

SWEET ONE

PETER DOCKER



FREMANTLE PRESS

Nana Was Right

(Somerset, outback Western Australia)

Feel the heat. Feel its texture. Feel how the very air is woven into a denser pattern, with the stitches and purls falling back upon themselves. The heat blankets the country like a pea-soup fog, seeping right into the bones. Feel the heat radiate up from the land herself. The sun has gone now but it feels hotter still. The Old Man is a friend to the heat. The heat is like a cousin/brother he has known since birth. All the character nuances of the heat are as familiar as the smoke from the family fire. But not this heat. This hot wind is here at the wrong time. There has already been much discussion between the Old Man and his peers. What is the meaning of this heat at the wrong time? There is some great disturbance in atmospheres way beyond this continent – that is all that can be agreed upon. The Old Man knows that weather patterns here have their origins way to the north, around the mountain ranges of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Old Man understands the connectivity of all things. Inside the heat, even this unseasonal heat, the only thing to be done is to survive. To go on living. Understanding will come later.

It's Anzac Day. 25th April. Ninety-odd years ago Australian and New Zealand soldiers under the control of English High Command swarmed onto the wrong beach in distant Turkey under a merciless hail of machine-gun and artillery fire. The Old Man knows the story of that first day only too well. His Grandfather told him the story over and over. It had been a warm day in Turkey as well. That story is woven into the family history, as well as the history of the nation to which his Grandfather did not officially belong. The truth is, his Grandfather never wanted to belong, and his exploits in the AIF had nothing to do with this thing that would later be thought of as a nation. Before Gallipoli and France, his Grandfather had little to do with white men and uniforms. And after, even less so. The Old Man knows exactly how his Grandfather felt. Things go in cycles – that is for sure.

Now the Old Man can see two white men in uniform. And him got no mob. All alone. They sit in the front of the brightly lit divvy van pulling up behind him. The Old Man turns off the engine of his Troopie. It is quiet now, with the police lights flashing across the deserted road, washing everything with momentary blue. The Old Man picks up the white can of Emu Export lager nestled between his legs, drains it, and drops the empty can on the floor of the passenger side with all the other shit. In his rear-view mirror, the Old Man sees Senior Constable Lishtokitz get out of the paddy wagon and start to come towards him. The Old Man sees the blast of heat hit the white man as he climbs out of the air-conditioned police vehicle. Lishtokitz almost staggers as though a bag of wheat was dropped onto his shoulders – but then catches himself and strides out to where the Old Man waits.

G'day mate, Lishtokitz says to the Old Man.

Hello, says the Old Man amiably.

Do you know why I've stopped you?

Cause I'm the only one drivin!

The Old Man cackles and looks around the deserted dirt track so that the younger white man can have a chance to get the joke. The younger man in uniform does not acknowledge the Old Man's quip in any way. It's Anzac Day. Australians everywhere are drinking beer and burning meat while the Southern Cross and Union Jack against a background of blue flutters overhead. They are talking about far distant places like Gallipoli, Lae, Tobruk, Long Tan, and drinking more beer. They are playing two-up, discussing the colour of medal ribbons and their meanings, and drinking more beer.

This is a random breath test. I will require you to blow into the device with one long continuous blow.

Lishtokitz holds up the breathalyser to the Old Man. The Old Man regards the plastic tube suspiciously. He's been here before.

Have you been drinking, mate?

Only beer.

How many?

Eh?

How many *only beer*?

Yuwai. Only beer.

Fluent in five languages, English was the last one learnt, and the hardest for the Old Man. But even his grannies know that he

understands more than he lets on. These are survival techniques on the frontier. The Old Man was living as a naked child of the desert, wild and free, when he was first studied by gudia anthropologists. They learned. He learned also.

One long continuous blow ...

The Old Man blows into the plastic tube. Senior Constable Lishtokitz steps back. He is sweating heavily now. The Old Man regards him evenly. Lishtokitz wants to watch the Old Man all the time. He's heard they can beat the breathalyser with their didgeridoo breathing techniques. But he can't hold the Old Man's eye. And isn't sure why. The hard ground beneath his feet feels soggy for a moment. The hand-held breathalyser beeps.

Sir, I am going to have to ask you to step out of the vehicle.

As soon as the *Sir* tumbles out of his mouth his mind juxtaposes it with *mate* like a Google-search. He went for Sir because you can't say *get out of the car, mate*. Now it all sounds wrong. It should have been Sir all along, the Google-search result seems to say. The Old Man doesn't move.

Get out of the car, now!

His voice is too loud in the desert night. The trees look on passively through the heat. Constable Slopken is getting out of the police vehicle and moving quickly to the scene, his right hand on his holstered Glock. The Old Man slowly opens the door of the Troopie. Not rushing is second nature to him. Rushing around can get you killed in the desert. You'd be walkin round dead. He climbs down and stands steadily in the desert night.

I'm placing you under arrest for DUI. Do you understand?

The Old Man smiles and holds out his hands ready to be cuffed.

Lishtokitz nods at Slopken who takes out his cuffs and places them on the Old Man's wrists. Slopken walks the Old Man back to the police vehicle. Lishtokitz leans in and takes the keys from the ignition of the Troopie. He winds up the driver's side window and locks the door. On the back seat Lishtokitz sees an old suit jacket with a little row of medals pinned to the lapel. For a moment he considers grabbing the Old Man's jacket – but fuck it, it's too hot. He goes back to the divvy van where Slopken is just climbing back in, having loaded the Old Man into the back. They drive in silence through Somerset back to the station, both men leaning forward to feel the cool air being blasted out

by the aircon hitting their skin. It takes two minutes. The town could be a ghost town. The pub is full but the streets are empty. Somerset is named after some English lord, who no doubt never set foot in the place. He probably financed some prospectors, or graziers. These guys were like hedge fund managers investing in the joint venture of taking over WA. And they got to have things named after them as a bonus. That's the way these things go.

They pull up right out the front of the police station, and get the Old Man out of the back. They take him in through the heavy glass front doors. It's one of those low flat modern concrete buildings that look like it is designed to withstand a cyclone, or a bomb attack.

Sergeant Smithers is standing at the front counter as they come in. The cop shop aircon is cold after the outside heat. The Old Man shivers as if someone just walked over his grave.

Well, look what the cat dragged in! calls Smithers.

Hello, says the Old Man as though nodding to a mate in the front bar.

Are you calling us cats, Sarge? asks Slopken.

DUI, says Lishtokitz to no one in particular.

Tjilpa, says the Old Man.

What's that? asks Smithers.

Tjilpa – desert cat, explains the Old Man.

We haven't dragged anyone, adds Slopken.

Wha'd ya cuff him for – ya Neanderthals? barks Smithers.

He held out his hands ...

Get them off him. Get him processed. Fuck me dead.

Slopken takes off the handcuffs and they lead the Old Man through to the testing area. Smithers leans down to get some paperwork from under the counter.

What's up his arse? murmurs Slopken.

Smithers looks up.

It's Anzac Day, Slopken – something you wogs wouldn't understand.

Lishtokitz sits the Old Man down in the chair.

Whaddya mean, Sarge? Us New Aussies love the flag!

That flag has been draped on the coffins of our dead boys – ya can't wrap yourself in it and get pissed, or hang it out the back of your orange Commodore with mag wheels.

You having a go at my Commodore, Sarge?

You're outta your depth, Slopken.

One long continuous blow, says Lishtokitz, and holds the plastic tube out to the Old Man.

The Old Man blows into the device until it beeps, and then he sits back.

What's the reading? asks Smithers, already halfway through the form.

Zero point two three one.

What does that make it at time of offence?

Point two two two.

Slopken is looking over Smithers' shoulder as he does the form.

Do you know him? asks Slopken.

Course I fucken know him. He's a big boss man out at Burwarton.

Slopken doesn't know that Burwarton is another of the English peerage. He goes and gets the fingerprint station ready.

So he's the boss of a couple of tin sheds and a dozen car wrecks? comments Slopken with a twist of his mouth.

He laid the wreath this morning for the Aboriginal soldiers. That's why he's in town, says Smithers.

What's he a veteran of, the Battle of the Animal Bar?

He was in Vietnam, fuckhead. Recommended for the MC three times.

Did he ever get one?

Did Polly Farmer ever win a Brownlow?

I only follow European football, Sarge.

It's called soccer, you fucken dipshit!

Why do you go to the dawn service, Sarge? Anzac Day always puts you in a bad mood. You got medal envy?

Piss off!

Smithers is imagining Somerset and Burwarton getting together in a gentlemen's club in London for an Anzac Day drink. Sitting in fat leather armchairs toasting the Queen with forty-year-old Scotch, patting themselves on the back for providing the Empire with such robust and ready cannon fodder. Smithers shakes off the fantasy and steps up to the Old Man. The Old Man sits quietly with his eyes closed.

You are under arrest for driving under the influence, with a blood alcohol reading of point two two two. Do you understand?

The Old Man nods.

You will also be charged with driving contrary to conditions of an extraordinary licence. Do you understand?

The Old Man nods again.

Now, I'm gonna haveta send you to Baal in the morning. Do you understand?

The Old Man nods. His gaze seems to fall on nothing in the police station. He is thinking of a song. Feeling for it. He's not sure what it is yet. It's this place.

Because you're a cheeky fella. Cheeky fulla go walkabout. You walkabout – no show court.

The Old Man smiles as if at a memory.

I wanna go to sleep, he says.

His eyes are closed as if he is finished with this procedure now, and doesn't want to look on these images. The world we can see is an illusion. He closes his eyes as if he is imagining himself away from this place. Out in his beloved desert country. Away from white man police. Away from Anzac Day and all the talk of sacrifice.

You want me to ring someone in Burwarton?

Sleep now, the Old Man says to the polished concrete floor.

All right. You sleep. Tomorrow Baal lockup.

Slopken ushers the Old Man over to the processing area. At 10:10 pm Smithers signs the Form 5 bail record form, refusing the prisoner bail.

It was only last year when Smithers attended court as a witness in a case against the Old Man, and the Old Man didn't show. Going to court is such a pain in the arse. A day lost.

Smithers records two reasons: if the accused is not kept in custody he/she may fail to appear in court in accordance with his bail undertaking; and if the accused is not kept in custody, he/she may commit an offence. At 10:15 pm Smithers picks up the phone and dials. It rings for a long time. A woman answers.

Rankin.

Sergeant Smithers, Somerset Police.

Yeah.

I have a prisoner for transport tomorrow morning.

You're kidding.

I'm not.

It's Sunday on a long weekend.

What's your point?

Bail him and he can appear in your court next Tuesday.

We'll bail him and he'll go walkabout. I want you to pick him up tomorrow morning.

Rightio then.

As long as it's not too much trouble.

Get fucked.

She hangs up. Smithers puts down the receiver, shakes his head. The worst thing the state ever did was to privatise the prisoner transport. It's always the same with the GPL4 supervisor, Rankin. Wouldn't work in an iron lung. Smithers looks over and nods to Slopken.

Slopken leads the prisoner out to the cells area. It's empty. All the mob are out at the community where the Old Man has driven in from. No one in town to fill the cells tonight. No animals for the Animal Bar. That's why the cops are driving around bored. Don't know how to do nothin – these fullas. The Old Man goes into the cell and is lying on the bench by the time the open-barred door clangs shut behind him. Slopken doesn't mean to slam the door, but it's so heavy that even a little bit of momentum in the door-swing will guarantee a cage-shaking locking of the cell. 10.30 pm. Anzac Day.

When the Old Man wakes he is dehydrated and disorientated. There are two white men standing at the cell door talking: a policeman, and the local JP, Finn Macomish. Macomish is a red-faced stocky bloke. He holds his akubra hat in his hands, and constantly smooths down the front brim. The Old Man recognises the cop.

Charleston, says the Old Man, and moves his feet in a one-two shuffle gesture, originating in his knees, to demonstrate the charleston.

Senior Constable Charleston smiles.

Hello, Old Man.

Him your good boy? the Old Man asks, so fast and running all the words together, that Macomish the JP misses it. He is looking at the brim of his hat.

You have to get used to the desert accent. Charleston smiles and nods. The JP has lived out here all his life, and still can barely understand a word.

The Old Man grins to himself.

Good morning, says the good boy. Had a few drinks last night, did we?

The JP speaks too slowly and too loudly, like an Australian tourist ordering soup in Saigon. Charleston rolls his eyes. He knows this is just Smithers' usual bullshit but there is nothing he can do about it. The Old Man should've been released on bail.

Water? asks the Old Man.

The JP asks him his name. He tells them his white man name, cause that's what they want to hear. The JP tells him that he's gotta go to Baal. Already knew that. The policeman sends his good boy away.

You got im cuppatea?

Charleston smiles, unlocks the cell, and leads the Old Man out the back of the station to the kitchen area.

Ngamari?

Charleston nods and takes out his Winnie Blues and gives the Old Man two cigarettes. The Old Man looks at the two tailor-mades in his hand.

Waru?

Charleston hands over his lighter.

Kettle, tea, sugar – help yourself. You can go out the back, he says, and gestures to the backyard.

The Old Man makes himself a cuppatea. He uses two teabags, four sugars and a generous splash of long-life milk – all in the big fat CIB mug. Then he carries the big fat CIB mug out the back door of the station. He finds a spot near the cyclone fence where he can sit on an old drum. He sits down, places his mug of tea on the red earth, takes out the first cigarette, and lights it up. He takes a draw on the smoke and looks up. Just above is a big old wurrung, his black feathers iridescent in the morning sunshine. Their eyes meet and they let out a little sigh. The crow flies off. The Old Man applies himself to his cigarette.

Charleston is at the front counter when the GPL4 Mazda van pulls up.

What a heap of shit, thinks Charleston.

Howell comes in first, with Stockbow just behind him. Howell looks like he doesn't belong in uniform, even the shitty grey GPL4 attire. There is a knack to wearing a uniform. And you've gotta have pride. To Howell the uniform is just clothes. He has heavy rings around his eyes, and his skin is puffy and red. His gut hangs over his belt. Charleston

was born in his police uniform. He works hard in Lishtokitz's backyard gym, and he hates fat people. Greedy and lazy. They walk in mid-argument.

Well ya shouldn't have fucken said yes if ya didn't wanna come, Howell says.

Don't be a wanker, I'm just sayin ... says Stockbow.

She stops when she sees Charleston. Charleston is why she really came.

Senior Constable Charleston, she says, and tries to look bright.

Youse both look like shit, comments Charleston.

Smithers' bullshit is really starting to grate now that these clowns are here.

Anzac Day. Didn't ya have a sip? asks Stockbow hopefully.

Dawn service. Then I went for a long run, says Charleston.

It was too hot.

I love the heat, says Charleston flatly.

Me too, says Stockbow, but not this time of year. Felt like Australia Day. Fucking climate change.

It's all Greek to me, says Charleston.

We're here for prisoner transport, says Howell.

Charleston flicks a pile of papers onto the counter between them.

Sign here, here, and here.

Howell checks the entries.

When ya comin to Baal next? asks Stockbow.

I'll get your passenger.

Charleston goes back to the cell. The door is wide open and it is empty.

He heads out to the kitchen area.

Uncle?

The Old Man is outside having his last cigarette. He finishes it and stubs the butt out in the red dust. He slowly gets to his feet and shuffles towards the door. He doesn't want to go. But he knows full well that this is what the whitefullas do - they love to move people around, especially if it is off-country. Charleston grabs the only water bottle from the fridge.

I got this, the Old Man says, and shows Charleston the frozen pie he took out of the freezer.

Charleston smiles and nods.

You right, he says.

When they emerge from the cells area, Howell and Stockbow are outside by the van. Charleston looks at her through the heavy glass doors. She should be attractive – but why isn't she? Women are certainly hard to come by out here. Charleston leads the Old Man through the doors.

You got water? asks Charleston.

In the front, says Howell.

For the Old Man, reiterates Charleston, as though talking to children.

Howell and Stockbow look at each other.

I got this, but it's only six hundred mil, Charleston says, and hands the bottle to the Old Man.

Howell gets the back doors of the Mazda open. The Old Man looks in doubtfully. All four of them can feel the heat radiating out from the cell pod.

The sooner you get in, the sooner the aircon kicks in, offers Stockbow.

Charleston gives her a look. He's gonna give Smithers a serve when he sees him.

Is it working?

Course it works. Ya gotta get in, mate. Then it comes on.

Charleston glares at her.

Why didn't you put it on before to cool it down?

Stockbow ignores Charleston and concentrates on the Old Man.

The sooner you get in, the sooner it comes on, she repeats.

Howell moves closer to the Old Man.

Carn, mate, in ya get.

The Old Man turns to Charleston. Charleston can't meet his gaze and turns away. The Old Man gingerly climbs into the prisoner pod like he's picking his way across sharp hot rocks. Howell quickly locks and bolts the inner and outer door.

Thanks, mate, Howell says to Charleston, and gets in the driver's side.

Stockbow looks across to Charleston who is wishing the earth would swallow him up. She takes a step in.

Call me, Steve, she says.

OK. You're Steve.

C'mon, Steve.

See ya, he says through a tight jaw.

She turns and climbs into the Mazda van. They take off. A small article of blue rubbish is blown across the police driveway, and the van drives right over it. Charleston takes a few steps to pick the rubbish up. He bends and grabs it, only to realise that it is one of the little Australian flags made in China that would've been adorning a lairy ute only a few hours before on the national remembrance day. Charleston stands there for a moment holding the crumpled little blue nylon flag, watching the white van go. Warming up a bit. Good one. He turns and goes back into the police station, dropping the blue rubbish into the small plastic bin near the counter.

In the back of the van, the Old Man already knows that he's made a terrible mistake. He should've refused to get in. Should've appealed to Charleston. It's too hot.

There is no fucken aircon.

The seats are metal benches, already too hot to sit on. There are no handles to hold onto to stand up. And Baal is nearly four hours away. He puts down the pie and the water bottle. It's too hot. This heat is the wrong kind. All this steel.

It's an oven. The gudua will cook him. His nana was right. White men will steal you in the night, then cook you and eat you.

He stands with his feet apart, jammed against the benches at the base.

There is one small window up high, but he can't see out of it. Not being able to see the country is a torture in itself. The Old Man loves to drive through the country, and when the road comes close to a songline, which it does in several places, he can look out the window and read/feel the Tjukurrpa as he goes, even singing out the story. But now there is nothing. No chance for anything but to get hotter and hotter. He bangs on the hot steel of the wall that is closest to the driving compartment. He pounds out a storm. A battle rages in his fists against the blistering steel. The sweat pours off him. He knows this exertion is wrong. But he is trapped now. His fists eventually die down to a slow song, and then silence. He listens. Nothing. Just the humming rattling roar of the old Mazda engine, dragging them relentlessly down the baking tarmac. He takes off his shirt, his fingers fumbling with

the buttons. The heat seeps into him, sears its way in like slow-motion lightning. He remembers finding the sand melted into glass tubes by lightning as a child in the desert. How fragile they were. He drops his shirt to the floor. His head is buzzing like the burning road snaking away beneath the moving cell. He tries stamping his feet. There is no give in the metal floor. He sits on the bench and kicks at the inner door. It is solid and the hot metal bench scorches him through his jeans. He jumps up. He starts to sing a song low in his throat; a single phrase in his Nana's tongue repeated over and over. Calling out to Country. He sees the water bottle and goes to bend forward to grab it. The van suddenly lurches sideways; he loses his balance and goes down hard, smashing his left eye into the edge of the metal bench. He lies on the metal floor between the facing metal benches, blood pouring from the deep cut over his left eye. The pouring blood obscures the sight in his left eye and his right vision is blurry. The song tumbles soundlessly out of his lips as his core temperature skyrockets, and his internal organs begin to collapse one by one.

Until only the Old Man's heart and his voiceless song throb through the crushing heat. Eventually his heart begins to slow, the compartment is filled with the stench of human flesh cooking, and the song is released.

Stockbow doesn't wake until one of her iPod earphones has fallen from her left ear. Howell drives. The road snakes away in front of them to the shimmering horizon.

How long have I been asleep?

Hours.

Prisoner settle down?

Stopped banging ages ago.

Didn't have much rhythm.

They count different.

Stockbow drinks from her water bottle. The engine rattles away beneath them. Howell leans forward, resting with his elbows on the steering wheel.

You want me to drive?

I'm not fucken stoppin.

They drive in silence. Stockbow leans over and taps the small CCTV

screen on the dash. Nothing. She puts her left earphone back in and selects a track. Jimmy Barnes: 'Driving Wheels'. She slumps back against her closed window and stares out at the passing low scrub and red dust country. She doesn't really go to sleep but doesn't really stay awake. The country hypnotises her with its sameness, with its bigness, with its unknowability. Her hangover vibrates with the drums and bass on 'Driving Wheels'. She vagues right out.

Eventually Howell's voice cuts in.

You wanna ring the prison?

Are we that close?

Look around.

Stockbow leans over and taps the CCTV screen. It flickers then stops, for a moment a perfect black-and-white image of the prisoner pod. The Old Man is facedown. The screen flickers again.

We should check on him.

I'm not stoppin.

He's facedown with his shirt off.

Howell's lips go tight and he slows the van.

Just get him to put his shirt on and drink some fucken water!

The van pulls over, raising a little red dust cloud on the shoulder of the highway. They are getting close to the big sheds and big yards stuffed with big machinery that is the industrial area on the outskirts of Baal. The GPL4 officers climb out. Stockbow takes the keys and Howell stretches. She gets the outer doors open. The metal is hot to touch. She can see the Old Man is shirtless and facedown. She can see the pool of blood from his bleeding face.

We gotta get him out.

Howell arrives at the back of the vehicle.

We can't open the inner door, he says.

He's bloody hot.

They live in the fucken desert.

HEY! OLD MAN! HEY!

There is no response from the Old Man.

He might be dead, Stockbow says quietly.

He's not fucken dead. They live in the desert.

Let's open up.

I'm ringing Rankin.
He pulls out his phone and dials.
Rankin.
Yeah, it's me. We got a problem.
Broken down again?
It's the prisoner. Passed out.
What's wrong?
He's hung-over and didn't drink his water. Took his shirt off.
Turn the aircon up.
The aircon doesn't fucken work.
Since when?
Oh, for fuck's sake.
Get his shirt on. Take him to prison.
We can't deliver him unconscious.
Take him to the hospital. I'll meet you there.
The phone goes dead. Howell rings again. Nothing.
What? Stockbow demands.
Fucken reception.
Wha'd she say?
Get his shirt on, get him to drink, get him to hospital.
He's not gonna drink. He's out to it.
He's just hung-over. Get his shirt on.
You're hung-over.
So're you. Get his shirt on.
I'm not touching him.
It looks like we knew he was hot and did nothing!
How could we know?
The aircon's not even fucken working!
Everyone knows that.
Not him! Howell says, jerking an angry thumb at the prone figure.
He fucken does now!
Just get his shirt on.
They open the inner door and the heat and the stench of burning
flesh blasts out at them.
Fuck, she says under her breath, and climbs in.
The heat is overwhelming and Stockbow breaks out in an instant
all-over sweat. She rolls the Old Man over and sees the burn on his
guts.

Shit.

Howell sees it too. It is serious – a deep burn taking up half his abdomen raised up and angry red and orange, in the shape of the rising sun badge of the ADF, complete with sun rays coming out of the crown where the burning flesh of the Old Man must've had little folds where he fell. Neither of the GPL4 officers recognise the shape.

Just get the shirt on him, urges Howell.

I think he's dead.

He's not dead. Get on with it.

But the Old Man is too heavy. She gets the sleeves over each wrist.

You pull him forward.

Howell half climbs in and gets the Old Man around the shoulders and pulls him forward. The cut over his eye looks deep. Stockbow slides the shirt up his arms and down over his front. Howell eases the torso back down and the Old Man's head hits the hot metal floor with a clunk. She quickly gets the buttons done back up and gets out. Howell is on the doors immediately, shooting the bolts and locking them. She stands by the road panting and sweating heavily. Howell's shirt is so wet from sweat that he looks like someone has poured a bucket of water over him. Stockbow gathers herself, and they head for the cabin.

Hurry up. He might die.

He won't die.

He might already be dead. I couldn't feel no pulse.

Howell starts the engine. It coughs and splutters. He slams it into gear and they head for the hospital. All around them are massive red slag heaps baking in the sun, as though the town of Baalboorlie is ringed with the shallow graves of giants.

Faith

(Gold Coast, Queensland)

Izzy stands on the too-small balcony. She looks out to sea. It was clear. But now there is the odd cloud scudding in, hitching a ride on the cool sea air current. Izzy looks down the coast. South. Down there is Sydney. He'll be there by now, reclining in one of those low beige armchairs in the lounge. He might have a barely sipped beer sitting in front of him, and an untouched small pile of nuts in a shallow white plate. He'll see his flight come up on the board. He'll get up and go. He'll fly to at least one other place. And then to Kabul.

Izzy is thinking of him. Can't stop. He still feels all around her. She can still feel his shapes. And taste his skin. It is a merging, she decides. Of things. Of concepts as much as feelings. Feelings as much as sensations. Where concepts and feelings become the sensation. The merging. Of – looking forward to, aching for, hunger deep, bleeding into experience, the doing, the after, the regret – it is all a merging. And skin. How truly wonderful is skin? Wrapped around us. Like a skin. She wants to remember this. To burn the connection deep into her synapses. This skin draped over this other shape that is us underneath the skin. The other shape that now we can feel in each other. Can feel with the grinding. The stroking. And the other shapes below that. Way underneath the fondling. Lurking like fat goldfish in our murky moats. Down there surrounding those impossible castles. So far from here. And this heat. The shapes heat up. They shiver beneath our outer shapes and drink in the power of being awakened. Of being present here with all of us. All of us two in this bed. On this bed. Around this bed.

The wanting. The having. The had.

A shadow passes over her. A bird. Izzy gets the rushing feeling. It's like someone walking over your grave, but rushing the moment – so

that it takes no time at all, and the moment is lost, stolen away by the rushing. It is like déjà vu but again with the rushing – it is not something happening that has happened before and will happen again and is happening now – it is a memory instantly forgotten of a moment that never happened and can never happen again. Izzy looks up to search for the bird in the sky who made the shadow – but she sees nothing. Was it a kite? Some kind of a sea hawk? Or a crow – one for sorrow?

And Macca is standing beside her, holding out a glass of wine. She takes the wine, and clinks his beer. They both drink.

The slight breeze ruffles Macca's hair. He smooths it back into place. He has good hair. All grey now, but still thick and rich. His hair-smoothing automatically leads his hands on to smoothing down his blue suit. Izzy reaches out and straightens his medals, just a touch, more for the gesture of touching him than setting the medal board right.

You look good, Macca, she says.

Macca smiles. His face is worn, shining now from having already had a few drinks, but resilient. He takes out another set of medals, and puts them on the small glass-topped table. Izzy looks to him.

I know he hated Anzac Day. But I like to take him anyway. Macca laughs, and his crow's feet dig deep into his face.

He might've changed, Macca.

'They shall not grow old ...' intones Macca.

Touché, she says.

Macca drinks.

Nah, I bet he'd hate it even more, he laughs.

Izzy picks up the medals.

But I'd be too lonely without him, adds Macca.

Izzy strokes the ribbons.

Do you want to have them? Macca asks suddenly.

Izzy looks up.

No, Macca. You look after them for me.

Izzy puts the medals down. Macca goes to the little green tree in a big wooden pot at the northern end of his balcony.

Do you want a macadamia? Grew them myself.

He shows her the nuts growing on the tree.

I spose you'd call it a bonsai. Bonsai macadamioso. Can't eat em myself, because of the diver.

Izzy sips from her wine.

I'm not hungry, Macca.

Macca drinks from his beer and wanders the few steps back down to her.

You've gotta put it out of your mind. Get on with life, he says, and puts his arm around her shoulder.

Izzy lays her head against him, her tight blonde curls falling against his blue suit, and his medals.

Travelling back on Anzac Day? The Army have got a sense of humour, Macca.

That's one fucking word for it, says Macca.

He pulls out his smokes and lights one.

Oh, shit – are you still given up?

No, Macca, she says, and forlornly pulls out a packet of menthols, and lights one up.

They both laugh.

This doesn't seem like you, Macca, she says finally.

Macca shrugs. Looks around. Shrugs again.

Yeah, well. Divorce, lawyers, payments, ah ... fuck. So now I'm living the Gold Coast dream. But at least I've still got my bonsai macafuckendamia!

They laugh, clink glasses, drink, and smoke.

Oh, Macca. What if they send him back to me in a box?

Macca squeezes her tight again.

Josh is a good soldier. The best. You've gotta have faith.

I've got none, Macca.

You're only the girlfriend. If he comes back in a box, it will be to his mother.

Thanks for nothing, she says.

They hug for a long time. Izzy pulls herself together.

If ya can't have faith ... Ya gotta develop a hard edge, says Macca out to sea.

They both drink, and watch the growing wind begin to affect the surface of the ocean way out in front of them.

What are you doing now, Macca? Going back to the RSL?

Catching up with some copper mates. You'd be welcome.

Oh, yeah, who?

Just some mates. I can't do the big crowd thing anymore.

I gotta get back to Melbourne.

He sends his regards, Macca says.

Who? Big Bill? You gotta be kidding me?

Macca finishes his beer.

You want another wine?

Thanks, Macca. Sorry.

He tops up her drink. They stare out at the ocean. The sun is getting ready to go.

Wake Up, Australia.

(Peshawar, northern Pakistan)

The one he calls Washington sits up in the half-light that is coming through the wooden shutters. Washington cradles his AK on his knees. Something feels wrong. Something in the fabric of the air has changed. He glances to the door. The thin wire wound around the doorhandle and attached to the wall appears untouched. At the window, the one called DiMaggio is at the shutters, looking out, his weapon held low. Then Washington sees the tiny flame flickering at the feet of the blanket-wrapped man against the mud wall of the small room. The smell of burning blanket is acrid. In the impossible cold of the morning, the man's blankets are bursting into flame. Combusting for no known reason. Washington makes a noise with his tongue.

Tsk!

DiMaggio looks back to him, and then follows his eye to the impossible flame.

Shit, says DiMaggio.

Wake him up, says Washington.

You wake him, says DiMaggio.

Washington moves across the room to the sleeping man on fire. He hesitates. DiMaggio pushes him on with his eyes.

Australia – wake up!

There is no response.

Wake up! Australia! Wake up!

The man they call Australia does not move a muscle but his eyes snap open. Those eyes have the look of a man who didn't know he was asleep. Those eyes have the look of a man ripped out of a dream, a man to whom reality is a shock. Or another dream. Australia is not his real name. It's what they call him. It's not a false name. It is true. Fiction often is. But not his actual name. Before he was called Australia he was

called something else, and before that – something else again. Where he comes from, a man can have many names throughout his lifetime. Names mean nothing here – they can even be a liability, an unnecessary complexity, or a risk. The tall American he calls Washington is leaning over him – but not too close, speaking in a hoarse whisper.

Australia – you burning up, man.

Australia sits up. Australia has his big Russian pistol in one hand, and his kukri in the other. It is this second weapon, with its razor-sharp inward-curving blade, that makes the Americans nervous. When they got stopped at that checkpoint at the Rampura Gate in the old city, and Australia took the young QST guards out with the blade, Washington and DiMaggio wished they'd shot the kids first, even though they knew that gunshots would've been the end of them.

Australia looks at the small flame at his feet. He kicks the blankets off him and kills the flame. He looks down at his feverish body as if examining something outside of himself. He is so hot that his dark skin is practically glowing.

The piss bucket, says Washington.

DiMaggio grabs the bucket and pours it onto a blanket. The piss is cold, having sat there all night. He bends, and wraps the cold-piss blanket around Australia. Australia seems calm. Washington gets him some water from a canteen. The piss-blanket steams against the heat of his body. Australia pulls it tight around him. His mind is racing. He knows that this heat is not a body thing. Heat has a texture, a memory, and this heat is not from here. This is heat that has hunted him out from half a world away. The two Americans look at him like they are looking at a ghost. This isn't right.

Australia pulls open his tunic to reveal the severe burn to his guts. The burn is in the unmistakable shape of the rising sun badge. Only Australia sees this. DiMaggio grabs the first-aid kit. He rips open a shell dressing, pours disinfectant into the dressing, and applies it to the wound. Australia wraps the bandages quickly around his torso until the dressing is held firm.

Then the sat phone, resting on a stool between the three of them, starts to buzz quietly. They all look at each other. Washington picks it up.

Yeah.

He looks at the Australian.

It's for you.

Washington shrugs and steps back quickly. He is so tall his head nearly touches the ceiling of the tiny mud-walled room. Australia looks around as if trying to get his bearings. The room is dark and cold. The other American, the one he calls DiMaggio, is back at the window, peering through a slit in the wooden shutters. A motorbike putt-putts past in the street below. A man urges his donkey in Urdu. They are all freezing. This snow is so unseasonal that it is unheard of. Something is out of whack.

Australia rests the Tokarev in his lap, and puts the sat phone to his ear.

Yeah.

It's me, Coorda.

Yeah.

Had a call from home last night.

Who?

Promised One. She was upset. Really upset.

Wha'd she say?

Forgive me, Brother. Jamu is finish-up.

In the silence the line crackles and beeps.

How? Australia's voice comes from far away.

Death in custody.

What?

In the van.

How?

Heat stroke.

Australia holds the shell dressing tight over the burn to his lower abdomen.

Where are you?

In the city.

Stay strong, Brother.

Yeah. Stay strong.

Australia gets up and puts the sat phone back. The cold-piss blanket falls to the floor. Australia shivers as if someone just walked over his grave. Washington sits back down on his canvas stool. He lights his gas cooker. The little blue flame slams the cold into them. Outside it is snowing. The snow is good for them, they keep telling themselves, trying to make sense of it. The markets are nearly empty. Anyone

moving around is probably QST. The prevailing feeling now is not of cold but the gnawing emptiness of isolation. The cold is like the texture of the isolation. The men in this room have no friends in this country. Feel the alone-ness, the out-on-a-limb-ness. The two Americans look at the Australian. The heat thing is completely insane, and they can see that the phone call has rocked him. And they know him well. Australia stands. He lifts his qmis and nestles the Tokarev into his belt in the small of his back. The kukri he puts in the belt at the front. The qmis is so loose that neither weapon bulges.

You want coffee?

Australia is in another zone. His dark eyes are impenetrable. He picks up the cloth of his pogray, and winds it around his head into the turban shape with the distinctive end bit hanging down in the Pushtun way as if he'd been doing it all his life, as though he really was Pushtun.

You cold, my man?

Australia picks up the AK-47 from next to his blanket, and slings it over his shoulder. DiMaggio sees his intent and crosses to the door. It is a small cramped space, and the smell of the three men living in there fills the air and seeps into the mud walls.

Whatever it is, you can't change it from here.

I know, replies Australia, but he doesn't look at the American.

Another week here tops, adds DiMaggio.

Australia shakes his head.

Sit down, Australia, says Washington trying to keep his voice steady, I'll make coffee.

Australia looks at DiMaggio, who is blocking his way. He nods.

OK.

DiMaggio's eyes flick to Washington on his canvas stool. In that moment, Australia knees him hard in the balls. As DiMaggio is dropping to the floor, Washington sees the Tokarev aiming at his head.

Don't do it, Australia. They'll kill you.

I'm already dead.

Australia steps over DiMaggio, undoes the wire, and goes out the door.

The Afridi tribesman outside the front door jumps up, grabbing his weapon. Australia shakes his hand, and pulls the man in close, keeping the Tokarev aimed back at the door the whole time.

Brother? says Australia, his voice ragged.

Yes, my Brother, says the Afridi, and grips Australia's shoulder.

I must go, Brother, says Australia.

Where?

Home ... Family.

The tribesman nods sternly.

Honour ... Badal, says the Australian.

Courage ... Tureh, says the Afridi man looking him firmly in the eye, and then embraces him fiercely.

Then Australia moves carefully down the tight little corridor, down the rotting stairs, and out into the streets of Peshawar, the City of Hospitality, the City of Flowers. The Afridi man comes behind him, and takes off down a back alley without a backward glance.

Australia is looking across the snowy street to the building there. That's where the money is being kept. There should be two guards out the front. There is nobody. Shit. Something is going down. He replays the phone call in his mind. Is there a code there? What Smokey had to say was bad enough. The pain from his guts is searing now. Then he hears a vehicle coming. He looks down the alley where the Afridi man went. There is a crumbling wall a few metres in. Australia gets behind it and flicks down the safety catch on his AK. Washington and DiMaggio must've been faster than he thought in giving him up.

The vehicle pulls up right in front, and two men jump out. They are both dressed like locals, as he is, but by their stances he picks them instantly as outsiders. It is two tiny things that give them away – the relationship between their hands and their wrists, and the relationship between their necks and heads. These relationships go deeper than body language, even though they are almost invisible to the naked eye. Australia knows full well that they can even help an individual 'beat' the image recognition systems that they analyse the drone footage with. The outsiders stand near the alleyway for a moment. Australia ducks down. Those two sets of eyes that he glimpses beneath turbans rock him. He knows both of them. Thorpe, the American who dragged him into all this in the first place, and Mort. Mort – who he called brother once. Those two sets of eyes tell him everything. If they look down, and see the fresh tracks in the snow, he is a dead man. But that look in their eyes, they are thinking about something else. They didn't even glance across the road – they already knew the guards would be gone. The two men lift their weapons and disappear up the rotting

stairs. Australia takes a breath. His body feels hot and cold at the same time. He is shivering from the cold piss. He hears Thorpe and Mort going up the stairs. He turns and goes, carefully placing his feet in the footmarks made by the Afridi tribesman. He's only taken a few steps when he hears two short bursts of AK fire. Goodnight Washington and DiMaggio. Australia increases his pace, and is quickly deep into the narrow winding streets of the old city. Even with their drones they'll never find him in here. And they won't be coming in after him. They've got other priorities. They'll come later. Australia lets this occupy his mind to keep at bay for as long as possible the terrible knowledge of the phone call and the burning heat in his lower guts. Let them come.