeds. There were words written on each in her grandmother's hand – she recognised it from a red bound book of recipes that her mother had kept in the kitchen, the ink fading and along the top in a fine looped scrawl, *rabbit stew* and *shepherd's pie*.

And standing there on that Saturday, with the light falling down around her, she had felt just the corner of a smile but a corner, still, and she nodded and began.

At the end of that day, as the sunlight faded Ruth had stretched her heavy arms and held her fingers wide, the dirt worked into her skin like

wood grain and a penny-sized blister rubbed through on each palm. She had straightened and let her eyes rest on the newly turned beds behind her, churned through with grass and the dead branches piled and ready for burning and the nanny goat snatching at a pile of pulled weeds that reached up past her knees.

That evening she had spread the packets of seeds out on the kitchen table – pumpkin, tomato and brussel sprouts – labelled in a slanted writing with the blue ink fading to lilac, placing her hands over them. Without knowing why, she had pulled open her grandmother's book of recipes and turned the pages, the ingredients listed in a careful hand – *corned beef, pound cake, damper*. There were places where the paper ran short and there, in the margins and on the edges, in letters smaller than type, the words ran like vines around the buckled edge of the page. There were loose sheets too, carefully cut to size or folded, pressed between the pages of the book. It was there that she found her grandmother's notes for the garden, between instructions for preserving apricots and brining mutton.

Work soaked wood ash into soil before planting tomatoes.

Sow broccoli, silverbeet and celery in spring.

The next morning, in the garden, she had opened the packets, the small seeds in her hands like sand grains. Crescents of red dirt under her fingernails and her knees muddy from kneeling in the beds. In the coming weeks she had found in the rising shoots and growing buds a world more whole than any she had ever glimpsed between the pages of the books that they read at school.

But that afternoon, with the letter folded in her pocket she hadn't stayed in the garden. She walked down the rosemary-lined path, past onions stalky in their beds and the broad beans climbing a frame of old wood and wire, past a pumpkin vine spiked with yellow flowers and a glossy thicket of corn. She had let herself out of the rusty gate, stopping to stroke the nanny goat's nose, and made her way past the forge and the horse yards, through the paddocks and down to the dam. The day was almost over, the shadows of the trees lengthening and the first kangaroos coming out to graze. She stood on the edge of the dam, looking back up the hill to the house. At the buckled roof and the leaning fence posts etched by white ants. At the sagging front gate and the weeds under the verandah.

She took the letter out of her pocket and read it again, frowning, the light fading and under her cardigan the edge of a cold wind promising rain.

She remembered the day her mother died – walking up the driveway from school and wondering at the doctor's pony and cart in the yard. There were other men there too, with serious faces and a policeman on a chestnut mare with a crooked blaze. She had stopped with her hand on Tom's arm and the men, seeing her there, fell silent. That moment was as clear to her as though it was etched on glass. The feel of Tom's shirt in her hand, the father of her school friend who held his hat against his chest but couldn't meet her eye and on the doctor's cart a blanket-covered bundle.

Ruth held the letter out to the cool air like a white flag. Then with the tips of her fingers she carefully tore it into tiny pieces. Letting them go one by one and watching them fall into the wind like confetti.

Later that night she sat down and opened her grandmother's recipe book. Around her a small, buttery pool of kerosene light and the rest of the room slipping coolly into shadows. She was tired and she smoothed the loose sheets on the table, nodding over the lines and the sloping strokes of ink. Feeling in the quiet dark a kind of stillness. And in the tiredness a kind of ease.

After thinking for a while she picked up a pen and opened the book to a sheet of white paper, carefully folded to size, written with a darker ink and in a different hand. And under the last entry she wrote *Plant corn and pumpkin together*.

The Japanese came to Padang on bicycles, six abreast. Worn, dusty and their faces hard with experience. Their wheels were covered with strips of solid rubber joined at the ends with metal pins and the sound of them was the sound of rats, in their hundreds, running on tin.

From the door of the warehouse Tom watched them pass, the port around him empty for the first time and still. Beside the docks the water was deep and sluggish and slicked on top with spilt fuel rainbows and cigarette ends. A plane flew overhead – red circles on the wings and the lowering afternoon sky. The next day, in the town square, the Dutch flag was replaced with a rising sun.

The first things they took were the radios. Tom, at his desk, held his hands up in surprise as two Japanese soldiers elbowed their way through the door of the warehouse. Their rifles seemed to fill the room.

'Keirei,' they yelled, waving their rifles at him.

Tom stood up in a rush. 'I don't speak Japanese,' he said holding his hands out. 'No Japanese.'

'Keirei! Keirei!'

'No Japanese, sorry, I can't speak ...'

One of them reached over and grabbed Tom's shirt, dragging him out from behind his desk.

'Keirei!'

'I'm sorry,' he said hearing his own voice squeezed small in his throat. 'Please, I don't understand.'

'Keirei!' With a sudden lunge one of the soldiers hit Tom between his shoulders with his rifle stock. Tom doubled over.

'Keirei,' he said, nodding at Tom who straightened slowly, hauling air through his open mouth, feeling his eyes burn and a sudden sweat on his

skin.

Looking around the room one of the soldiers saw the radio on a low shelf. He pointed.

‘Radio!’

‘Yes,’ said Tom. ‘My radio.’

‘Radio!’ And gestured for Tom to bring it to him.

‘You want my radio? Well, I mean, well it’s not actually mine. It really belongs to Mr Mortimer.’

‘Radio!’ barked the soldier and stepped towards Tom with his rifle at chest height.

‘Yes, certainly.’

Tom took the radio from the shelf and passed it over.

One of the soldiers yelled ‘*Keirei!*’ so close that Tom felt his breath in his face and the hot briny smell of his breath. He bent low, looking at the scuff marks on the toes of his shoes, his heart juddering. He saw the fine cracks in the concrete floor of the building and the spider webs behind the door that the maid had missed. When he heard the door slam shut he straightened slowly, a sourness in his throat and his legs feeling like he’d just ridden five miles on flat tyres.

The day they came for bicycles and musical instruments, Tom was at home at his desk. Across the road from him lived old Mrs De Vries who had spent her whole life in the tropics and who was spotless, always, in white dresses edged with lace – her face in the elliptical shade of a bone-handled parasol. She spent her days tending her large garden and drinking coffee on the front porch where the shade was deepest. In the evenings she would play piano and, with the windows open, Tom could hear her play – hymns mostly, but also Liszt and Chopin and carols in the season.

They came on a Sunday, five soldiers and a flatbed truck and Tom could hear their voices from across the street. From his window he watched them rock the piano on its castors through the open front door and across the tiled porch. And Mrs De Vries fluttering beside them with her hair coming loose from its pins in long silvery strands.

‘Please, please,’ he heard her say. ‘It was from *mijn moeder*.’ Her hands at the side of her face. ‘My mother.’

At the top of the steps it teetered, three men at the front and all of them yelling. Small men, though nuggetty, and the piano heavy down the stairs. Tom could hear crunching and the sounds of badly played chords. Between them they wrestled the piano across the grass to the truck and with yelling and reddened faces pulled it onto the truck on its side. Where it lay with the lid sprawled open.

Tom returned to the ledger on his desk and the long columns of blue-inked numbers, leaving Mrs De Vries on the top step watching, long after the truck had disappeared down the road.

After the musical instruments, the Japanese soldiers took the children’s kites and made piles of them on street corners, like bundles of fallen birds, bright-plumaged and their long tails of string and twists of newspaper. Tom had loved to watch them fly from the street beside his house – bamboo-strutted and tethered to small and barefoot boys. The sound of yelling and the rattle of wind through paper tails. Sometimes the boys glued shards of glass, ground fine between two stones, to the strings of their kites and it caught the sun like gold dust as they struck the wind.

Tom watched as a soldier made a pile of kites across the road from his house and the faces of children looking out sullenly from behind low walls and open windows. The pile lifted in the light breeze as the Japanese soldier held his cigarette lighter to the underside. When it finally caught, the kites at the top of the pile lifted in the smoky heat like they were escaping. The soldier tried to push them back down and the embered ash rose around him, the smoke in his eyes and he coughed and in the end only the paper burned and the piles of bamboo lay charred like chicken bones.

‘Welcome to the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,’ called Mrs De Vries a little while later as Tom poked the still-smoking pile with his toe. ‘Here they take the children’s toys. And they cannot even burn them properly.’

Tom looked around but the street was finally empty.

‘Such fools,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Do you know why they took the kites, Tom? It was because they were frightened that we would use them to

send signals to each other.'

Tom crossed the street, hoping that the old woman would lower her voice.

'Perhaps next they will take our bedsheets in case we write on them and post them as letters,' she said. 'Forgetting of course that they have already stopped the postal service.'

She laughed and Tom saw her small yellow teeth and thin folds of skin at her neck.

'They will come for us soon,' she said. 'We should be ready.'

'Do you think so?' said Tom.

'Of course. They are not likely to leave us expatriates unattended for the duration of the war. And Hirohito will no doubt be modelling himself on that other bully, Herr Hitler, who has no problem locking up those who disagree with him.'

Tom nodded. 'I think we'll just have to put up with their demands until the war is over. It shouldn't be long, surely.'

Mrs De Vries looked at Tom and shook her head. 'If the Japanese were expecting an organised resistance, they must be laughing now.'

In Tripoli, their camp overlooked the sea. With the armistice signed, Arthur slept through the night and woke with the sun steaming the canvas. They bided their time in the town, past buildings big and smooth with age. They ate plump olives and dark-skinned figs – seamed and split with sugar – and talked about home like men that might just get there. They spent their afternoons writing letters and washing their clothes, and at night their tents smelled like hard yellow soap and the resinous pine trees outside the camp.

One day they were gathered in front of the army veterinarian – dozens of men, all easy, with their sleeves rolled and their hats off, and he cleared his throat and read from a sheaf of paper that fluttered in the breeze, Arthur thought, in a way that made it seem as though his hands were shaking. The horses, he told them, would not be returning home.

In the silence that followed Arthur looked up, blinking, and saw a small hawk describe cursive loops across the bright sky. He felt as though he should find some comfort there, in the sweeping flight and the scalloped grey feathers of its wingtips. But he blinked again and it was just a bird, after all, against a lupin blue sky full of light.

The cost of quarantine, the vet told them, was prohibitive. Most of the horses – those over the age of twelve or no longer in working condition – were to be shaved of their manes and tails and shot.

Arthur had imagined the little mare teaching his children to ride, the stirrup leathers rolled around the irons to reach their small bare feet and maybe her own dark-coated foal nimbling along beside them. He had thought how she would love the sweet, soft crunch of windfall pears and in summer, the paddock by the house where the cape lilacs cast a denser kind of shade and the bees humming in the canopy. She would not, he realised now, follow him around the house yard, nudging his pockets for treats or wriggle her lips on his arm while he scratched her.

Arthur stood in the silence of men and felt like the blood was going out of him. His face was cold and his neck all tight inside. He looked up again, at the hawk chasing insects across the sky and his lunch was at the back of his throat, greasy and tasting like bile.

The next day he saddled the little mare and rode out of town, through groves of olives, their ancient grey trunks twisted and scarred. She shook her head and he nudged her into canter, the reins loose on her neck. She snorted with each stride, for the ease of it and the shaded path, the sand hard-packed beneath her hooves. When the olive groves ran out, the ground fell away to fields tufted with wiry grass, flat-topped hills behind. And he pulled up, dropping the saddle on the ground. He let her pull at the grass, the tiny shadows of bees across the ground and the sound of church bells faraway.

Later, with the afternoon light yellowing the olive trees she rested, easing her weight with a hind leg cocked and her eyes half-lidded. With gentle hands he pulled her small ears, softly. The velvet at their base and the smell of her as familiar as his own skin. He felt with sadness the dents and scars in the smoothness of her neck and the tendons hard with work. With his sleeve he rubbed the light sweat on her back until it was dry, the thin wrinkles behind her forelegs and the long sloping plane of her shoulder.

He took some sugar from his pocket and she licked it from his hand, like a cat, and her long tongue sticky. Resting his head against hers and the pistol heavy on his belt. He stroked her face lightly and whispered to her, waiting till the last of the sweetness was gone from his skin.

‘Good girl,’ he said to her at last.



Two weeks later, back in Egypt, he tried to write home. Sitting on an oil drum in the sand with paper across his knee and the pyramids crumbling into the sky behind him. *Dear Helen*, he wrote with the pen in his fist. With his breath glugging out of him like water out of an upturned bottle. And, *Dear Helen* again just underneath.

His hands rested on the knees of his breeches, the bones showing white below the tan. The sweat on his palms and a feeling like lice on his skin

despite his newly issues clothes. *Dear Helen*, he wrote again, the pen through the paper in places and the ink on his knees. *Dear Helen. Dear Helen. Dear Helen*, until the paper was covered. Half torn and the ink smeared to clots on the page.

When he was done writing he took a handful of sand and watched it run, fine like flour, from his hand into the envelope. Instead of words. Pressing the letter down on top and sealing it shut with careful fingers.

And he cried then, finally, as the camp went on around him. For a view framed by pointed ears and the arch of a curved neck beneath his hand. For the smell of sweat and galloping. For a fine little horse quick with courage. For a small hawk scribing circles in a lupin blue sky. For all that light.

And finally. For a dark shape lying still at the edge of an ancient olive grove.

The Japanese came for them before dawn, their shadows like giants in the headlights and the sound of their voices like gunfire. Tom watched them from the porch, shivering in the just-cool air and a small bag of belongings at his feet. When the truck stopped outside his house he deepened into a bow, only straightening when he heard the soldiers' boots on the wood of the front step.

There were a dozen men already in the truck. Tom knew some of them from parties at the governor's mansion where, in their smooth linen suits, they had seemed much taller. The men in the truck had uncombed hair and sleep-creased faces and they shuffled for balance as the truck moved, a faint smell of aftershave and burning engine oil.

Tom nodded at the others and found a place where, through the planked sides of the truck, he could watch the town slide past. Tamarind trees and tobacco plants, children playing in puddles and an old woman on her way to market. Every few minutes the truck would stop and more men would climb in until, eventually, they were shoulder to shoulder, hot under the thin roof and in the press of bodies.

Tom thought about Alice. On the way to the dock she had cried, his handkerchief in her hand and her wooden trunks strapped on the back of his truck. On the wharf people, baggage and pony carts jostled for space amongst sacks of rice and piles of green bananas. She had turned and looked at him, her face pale and the crowd shifting hard around them.

'Just come home to me as soon as you can,' she had said and kissed him, her lips pressed thin against his teeth and her small cool hands up under his shirt.

Tom sighed. The truck was slow on the ragged road and, as they left the town behind, he saw the mountains ribboned through the gaps in the wood. He was thirsty and his legs were tired from standing. The truck rocked through a pothole and the man beside him stumbled. Tom grabbed his arm

and the man grunted and nodded his thanks. Tom saw that he was old enough to be his father, thin-haired and his cheeks shiny in the heat.

‘Now I will feel more sorry for the cows on their way to market,’ said the man with a quick smile.

‘Yes,’ said Tom, ‘it’s getting pretty hot in here, isn’t it?’

The man nodded. ‘I think it’s not much further. There was talk of them using the Dutch army barracks to house us. That is maybe just a few miles more.’

‘I wondered where we were going,’ said Tom.

‘Yes,’ said the man leaning forward to squint through the planks at the country beside them. ‘I know this place, I have been here before. We are close now.’

Tom wriggled his shoulders, wiped his sweating palm on his trousers and offered it to the older man. ‘I’m Tom Watkins, by the way.’

The older man smiled and took his hand. ‘Dirk Huisken.’

The truck heaved to a stop. Through gaps in the boards Tom could see a large grassy compound lined with long, low buildings of tile and wood. He could see men in groups and a high fence made from wire. The truck ramp dropped and there was a sudden rush of cooler air. Tom blinked in the bright midday sun and filled his lungs.

The soldiers started yelling at the men and hitting the sides of the truck with their palms.

‘*Tenko! Tenko!*’ they yelled and the men in the truck looked at each other, raising their shoulders and their faces puzzled.

An English bank manager, who Tom had met before at tennis parties on the governor’s lawn, made his way to the front of the group. He held his smooth white hand out to the soldiers as though for quiet.

‘I’m not sure we know what you want. Perhaps if you just ...’

A Japanese soldier strode up the ramp and, grasping his shirt by the collar, dragged him to the ground. When the tall man crumpled at the base of the ramp the soldier kicked him until he struggled to his feet.

‘*Tenko! Tenko!*’ the soldiers yelled and the men came hesitantly down the ramp, close together like schooling fish.

With rifle butts and fists the soldiers began to move the men until they formed two lines. Tom found himself next to Dirk and noticed that the older man's shoes were soft leather, finely made, and the cuffs of his shirt were stiff with starch.

One of the soldiers yelled '*Keirei!*' and Tom bent low, tugging briefly on Dirk's sleeve until he too bowed.

Inside the buildings there were sleeping benches made from bamboo and wood. The men's feet were quiet on the hard dirt floor and their voices low as they looked around the building that was now their home. The warped shutters were closed against the sun and in the thin strips of light Tom saw dust motes turning like tiny stars.

The first night in the barracks Tom lay awake on the hard bench, watching the shadows change and listening to the *chuck-chuck* of the geckoes as they chased each other up the walls. In the distance he could hear the women singing as they pounded rice, their voices rising and falling to the rhythm of their arms. The daylight, when it came, brought with it the smell of his home in Padang – turned earth, wet leaves and cooking fires, and Tom breathed, the feeling of it in his chest like a fingernail pressed into the soft skin of his palm.

After sunrise Tom heard the Japanese guards yelling and he sat up.

'Tenko! Tenko!'

Along with the rest of the men from his building he stumbled into the early morning sunshine in front of the barracks. The men quickly arranged themselves into lines and Tom found a place amongst them, keeping his eyes low. They were silent and still, their shadows long, and a fine mist covered the foothills beside the camp.

An older Japanese officer with wire-rimmed glasses stood in front of them and pulled a sheet of neatly folded paper from a breast pocket, opened it and cleared his throat.

'I am Captain Jiro. You are here today because you are prisoners of His Majesty the Emperor Hirohito. You have been cast off by your nations and have become the rubble of their futile war. Their plans to dominate the Asian people have been dashed by the might of Nippon. Now the Asian nations have risen together and have formed the Greater East Asia Co-

Prosperity Sphere. You will remain our prisoners until such time as your governments discontinue their resistance to the inevitable allegiance of Asia.

‘His Majesty has graciously allowed you to live. You must be humble and allow no anti-Japanese feelings or thoughts to corrupt your mind. Anyone who does not work will not eat. There will be no luxurious meals such as those that you are used to. You will be honed by sacrifice and hardship. While many of you will not see your homes again you should be reminded that you are only here today because of the grace of His Majesty the Emperor and you must work hard and accept that he grasps your fate with his hands.

‘I am to be as your father – a strict and tireless father who will control your every waking step. You will learn to carry yourselves in the manner, not of your own undisciplined masses, but in that of the great Imperial Army. I will issue you with rules and you will obey them cheerfully.

‘Escape is futile and you should abandon any hope of success. The people in the villages around you are free from the yoke of their colonial tyrants at last and will not entertain your wishes for freedom. If you attempt to escape, execution will follow swiftly.

‘Your job will be to build a road fit to carry the soldiers of Japan. This work is in the interests of the world and, if you should happen to lay your life down for it you will be just one of many. There is suffering ahead of you that it will be your honour to give your best effort to. Live your life by this motto and you will die a happy man.’

On a teak beam near the door of the barracks the men kept a calendar. One small nick in the wood for every day. As the days passed, the nicks grew up one side of the beam and down the other. And then started again on another beam while the men watched the sky and waited for news of the war.

They worked each day except Sunday, marching out of the camp and down through the village to where the wide road cut through the jungle like a scar. Tom spent his days on the pick, shifting rocks. At first his hands blistered and the blisters rubbed to blood. But eventually the skin grew thick and hard and he swung the pick each day till his shoulders ached. He tightened the belt that had once belonged to his grandfather and, when there were no longer holes to fit, he made new ones with a smuggled nail.

On Sundays the men were allowed to work in their own gardens and they turned the heavy red soil and tended the rows of kangkong and thin, running beans, nudging out the weeds and carrying water to the rows in kerosene cans. It was hot in the camp, in the open spaces between the barracks, and after lunch when the air was thick like tepid water the guards would often doze in the shade, smoking and reading. Often then, the villagers would come to the fence to trade, their mouths stained red with betel nut and their pockets bulging. With an eye on the guards the men would barter for duck eggs, sambal, meat or even a bar of soap.

One Sunday afternoon when Tom was pulling weeds from the garden beds one of the Dutch prisoners walked past and whispered, 'Tom Watkins?'

Tom nodded.

'By the fence,' said the man.

Tom looked to where a villager sat under the tree closest to the fence, smoking.

Tom made his way to the fence and as he got closer the villager stood up and, watching the guards carefully, shuffled over to the fence with his head down.

Tom held his hand across his mouth to hide his smile as he looked at the villager's broad brown face.

'Tom,' whispered Kadek, smiling.

'Kadek,' he whispered back. 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm helping a friend.'

Tom smiled but covered it with his hand in case the guards were watching.

'Do you have any news of the war? Are the Americans winning?'

'It's not so good right now but I'm sure the tide will turn soon. No-one can stand up to the Americans for long. Not even Hirohito.'

'We keep hoping for good news, but it doesn't come.'

Kadek looked at the guards. 'I have something for you. But once you have it you must walk away from here as if you have nothing or the guards will take it away.'

‘Thank you.’

‘It is nothing, my friend. A little something from the fish.’

Tom looked at his friend through the wire, and his chest was warm and tight.

‘You are a good friend.’

‘You would do the same for me, I know.’

As he watched, Kadek bent down as though to pull a prickle from his foot and pushed a small bundle beneath the wire. Then he walked away without looking back.

Tom walked with little purpose and bent down and picked up the package, feeling the weight of coins in his hand, shoving it quickly down the front of his shorts and walking away, back to the garden as quickly as he could.

Beside their camp in Palestine, the barley fields lay fallow and the olive trees were buckled by the wind. They were close enough to see the sea once the early morning mists had cleared, but too far to walk now that the horses were gone. Though the war was over they trained each day. Marching and rifle practice in the cold – lines of men plumed with breath steam and the winter fig trees shrivelled to empty branches. They waited, with seven other regiments, for the generals to order them home. Listening to rumours and the threats of an Egyptian uprising, writing letters to their families and scrounging the plains for firewood.

Their bell tents were threadbare, no longer white but marked with mud and dust and by the rain that came through the canvas like it was lace. Some of their blankets had done a thousand nights and a thousand days too, bedrolled behind the saddle and sometimes under it, in the weeks when the tibbin was scarce and the horses' spines were close beneath their skin. Arthur's blanket was so worn the bone-coloured weft threads showed in the folds and at night the cold burrowed through it like a parasite. He missed the heat of the blacksmith's forge and the press of warm, dusty bodies in the horse lines.

The closer he got to going home, the further away it seemed. At night before he slept, he touched the photo in his pocket, worn and the paper sueded, and thought of the woman he barely knew and the child he'd never seen. And the paddocks empty and the best of the horses gone to the war. When he woke, hours before dawn, it was to dreams dark like bile in his throat. He'd lie under his blanket and press the heels of his hands into his eyes till his heartbeat slowed and the terrible newsreel faded.

After more than four years he knew when one of the others was awake, could hear their breath lifting or a sudden stillness. He was rarely the only one awake in the dark, but they never spoke of it and in the morning, red-eyed, they'd stretch and piss holes side by side in the chalky sand like the

night before was nothing. Rum, he found, was good for a few hours sleep but the dreams would come in the end. Sliding over the top of each other, shells bursting, men screaming and the unmistakable sound of bullets hitting horse flesh.

Sometimes, in the afternoon, to shrink the time before tea, he'd wander into the Arab village at the side of the camp to buy a handful of leathery dried figs and he'd watch the young boys bringing the goats in for the night and the thin children playing on the sand. Crops grew sparsely in the hard dirt and Arthur knew that the sacks of grain under the eaves were hardly enough to line their bellies over winter.

The women in the village were covered in dark-coloured cloth and turned their faces away from him when he spoke. An older man called Nabil took his money and counted the figs into his hand, one by one, wearing a Turkish greatcoat meant for a much larger man. He smiled politely with tobacco-coloured teeth and limped on a leg withered like a ringbarked tree. In the village Arthur could see things that he guessed had been stolen from the army camp – a shovel, the head of a pickaxe and a dented canteen. When Nabil noticed him looking, he shrugged and wiped his hands on his thighs like a man with better things to do.

Arthur walked back to camp, chewing and spitting the nubbly twig ends of the figs onto the sand while his thoughts bunched and scattered like just yarded sheep. He knew what the others would say. But he wasn't sure. He wished he could be certain about things and could talk with his hands on his hips and his feet planted, but ever since they'd shot the horses he'd had trouble drafting his thoughts in the direction that he needed them to go. Sometimes it seemed that he had more memories than answers.

He thought about the week after he was wounded. They'd made camp near an old riverbed, hot and so dry they lived from one camel caravan to the next. A pint of water each per day – not enough to wash with, and his pants leg black with old blood. His leg was tight like the belly of something already dead and though Joe shook his head and told him to report sick he worried about the mare and he didn't want to let the others down.

There were no tents that close to the front so they dug holes in the red dirt to sleep in and covered them with canvas bivvy sheets. One night Ernest

watched Arthur climb into his sleeping hole, turning gingerly around his injured leg and the sweat on him like saltwater spray.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said, ‘if your leg doesn’t come right soon, one morning we’ll just fill the hole up, with you still in it,’ and shook his head. ‘At least you’ll have saved us the effort of digging the hole.’

Arthur smiled thinly. ‘No chance of that, Ern. It’s getting better every day.’

‘Yeah, looks like it,’ said Ernest turning away.

Every morning that week, in the hour before dawn, they saddled up and rode down through the riverbed and out onto the plains near the Turkish position. Sometimes they’d see the Turks on their grey Arab ponies, pink in the dawn light and the almost perfect circles of their hoofprints in the sand. But they stayed out of range and for six days he didn’t once get his rifle from the leather bucket on his saddle.

One afternoon, on their way back to camp, they had pulled up to let the horses rest in the slim shade of a rocky cliff.

‘Did you hear,’ said Joe, ‘that some signaller in the Fifth found some really old painting in the bottom of an old Turkish trench.’

‘How old?’ said Herbert.

‘They reckon thousands of years.’

‘What sort of painting lasts for thousands of years?’ said Ernest.

‘I dunno. They say it’s made from tiles or something.’

‘Well, that’d make it a mosaic, not a painting,’ said Ernest.

‘Smart-arse,’ said Joe.

‘Still, we should go and check it out,’ said Ernest. ‘Can’t have Herb going back to his ma without getting a look at something holy, can we?’

‘What makes you so sure that it’s holy?’ said Herbert.

‘Well this is the Holy Land, isn’t it?’ said Ernest.

‘Yeah, but that doesn’t make every bloody thing in it holy,’ Arthur said.

‘I’m tired,’ said Herbert. ‘Can’t we just go back to camp and see if the mail’s come?’

Ernest looked thoughtful. 'If it's from Roman times it might have naked ladies on it.'

'Well, that's good enough for me,' said Joe.

'Why didn't you say that in the first place, Ern?' said Herbert. 'Let's go.'

There were no naked ladies on the mosaic, but it didn't matter. They stood on the edge of the trench, peering over the shoulder of a captain who, on his hands and knees, brushed dirt from its surface with a paintbrush. The colours and shapes coming out of the dust like something newly made. Arthur could see lions and horses, birds and a goat made from small square tiles. There were bunches of grapes and vine leaves, just like the ones that grew in trellised lines at home.

'What're you doing?' said Ernest to the captain.

'We're just getting the mosaic ready to be photographed and then we're going to pack it up and ship it back home.'

'Back to Australia?'

'Best way to keep it safe, I reckon.'

'What do the Wogs have to say about that?'

'Dunno. If they liked it so much they shouldn't have left it in the bottom of a trench, should they?'

'True,' said Ernest. 'How old do you reckon it is?'

'Over a thousand years at least,' the captain replied over his shoulder.

'Crikey,' said Ernest.

Arthur tried to think of that much time, but his leg hurt and the vine leaves made him think of home and his heart was small, somehow, and sliding. He sat down on a pile of dirt next to the trench. Breathing carefully, weighing clots of fine sand in his hands and crumbling them to dust. His fingers closed around something small and hard. A dirt-coloured rock, smooth and cool in his hand, square. He spat on it and rubbed the dirt off with his thumb. Beneath the brown it was green, and he held it and it seemed to him that it was the colour of thousand-year-old vine leaves and he slipped it into his pocket.

The next day they rode for the coast, to Marakeb. For three weeks leave, clean uniforms and the promise of the sea. Arthur felt his leg getting hotter

as they rode, the skin around the wound stretched shiny tight and a thin trace of red up his thigh. It was too sore to touch and the water was tinny in his canteen and made him gag.

Their camp was in amongst the dunes and as he swung down from the little mare he felt the swollen skin on his thigh give way like a fraying seam. He staggered backwards and swore, his leg feeling wet and his eyes all buckled like he was looking through old glass. Joe took the little mare by the reins.

‘Go and sit down before you fall down,’ he said and nodded at the sea.

He wove to the beach pulling his boots off and the salt water stung but was cold. Lying at the tide edge with his breeches half down and a hole the size of a child’s fist in his thigh, he watched tendrils of pus and blood float upwards until his skin puckered and the wound was finally clean. Later that night, still shaky, he wrapped it with a strip of cotton and slept a sleep so navy blue and seamless that even the sharp-eyed morning light didn’t wake him.

For three weeks they slept and swam and the dinners were hot and not always bully beef. There was real bread, not biscuits, and a double rum ration once a week. In a letter to Helen, Arthur wrote, ‘My leg’s not that bad, and it’s getting better, but I reckon you wouldn’t buy me if I was a horse. Well, not if you wanted something that went a bit fancy, anyway.’ But he healed and when their leave was up and they rode over the dunes he realised that he wasn’t wincing because of the wound in this thigh but because of the rub of his sunburned arse in the saddle.



Arthur finished the last of his figs and wiped his hands on his thighs. Two years later he could still feel it, the divot in the flesh and the tightness, the skin gathered at the edges. He could feel it when he rode or at night rolling over and he didn’t like to look at it much, but his leg worked alright and he knew he’d been lucky.

Herbert had a fire going next to their tent and Arthur held his fingers out – all itchy and red from the cold, to the flames. There was a billy of tea beside it and he smiled because Herbert liked it sweet, like he did. The wind

dropped as he drank his tea and with his hands around his mess tin and his boots towards the fire he was almost warm enough for the first time in days.

After dinner they opened their mail and sat around in the firelight reading it over and swapping lines.

‘How about this?’ said Ernest holding out his letter. ‘Agnes says that Daphne topped her class in the arithmetic. Bloody hell, she’s a smart kid for sure.’

‘That’s great, Ern.’ Arthur tapped his letter with his finger, lightly, rustling the paper. ‘Helen says Ruth likes the grocer because he drives a pony in a buggy, but not the baker because he rides a bike.’

Joe reached over and patted Arthur’s shoulder. ‘Just like her dad,’ he said, smiling. ‘Whereas your girl, Ern, obviously takes after the dam.’

‘You’re absolutely bloody right,’ said Ernest laughing. ‘I never was much good at school. Guess that’s why I’m here with you bastards and not getting fat behind a desk.’

They passed a bottle round, the letters safely folded and the rum on them, leaning heavy. As they were about to turn in they heard a shot, not faraway.

‘That’ll be some silly bugger cleaning his gun, I reckon,’ said Ernest and Arthur agreed, yawning, and the thought of a scraped-sand hollow for his hip and a worn blanket calling.

The next morning Arthur was up first and he tickled the embers with his breath and some kindling sticks until he had flames and the billy full and wedged up in the fire. When he sat down to wait for the boil he realised that though usually at that hour the camp would be quiet there were voices in the early dawn and movement too, men shouting in the distance and a something-going-on feeling all around him. For a moment he hoped that the something might mean they were packing for the harbour but he’d learned not to hope when the army was concerned. They had hoped it was all over when the war ended but here they were, four weeks later, and not one soldier had sailed for home. Unless of course he counted those on the hospital ship they’d seen steaming down the Suez.

They'd stood to watch it pass down the canal and Herbert had shivered. 'There but for the grace of God go I,' he'd said and Ernest had snorted as he lit a cigarette.

'God? What God? There's just the sky above us, Herb, and let me tell you – it's fucking empty.' He inhaled deeply, tipped his head back and blew a thin stream of smoke from the corner of his mouth into the air. 'Unless you count the birds of course.' Ern waved his hand up at the sky. 'And the best that they can do is shit on your hat.'

Arthur saw another soldier passing and hailed him with a raised hand and a smile.

'What's going on? Feels like something's going down?'

The man paused. 'Sure is. A young Kiwi trooper was shot last night by one of the thieving bloody Arabs from the village. Looks like he was trying to stop him stealing his kit bag.'

'Bloody hell,' said Arthur, shaking his head.

'The Kiwis threw a cordon round the village last night but now the brass are gonna call it off. Can't go upsetting the locals, you know.'

'What, so they're not going to try and find out who did it?'

'No. Some major went up there last night and asked them to hand over the culprit. They denied everything of course and the major says we've got no evidence.'

'Bloody hell,' Arthur said, shaking his head.

'Yeah, except the fellas found one of those Arab hats in the sand near where the young fella died and some bare footprints leading back over the dunes. And anyway, who else would be in the camp at night, stealing stuff. They steal the shirt right off your back if they had half a chance.'

Arthur nodded. 'They can be a bit light-fingered, yes.'

The soldier shook his head. 'A bit light-fingered? You've been out there, they'll dig the bloody bodies up just to steal the boots. If we don't do something about this, they'll waltz right into camp any time they like and take their pick.'

'Bloody hell, I'd like to think we'll be home before that happens.'

‘Don’t kid yourself. This bloody mess could drag on for months. How many blokes are they gonna murder before we leave?’ And he strode off leaving Arthur shaking his head.

When they lined up later that day for rifle practice in the dunes a small soldier walked up to Ernest and from the side of his mouth said, ‘We’re gonna sort those Arab bastards out, tonight at eight. Half a mile to the north of the village there’s a fallen-down tree, we’ll meet up there. Got to keep it quiet, but, so be careful who you tell and no rifles.’

Ernest nodded. ‘We’ll be there.’

Arthur looked at Joe and shook his head.

Later as they walked back to their tent he said to Ernest, ‘What did you mean by “we’ll be there”? I’m not bloody going anywhere.’

‘Yeah,’ said Joe. ‘I’m sorry for the poor Kiwi bugger that copped it. But I’m done with this shit, the war’s over.’

Ernest spat. ‘I knew you blokes wouldn’t come at it. But Herb and I’ll be there. You gotta show them who’s boss. You know that.’

Arthur shook his head. ‘It’s over Ern. Leave it be.’

‘I can’t mate. We’re like brothers now, all of us, and I can’t walk away from this.’

‘You don’t even have to walk away, Ern. You just have to stay here and not go.’

‘Look, I know you fellas are a bit soft on this sort of stuff and that’s fine by me. I won’t try to change your minds. But I’m going and I’m guessing Herb’s coming with me.’

Herbert nodded and Arthur saw that their faces were hard and planed by resolve. He shook his head.

‘You have to do what you think is right but if you ask me, no good can come of it.’

Later that night when Arthur would usually have been thinking about his blanket, Ernest and Herbert stood up and slipped from the yellowed circle of their small fire into the dark. Herbert carried a heavy-ended stick and he weighed it in his hand, smacking it into his palm like a cricket ball and Arthur listened, breathing shallow, until he couldn’t hear it any more.

He tried to sleep, turning over on the sand, feeling the cold in his bones and his coat bunched beneath him. At midnight he was thirsty and then again at one. Outside the tent the air was still and thickly pocked with stars. He climbed a dune, and looked towards the village where a red glow like embers filled the bottom of the sky. He heard Joe behind him.

‘Looks like they’ve had their fun then,’ he said.

‘We should go over and bring them back or they’ll end the war on a bloody court martial,’ said Arthur.

‘Yeah, they’re probably all sitting round a bloody great bonfire drinking rum,’ said Joe.

‘And here’s us, without any.’

‘Alright then, let’s go.’

They walked towards the distant fire, picking their way through the sand and scrub, a thin scrap of moon and the starlight just enough to see by. Somewhere between the camp and the village he felt Joe pause beside him. He laid a hand on his arm and whispered, ‘What’s that? Can you see?’ And pointed to a low dark shape beneath some olive trees. They moved closer and heard the muffled cry of a child.

They stared. In the deeper dark of an olive grove were dozens of women and children huddled and still on the ground. Close packed and robed, they could have been boulders or a shadow.

‘Jesus,’ said Joe in a whisper. ‘Do you think they’re alright?’

Arthur stared, seeing the curve of a mother’s arms around a child and the flit of low light on wide open eyes. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I reckon they’re just hiding,’ and felt a shivery coldness in the bones of his neck.

Just outside the village Arthur took the lead, edging around a stone outbuilding, roof timbers smouldering. They were careful, staying in the shadows, as they followed the fire to the centre of the village.

Later, much later, Arthur wondered if what he saw was already familiar, like a dark and terrible colour plate from a book that he’d once seen. Or maybe it just seemed that way because, for decades after, it was what he saw when he closed his eyes or slept and even once in the bottom of his teacup, around the specks of slipped-through leaf and undissolved grains of sugar. The

houses burned, roof timbers charring and on the ground, between the darkness and the firelight, were Arab bodies, dozens of them. He knew enough by then to know they'd died hard, their arms bent like sticks to shelter their broken faces or to call to their god. Ranged around the square were faces that he recognised, men that he knew. Ernest and Herb and others, passing a bottle back and forth – hats pushed back and sleeves rolled as though for work. In teams of four they carried the bodies to the well and hoisted them up and over the low stone edge. As he watched they picked up a body clothed in a Turkish greatcoat meant for a much larger man, a spindling leg hanging beneath. And over the bleating of goats trapped in a burning barn Arthur heard the men cheer.

Though eventually too many died to bother remembering – or some days even counting – Tom would never forget the first man in the camp to die. All night they heard him, raving and shouting, and the next day too. His teeth knocking in his head like a can full of pebbles and his face waxed with sweat.

The next afternoon, Tom saw the man in the hospital – just a roof on rough bush beams, four bamboo benches – and the doctor, a Dutch veterinarian with big knuckled hands and eyes nubbly from the sun. Across the sick man's shorts was a dark brown stain. Tom paused and the doctor caught his eye.

'Blackwater fever,' he said. 'When they piss blood like that, there's nothing we can do but pray.'

'Nothing?'

The doctor shook his head. 'The malaria is in his brain now.'

In the nearby village, alongside coffee bushes sagging with bright berries, were cinchona trees and their bark, when dried to dust, could be made into a tea for malaria.

'What about the tea?' said Tom.

'It's too late for that. Maybe in a proper hospital we could help. But here we have nothing.'

In the camp, malaria was called *going to the mountains*, for the chills that shook them like the cold night air of higher altitude. Sick men got half rations so a man would muster at *tenko* until the fevers had him so tight that he couldn't stand. And his eyes crossed with the pain in the back of his head. But mostly it passed and three or four days later, hollow-gutted, he'd be back on the line grubbing out rocks or carting sand in baskets of tightly woven rush.

Two days later they buried the man behind the barracks. They took it in turns to swing the pick on the biscuity ground and watched as four of his friends carried him there, rolled in his sleeping mat and dressed in a pair of shorts. One of the men read a psalm and they each filed past the grave and threw a handful of soil onto the body. Many months later, in the camp in Pekanbaru, Tom would remember that burial. In Pekanbaru the graves grew like weeds along the riverbank. A man needed four friends for a funeral or he'd be rolled into a hole and covered without a word, and in the rainy season the graves filled with water and they had to haul rocks from the river to weigh the bodies down.

In Pekanbaru they took pages from the Bible as tobacco paper, rolling it around dried leaves and crushed bark, drawing the sour smoke deep into their lungs to try and quell the aching of their shrinking guts. Tom remembered a man reciting the twenty-third Psalm as he smoked it: 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies,' he had said. 'Fuck. If only.'

In Cairo the streets were crowded with carts and donkeys, soldiers, covered women calling from doorways and men yelling. It was before noon and they were passing around their second bottle of rum, walking the streets of Wasser with the smell of hashish faint and sweet above the fetid smell of dirt and troddenin dung.

‘Shit,’ said Ernest wrinkling his nose and waving his hands at the street ahead of them. ‘Over the past few years I’ve become intimately acquainted with all varieties. Camel shit, horse shit, donkey shit ... I could just about write a book on it.’

Herbert laughed. ‘What you mean to say, Ernest,’ he said, ‘is that you’re absolutely full of shit.’

‘It means, Herb, that I’m sick to fucking death of it. I am well and truly over this shit.’

‘What, and it’s taken you five fucking years to figure that out? I was done with this shit about five minutes after we got off the damn boat,’ said Joe.

‘Well, if we sail tomorrow, like we’re supposed to, we can turn our backs on all this,’ said Arthur.

‘Doesn’t seem real,’ said Ernest.

‘If we hadn’t handed in our 303s it’d seem like just another rumour,’ Arthur said.

‘It’s no rumour,’ said Herbert.

‘Yeah,’ said Joe, smiling. ‘We’re leaving tomorrow. Even if we have to paddle the bloody boat ourselves.’

Herbert nodded. ‘I’ll be waving goodbye to this shit forever.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ said Ernest raising the bottle in his hand. ‘See you later shit! It hasn’t been nice knowing you, to be honest it’s been ... well, I’ve got to say ... it’s been shit.’

‘Couldn’t have said it better myself, Ern,’ said Joe, taking the bottle and drinking.

After a while they settled themselves into a small bar, sitting on rough wooden benches with their feet in the dirt. Laughing, the weeks floating off them like dust. By the end of the third bottle, Arthur stood up to piss, feeling the ground rock beneath his boots and his eyes like they were loose in his head, untethered. He picked his way across the room slowly, nodding at the other drinkers and the barman, slow swerving like a half-broken horse and his shins against the benches. A bottle later and he went again. The worn buttons on his pants were wobbly on their threads like loose teeth and one came off in his hand. He held it on his palm, feeling the rum in his chest and something else besides. A feeling that settled into him. A kind of cold heaviness.

When he got back to the bench the others were standing.

‘Time to go,’ said Ernest slowly.

‘Where?’ said Arthur.

‘Brothel,’ said Herbert, propped with one arm against the wall.

‘Not for me, mate,’ said Arthur and looked at Joe who rocked on his heels, his eyes half closed.

Joe nodded. ‘Brothel,’ he said. ‘Let’s go.’

Ernest stumbled and Herbert grabbed the back of his shirt. ‘C’mon digger,’ he said. ‘On yer feet.’ Together the two of them wobbled into the street.

Arthur put his hand on Joe’s arm. ‘Joe? Didn’t you once tell me ...?’

Joe pulled his arm away and waved his hand in Arthur’s face. ‘Don’t say it,’ he said. ‘Don’t you say it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because that promise I made to myself, it doesn’t mean anything anymore.’

‘Why not?’

Joe spoke slowly. ‘It doesn’t mean anything anymore. Because nothing means anything anymore.’

‘Joe ...’ said Arthur.

‘You reckon you can leave this?’

‘I reckon,’ said Arthur, but his own words sounded tinny in his ears.

‘You’re never leaving here, mate. Not really. This shit ...’ and he paused and waved his hand, swaying. ‘It’s not just on you. It’s in you.’

They stood, looking at each other, the carts making their way past in the street and the voices forgotten. Arthur shook his head and reached out to touch Joe’s shoulder.

Joe flinched and shrugged him off. ‘Now, I’m going with the others,’ he said. ‘And you ... well you should come with me.’

Arthur shook his head and Joe turned on his heel and walked away, the afternoon sun through the dust and the traffic swerving all around him. But the weight in his chest. With each yard, Arthur felt himself getting smaller.

‘Joe,’ he called. ‘Hold up. I’m coming with you.’



The Arabian Sea in the morning was flat like slate and empty. Arthur stood at the rail of the ship and watched the sun climb and the shadows of the derrick masts shrink away. The warm air lifted the veins in the backs of his hands, the brown skin creased and thin.

There were footsteps on the deck behind him.

‘Thought you might be here,’ said Joe.

‘Just holding up the rail,’ said Arthur.

‘Not a bad view, I suppose’ said Joe. ‘If you like that kind of thing. Bit short on trees for my liking though.’

‘Overall, I’d have to say that the view’s been a bit short on trees for the past few years,’ said Arthur. ‘Come to think of it, been short on all the things you’d like to see, really.’

‘And long,’ said Joe. ‘On things you don’t want to ever see again.’

‘Yeah, that’s true,’ said Arthur nodding.

They stood together, watching the water peel like curls of butter from the bow. Joe rolled a match between his fingers and said, ‘There was that one place though.’

‘You mean the one with all the gum trees?’

‘The ones that smelt like home,’ said Joe.

‘Khirbet Deiran,’ said Arthur. ‘In Palestine.’

‘Yeah. It was alright, wasn’t it?’

They had ridden into town at midday, a long weary column and the horses’ hides dry like hessian from the dust. The last mile was lined with trees either side and they slipped out of the sunlight and into the grey-green shade. Like opening your eyes underwater, thought Arthur – at the end of summer with the riverbank high above your head and even the deeper pools warm and the colour of old glass.

Arthur caught the edge of a smell as he breathed and he turned in his saddle to have a closer look. ‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ he said peering up at the canopy of silver grey leaves. ‘These’re bloody gum trees.’ He turned to talk to Joe but he was closed-eyed and snuffling like a roo dog. Smiling.

‘They sure are,’ he said from behind closed lids. ‘They sure bloody are.’

Arthur breathed himself home for an instant. His mother with the bedsheets in a copper on the outside fire, the crackle of sappy wood burning and a mist of soap steam about her head. She had strong arms on the paddle and her face all shiny with work. When the wind was right the smell of the fire would be in his sheets for days, soap and sun and eucalypts burning.

Khirbet Deiran was small and clean like a picture book or a page from a magazine. Whitewashed houses, red-roofed, with gardens in neat beds all around. Trellised vines heavy with fruit and citrus trees in long rows like the comb lines in his father’s Sunday hair. Arthur saw a synagogue and trousered men with beards.

They made camp in a field ringed with eucalypts and soon there were rosy girls with baskets of bread and fruit for sale. Their cotton dresses were bright and Arthur hung back and hoped they couldn’t smell the days of sweat on him and the miles. They were so clean, their dark hair shining like birds’ wings. He had his shirt on seam side out to shift the lice that hid amongst the stitches and he’d hardly slept for a week with the itching.

Over the next few days they washed their clothes and bathed, riding down shaded roads to the sea with their bellies full and fresh bread in their saddlebags. They slept with the smell of eucalypts round the camp, their skin

tight with sun and salt. The horses grazed on fields of young barley – after a week Arthur had to loosen the little mare’s girth two holes and in the mornings when he first swung up, she was fresh and her feet light and skating on the ground.

Ernest reckoned he could eat any man in the regiment under the table and, to Arthur, it seemed like it might be true. He watched him eat two loaves of bread at lunchtime and follow it with a handful of figs and an orange. When he stripped off for a swim Herbert pointed to his belly and said, ‘Christ, Ern – you look like a python in a hen house. There’s nothing of you till you get to your guts.’

‘I’m just enjoying it while I can,’ said Ernest. ‘It’s alright for you blokes, you’re all good doers. Me ... well, you can’t fatten a thoroughbred.’

‘Or a stray dog,’ Joe had said, and laughed.

Arthur smiled at the sea. ‘That place was alright, wasn’t it.’

‘Yeah,’ said Joe. ‘Though I never did find out why they planted all those gum trees. Not that I’m complaining, mind you.’

‘I’ve thought about that,’ said Arthur. ‘And I reckon that a man that moves to the desert from a greener place will want some shade. And maybe gum trees are all that’ll grow.’

‘You could be right.’ Joe scratched his stubbled chin and sighed. ‘I still don’t get it though. Why would you trouble yourself to move there in the first place?’

‘It’s got something to do with the Bible, I reckon.’

‘Not many other reasons I suppose for all them fellas to be fighting over so much bloody awful country.’

‘Yeah, if that was my place and someone else wanted it, I wouldn’t fight, I’d just move. Leave the keys in the door.’

‘Wouldn’t you just,’ said Joe. ‘You’d move to somewhere with a lot less sand.’

‘Less flies.’

‘Less bloody scorpions.’

They laughed.

‘You fellas’ll miss lunch if you’re not careful,’ said Ernest, walking up behind them.

‘Ern,’ snorted Herbert behind him, ‘you’re the only man alive that’ll get excited over army stew.’

‘I don’t ever plan on going hungry again, that’s all,’ said Ernest. ‘Now what were you talking about bloody scorpions for?’

‘We were just talking about the delights of the desert and how maybe you wouldn’t stay and fight over it.’

‘Oh yeah, bloody Jerusalem. Supposed to be the holiest place on the planet. Arse-holiest more like it.’

‘Bloody hell, the mud!’

‘The dysentery!’

‘Not to mention,’ said Herbert, ‘that cold fucking rain.’

‘Yeah but it wasn’t as bad as the Jordan Valley, was it boys?’ said Herbert.

‘Nothing was as bad as that,’ said Arthur, shaking his head.

Joe sniffed. ‘Lowest place on earth, they reckon.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ said Ernest. ‘When the priest says you’re going down below, he doesn’t mean you’re going to hell, he means you’re going to the Jordan Valley.’

‘Same place isn’t it?’ said Herbert.

The valley was deep and steep-sided, treeless. They made camp by the river, pitching their tents in the chalky white sand and the windless air hard to breathe. They saw the first snake within minutes of dismounting, a fat-bodied adder that wove through the dust between the horses’ legs to the edge of the river then rode the current downstream with just its eyes above water.

The next day bundles of sticks and oat sacks arrived on camel trains and the men gathered around the sergeant, squinting in the midday sun and the hot air sitting heavy like a dead thing.

‘It’s a big job we’ve got here boys,’ he said with his hat in his hand and sweat like beads of resin on his forehead. ‘We’re just one regiment but we need to make the Germans think we’re all of the British regiments. I can’t say

too much of course but it's important that we make as much dust and smoke as a force twenty times our size.

'Those sticks and bags are to be used to make dummy horses. HQ has come up with a design that they think will look pretty convincing from the air. I don't know about that but we'll do our best.

'Every day we'll make dust and at night we'll light fires and if there's a German aircraft within ten miles of here we need to get seriously busy so that there's a chance that from the air a bunch of sticks and bags looks like the horse lines of the entire light horse brigade.'

The men nudged each other and rocked on their heels, but by the end of the following week there were lines of stick-legged horses made from hessian stuffed with straw. During the day they took it in turns to drag branches behind their horses, stirring up dust that hung like a heavy curtain in the windless valley. At night they lit fires up the valley, scrounging wood and drying out dung to burn. They were harried by clouds of mosquitoes that lumped any bare skin and filled the sick bay with men too fevered to work.

Six long weeks, ten men dead from malaria and two horses killed by snakes. Even the camels sickened in the heat, the sand too hot to lie in and the edge of their nostrils crusted dry. The men burnt the scorpions when they caught them and watched them turn in the flames, their black bodies beading with liquid and a smell like rotten fish cooking.

In the end they left at night, silently. Too dark to see the dummy horses stretched up the valley in neat rows and the last of their fires burning to embers behind them. They rode hard for two days and only one stop for water along the way. Just before nightfall on the second day, they felt the breeze, the edge of coolness and the air blown clear. Their legs were thick from the saddle and the horses' skin pinched up with thirst but they smiled when they felt the wind, knowing that they were out of the lowlands, their faces pointed to the sea.

The Arabian sea was flat and calm. Ernest picked at some dry skin on the back of his hand. 'What was the name of that bloke from our unit that got malaria in that bloody valley and died? You know, the one with the red hair?'

'You mean Ted?'

'Ted? I dunno. Didn't he have brown hair?'

'Nah,' said Joe. 'You're thinking of ...' drumming his fingers on the rail and his brow wrinkled. 'Stanley!'

'No way,' said Herbert. 'Stanley copped it at the Nek. He was in the first lot to hop the bags.'

'Oh yeah, that's right,' said Joe. 'Well, was it Jack then? The bloke with the crooked finger.'

'Nah. He got it at Megiddo. Got a stray round in the chest.'

'So what happened to Ted then?'

'Had his horse shot out from under him and it crushed his lungs.'

'Nah, that was Bill. The fella from Bunbury who used to sing.'

'I remember now,' said Joe. 'Ted got a fever. Remember, he went yellow?'

'Oh yeah.'

'So, who was it that got malaria in the Jordan Valley and died?'

They stood for a while, watching the sea.

'I can't remember,' said Arthur and shook his head.

'Me neither,' said Joe and Herbert shrugged.

'Seems like a pretty fucking stupid story when you can't remember the names of the fellas that've died,' said Ernest and there was a deep clench between his eyes. 'Particularly when those fellas were your mates.'

They were silent then. Joe rolled a smoke and Arthur rubbed salt spray from the rail with his thumb. Ernest was standing with his arms folded, chin on his chest. In the silence Arthur heard him draw a deep breath, ragged at the edges and the sinews in his hands like wire. He lifted one hand to his face and rubbed his brow, working the heel of his hand into his eye sockets and Arthur could see that his eyes were clenched shut, a slick on each cheek.

'Hey Ern,' said Joe into the long silence, 'I've been meaning to ask you something.'

Arthur squinted at the light on the water, feeling the heat of the deck through the soles of his boots.

‘When your missus peels the potatoes for Christmas,’ said Joe, looking into the water. ‘And puts them in the bucket of water, what’s the coal for?’

They stood and watched the horizon, listening to Ernest wrestle with his breath. Joe and Arthur on one side and Herbert on the other. Like there was nowhere to go. Like they could stand there forever watching the lines of swell corduroy the sea.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ernest eventually, his throat thick with snot and the names that they couldn’t remember. ‘I never asked her.’

He straightened and pushed the hair from his eyes, the four years of war like forty on his skin.

‘But maybe I will,’ he said, ‘when I get home. And I’ll tell you.’

But he never did tell them. Arthur lost sight of the others at the Fremantle dock and though they promised to stay in touch, to write, to meet up – they didn’t. Years later he heard that Herbert had died of TB. Coughing and spitting out bits of his lungs till what he had left was not enough to breathe with.

Joe, he heard, went back to the family farm and stayed there while his sisters married one by one. Arthur imagined him grafting a living out of the poor red dirt with no-one to talk to but the mulgas, the dry wind off the paddocks and the possums on the corrugated roof.

He lost track of Ernest too but once he saw him across a crowded street, red-faced and rounded. Wearing a navy blue waistcoat with buttons deep set against his gut like a leather sofa Arthur had seen in a fancy hotel in Cairo. A woman that Arthur supposed was his wife walked half a step behind him. A thin, nervous-looking thing, he thought, with her head tucked into her chest and her hat all askew like she’d dressed in a hurry.

He raised his hand for an instant to call across the street, but as he inhaled he changed his mind and let it drop to his side. There was a sick sort of dizziness in the middle of him then – a memory of bodies bent like sticks, a village burning and the sound of goats bleating. He turned his face away and breathed fast to still the spinning centre of himself.

From the side of his eye Arthur saw Ernest look in his direction, saw him slow his stride and pause, half turning. And then look away. The last he

ever saw of Ernest was the back of his head disappearing down the street with a skinny woman scuttling like a badly broken horse behind him.

At night, in Pekanbaru, the men used the last of the firelight to kill each other's lice. They were hard to see in the half dark but popped between two fingernails like seeds ripe with sap. And though they tasted like turpentine there was not a man in the camp who, afterwards, didn't lick his fingers clean.

A starving man will do anything for food, Tom discovered. The geckoes that chased each other through the *atap* were all gone, their silvery skins and fragile bones like the small fried fish that were sold in the markets. Monkeys too were food if they could get them and though, at first, the sight of their small and human hands floating in the broth had made him pause, their tender bones were easy to chew – even for men whose teeth had loosened in their gums.

Candle wax, rats and the tips of growing ferns were food too if you could find them, and even boiled grass might yield something or at least serve to colour the broth. Most nights it was a slurry of tapioca starch for dinner because rice, they were told, was for soldiers. Tom dreamed of his mother's bread, fresh from the oven and thickly buttered. Or shortbread biscuits that crumbed his chin and the sweet spangle of sugar crystals on top.

In Pekanbaru camp, for the first time in more than two years they lived without fences, because there was nowhere to go, just the jungle steep around them and the shadows of the hills. At night they lay on bamboo benches, so tightly packed that when one man wanted to turn they all had to roll over together. Later, when so many had died it was easier to turn but by then, thin-skinned and weak from dysentery, malaria and beri-beri, they shivered for the warmth of the missing men.

In September 1944 they had marched from Padang to Pekanbaru, two hundred miles and most of the men barefoot. Some of them were already sick, their feet and legs fat with a swelling that dented like a finger pushed

into soft clay. Some with an itchy rash that covered their bodies like a vest and deep bruises purpling their arms. The guards on bicycles rode up and down the long line of men, harrying them like they were cattle and beating any man that fell behind.

One day as they walked Tom found himself next to Dirk.

‘This is a good sign, Tom,’ said the older man with a half smile. ‘If the Japanese are using prisoners to build a railway across Sumatra it’s because they are desperate and can no longer send their supplies by sea.’

Tom nodded slowly.

Dirk said, ‘You would not send your coal through the middle of the country when it is so easy to go around unless your navy had been destroyed.’

Tom nodded. ‘You’re right, I hadn’t thought of it like that.’

‘And,’ said Dirk, waving at the men who limped along the road, ‘you would not use dying men to build it unless you had no other choice.’

As the war dragged on, it seemed to Tom that every yard of railway line that was laid was paid for with a life. One morning, as they walked out to start work, an Englishman who had long yellow teeth and a laugh like a donkey bitten by a snake. Tom heard him yell and saw a smooth black tail disappearing into the thick scrub. They all stopped and gathered round the man, looking at two small punctures on the side of his shin and shaking their heads. The guards forced them along with kicks and blows so they left him there, sitting on the side of the path with his back against a tree. As each man passed by, the man nodded, showing his large teeth and the sweat on his skin like beads of glass.

That evening, as the men walked back to camp they passed the man still there against the tree – his eyes unblinking and his clothes gone. Tom nodded at the corpse as he passed and wished that it was him who had thought to take the dead man’s shorts.

There was only one thing in the camp, Tom thought, that was more precious than food, and that was hope. When a man lost hope, his life was sure to follow. A man who had lost hope could get an ulcer and be dead within a day. While others would lie gasping and rattling, their skin

stretched thin as sausage casings and their starving bodies bloated with beri-beri. And yet, even as the vet punctured their bellies to drain off the fluid that they were drowning in, they would smile and try to talk about tomorrow.

Tom thought of home often, and it was a kind of hope. He pictured himself walking up the gravel driveway, through the dappled shade of the almond trees and the old house nestled by overhanging branches and the jade of the grass where the shade was darkest. He saw his father standing in the open door and he saw himself smiling and his arms were wide and open. Although they hadn't spoken for eight years, Tom knew his father better now than ever before. He knew now where the words had gone and he also knew, somehow, that he could help him find them.

Tom remembered an afternoon, just weeks after his mother had died. He and Ruth were peeling vegetables for dinner and Arthur sat at the kitchen table with a broken bridle on his knees and an awl in his hands. Squinting and pulling waxed thread through the leather. Their mother's dog still pined for her and he was asleep by her chair, waking and whining before falling asleep again with his head on his outstretched paws.

All of a sudden Arthur stood up and dropped the bridle on the table. He grabbed the dog by the collar, dragging it behind him as he walked. Tom and Ruth looked at each other.

'What's he doing?' said Tom.

'He's going to the shed,' said Ruth watching her father through the open kitchen door. 'I think he's going for his gun.' She started running.

Tom followed.

Arthur came out of the shed with his rifle under his arm and his face the colour of just risen dough. Ruth ran towards him.

'No, Dad.'

Arthur shook his head and Tom saw that the fingers bent around the stock were bloodless.

'You can't do this,' she said, bending down and taking hold of the dog's collar.

Arthur shook his head again but Ruth's hands were strong and eventually Arthur let the dog go. Ruth bent down, picked the dog up in her

arms and started walking back to the house with her face in his neck. His father watched her go and Tom, in the shadow of the cape lilac tree, watched him, unnoticed.

‘Don’t you see,’ his father said to himself, pushing his hair from his face with an unsteady hand. ‘I’m just saving him from the pain.’

One day, as Tom swung the pick into the stony ground he realised that he finally understood.

The cool and silent earth offers refuge to those who have lost all hope.

Three weeks after the war ended Arthur rode the young horse out of the yard. The colt shied at a bird in the bare vines that flanked the road, quick and skittery, lifting his knees and his small ears sharp. Arthur stroked the horse's neck with fingers dulled by cold, humming tunelessly and his breath like wet smoke.

The afternoon sky was low and grey and his thigh ached with unshed rain. Three weeks they'd been waiting now for news of Tom and, like a cracked rib, the feeling shallowed his breath, hard up against the inside of his chest.

Arthur had left his god by a stone-sided well in a far distant country but, still, he prayed hard each night for his son. Beside his bed like a child, eyes tight closed against the fear that rose in him like a tide. He couldn't picture the places Tom had been, the days dense with rain and the jungle like a thick fleece over everything. He knew it only from a handful of photographs. But he knew that he wanted him home, more than he'd ever wanted anything.

And every night, in the last of the kerosene light, he took from under the bed a small wooden box, riffling his fingers through it for the photo of Tom. Pressing the paper against himself, against his chest where a pocket would be, as long ago he had held another photo. As though the beating of his heart could somehow bring him home.

He blinked into the wind feeling the sharp heat there in his eyes and in the salt at the back of his throat. He shook his head with the shame of it and pressed his palms hard, one by one, against his eyes.



Three weeks after the war ended Ruth rode her bike home through a dusk that promised rain. Her father was unsaddling a horse in the yards and she

raised her hand to him as she pushed her bike under the shelter of the verandah.

Every day since the war ended she had bought the *Daily* on her way home from work, spreading it out on the table after dinner, looking for news of Tom. Some of the prisoners from Singapore, she had read, were already on their way home and she had seen photos of them, thin and weary on makeshift hospital stretchers, their clothes like rags and their legs just bones clothed in skin. But of Pekanbaru there had been no mention and she laid the paper down wearily on the table on her way outside.

She fed the nanny goat and counted, as she did every night, the hens onto their perches. There were fourteen, one less than usual. She began searching, finally finding her under a rosemary bush in the orchard, fluffed and broody. By the time she shooed her into the pen and put her hip against the heavy door to close it, it was almost dark.

In the house the grate was cold and the box of kindling empty. She leaned against the doorframe, feeling the weight of the last weeks and her lips trembling like she was cold. After a few moments she sniffed a deep breath, patted her hair into place and straightened her shoulders. At the back of the kitchen cupboard was the pudding brandy and she poured some into a teacup, sitting down at the kitchen table with it cradled in her hands. She closed her eyes as it burnt its way down her throat and sighed for the smell of cake batter, for raisins and squares of muslin drying in the sun. For the hope of Tom home by Christmas.

When she was finished she stood up, feeling her bones less sharp against the inside of her skin and a circle of warmth in her stomach. She coaxed the fire back to life with some bark and old newspapers and lit the lamp. As she was peeling potatoes she heard a sound from her father's room.

He was sitting on the edge of his bed holding the newspaper in his hands and the box that she'd seen for the first time three weeks before was on his knees.

'Dad?' she said. 'Are you alright?'

She stepped closer to him and saw his eyes tight shut, the stubble grey on his cheeks.

'Dad?'

She took the paper from his hands – it was folded open to a photo of five men and above it the headline, *Hundreds Dead on the Pekanbaru Death Railway*. The men in the photograph were lines of shadow and light – ribs, femurs and collarbones. Their newly issued shorts hung from their hips, one held a cigarette and another had a clean bandage around the stump of his hand.

She sat down beside her father and read. *The Pekanbaru Railway, a line that stretches for 135 miles through some of the most inhospitable country imaginable, was finished on the 15th August 1945 – the day Japan surrendered. Joining Padang on the west coast of Sumatra to the Malacca Straits on the east, hundreds of Allied POWs and tens of thousands of press-ganged Javanese labourers lost their lives there, many of them in the final weeks of the war. The true horror of what has come to be known as the Pekanbaru Death Railway is only just being uncovered as the first of the survivors emerge from the jungle in pitiful shape.*

When she'd finished reading she pressed the paper flat against her knees. Pausing, her face cold and her hands heavy.

Her father sat beside her, his face in his hands.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered, so quietly she almost didn't hear.

'It's not your fault, Dad.'

'But I sent him,' he said. 'Even though you hated me for it.'

Ruth pushed a loose strand of hair from her forehead. 'Only because I wanted to go instead.'

Arthur was quiet. He took his hands from his face and covered the box with his hands.

'Ruth,' he said slowly.

'Yes.'

'I haven't been much of a father.'

'That's not true,' she said, but he shook his head.

'It is,' he said.

'It's okay,' said Ruth.

Arthur shook his head slowly.

Ruth listened to her father breathing and smoothed the paper with her fingertips, the night pressing dark against the bare window and a cold draft on her neck.

‘We all cheered when we heard the Great War was over,’ he said and closed his eyes. ‘As though we could go home and leave it behind us.’

Arthur lowered his face into his hands. ‘We shot the horses you know,’ he said. ‘A few weeks after the war ended, because it was too expensive to bring them home. Walked down the horse lines where they were standing, all quiet with their nosebags on. And we shot them one by one. They were loyal and brave, the best friends a man could ask for and we shot them – so used to the guns by then that they didn’t even try to run away.’

‘I’d dreamed of bringing my little mare home with me, sitting you up on her back with the leathers rolled so your feet could reach the stirrups. But instead I took her for one last ride and I patted her and gave her a few grains of sugar, then I shot her and carried my gear back to camp. She’d saved my life more times than I could count and that was how I thanked her.’

‘You learn a lot of things when you go to war – things like how to clean your gun and how to shoot. What they don’t teach you is how to live when it’s all over. How to sleep when every time you close your eyes you see your best mates laughing over the body of an old man. Or a riverbank black with blood and lined with bodies as far as you can see.’

‘They don’t teach you how to hold your wife when you look at her and all you see is blood and you’re back there like the years in between mean nothing. They don’t teach you how to talk to your children or how to be a man. If all you came home with was some back pay, campaign ribbons and a bugged leg it’d be alright. But you bring the war home with you. And when you do that, it doesn’t matter what the papers say, it’s never really over.’

‘Dad,’ said Ruth in the tone he used on frightened horses. But her father shook his head.

‘I’m weak, Ruth,’ he said. ‘I had years to make it right but I couldn’t. I turned away from your mother when she needed me most because I couldn’t bear to see her bleed again, and after she died I sent your brother away because he reminded me of her and how I’d failed.’

‘And now,’ he said slowly. ‘When I think of my life there’s not a lot to be proud of. But the one thing that I regret the most is that I never ...’ and his voice faded like a tide going out.

‘Never what, Dad?’

Her father’s face looked like inside of him something hard was being broken open.

‘I never told Tom I was proud of him.’

And then, her father, who had flinched to shake Tom’s hand goodbye at the Guildford station, took her hand between his and held onto it as though to stop himself from drowning.

The next day Ruth got up early and made her way into the garden, feeling the cold through the soles of her shoes and the dawn-hazy sky. A bed of potato plants yellowed and sagged, waiting to be harvested. She held the shovel in her hands, the wooden handle rubbed smooth by years and she concentrated on the weight of it, pushing the blade into the loam with her foot curved across the top. The smell of split soil and the potatoes coming, smooth, from the ground tightened something in her throat and she breathed out loudly.

Her father came up from the yards, his face stubbled and shirt loose. She laid her forearm on the shovel and rested for a moment.

‘The box,’ he said quickly and his voice was small.

She wanted to go to him then but he was brittle, she saw.

She nodded.

He looked at the ground and his face was furrowed. ‘There’s not much in it really ... a handkerchief that once belonged to your mother. Some photographs. A few strands of mane. Just things that remind me that it’s not been all bad. I could tell you all about them one day. If you’d like.’

He blinked and in the silence Ruth heard a horse neigh and a crow’s feet sharp on the tin roof.

‘You get to thinking, after a while,’ he said, ‘that all your memories are bad ones. And it gets so that you don’t ever want to look back because you know what you’ll see. The box ... it reminds me it’s okay to look back.’

She looked at him, but his eyes were fixed down.

'It's just memories. Not all of them good, just mine.'

Ruth nodded, not trusting her voice, and Arthur turned to walk to the house, his shoulders straight like he was on parade.

August 30th 1945

Pekanbaru, Sumatra

Tom had always imagined dying in darkness but, in the end, there was light. It fell through the cracks in things, through the bamboo walls and the holes in the *atap* roof. It dappled the shade beneath the last rubber tree and drew the smell of ash and dead leaves up from the ground. There were voices faraway and in the village, fires smudging upwards.

He was just bone weight. His skin eyelid-thin. Even the soft morning light burned where it touched him, like looking into the sun. He lay and listened to the sound of wind ebbing through dead grass and seed pods, broken open. The late summer of his childhood, bare ground dried out and waiting for rain. Eventually he realised that it wasn't the wind that he heard but the shivering sound of his own breath thin across his lips.

His mind searched for a memory like his tongue for a poppy seed. An early morning foaling and him just a boy with cold knees and the long grass wetting his shins. He remembered his father's hands on the rough, hemp rope – square knuckles and brown skin like his mother's good shoes. The mare's hooves had scraped the pasture down to soil in brown, curving lines where she lay and he could see the underside of her hoof, the rim of sharp horn and a clod of mud in the cleft. There were two hooves at the back of her too, soft like they were wearing jelly slippers. His father held the rope and the muscles in his forearms were close beneath the skin. The foal arrived in a rush of blood and oily fluid, the smell so thick at the back of his throat he had to swallow in order to breathe past it. He helped his father coil the rope and the foal blinked and shook its head as the light and its mother's tongue touched it for the first time.

His thoughts returned to the camp, slowly. Above him a bird hung in the updraft, balanced below the sun. Its body dark, its great wings rimmed with light. For a moment he sensed another world, a bird-shaped hole in the

fabric and the light behind. He could feel it there – like the ache in his chest he felt when he thought of Alice, the smell of her hair or the feel of her breath on his skin.

An insect crawled across his face. He tried to brush it off but his hands were dead weight, no longer a part of him. He had seen enough death to know that his own was close. He wanted to think about Alice but the bird light was falling down beside him and in it the floating specks of ash and dust seemed more real than anything from within the pages of a book or a letter folded and refolded, the ink rubbed thin beneath his thumbs.

His thoughts elongated as the afternoon shadows did, cinnamon-tinted in the last of the light. The camp was golden then – the buildings, the few remaining trees and the far edges of the fence gilded with light and the warmth of the lowering sun. He wanted to cry because it was so beautiful, but he couldn't and his face was heavy.

He heard a sound, far above, and opened his eyes. The bird was gone and in its place a plane's silver fuselage high up against the sun. He heard engine noise and the rushing sound of silk beating the air. He blinked. Parachutes and packing boxes fell from the plane and sailed across the clouded sky like spiderlings.

He heard English voices, and then there were faces looking down at him. He tried to speak but his mouth wouldn't work. Someone said, 'Can we have a medic over here?' Tom saw uniforms the colour of old dust and an armband crossed with red.

'The war is over,' the English soldier said, and Tom felt a warm hand settle on his shoulder. 'You're going home, son.'

Notes

If you are interested in reading further about the Pekanbaru Death Railway or the 10th Light Horse Regiment, following are some of the texts that I consulted for background information.

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Velmans, Loet. *Long Way Back to the River Kwai: Memories of World War II*. Arcade Publishing, 2005.

Some of the information about Dirk Huisken came from conversations I had with my grandmother Catherina Huisken (1914–1998). She had a small

collection of photographs of the father-in-law she never met and I keep them in the hope that one day they will inspire someone else.

Karrie Loudon, a private collector, kindly showed me her 10th Light Horse artefacts and spent time talking all things light horse with me. Lucinda Hooper from Darwin introduced me to her walers and shared photographs of them dressed in their light horse equipment. Rowan Colman found an original universal pattern saddle for me and I treasure it, not only because it reminds me of the past but because it is evidence to me of how history unites us.

Acknowledgements

This much is true. My great-grandfather, Dirk Huisken, died in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in March 1945 while building a railway line across Sumatra. Thousands of others died alongside him – hundreds and hundreds of men for every yard of rail that they laid. The Pekanbaru Death Railway, as it has come to be known, was finished on the day that Japan surrendered and never once saw a train run along its full length.

It might also be true that from Dirk I get my love of things that grow, my mother her voice, my daughter her kindness, my sons their sense of humour – but those are things we will never know. By the time I stand at the place where he died there is no one left who remembers him. And I am alone with the dappled shade, the sound of traffic and a loudspeaked call to prayer.

My grandfather never spoke about his father and when he, and then my grandmother, died I was left with a troubling sense of a story untold. An online search eventually revealed Dirk's death certificate and further research found perhaps the only still-living expert on the Pekanbaru Death Railway – Jamie Farrell.

Jamie invited me to stay with him in Sumatra and showed me the little that is left of the line. The iron spike we found together sat on my desk while I wrote and tethered me to the place where the railway embankment still runs through fields and palm oil plantations.

The remaining truth lies in the warm equatorial earth – a small white cross amongst thousands, a handful of old photographs and an archived record of thickly inked Japanese characters.

There is truth also in the 10th Light Horse sections of this book. As a horse trainer I am lucky to share my life with the most beautiful and remarkable animals on the planet. During World War I, 136,000 horses left Australia's shores and only one returned. I hope that this story, in some small way, honours the memory of those thousands.

And lastly, it is also true that this story would never have made its journey to the page without the help and support of many people and to them I offer my most heartfelt thanks.

Jamie Farrell for his knowledge and endless support. Richard Rossiter for always being the voice of reason, the wisest mentor and most generous friend. Georgia Richter for her intelligent, intuitive and supportive editing.

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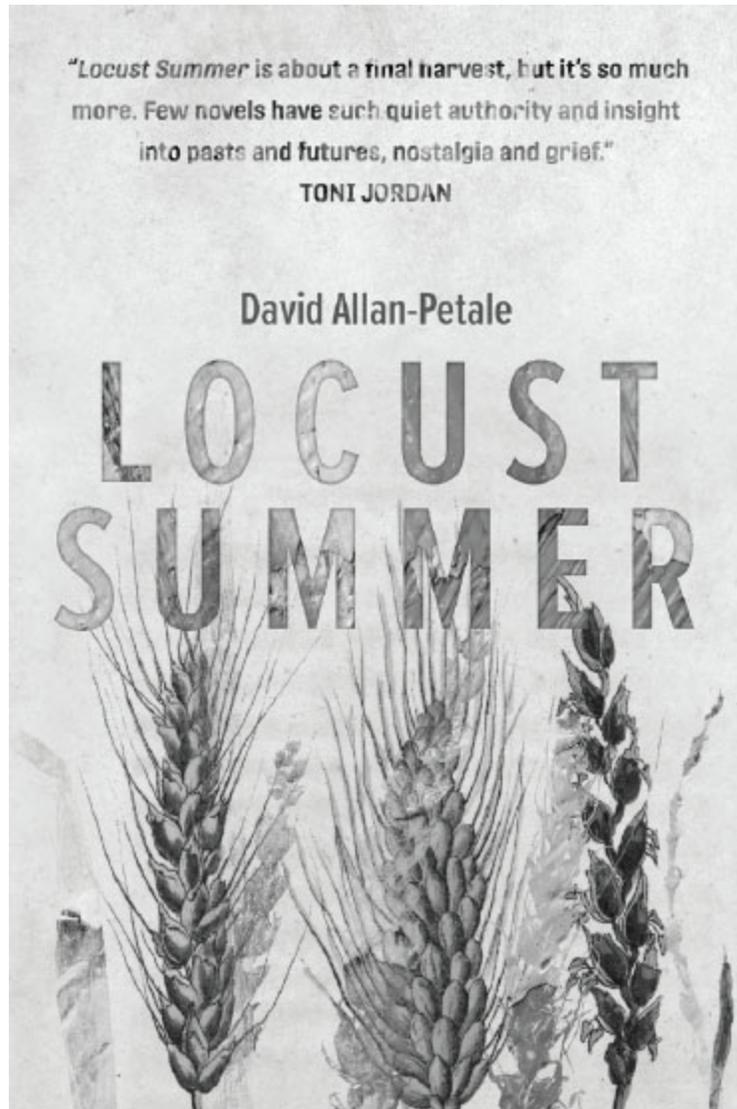
Bruce for receiving the baton with grace.

My beautiful family – Simone, Carla, Warren, Riley, Clancy and Raffy. I owe you everything. This one's for family.

This one's for you.

Only Birds Above was written on Whadjuk land and I honour the past, present and future custodians of this Country.

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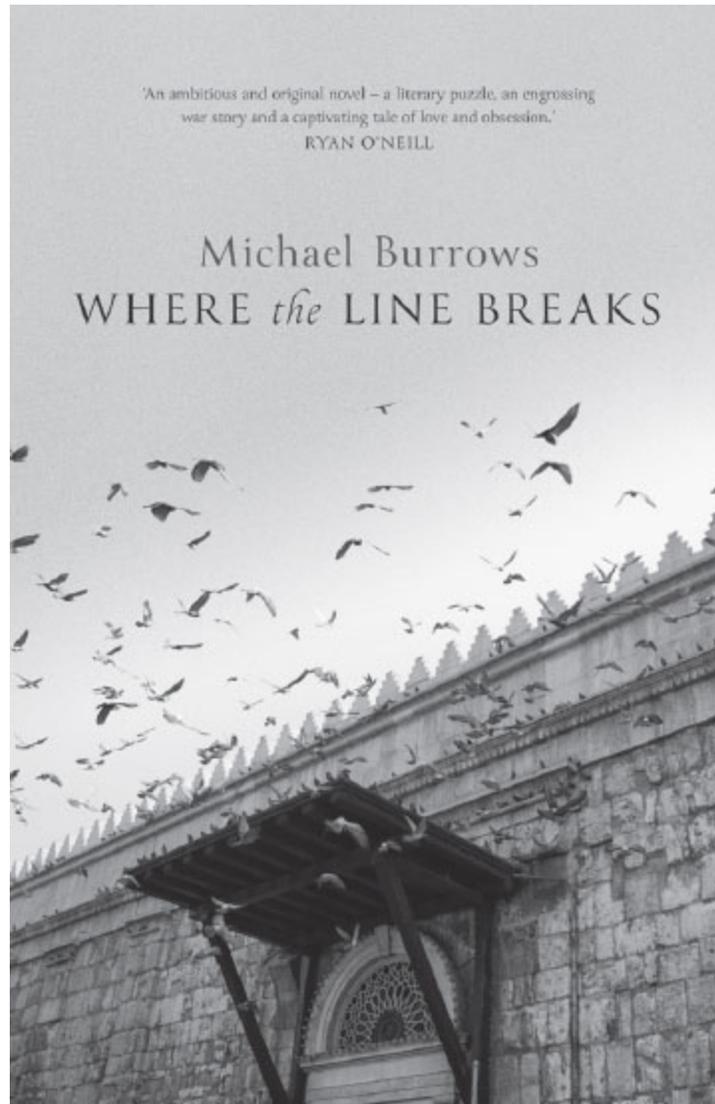
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