

**The Peggy Chapman-Andrews
First Novel Award 2016**

RUNNER-UP

Orphaned Leaves

by Christopher Holt

“In that inner room of life sits Regret with her pale face, and Shame with dust on her forehead, and Memory with tears in her eyes. It is a pitiable thing ... our coming in.”

From ‘The Threshold Grace’ by P.C. Ainsworth

“No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.”

From ‘Mere Christianity’ by C.S. Lewis

ONE

From Adolf Hitler’s Obersaltzberg Speech to Wehrmacht commanders on 22nd August, 1939.

“I put my Death’s Head units in readiness with the order to kill without pity or mercy all men, women and children of the Polish race or language. Only thus will we gain the Lebensraum that we require.”

February 1940

A Forest in Upper Silesia, Poland.

“Your first murder is like your first love. You never forget it.” His breath steams in the freezing air. It reeks of schnapps. Trummler is as maudlin as a lost dog.

The younger officer clenches his fists in frustration. Trummler’s ramblings have delayed the Aktion by an hour and still more prisoners are being offloaded from the lorries. Frick struggles to keep his voice calm. “We cannot fall behind, Hauptsturmführer. Our orders are to keep up with the Advance. We’ve still got another batch straight after this one. If we don’t hurry, sir, it will be too dark to process them.”

Trummler’s eyes are bulging more than usual. They look ready to burst. “Another batch? What do you mean, Frick? Are you talking about loaves of bread?”

Frick is at his wit’s end. The condemned are already being lined up at the pit’s edge. They are all shivering. Any moment one of them, especially a child, could topple in. That’s all it would take to start pandemonium. It is clear that the Hauptsturmführer is out of his mind and Frick is desperately trying to decide if he should take over command.

And now of all things, Trummler starts whimpering like an infant. His thick Swabian consonants slur into a passionate tirade. His voice rises.

“Frick, just listen. *Listen.*” His tears run freely down his cheeks. His frame begins to rock and Frick steps towards him in case the man needs support but Trummler steadies himself and wipes a gloved hand across his face. His voice is quieter.

“Can you explain to me, Frick, why Colonel Krüger has given orders that we are never to make eye contact with a prisoner?”

Frick stares at him. “I don’t know. I just don’t know, Herr Hauptsturmführer.”

“But surely it must be obvious to you, Frick. It’s because once you look him in the eye he actually becomes a human being and if you kill him ... *then God help you.*” Trummler starts his blubbing again, then abruptly without taking Frick’s salute, he lumbers off bear-like to the Opel where his driver is waiting to take him back to Base HQ.

Frick assumes command. At the pit the SS Scharführer awaits his signal. The procedure has been finely drilled. Frick only has to give three nods. His eyes sweep down the line of prisoners who are spaced out at one arm intervals along the edge of the trench. At his first nod, eight Schützen rush forward with long planks which they raise horizontally behind the adults’ knees roughly level with the shoulders of toddlers. Again Frick nods and twenty four trained executioners step up with Luger pistols. Frick nods again and the executioners shoot the victims in the back of the head. At once the eight Schützen tip their planks so the bodies drop in a straight line on top of the previous batch, what Krüger calls “Sardinienpackung”.

Frick needs to be vigilant. He recalls one of Heydrich’s remarks at the commencement of the *Aktion* campaign.

“Sub-humans do not give up their lives easily. They’re like polecats. Have you ever tried to kill a polecat?”

A few of the victims are still emitting signs of life but the moment the executioners hear a groan or spot a gasping mouth, their pistols are ready. Frick hears the wheezing of a baby girl abruptly cut short by two shots in close succession. An old man twists his face to the sky. His lips are moving. Another shot.

Finally all the bodies are still and a pale vapour rises above them in the frigid air. A woman’s arm juts skyward like a dead branch, her wedding ring gleaming in the low sun. One Schütze climbs down and wrenches it off her finger.

There is a terrifying calm. Along the edge of the trench the blood is freezing into little pulks like rubies. Frick wonders if, like himself, the other SS men are feeling a numbing detachment from the dead.

He winces in pain from an exposed nerve in a lower tooth. It’s a worry. At twenty four he still rigidly maintains the physical requirements of the SS when he first enlisted in 1937. One of these is that he possesses a full set of teeth without fillings. Now the Reich is at war he supposes it doesn’t matter very much but he’ll still need to find a dentist in Uppeln.

The long shadows of the silver birches bridge the trench as the short winter day ebbs into dusk. There is just sufficient time for the last batch. The executioners stub out their cigarettes in the snow. A groaning bulldozer starts scooping up loose earth and gravel to cover the bodies before nightfall.

Frick's boyish voice cuts through the icy wind. "Bring up the next group, Schärführer. Quickly now." Why did he shout 'group' instead of 'batch'? Damn Trummler and his loaves of bread.

The sergeant salutes him. "Yes, Herr Obersturmführer." He stamps his feet to keep up the circulation, then hurries across to the edge of the woods and blows his whistle. Somewhere in the trees another whistle responds and heavy diesel engines start up. Frick hears the crunching of massive tyres over gravel and ice as three tarpaulin clad lorries rumble into the clearing and clunk to a halt. Six SS Schützen drag back the tarpaulins to reveal a gallery of pallid faces, their eyes squinting from the light.

The torpidity of the prisoners unnerves Frick. They assist each other out of the vehicles and form an apathetic line. One woman with a baby in her arms starts to sing. It sounds like a Polish hymn. Nobody joins in. A father clutches the hand of his small son and guides the boy's eyes upward through the blinding snow to a blur of light. The wind grows stronger.

Goaded on by the shouts and blows of the Schützen, the column shuffles towards the edge of the pit. Most of the prisoners are well dressed. Trummler had given orders that they are to die in their winter coats and scarves. Some of the women are in furs. The N.C.O.s grumble that this is a criminal waste. The Reich could have confiscated them for its "Clothes for Victory" campaign.

Frick suspects that only a couple of days ago, these prisoners had been assembled in some civic square where they would be told by an immaculately uniformed Sturmbahnführer that they were to be resettled in the east.

"But what of our luggage, Captain?" one venerable figure might have politely asked him and then the officer would have given him a rare smile.

"Don't worry, old man. Your suitcases are going on ahead. They'll be returned to you later."

Looking at the deteriorating weather, Frick is glad that the faltering Trummler was at least able to requisition the lorries. Previously the prisoners had to be force-marched forty kilometres from the railhead to their place of execution. He remembers how the temperature had been so low that the SS boots rang like metal on the wooden bridges. Sometimes the guards would throw children into the icy rivers and watch as the parents jumped in after them. It was a useful ploy because it quickened the march and saved ammunition.

The wind lashes the snow drifts to a fury and visibility drops to thirty metres when Frick hears shouting coming from the direction of the parked lorries. The sergeant halts the prisoners while two Schützen are yelling and rushing about in the trees. Frick takes long strides over to the sergeant. "What is going on, Scharführer?"

The man salutes. "A woman, Herr Obersturmführer – she was hiding under the lorry. She's taken off into the woods."

"By herself?"

"I think so, sir. It's not easy to tell in this weather."

Frick is fuming. If she gets away, it will be he who will have to answer to Krüger, no-one else.

"Get the Schützen back here and you oversee the executions yourself."

“Yes, Herr Obersturmführer.” The sergeant blows three long blasts on his whistle; the Schützen return and the column creeps forward to the trench.

Frick inspects the ground. The wind is fast obliterating the woman’s tracks but his trained eyes detect the lay of an ancient path which skirts a frozen swamp before leading into the forest. He sets off in haste, his boots squeaking in the soft drifts. He is certain that despite the driving snow, the slim columns of the birches will not offer the fugitive any concealment.

Frick is so convinced that the forest is uninhabited that he is startled when an old house looms into sight. Its upper floor leans forward giving the whole structure a weird lop-sided look. From its eaves, Slavic gargoyles thrust their open mouths forward, the icicles hanging from them like canine teeth.

The building is out of kilter with the soldierly trees and its slant is made all the worse by the ecclesiastical steepness of the high shingled roof with its precarious sickly green onion dome.

In the twilight the house evokes those terrifying illustrations in a book of fairy tales that Frick remembers as a child. The recollections are so vivid that for an instant he loses his sense of direction, and blindly stumbles into a disused sawpit. Unhurt, he leaps to his feet and slaps the snow off his uniform.

And there she is!

The woman is barely three metres away, standing in a corner of the pit, her stark white face framed in a wild tumble of red hair. She is as motionless as a church-yard statue. Her steaming breath is the only sign that she is a living being. Like the other prisoners she looks well heeled. She is wearing a long woollen coat with a fox fur stole draped around her shoulders. He thinks she would be in her early thirties. One can never tell with women. The two stare at each other. Her green eyes unnerve him but he swallows and pulls himself together.

It’s nearly dusk. Above the whirr of falling snow he can hear the drone of the bulldozer but the shooting has stopped. The executions are over for the day. It’s too late to drag the woman back. He’ll have to shoot her here and now - his first personal execution. Damn Trummler. What would the man have him do? He *has* to go through with it – or does he really want to be the first SS officer to tell Krüger that he has disobeyed an order from the Führer?

The woman hasn’t moved, not even as much as a shiver despite the deathly cold. Frick slips off his gloves and gropes for the Lüger, his hand trembling. Still the woman doesn’t move. She is the easiest of targets but it is because she is so defenceless that he finds it harder to squeeze the trigger.

Why won’t she say something? Anything – scream at him, beg for her life!

Whatever she is, witch or half-demon, as an SS officer he has to do this. If he concentrates on the word “duty” the task will be easier. He even feels churlish for keeping her waiting. His finger steadies on the trigger. He grimaces then fires once, then twice into her chest. She goes limp but instead of falling to earth her body rests partially upright against the bank. Her head swings back but her eyes stay wide open.

He fires another two rounds direct into her face. An eye bursts, blood pumps over the red hair, spurting out with the final beat of her heart. Her jaw falls sideways and her mouth opens. From the rags of bloodied flesh, the remaining green eye returns his gaze. Her corpse still leans on its feet against the side of the pit but the bullets have set off a small avalanche from the bank and a splurge of snow bedecks her head and shoulders like a bridal veil. The one eye continues to stare into his. It is eerily possessive.

Frick bends over and throws up. After his stomach is empty he stoops to snatch a handful of snow to rinse his mouth not once but several times which sets off his toothache again. He grabs up more snow, not for his mouth this time but for his burning face.

At last he straightens up and keeping well clear of the corpse, he seizes a branch, drags himself out of the pit and staggers clear of it. He shuts and opens his eyes repeatedly as if trying to change the present world to the past, to never have to face the actuality of what he had just done and what he has now become.

He should have just let her go! Who would have been any the wiser?

The cold penetrates his overcoat; it penetrates his body right to the marrow. Before he puts on his gloves, he wraps both hands around the pistol and finds its heat comforting.

Again Frick shuts his eyes but no darkness can blot out the personal horror of what he has done. His body trembles.

Why didn't he just let her go?

When he opens his eyes again he is shocked by his close proximity to the derelict house. He is actually standing in the porch. He hastily moves a dozen paces away but an unhealthy obsession with its appearance causes him to look back.

His second impression of the building is more chilling than the first. It seems to him that the onion cupola is slanting more than the rest of the roof. Now he notices that the front door of the house is slightly ajar. He is sure that it was firmly shut when he first saw it. Before he has time to take this in, he hears a rustle in the junipers behind him. Instinctively he spins around and draws his Luger. Nothing, just snowflakes spinning in the capricious wind. His heart pumps violently and he stares about him. Still nothing. God knows what lurks in a place like this.

Rising panic overwhelms him and all he wants to do is to get back to his men at the double. He plunges through the drifts towards the whine of the bulldozer. A night bird shrieks over the frozen swamp. Behind him something howls. He quickens his pace but the howling continues, a doleful ululation carried to his ears through the sibilant air.

When he returns to the clearing he has the sensation of being diminished, an older, dwarfish, bent figure shielding his face from the chastening wind. The pungency of fresh human blood smarts his nostrils and he shields them with a gloved hand.

The sergeant steps up to meet him and salutes. Frick salutes too but because he must stink of vomit, steps well back from him. "The fugitive is dead, Scharführer," he says. "She lies in a sawpit." He points out the direction through the trees. "It's in front of a derelict house. You can't miss it."

"Do we bring the body here, Herr Obersturmführer?"

"No, I'm already late enough as it is. Just drag her into the house and burn it down. Despite the snow it will go up in minutes. Hurry now."

...

Frick rides back in the lead lorry. This carries a greater risk of ambush but for the sole officer to travel in one of the rear vehicles is unconscionable. As it is, the journey is anything but comfortable. The forest road is a slushy mire. The substantially lightened truck swerves and skids dangerously

close to the soft verges. At times the centre hump scrapes the axle shield and as they drive over the hidden pot-holes the vehicle rises and crumps like a bronking horse and Frick wonders how Trummeler fared in his low slung Opel. They are down to twenty kilometres an hour. The driver hunches forward trying to scan the way ahead as the wipers smear yellow mud and snow across the windscreen.

Frick's mind dwells on the house in the forest. By now the wind will have whipped the fire to an inferno. In hours the whole ghastly structure and also the body of the woman will be razed to hot embers hissing in the snow. Several times he has looked through the back windscreen to see if the sky is blushed with reflected flames but the forest behind the convoy is a limitless wall of gloom at one with the driving snow.

At last they fork onto a tarred road devoid of traffic. It is strewn with the detritus of the *Advance*: broken hand carts, some richly carved, the heirlooms of generations of peasant farmers, others are coffin shaped with rubber tyres. The wheels of the lorry splodge muck over the blitzed Kapliczi shrines and tottering wayside crosses, all witnesses to a god in ruins. In the thickening air, the headlights start reflecting the headlights back and the driver eases up on the accelerator.

"The weather's getting worse, Herr Obersturmführer. A blizzard."

"Yes." Frick's mind is fixed on the image of the dead woman. He stares mindlessly as the impish snow-flakes pirouette over the bonnet. Beyond the roadside, the tree limbs are plumping into long pillows of virgin snow. He wishes the driver would speed up again. He imagines the forest creeping up behind them in vengeful pursuit.

He is relieved when they enter a more populated district but this region is still a conflict zone and the road is littered with crumpled cars and overturned Polish army vehicles. Tanks are blasted apart, their exposed interiors scorched black like garden incinerators and despite the closed windows in the lorry, Frick detects along with the smoke, another smell, sweet and sickly. Here are countless frozen dead, their twisted remains unburied after nearly three weeks. Despite the blanketing snow, he sees whole villages disfigured by razed cottages, ruined churches and bullet-pocked walls.

Behind one of these is SS Base HQ.

Frick arrives at the Mess freshly bathed and wearing his black uniform, its blackness made the more sinister by the peaked *Tellemütze* cap emblazoned with the SS eagle and the silver Death's Head. His glistening boots have a steel band on each heel.

But he is late and the other officers have started on their soup. Frick hands his cap and gloves to an aide. He clenches his teeth. No one should be late at a dinner for SS Standartenführer Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger.

He approaches the table but remains standing. The officers put down their spoons and await his apologies.

There is a snap of steel against steel as Frick clicks his heels. "I wish to formally apologise to you Herr Standartenführer and to my brother officers. I was delayed at the Aktion."

There is silence. No-one picks up his spoon. "I had to shoot a woman," he adds.

More silence, then Krüger laughs in amazement. "Today your company executes eight hundred sub-humans and now you solemnly report to us that you had to shoot one woman?"

Some of the officers laugh. Most look vaguely curious. Frick glances around for Trummler but his chair is empty.

Krüger waves him to his seat. "Now tell us, Frick, why is this woman of yours so exceptional?"

Frick swallows. "She was an escapee, Herr Standartenführer."

"So?"

Frick looks at the officers' expectant faces. "She had bright red hair," he says stupidly.

At this there is general ribaldry among the officers. Frick's cheeks burn.. He feels he should offer some explanation but in doing so he increases his embarrassment. "I've never seen a Pole with such red hair, sir." More laughter from the officers but this time it is forced and uneasy.

Thank God at this moment the pedantic Brunner butts in. He is one of the older officers and used to be a lecturer of some sort. "She was probably a Khazar," he says in his usual anodyne tone. "Frick, are you familiar with the legends about the Khazars?"

"I am sorry, sir. I have never heard of them."

Brunner elaborates. "They were red haired warrior Jews from beyond the Caucasus. "

"Warriors, sir? How can Jews be warriors? They're ... *Jews!*"

"But my dear Frick, Jews can indeed be warriors. Have you never heard of the Jewish war with Rome and the siege of Masala? When you were at school don't you remember how Samson and later David defeated the Philistines? We're talking antiquity, you know." Brunner starts coughing and pauses to take a sip of his claret. "The Khazars believe they're one of the lost tribes of Israel and are destined to overrun Europe to avenge their persecuted brethren. There are many superstitions about ..."

"*Enough!*" Krüger crashes his fist on the table. Brunner abruptly shuts up and gulps a whole mouthful of claret, some of which dribbles down the corners of his mouth. Frick feels his pulse quicken. Krüger is known for his outbursts and as the commanding SS Colonel, he would be paranoid about the morale of his officers. He will be aware that few of them can stomach the Aktion. Most, like Trummler, are drinking too much. Some are even starting to talk to themselves.

Again Krüger strikes the table. "Now hear this! There'll be no more lying talk of warrior Jews or stupid tales about red haired Jewesses wielding battle-axes. Do you understand, gentlemen?"

"Yes, Standartenführer," they mumble.

"I did not hear you."

"Yes, Standartenführer," they shout.

Krüger rises stiffly from his chair speedily followed by his officers who click their heels to attention. His anger abated, he raises an unwavering arm.

“Sieg Heil!”

The officers return a drill-perfect salute.

“Heil Hitler!”

...

When Frick returns to his quarters he finds that Stroop has been busy. The desk has been waxed, the bed is squarely made up and his shoes and spare boots have a varnish shine. On his camp locker is an envelope addressed in Brigitte’s handwriting. He slits it open with care, then sits down on the bed and reads it meticulously except for three sentences which he tries very hard to ignore.

I realise that I should be brave and confident but I do worry about the fighting. I know you protect your men but please, please protect yourself too, not only for my sake but also for Cordula’s. She will grow up to be so proud of you, as am I.

Despite Brigitte’s fears for him, Frick is deeply ashamed that he has never once confronted an armed enemy of the Reich. He loathes deceiving his wife. But Hans Frank, the Governor General of Occupied Poland, has ordered the Aktion to be kept a military secret. Frank’s edict does nothing to ease Frick’s mind about the events of today and his own ignominious part in them.

He wonders about the military necessity for the Aktion. He knows full well that Brigitte would not be proud of him if she really knew what he was doing in Poland. It is not enough to believe that she is simply naïve about strategic affairs. What would she say if she’d seen those children being slaughtered at the trench today?

He takes down her photograph in its brown leather frame and brings it closer to his reading lamp. He stares at it for some time and where he once saw a face full of love looking back at him, he now imagines a mocking, accusatory glare. His hands begin to shake. What’s wrong with his eyes? Brigitte’s features are beginning to blur into the face of the corpse in the saw pit. Seized with terror he snaps the frame shut.

It has to end. Tomorrow he’ll see Krüger and request an immediate transfer to the Wehrmacht. At the Front of the Advance his comrades will no longer be melancholic drunks like Trummler or pedants like Brunner. They’ll be proper fighting troops.

He hates the fact that Hans Frank’s wife is also called Brigitte. Dear God, what a comparison. He remembers when the Franks first arrived in Krakow to be crowned “King and Queen of Poland” at Wavel Castle overlooking the Vistula. Krakow was adorned with billowing swastikas. A Brownshirt Guard of Honour stood to attention at the castle entrance. Mass units of the Volksdeutsche militia and the Waffen SS lined the quadrangle, all bearing flame torches. The Silesian Philharmonic Orchestra started up and Frank and his wife processed through the gates behind the biggest Hakenkreuz that Frick had ever seen. On the podium Frank pointed to the overblown flag and told the multitude that the swastika would fly over Wavel Castle for a thousand years. He made it sound like a decree from Mount Sinai.

Frick wonders now as he wondered then: Is the Führer so short of talent that he has to appoint a sycophant like Frank to run the General Government of Poland? Mind you, Hitler also appointed Himmler, - even Goebbels the garrulous cripple for God's sake, and apart from Heydrich with his bull terrier face, there isn't a full blooded Aryan among them and ... when you come to think of it, even the Führer himself ...

No, Ernst, never ever go there. Don't even think of it.

But he *has* thought of it. Not just now but many times. He'd been scrupulous though. Not once did he broach the thought with anyone else, not even with Brigitte.

His wife is the epitome of how all Aryans should be – tall, blond and athletic. It had not begun as a love match. They had been selected for each other, coerced into a duty marriage by the SS. Himmler would have thought it all very scientific with Frick the pure bred stallion and Brigitte his matching filly.

Cordula cannot be his first child. Brigitte must know this. She never says anything but of course she knows, she's not stupid. At the Academy, where he studied civil engineering, Frick was an elite above the other elites, one of the tallest and blondest of his peers, full-muscled and twice winner of the SS marathon. Brigitte would have taken it for granted that he would have been "volunteered" into the trendy Lebensborn Project for breeding pedigreed Aryans. He recalls those passionless couplings by the Baltic Sea in the arms of Nordic goddesses. *Of course* they became pregnant. In fact Brigitte would have been miffed if he had *not* been selected.

She has only given him one child. Soon the SS may start asking questions. The Third Reich demands more of its elite, four children at least.

Next month he will be twenty five, still young enough for high promotion in the Wehrmacht if his transfer is approved but he'll have to put more effort into his fitness regime. He fears the *Aktion* campaign has been making him soft. There is no excuse for this. Physical fitness is a *moral* choice. Bodies matter, which means you have to stay young at all costs. True National Socialists must be the Ever-Young. He has seen those early photographs of the Führer and the first cabinet. They were all *young* men. Once you let yourself grow old, you're finished. Why choose Hugo Boss to design uniforms for the Reich if they are not tailor made for virile youthful men? Yes, bodies matter because when you come to think of it, all we have is our biology. Darwin was a genius.

Damn! Damn! Damn! He clamps his eyes shut so tightly that his ears ring yet he cannot shut out the face of that woman he shot today. Brunner called her an avenging "Red Jew". What did he mean by that? But she's dead. She'll never take her revenge on anyone - unless...no, that's all superstition. But this is the 'Wild East' and, as he's been told, superstition is not only rife out here, it is contagious. He has to keep a grip on himself. Tomorrow he must front up to Krüger about his transfer.

He undresses and gets into bed but his mind roils like hot bubbling Kartoffelsuppe. What possessed him to join the *Aktion* in the first place? He's a qualified engineer for God's sake! The SS had misled him. They said the Reich needed first class officers for its most essential priority: 'relocating' Untervolk from the new German colonies to unspecified regions further east. It was Eichmann who had encouraged him, even convincing him that he would play a senior part in resolving the Jewish Question. He said it was an essential arm of policy, especially here in Poland where for the first time Frick is encountering 'real' Jews, the ones caricatured in *Die Stürmer*, men with long beards, ringlets, side-curls, kaftans and little round caps trimmed with fox fur, villainous sub-humans, all of them.

And just as the Americans ousted the Indians and colonised the Wild West, so the German Aryans will do the same for the *Wild East*. But Frick has had enough. After today he will be happy for other men to take over while he serves at the Front.

He needs to sleep but all the same he dreads it. Lately he is being tormented by a recurring nightmare. The mass graves are being torn from the earth and rising in the air, the corpses unravelling themselves from the Sardinienpakung into a writhing of limbs, waxen faces and blood. So much blood. And tonight he is bound to dream of that woman in the pit. His eyes are tightly shut like clams on a rock. His jaws are clenching, his body shudders.

This won't do. He recalls the voice of his old headmaster in Weimar.

Self-discipline, Frick. Show some self-discipline, boy.

There's a hammering on the door. "Herr Obersturmführer. Wake up, sir."

For Christ's sake, now what? Frick rolls out of bed and reaches for his dressing gown. Stroop stands to attention in the corridor. He salutes.

"Come in, Stroop,"

Stroop salutes him once more. "Sir, I am sorry to disturb you, but Base HQ is on special alert"

"Why?"

"Hauptsturmführer Trummler is missing, Herr Obersturmführer."

Trummler's body is discovered the next morning. He had evidently staggered through the blizzard to the shell of a burnt-out church three kilometres away so the discharge of his one bullet would not disturb Krüger's formal dinner.

Frick's request for transfer to the Wehrmacht is turned down and Krüger orders him to take command of one of the new SS Einsatzkommando execution units fifteen kilometres from the Soviet occupation zone.

May 4th, 1945

Headquarters of Obergruppenführer Friederich-Wilhelm Krüger commanding the 5th

SS Mountain Infantry Corp. Styria. Upper Austria.

"I have bad news for you, Ernst. Please sit down."

Frick perches himself on the edge of the canvas chair. "Herr General?"

"Your wife has died in Berlin.....Your daughter too. I am sorry."

Frick swallows. If he were alone, he would weep. To openly grieve now would be taken as crass hypocrisy. He's had no contact with Brigitte since 1943. Krüger would know the reason. Frick bends forward on his chair. His shoulders tremble.

Krüger waits until he composes himself.

"It was suicide, Ernst, cyanide. They would not have suffered."

How would Krüger know that? Not have suffered? What, just the two of them alone in that miserable flat in the Grünwald with rubble all round, enemy bombers overhead, Red Army troops just blocks away, their shells shrieking down the streets and the building shaking on its foundations? And they would not have suffered?

Frick shuts his eyes for half a second and tries to numb his feelings by imagining the technical details.

How did she obtain the cyanide? Of course. Despite their separation her social standing was sufficiently high to receive the last gasp of Goebbels's propaganda: she would be *expected* to attend the Berlin Philharmonic's production of *Der Götterdämmerung*.

The Twilight of the Gods – what an exercise in cheap irony. He'd heard that after the final curtain call there was an announcement that cyanide would be offered to all members of the audience.

He imagines Brigitte waiting in a queue by one of the velvet-clad doors where a Hitler Youth hands out the little glass capsules.

"Please may I have two?" she would ask ever so politely and probably smile at the boy while one of Goebbels's hacks on the microphone tells everyone that the end will be painless and quick. No doubt some of the vials are dropped and trampled underfoot and the whiff of prussic acid would not be unpleasant, rather like crushed almonds.

But how in God's name would she get Cordula to take her capsule with the bombers overhead and the building shaking? Would she have held her hand? Of course she would. One weak hand holding another's. She would have secretly broken the capsule beforehand and mixed the stuff in a fine china cup with the child's hot chocolate. She would have told Cordula it was a special treat.

He needs to weep; to weep in the open air, to weep alone in the lime woods. He is weary. Not through the shock of the deaths – that has still to penetrate, nor the looming defeat of Germany. His ennui rises from a source that refuses to be defined. He staggers to his feet to salute and depart but Krüger waves him down.

"There is more, Ernst." Frick perches back onto the edge of the chair. Krüger leans forward to offer him a cigarette. Frick gives him a vacant nod and Krüger lights it for him with a solid gold lighter embossed with the Totenkopf.

"Are you aware that you are on Roosevelt's List?"

"No, General."

"Well I am afraid you are. I believe you are number one hundred and thirty seven. I am also on that list. There are nearly three thousand of us marked down to be arrested and tried as war criminals."

Frick stares at him. In a dead voice he asks: "What number have the Americans bestowed on you, Herr General?"

"Nineteen -- but that is beside the point. In just days this war will be over. Our brave soldiers will surrender and return to their homes. You and I on the other hand will face victors' justice. They will put on a show trial and we'll be sentenced to death.

Frick's heart beats faster. "How can that be, General? Surely we would be prisoners of war."

"We're hated, Ernst. You cannot believe how much we are hated. We will not be honourably shot. We shall hang. If we are lucky we'll fall into the hands of the British and die in seconds, otherwise we'll dangle on American cowboy nooses or worse, end up being pole - lynched by the Slavs."

"So it has all come to this."

"Of course we have the option of suicide."

"Like my wife," says Frick closing his eyes fiercely and shaking his head.

"Ernst, she had no alternative. The Russians were already in Berlin." He pauses to light another cigarette, this one is small and black. "On the other hand you do have another choice, that is, if you follow my last order."

"Yes, Herr General." Frick will agree to anything if he can leave now and weep alone.

Ten minutes later he is accompanied out by a stiffly uniformed SS Gruppenführer carrying a swagger stick.

"They are calling us war criminals," he says.

"So I believe," says Frick.

"But how can we be criminals, Herr Brigadeführer? We performed our lawful duties. We defended the German people from humanoid vermin. We rid Europe of its Jewish pestilence and we fought bravely for the Great Victory of Truth."

"Yes," says Frick. He has heard all this before, many times, word for word. Was it Goebbels who said it? No it might have been Himmler ... or Heydrichor Frank. Perhaps it was Göring.

It doesn't matter.

Brigitte and Cordula are dead.

...

In just three days has a new passport. It's in the name of Otto Brandt.

Krüger explains: "Our victors prefer certain German names over others. 'Otto' is one of their favourites. It has an amiable connotation, almost lovable: they give it to circus bears and Labrador dogs. And 'Brandt'? – fresh and uncomplicated – like new bread. You'll be Otto Brandt - a new name for the post-war era."

The crusty Gruppenführer tells him that the Gestapo had selected a Soviet Prisoner of War roughly Frick's age and physique, forced him to put on his black uniform, then tied him to a tree, strapped a live grenade under his jaw and blew his head to oblivion.

The Corps is duly informed that SS Brigadeführer Ernst Frick, unable to endure the loss of his wife and daughter, has committed suicide.

His parents will be told the same story. It is as well. How could they cope with their only child on trial for mass murder? It would finish them. It is best they think he is dead. He wonders if they will gather some of the old congregation from their church together and hold a service. Probably not.

Four Years Later

High in the Austrian Tyrol

Frick is on edge. The Austrian press has reported sightings of Adolf Eichmann and Martin Bormann. It seems the victors are suspicious of earlier accounts of the deaths of leading SS officers and he fears that the report of his own 'suicide' may be re-examined.

Since the war Frick has just about been able to suppress the up-welling of guilt for his part in the worst crimes in human history. When the memories overwhelm his thoughts, his response, as ever, is to close his eyes for a second or two, then throw himself into some practical task. Busyness is his one panacea.

Time is a fog. The post war years have scudded by but he has been oblivious to their passing, until today.

Originally it had been a wise move fleeing to the Tyrol. His willingness to learn fluent English secured him a job as a chauffeur and handy-man in an isolated retreat centre for British academics. His speedily acquired knowledge of the local countryside, his friendly assistance to the guests, even

giving up his spare time to coach them with tennis and golf have earned him respect and even some affection from his former enemies.

Today however, when two Cambridge women try to pose with him in a photograph he is alerted to the lethal risk of someone recognising him in spite of his square clipped beard and darkened hair. So he smiles, glances at his watch, then shakes his head. "I am sorry, ladies. I have to assist the chef or you will not be dining tonight."

The reported hunt for Eichmann and Bormann has helped him reach a decision. He cannot remain at the chalet any longer. In the drawer by his bed he has kept an article neatly cut out from a recent copy of the Manchester Guardian the women left behind in the breakfast room. He reads it for the third time.

The Great Australian Crisis: Populate or Perish.

To boost its white population the Commonwealth of Australia has abandoned its policy of not admitting former enemy aliens as immigrants. Providing they have not borne arms against Australian troops, have never been members of designated criminal organisations such as the SS and Gestapo and providing they possess technical or scientific training and that they can prove they are of pure European descent, their applications are now welcome.

Tonight he writes a letter of application to emigrate as a civil engineer. He furnishes the Australians with papers detailing his faked discharge from the Wehrmacht and outlining his modest but versatile service as an Unterfeldwebel in one of Rommel's sapper units and later, as a bomb disposal expert in Hamburg.

The doctor contracted by the Australian Consulate gives him a first class medical report and he is able to produce a testimonial from the chalet's manager, so glowing that it reads like a eulogy.

His interview in Vienna is as amiable as it is successful. He is listed as a demolition and explosives engineer under the Employment of Scientific Aliens Scheme and recruited to work on the new Snowy River Project in New South Wales. He is given *The Blue Guide for New Settlers*, a book full of photographs and articles about Australia.

Three weeks' later Otto Brandt embarks from Bremerhaven on the British Steamship *Syrenia* bound for Sydney.

...

TWO

December 1949

In the Straits of Dover

Only two hundred emigrants embark at Bremerhaven so until the ship reaches Southampton, Brandt has a cabin to himself. He hoists his case on a top bunk with a porthole barely a hand's breadth from his pillow.

Because of the temporary high ratio of crew to passengers, Brandt finds himself running into members of the crew every time he goes on deck. But he is wary of them. He decides that they are a detached breed of misanthropes. The officers look smart in their white uniforms but he has never once seen them salute their superiors or even the captain. Despite their solitary natures they occasionally saunter up to passengers, breaking into their private conversations and then wander off leaving them to ponder some enigmatic tale about a jinxed ship in the Sargasso Sea or a floating island off Honiara. Brandt wonders if spending one's life encircled by an ocean moat breeds an insular man, self-reliant to a fault, prone to moods and, when it suits him, to play at being a Captain Ahab or the Flying Dutchman.

He's heard most of the crew had originally been recruited straight off the war convoys. "Some of them are 'deep'," says his steward. "You don't know what they're on about half the time. They remind me of those old prophets in the Bible. Even the younger ones."

But Brandt suspects that church religion is a foolishness to men once constantly at risk of attack from the Luftwaffe or U-Boats, liable to meet their God beneath the black combbers off Iceland or in the growling pack-ice from Arctic Russia. As a German, he finds these men quite alarming but it is even worse when they appear to know more about the state of his soul than they should.

Tregowan, the grizzled First Mate is a case in point. His gruff voice snaps Brandt to alertness.

'A long voyage stirs up the demons in a man. This one's six and a half weeks. Longer still if we run into heavy seas and start rolling. A lot of time to be idling about.'

Brandt doesn't reply. Instead, his eyes are on the narrows of the English Channel. From the after-deck he can clearly make out both the French coast and the opposing chalk cliffs of southern England.

'Hell Fire Corner,' says Tregowan struggling to light his pipe in the wind. 'God alone knows how many good ships are lying below us here.' His tobacco smells of glazed cherries, like a Black Forest gâteau. He stares at one coast and then the other and takes another puff. "I suppose if you wanted to, you could swim out to either of 'em from here. I bet I could when I was your age." He pauses and looks down at the water. "Mind you, the Channel never really warms up. The exposure would kill you."

Brandt does some mental calculations. The distance between the opposing shores is laughable. How could it be that despite Goering's much vaunted Luftwaffe, Doenitz's fleet, the Wehrmacht's

eight million battle trained troops and eighty thousand paratroopers, the Führer was denied his invasion because of a mere strait hardly more than thirty kilometres across.

Brandt finds the sea mesmeric. Its colours change by the minute: cobalt blue, Payne's grey, ultramarine, raw sienna and a blend of indigo and dark umber. Like the gradations of the human subconscious, it has its deeps, its shallows and its capricious sands.

...

At Southampton no-one is allowed ashore. It is rumoured that the British are suspicious of the migrants who boarded at Bremerhaven but in any case there are only two gangways and the crew have enough to do managing the embarkation of nine hundred new passengers. On every deck the languages of continental Europe are drowning in the torrent of English voices. Over-excited children with their bustling parents, young women: secretaries, shop assistants, teachers, nurses? Most of the men look like artisans but he can see in their bearing the unmistakable stamp of military service. They form up smartly at the hatches, their shoes have an ingrained shine. With all these British people on board Brandt must keep his guard. He is not among friends.

By the wireless mast he notices a formidable looking Catholic priest in his seventies and two Brothers lining up twenty small boys in three rows for a photograph. Another Brother stands guard over their identical brown suitcases. All the boys are in jackets and ties and the oldest, probably no older than eleven are wearing English flat caps.

'They must be those orphan lads from Liverpool,' he hears a woman murmur to her husband. 'Poor little tykes.'

"I wonder if they were given any choice to leave Blighty," says her husband.

'I doubt it but what an adventure anyway. Just look at that one with glasses; he looks barely six years old. Look at their suitcases. So small. Lord knows what they can bring with them.'

"Not much."

Brandt wonders what the Führer would have thought of banishing Aryan boys to the furthest end of the world. Yes but Britain is a crowded country, more crowded than Germany. This must be the British version of Lebensraum and Australia is part of the British Reich. So too is Canada, South Africa and New Zealand. But of course! If Germany had possessed colonies like these, the Führer would have done the same. Now he understands.

Over the coming days Brandt finds the British emigrants puzzling. They are polite and self-effacing, not one of them has been hostile to him. If they are proud of their possession of a vast Reich, they show no signs of it. When they talk about Australia they imagine a land of sunshine and oranges, a glowing paradise with spacious bungalows, no post-war rationing and everyone swimming in a warm sea; a young nation with a larrikin disdain for the old world of snobbery and privilege. *"It's a country where, Jack is every bit as good as his master,"* they like to add.

However in Brandt's Blue Guide, the Australian Government makes it clear that all new settlers must be of "pure European descent" and that British migrants are preferred. It is true that there are some photographs of Dutch and Scandinavians but people with olive skins are rare. To Brandt the message could not be plainer: only Aryans are welcome.

But for now it doesn't matter. They are on the sea, which is not really a place at all; it is a restlessness.

...

Five of the new passengers now share his cabin. In the bunk directly below him is an Irish horse breaker. The rest are English tradesmen, two travelling with wives and children in the women's part of the ship.

The sedulous Brandt makes a point of keeping his bunk trimmer than the other men. He squares off his pillows and folds the blanket and sheets at sharp right angles in strict alignment with the bulkheads. Each morning he wipes the mist off his porthole then pauses a moment to watch the higher crests whipped to stern by the kinetic bulk of the *Syrenia* as it steams onward to Gibraltar.

The sleeping quarters are cramped but they could be worse. It is a mercy that his cabin is a safe distance from the Poles, Ukrainians and Yugoslavs. Some of these may be more than ready to settle old scores with a German travelling on his own, although Brandt, superbly trained in unarmed combat, would be a deadly adversary.

He also feels it wise to avoid fellow Germans, especially the four young men who were the last passengers to embark at Bremerhaven. He remembers at the docks how they carried identical grey rucksacks on their shoulders and stormed up the gangway like invading pirates. He recalls the arrogant tone of their voices, all speaking the Slavic-German of the East and making a point of telling everyone they were mechanics. These men were too young to have served in the Wehrmacht so they must have been with the Hitler Youth Auxiliaries. In the last year of the war this was an organisation more merciless than his own *Einsatzgruppen*. God help any partisans, Jews or Soviet P.O.W.s who fell into the hands of the Auxiliaries.

But Brandt is much more concerned by the nagging inquisitiveness of Mieszko Kowalski, a Polish journalist who with his long hair looks like Jesus except for his bitter cobalt eyes. Kowalski won't leave him alone. He tells Brandt he's been offered a position on the *Melbourne Age*. It's suspicious. Why would a Polish journalist want to talk to a German?

...

Off Gibraltar

It's a warm evening and the bar is filling up with married couples and singles in their twenties.

"It must be hard for you," says Kowalski who has twisted his way through the crowd over to Brandt who is extricating unwanted ice cubes from a glass of neat vodka.

Brandt abandons the ice cubes and stares at him. "I do not see why anything should be especially hard for me," he says.

But true to form, Kowalski slices to the jugular of Brandt's sensibilities. "Well, what I mean is, *howold* are you?"

"Thirty four."

"Thirty four. Oh my! And all the single women on board are much too young for you – and of course most of them are English while you are..."

"A German?"

"Yes," and now the Pole is smiling. He stares Brandt up and down like a tailor about to measure him up for a suit. "With your physique and looks, I am surprised you were not recruited for the SS."

Brandt's deflection is too quick. "I could not prove my ancestry."

Kowalski jumps on the indiscretion. "Ah, but then of course you would certainly have enlisted. Yes?" He smiles once more.

"That doesn't follow in the least." Brandt's mind is a boiling pot. He focuses his eyes over Kowalski's shoulder onto an art deco figurine of the crystal mermaid on a shelf above the bar.

"So you joined the Wehrmacht? Then you do have a war history."

"We all have war histories." The mermaid shines like a fixed star.

"Well perhaps. But not like you. And anyway being a German must be..."

"A liability? A handicap? Say what you damn well mean!" Brandt grasps his vodka so tightly that he nearly breaks the glass. He slaps two heavy British coins on the bar and goes out on deck.

...

Three Days Later

Brandt is self-conscious about his enviable physique. After ten years of rationing most of the British passengers look half-starved but he'd eaten well at the Tyrolean chalet and the weight had gone into hard muscle. The women passengers stare at him often. He knows he is worth a woman's glance. They think they can hide behind their sun glasses but he can feel their scrutiny. Nothing will come of it, of course. The war, or rather his actions in it, have made him a psychological eunuch.

So Brandt ignores them and leans into the arch of his deckchair and listens in on a one-sided conversation between Kowalski and a home - bound official from Australia House in London. The Pole is a reckless fool. Doesn't he realise how his voice carries?

"All four of them are Nazis," Kowalski insists. "Why do you Australians allow Nazis into your country?" Brandt guesses the Pole must be targeting the four brash young mechanics who embarked at Bremerhaven.

The official responds in a tone that should leave Kowalski in no doubt that he wants to be left alone.

“Nazis? I ‘spose you’re entitled to your opinion, mate.” He pulls the brim of his sun-hat down over his eyes.

The Pole’s voice rises. “*Of course* they’re Nazis. I can tell. Murderous ex-Hitler Youth from the Eastern Front. You wait. As soon as I get to Port Said, I’m going to see your Consul. Nazis should not be aboard this ship.”

The Australian sits up, tips back his sun-hat and stares at Kowalski. “You better watch what you’re saying, mate. These boys got through their interviews, *right?* All of them are skilled mechanics for heavy machines. They can fix trucks, cranes and bulldozers and come to think of it, they can fix tanks too. Australia needs ‘em - more I daresay, than it needs you. If they once fought for Hitler, so what? That’s all past now. At least they’ve learnt some discipline and know something about hard work. I’d much rather have this lot coming over than a mob of commos like you. You *are* a commo, aren’t you, mate?”

Kowalski ignores the jibe and presses his attack. “Then what about the SS?”

The Australian whistles softly. “No mate we don’t touch *that* mob. They’re screened out right from the start.”

Kowalski becomes more earnest. “Listen to me. I think there is a former SS officer on board this very ship. If you know what to look for, even the way they ...”

“If you say so, mate. We’ll leave it at that, eh?” The Australian re-adjusts his hat, slumps back into his deck chair and closes his eyes.

Brandt feels a dryness in his throat. The *Syrenia* has become a prison. One formal accusation made to the Australian Consulate and he’ll be arrested in Port Said, interrogated by the British in Cairo. Thereafter ...

Barely ten feet away he notices a man lying face down on a bath towel. When he turns over on his back to tan his chest, Brandt recognises one of the young mechanics. Like Brandt, he must have caught every word the annoying little Pole had said.

Three days later:

Still no sign of Kowalski. The captain probably thinks that either he fell overboard while drunk or that he committed suicide.

Brandt is certain that Kowalski has been murdered - probably on deck late one night after they closed the saloon. It is all so obvious. As soon as the intoxicated Pole was aware of the three figures blocking his way, he would have been struck from behind by a fourth probably wielding one of the deck cricket bats. In seconds they would have heaved his body overboard. He remembers a morning when the mechanics ate their entire breakfast together without saying a word to each other. Their silence was uncharacteristic. It reminded him of the *Einsatzgruppen* executioners immediately after an *Aktion*; that same silence, worse than any spoken condemnation: the terrifying silence of truth.

Off Tripolitania

Brandt doesn't need his sun glasses because the sun is too high for the sea to dazzle. Still dripping water from the pool, he stares over the rails to starboard. He is striving to remember from his schooldays what he learnt about the Barbary Coast.

"Mister, please can you teach us to swim like you?"

Brandt swings around sharply and recognises Bert, a lad of about eleven. Bert is known to all the passengers because he was chosen by the Brothers to be Head Boy. When the priest announced it at table, Bert was given an impromptu round of applause. Today he is wearing old man's braces over a shirt miles too big for him.

Bert is not alone. Brandt was so engrossed in the distant shoreline that he didn't notice that the whole group of Liverpool boys had made a loose semi-circle behind him. Quite a crowd. Brandt finds himself facing them like an officer inspecting raw recruits.

There's already a difference in their appearance from when he first saw them in Southampton. It's the ship's meals. These boys have never been so well fed in their lives, all their faces have lost that cavernous look.

He recognises the apprehensive boy wearing his cheap wire spectacles, singled out by the couple in Southampton, the one whom the others call Alan. The child gives Brandt an unwavering stare which makes him feel uncomfortable.

A swimming teacher? They have no idea what they are asking of him but Brandt sees the glint of something to clasp onto or, like everything else in his life, to let slip into the bleak past. They are silent, hanging on his reply. Under his bare feet even the deck planks feel as though they wait on what he will say next. The ship hangs in timelessness.

Brandt's habitual anonymity cannot hold under the burning scrutiny of twenty small boys. "Can any of you swim at all?"

Bert shakes his head. "None of us can swim, Mister. But we want to learn how. They told us in Liverpool that when we get to Sydney, we'll be surfing on Bondi Beach."

The request is as disarming as it is understandable. Off the North African coast, the temperature is over eighty degrees. The English boys are desperate to cool off but being non swimmers, they are barred from the pool.

"What about the Brothers?" he asks. "Don't they teach you swimming?" At this the older boys laugh in derision. "They'd go down like stones. Mister, have you seen any of 'em get into the water?" Now all of them are laughing, even the nervous Alan.

Acting on a half-forgotten solicitude Brandt's voice is almost fatherly. "Very well, Bert. You go and fetch me one of the Brothers. If he says it is all right, I'll teach you. But if I do, there will be no, what do you English call it, playing silly buggers? So if you do play silly buggers, you'll need to be tough, a lot tougher than me, and boy, that's tough." He tries to look stern but they all start laughing and Brandt realises they've already decided that their prospective swimming coach is quite capable of playing silly buggers himself.

The man who comes back with Bert isn't a Brother at all; it's their priest, Father Brendan Coffey. He is delighted that Brandt has agreed to teach the boys to swim. He shakes his hand warmly but he lists two conditions: at least two of the Brothers must be present at every lesson and the boys must never be late for morning Mass.

For his part, Brandt voices a few conditions of his own. The boys have to have new swimming trunks and towels purchased from the ship's own shop and after every lesson each must have his progress written up by the supervising Brothers. By a special arrangement with the Purser, the pool is reserved for swimming lessons an hour each morning before breakfast.

Decked out in identical navy blue swimming trunks and matching towels, the boys carry themselves with a new confidence. All are eager to impress Brandt. They call him "Jerry" and he takes it in good part. Their progress is excellent. By the end of the first week more than half the boys can swim or dog-paddle at least the length of the pool. Brandt has even taught backstroke to the more capable. Even the uncoordinated Alan Gilbert who is nervous about the depth of the water, manages to swim a few feet, his head twisting from side to side, and without his spectacles squinting like an owl in the sun.

"I'll never be a good swimmer, Jerry," he says after he pulls himself out of the water and a Brother passes him his towel.

"It will come," says Brandt. "You just need practice. At least if you fall overboard you'll be able to stay afloat."

"Did you shoot any of our soldiers in the war, Jerry?" asks Bert. There is no accusation in his voice. He might just as well be asking Brandt what he'd had for breakfast. The older boys gather around.

"Jerry can only give us his name, rank and service number," declares a dripping youth rubbing his head with a towel. "That's in the Rules of War, what it says about interrogating the enemy."

"Yes, it's in the Geneva Convention," adds another in a helpful voice. He is pulling on his oversized flat cap which is comically unsuitable for the Mediterranean.

Brandt smiles, the first genuine smile he has given anyone in years.

"The war is over, boys," he says, "It's been over since some of you were babies," and then, after a pause, he adds quietly, "and I am not your prisoner, gentlemen. I am not your enemy either."

"Where did you serve, Jerry?" asks Bert. "On the Eastern Front?"

Brandt's heart starts hammering but of course he has the answer. Krüger not only issued him with a new identity; he also documented his false war record. He points seaward towards the baking shores of Tripolitania just visible to starboard.

"Do you see that coast? I was over there," he says, "in the Afrika Korps." He feels as if he has just stabbed his own chest with a shard of ice. For a second he clamps his eyes shut.

"You served under *Rommel*?"

"That's right," he says through his teeth. *Dear God, if only it were true.*

"Yes, we thought so." Says a tall boy. Approving looks spread around the group.

Brandt snaps to alertness. "Keep this to yourselves. Real men don't gossip."

But there is no place on earth more prone to gossip than a migrant ship. One boy probably says something to one of the Brothers who mentions it to a married couple during dinner. Within days the embellished version of the best raconteur on board becomes an orthodox belief. It eventually reaches Brandt himself as he overhears two women talking during a concert interval.

'But of course the man was never a true supporter of Hitler. He was drafted into the Wehrmacht, but he never rose beyond the rank of corporal. That's because he refused to join the Nazi party. But he did do his bit for Rommel. He was fighting for his country after all, you cannot blame him for that.'

'Then do you know what happened? Towards the end of the war the poor soul lost his wife and children in an air raid. No wonder he's leaving Europe, he needs to heal his broken life. And isn't it simply wonderful that he's been teaching those poor orphans how to swim? The Brothers must be so grateful to him'

Brandt doesn't think much of the Brothers. He wonders what they actually *do* for the boys. Probably they see themselves as disciplinarians. Alan tells him the Brothers flog the boys with something called the tawse. Boys are "tawsed" if they are late for Mass, or fail to leave the meat on the side of their plates on Fridays. The thrashing is more intense if they are caught speaking to girls. Every night the Brothers terrify their young charges with lurid details of the tortures meted out to sinners in Hell.

No, Brandt concludes, despite his murderous history, these boys are better off spending a few hours with him learning to swim and afterwards playing silly buggers in the pool than mooching about with the Brothers. And come to think of it, he really doesn't mind being called Jerry at all. American youths would have labelled him 'the Kraut'.

It is inevitable that the boys look up to him as a father-figure, especially Alan. *Father figure?* God forbid. Any War Crimes Tribunal and all the world's press would portray him as the *anti*-father, a slaughterer of mothers and infants, a war criminal fit only for the gallows at Landsberg Prison.

A young English couple say hello to him as they start their daily perambulation of the deck. He returns the greeting with a smiling nod. They saunter off, linked arm in arm in a completeness denied to men like him. It is in moments like these when he should be missing Brigitte, yet even if she were at his side, he would be in a moral isolation. Human normality is passing him by. On the sun deck the women are wearing diaphanous tops over their two piece swimming suits. He hardly notices. It's as if, with the murder of the woman in the sawpit, he has murdered womanhood itself.

Brandt feels he has aged before his time. He wonders if the other passengers see him as an older figure who spends his days staring out to sea. Resolute in his belief that he is unfit for any company except his own, he even has moments when he would actually welcome the clapping of handcuffs on his wrist and swift deportation to the Nuremburg courtroom, even the ascent to the scaffold and the hangman's noose.

As Brandt showers before dinner he rubs the itch under his left arm-pit. He must be careful not to scratch it and leave a tell-tale scar. For nearly three years he had been applying lye and hydrogen peroxide to remove his SS blood group tattoo. It was gone by the time he had his medical inspection for Australia but there is still an irritation from the chlorine in the pool.

He brushes back his hair. More strands than usual are being caught among the bristles. He rubs Brylcreem over his scalp though it thins down the hair mass and reveals his underlining pink skin. There was a time when the thought of going bald would have alarmed him. but it doesn't seem to matter much to him anymore.

Having showered early, Brandt has some free time before dinner. In Bremerhaven the Purser decided to put him on Second Sitting. First Sitting is for families and fractious toddlers. He is happy to avoid them. The sight and sounds of small children bring back the horrors. He shudders as he recalls one big SS woman who used to swing Jewish children by their feet and beat their brains out against a wall. And then there was that hellish secretary in Lödzt who would hurl Polish babies out of third floor windows. He shuts his eyes. The memories are unbearable.

What is happening to him? He grinds his back teeth and shakes his head but the images return and they are getting worse. The past is thundering around his ears. Even today his swimming was spoiled by the sight of all those sunbathing bodies by the pool.

Bodies. Nothing brings back the Aktion more than seeing prostrate bodies. Winter was not so bad. Victims of the Aktion were mostly frozen before the bulldozers covered them. He had seen the thawing River Memel choked with frosted corpses while at the same time, its banks sparkled with daffodils and jonquils.

Summer was intolerable in the East, especially during the direct heat of June when the blue-bottle flies buzzed around the hundreds of putrid nostrils and open mouths brimming with maggots. In his mind he sees again the tumid bellies and once more breathes the noisome air. He would never have believed it possible that human bodies could make such a stench.

His recollections always end with killing the woman in the saw-pit. It has become the hellish parody of a bridal consummation for deep in his subconscious she remains with him in almost a wifely constancy, while he on his part is a faithful husband, for whom other women are forbidden.

Each night at dinner he is confronted at table by the delightful Michaela Haas, a widowed pharmacist from Linz. Throughout the voyage she has offered him a generous unaffected friendship and he knows that she cannot understand his aloofness.

"Oh Otto, don't you realise that to be properly alive, you have to react with other people," she once told him. "We have a choice. Life is to be grasped with both hands or we can just let it atrophy."

He looks at her soft cheeks and kindly brown eyes then something takes over and he sees her face shredded to jam by a volley of bullets. When he makes his apologies before dessert and leaves the table, he feels her bewilderment.

The Red Sea

No one came to arrest him in Aden and he feels safer. He has read that east of Suez the authority of the British Reich has waned since the war, especially with the loss of India.

But he remembers one incident which unnerved him. It was when the ship had to wait with a small flotilla in the Bitter Lakes to give way to western bound vessels in the Suez Canal. Alone on the top deck Brandt probably witnessed more of what happened than any of the other passengers.

The setting sun was just touching the horizon when a single crease on the surface of the lake marked the silent arrival of a tiny dhow which he had noticed earlier loitering off the port bow. Something else was moving through the water, a lone swimmer. He watched the bobbing head and pale arms of someone braving the sharks to swim out toward the little boat. That was all Brandt had time to observe before a yellow sand mist descended to merge with the yellow sea.

Perhaps he imagined it. It is possible that in these torrid places the smell off the ocean is hallucinogenic. Perhaps in his gradual withdrawal from the human world he is slouching back to his Darwinian roots in the warm primordial seas.

When the sand cleared, the dhow had disappeared but there was still no horizon, no definitive boundary between the kingdoms of the sky and the sea. The motionless ships levitated in a limbo of stillness.

The next morning at breakfast, Brandt learnt that a member of the crew, a Jewish youth, had jumped ship to migrate to the new State of Israel. There was another and darker rumour that the boy had been on deck the night Kowalski disappeared, that he had witnessed some figures lurking in the shadows and afterwards he had feared for his life.

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South Arabian Sea

The porthole is Brandt's welcome respite from the proximity of the other men in his cabin. Each daybreak it brings the sea so close to his pillow that when a wave breaks on the hull of the Syrenia, the sea smoke mists the glass.

But this night at two a.m. he is perched up in bed sweating and trembling all over. He is staring at the porthole. Someone had been screaming. It was him.

"You're in a bad way, boyo," says the horse breaker grabbing Brandt's shoulder and offering him a silver hip flask. Brandt gulps a mouthful of potcheen and tries to swallow another.

"Steady on there, man," says the breaker. Brandt takes back the flask, wipes his mouth on his sleeve, screws back the top then shakes his head at the other wakened men. He must have bellowed so loudly that he'd disturbed the whole cabin.

"You can turn off the light again, lads," says the breaker. "Holy Jesus and a terrible fright you gave us," he says to Brandt, "but for sure it was a nightmare. Back to sleep now, boyo."

Brandt waits to hear the springs of the lower bunk take the weight of the trainer's body then he turns his face away from the porthole.

For the first time he comes to dread the abyss beneath the ship; all that darkness, the unimaginable weight of water, the tentacles and needle teeth – but most of all the darkness.

It was only a nightmare but the worst he'd ever known. What must he make of it? Even if he is stupid enough to try?

For he had dreamt he was gazing through the porthole in the night when his own reflection was swept aside by the corpse of the red haired woman in a wedding gown rising from the ocean depths, her one green eye glaring at him. In terror he'd watched her finger nails desperately trying to claw onto the hull of the ship.

His bride was coming for him.

January 1950

Mid Indian Ocean

Brandt has finally managed the art of dressing himself properly as a civilian. For sixteen years he has been in some sort of uniform or other. Even at the chalet he had worn a uniform. Admittedly it was more like a set of overalls but a uniform it certainly was. He'd made sure of it – washing it

once a week and ironing it every night.

On the ship he wears light cotton trousers and short sleeved shirts, a white dress shirt for evenings plus a black tie to go with the tuxedo he bought in Bremen. Swimming trunks, shorts, slacks and tropical shirts complete his wardrobe, courtesy of the Purser's shop.

Father Coffey tells Brandt that the other passengers describe him as "serious". The old priest says that only lonely people are serious. He adds that in his experience lonely souls are more truthful. But Brandt has not that privilege. It seems to him that these people would lose little by telling the truth, whereas he would forfeit life itself.

Or would he? If he had the guts, a confession to the Tribunal, though it would result in a shameful death, might be more life affirming than his present state. At times he feels he is already dead. He breathes, he eats, he even trains boys how to swim but he no longer lives in the human world; he only haunts it. Whenever other people appear on deck at night, he thinks "*humans*", as though they are a different and dangerous species who could be shut out of his life by merely closing his eyes.

Humans. Must keep clear of humans.

It had been so much easier in the Tyrol. Despite the affable exchanges between himself and the paying guests, his regular duties had been solitary. There were always potatoes to be dug, meat and fish to be smoked, windows to be cleaned and the bus to be driven to the railway station.

But now it is different. He is at close quarters with other people on the ship and he is finding them not only a threat but also repulsive: their bodies, their smell, their personal habits, their couplings but above all, their little pretences, their snobberies and their pathetic self-importance.

But he is beginning to understand why they repel him. He had been scientifically conditioned to hate. First the Untervolk, then by extension the species in general, including himself.

He discovers that self-hatred has a perverse advantage. It means he will never have a chip on his shoulder. Each adversity will be so well deserved that he should never have cause to take offense. Whatever ills befall him now, a fall down one of the ship's companionways, a fatal illness, an assault, -- he deserves them all. No retribution is too severe. Yes, it is clear now.

Or is it ? He certainly doesn't hate the boys.

It has to be said that something has changed since he started teaching the boys to swim. It continues and it is slow. Like the thawing of frozen fingers and toes, the pain is intense. It is self-knowledge. Here on the whispering ocean he learns the truth and he asks himself: *am I really that bad?* And the answer of course is *yes*, much worse than you can possibly imagine, infinitely worse – diabolical.

Haven't you realised it until now?

And he reminds himself that those on Truman's list who were executed in Warsaw or Kracow were not buried there. That is because the ashes would have polluted the holy soil of Poland. Instead they are weighted down in steel ammunition cases and lie at the bottom of the Baltic sea.

The Southern Hemisphere

Tonight he haunts an empty deck and projects his fears onto a dark ocean which extends not to the invisible horizon but towards the fringe of the eternal. He fears the claustrophobic silence of ghosts; ghosts, writhing out of the void and clambering on board. The ghosts of Treblinka, Lódz, ghosts from Sobibor and Büchenwald the striped wraiths stand in their thousands, arms outstretched towards him.

Before the voyage his ghosts had lay dormant. But it seems that all along they had been massing to accompany him even to the farthest corner of the earth.

He looks up. Unfamiliar constellations hang bright in the dustless sky and apart from the low throbbing from the bowels of the ship, the human world is silent. In the saloon the dance band must be taking a break.

He takes stock of his position. The voyage has three weeks still to run, time enough to make a rudimentary plan for when he disembarks. At all costs in Australia he must minimise close contact with other migrants where he might be recognised. Living in a camp on the Snowy Mountains Project will pose a daily risk. He will deal with it. That is enough planning for the moment.

The purity of the sea wind fills his lungs. Far below him the swell rolls back to draw the long wake of the Syrenia.

In the saloon the dance band starts up again with *Sunrise Serenade*. Through the glass door he watches the flamboyant photographer from Copenhagen swanning around the floor by himself in a white tuxedo. At one table half a dozen women are clapping and cheering him on as he spins across to them and scoops up Michaela Haas. The music changes to *Some Enchanted Evening* in waltz time. It is two o'clock in the morning.

...

Ten Days Later.

They are in the cooler southern latitudes and the final swimming lesson is over. Brandt is the last to leave the pool. He heaves himself out, grabs up his towel and strolls over to Father Coffey. "All your boys can now swim, Father," he says. "None of them has much of a style but most can all do at least twenty lengths, even young Alan." He wraps the towel around his dripping body.

"The credit is due to you, Otto. They'll be thanking you when they're on Bondi Beach. You've heard of it? That place in Sydney."

"So they will be living there."

"No, not exactly. They won't live in Sydney – but we'll see they get to the beach from time to time."

Brandt has caught the hesitancy in the priest's voice. "So, if not in Sydney, where *will* these boys be living?"

"At a mission, St Edmund's Mission. It's out in the country. That's it, some place with an odd name. That's it, it's called 'Wait-a-Minute' somewhere in northern New South Wales."

"Ah, a boarding school."

"Yes. It's a boarding establishment, a farm school for orphaned boys. I've never been there myself, though. My work ends when the boys are passed over to St Edmund's staff at Sydney Central Station. That's the last I shall see of them. The Brothers and I will be staying with our Order in Sydney for two weeks then we'll be returning to Liverpool to fetch the next lot."

Brandt is still confused about the fate of the boys. He remembers quite distinctly that when he was teaching them to swim they were forever talking about Sydney, especially the big surf beaches. He had imagined they were to be adopted by Sydney families. From what the boys had told him they themselves were in no doubt of it.

"So St Edmunds Mission is really an orphanage, Father."

"A special orphanage. As I said, it's a farm school. Of course, they could still be adopted but that's unlikely. Couples prefer to adopt babies."

"So, please explain to me, Father. Are all the parents of these boys dead?"

"No Otto, it's only that they have no fathers."

"So the fathers are dead yet their mothers are still alive. Surely they cannot then be orphans. I do not understand."

"Are you familiar with the English word 'waif'? It is old fashioned and rarely used but it has no modern synonym."

"No, Father, I don't know this word."

"These boys are mostly what I would call waifs. They're like flotsam washing up on the beach. They have no family roots, their mothers are unsuitable; some are whores. Quite rightly their sons are taken away from them. Believe me, they'll be much better off in Australia. Take Alan Gilbert, for

instance. His mother scarpered off to Chicago with her American G.I. and left Alan with us in Liverpool. That was in 1946. We had to tell Gilbert she was dead.”

Brandt doesn't reply and goes to change out of his swimming togs.

After dinner he goes up on deck and begins a circuit. The ocean is sullen dark and furrowed by long combers spoiling for a fight. He smells the rich aroma of cigar smoke and finds Tregowan off duty and staring at the lights of a passing ship on the Western horizon. “She’s the Fairchild,” he says. “She’s going home.”

“Home?”

“Blighty.”

Brandt watches the ship already hull down and about to dip below the horizon. In just seconds she’s gone and he feels a new isolation, that of the common exile. For there is no home for him. There never will be. He had heard that Hitler had never had a home. Berchtesgarten, as it turned out, was only a gross perversion of one. Like his wandering Führer, Brandt can only play at having a home.

He takes Tregowan’s cigarette and both men look seaward. There’s a change in the light. Crepuscular rays stream through brazen clouds that darken by the minute.

“There’s a storm coming,” says Tregowan, “You can feel it in the humidity. Look! Sheet lightning over the Australian shoreline.”

The swells are angrier now. Occasionally they break against the hull of the Syrenia but most surge on towards an endless coast of desolate beaches.

He hears a hymn. They must be having a late evensong and he remembers that on Sundays the A Deck saloon is now a chapel. The believers, still in their formal evening wear are singing *Nearer My God to Thee*. Brandt immediately thinks of his parents. They had christened him Ernst and made some sort of baptismal vow on his behalf.

“Listen to that singing,” says Tregowan. “I think we should be in there with them.”

“Why is that?”

“Because those people are beyond the dominion of time.”

“How can that that be?”

“They know that everything can be redeemed.” Tregowan points out to sea. “A religious faith is like the ocean,” he says. “It is the repository of our best and worst intentions. Even the foulest river finds its redemption in the sea. As the Chinese say: *The sea is king. All rivers run down to it – the sea embraces them. It absolves them all.*”

He shambles off but before he has gone a dozen steps, he turns around for a few seconds. “All can be redeemed, brother,” he says.

Brand wishes Tregowan had stayed longer. The ship is rolling more than usual and pitching deeply in the dark wash. Overhead the clouds are dark and bristling. Lightning breaks over the sea, then the crack of thunder. When the storm breaks, it is like the Final Judgement. A wild deluge

lashes his head and cheeks and drenches his tuxedo. It lambastes the deck in rioting rain drops which dance around his feet and flood his shoes.

Remaining like a stoic in the teeming rain, it occurs to Brandt what a vulnerable thing is a ship – even a steel liner like the Syrenia. Tregowan once told him that it needs to be constantly painted. The chalk white hull is especially subject to the corrosion of the sea but layers of thick paint perpetuate the façade of permanence. Everything about the ship is a work of faith, even the passengers have faith, whether praying at the Sunday service, meeting the loves of their life on the dance floor or promenading the decks of their little vessel which is steaming over a chasm seventy five thousand fathoms deep.

Brandt still doesn't move. He has travelled half way around the globe yet the greater voyage has been through the ocean of his own consciousness, plumbing unbearable depths and finding only deeper levels of futility and darkness.

Sydney

The sun pierces the harbour fret and dazzles his senses. Brandt casts his eyes down to where the propeller of the Syrenia is churning up yellow silt. The water roils like frothing yeast.

He is queuing with the other non-British immigrants at the lower gangway on to Woolloomooloo Docks. He sees Michaela Haas escorted by the Danish photographer. As Brandt catches her eye and nods an awkward farewell, she turns away. His spirit curls like a leaf on a severed branch.

"Jerry!" Squirring through the melee of disembarking passengers Alan Gilbert rushes up to him, his eyes full of anxiety.

Brandt looks around him for the other orphans but the boy is alone. "Hello, Alan. Glad you came down to say goodbye – but you'd better be getting back. They'll be looking for you."

"I need your address. Please print it." The boy thrusts a piece of cardboard at him and a blunt pencil.

"I don't know it yet, Alan – but I suppose you might reach me at.." In his passport is his letter of appointment. He prints in large letters: *The Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation – Cooma, NSW*. "That should find me," he says "Remember I'm called Otto – no more Jerry eh? So where will you be?"

"I don't know, Jerry, I mean Otto. The Brothers have been telling us about some place called St Edmund's Mission – it's in New South Wales too but one of the Brothers says it's nowhere near Bondi Beach."

Brandt takes back the pencil and writes St Edmund's Mission down on the other side of his letter. He shakes the boy's hand. "Goodbye, Alan Gilbert," Perhaps we shall meet up again."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

“You’re a good bloke, Jer..Otto,” he says and rushes off. If Brandt is to retain just one positive memory of his arrival in Sydney, it will be the preposterously misguided comment made by a young English boy that he was a “good bloke”.

Brandt closes his eyes and they remain shut until he feels the pressure of someone’s suitcase against his leg. The queue is shuffling forward once more.

A new country. A new city. He hears the whine of trams and catches the smells of motor engines, food frying, and stinking drains. He descends the gangway to a paved jetty and the stability of bricks and concrete.

Brandt is not long in Sydney. After passing through Customs and Immigration without hindrance, he boards a green bus waiting to take him and the other Snowy recruits to Central Station for the train to Cooma.

He had never fraternised with any of them on the voyage. He doesn’t know a single name.

THREE

“We are all New Australians. This is an honourable title which is not to be abused. The nonsense of Europe has no business here.”

Senior Engineer Walter Hartwig speaking to Polish and German workers on the Snowy Mountains Scheme in 1949.

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September 1951

Island Bend Migrant Workers’ Camp. Snowy Mountains Authority.

Two icy winters and a blistering Summer in between have hardened Brandt’s features giving him the bronzed photogenic look so appealing to the overseas film crews making documentaries on the Snowy Scheme. He avoids them. The last thing he needs is for someone in a Munich cinema to note that the heroic engineer blasting a tunnel through a granite mountain in Australia bears a remarkable likeness to the late SS Brigadeführer, Ernst Frick.

Like the other migrant workers he benefits from free food and accommodation at the Island Bend Camp. This means living in close proximity with Poles. Violence is rare but animosities are still

raw. To retain his anonymity he keeps himself to himself and rarely takes the Authority's green bus into Cooma with its bars, prostitutes and unfettered gambling.

Instead, Brandt works every overtime shift he can get as though he alone will force the Snowy River through the vertebrae of this ancient southland and rotate the great turbines to spin electricity for Sydney and Melbourne and later let the waters flow gently westward to turn the dry plains of the interior into orchards.

Brandt is taking more physical risks in this peaceful country than he did throughout the entire Second World War. He and the team he now leads are not deterred by the crates of gelignite precariously stacked next to the arc welder deep in sludge, or by the rock falls, the cave-ins and avalanches. Without complaint they take into their lungs the acrid vapours of newly-poured concrete and wet steel. Their ears are numb with the whine of diamond drills, the groaning of cranes, the rumble of heavy winches and the exploding onrushes of air thundering towards them through the tunnel like steam locomotives.

Some of the other engineers accuse Brandt of having a death-wish. They have no idea how close they are to the truth. No man, other than a prospective suicide, could be as careless about his life, although it must be said that although he risks personal oblivion a dozen times a week, he is scrupulous not to expose his men to the risks he takes himself. Brandt is the only one who stays behind at the rock face to set the final charges before sprinting for cover just seconds before the blast.

He is told that the bosses call him a 'Maverick' but when his team earns more bonuses than all the rest in the race to excavate the tunnels these same bosses are compelled to recognise his leadership, raw courage and attention to detail. His promotion to Engineer Level 2 is popular among the men. He is given a fifty percent increase in his salary and his own cabin at Island Bend.

The presence of female employees, especially at meal times, is not the hazard they would be in most other working environments. This is mainly because there are so few of them. However the women know his name and single him out. He overhears a young waitress in the canteen say to one of the new nurses: "Otto is wonderfully handsome, just like a film star but he always looks sad and keeps to himself. None of us can cheer him up. I sometimes wonder what he's got against women."

His new cabin gives him privacy but it cannot free him from his nightly dread that the spectre at the porthole will appear at the window. It is little wonder that he lives only for his work, volunteering for every hour of overtime that comes his way. He never bothers to look at his finances and is unaware of the burgeoning funds in his Commonwealth Bank account until the manager, Tom Henty, writes to him with an offer to transfer a thousand pounds to an investment account. Even after agreeing to do this, it astounds him that he still has another four thousand left over.

Every Spring in Cooma the Snowy Mountains Authority holds its annual vehicle "change-over" when the old work vehicles are auctioned off. Brandt meanders through the rows of cars, jeeps and lorries running his practised eye over engines, tyres, manifolds and bodywork. Eventually he successfully bids for a short-based Land Rover, a sturdy little ute with its spare wheel bolted onto the front bonnet. The vehicle has a canvas hood and just enough room for the driver and two passengers at the front.

As he drives it into Island Bend the men give him a cheer. An hour later the site supervisor comes around to his cabin and orders him to take twenty four hours compulsory leave. "For your own good, Otto," he says. "Now you've got a bonzer little ute to drive around in, there's no excuse for you. So bugger off, mate, and see the bush. The Kosciusko State Park is worth a decko."

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Brandt enjoys driving in this part of the world. The empty road winds between granite boulders which rise from the plateau into a stainless breadth of sky. At one point gleams of bright blue mark a line of narrow lakes. He drives with the hood down, letting the iced wind toss his hair and smart his cheek. Sunlight off the snow makes him squint and he slows down.

He parks by a sparkling creek. Snowdrifts overlap its banks and curtains of needle thin icicles are weeping with the Spring thaw. Spider webs listing with their burden of frost are like the shrouds of glass galleons. Brandt climbs out of the ute and compulsively opens a fresh packet of Capstan Blue. He finds Australian cigarettes superior to the European varieties yet he doesn't light up. There is a purity in these high places. The air is too sweet for tobacco.

The Führer would have approved. It was well known that Hitler loathed smoking and Brandt is tempted to screw up the packet. He doesn't. It is only a momentary whim. As he slips it back into his pocket, he is struck by his lingering obeisance. Was it only twenty years ago when he first glimpsed and heard Hitler far away on a Nuremburg podium, a strident gesticulating figure reminding him of an angry hornet trapped in a jar.

But by then Brandt had already taken the SS Oath, abused his intellect and chosen to serve what? No, not a normal man, definitely not a normal man. Even after the Führer ruled most of Europe, his closest aides could never converse with him as one human to another. Hitler was just a void; in reality there was no one there; he was just a mouth echoing their own hatred.

No, Brandt may well be reduced to a living desolation but he will never again hearken to that mouth. As soon as Hitler comes to mind, he must remember the Insect.

He gets back into the Land Rover and starts the engine. The road skirts the mountains with their bright flanks of snow and descends into tangles of snow gums, which give way to a dappled bushland of lofty iron barks and native pines. There is no gothic darkness in these Australian forests. Here the slender leaves of the gums hang vertically and let in the light and the warmer air is redolent with eucalyptus and soft resin.

Just beyond a bend in the road, he is waved down by a ranger who, despite the official badge on his slouch hat, looks like a boy. An apprehensive Brandt brings the ute to a halt.

At close quarters the ranger now seems a little less like a boy. He wears a long Dri-Za-Bone coat over a slim grey jacket, white shirt and brown tie. His boots have an ox-blood shine.

"Sorry about this, mate," he says. "Could you spare us a moment?"

Brandt pulls the Land Rover over to one side and gets out.

"You see," says the ranger. "My fiancée, that's Jill, well we've just got the Methodist minister up from Tumut to marry us in the National Park but now he tells us he needs an extra witness. I wonder if you could oblige us. I'm Bob McColl."

"Otto Brandt." They shake hands. "It would be a pleasure, Bob." Brandt disguises the relief in his voice at being stopped by a uniformed man on a remote mountain road just to witness a wedding!

"You beauty," says the young bridegroom. "We're just up the track there." He looks at Brandt's Land Rover. "Start her up and I'll show you where to go." He leaps onto the bonnet, perches on the spare wheel and points to an opening through the trees.

Brandt starts the engine and the ranger points with his arm to guide him along a rough track to a government bungalow with the blue Australian flag straining in the wind against a stark white pole. The dwelling is set in a wide fire-break clearing where three grey wallabies are cropping the fresh grass under a water sprinkler.

Still following the ranger's directions, Brandt parks the ute at the side of the house and gets out. Here at the lower altitude the air is almost balmy. A white sheet partly disguises the trestle table on the veranda. Brandt notes the plain government cutlery and a small cake with white icing. A trap designed for electrocuting bugs and mosquitoes is housed in blue glass and suspended from the veranda ceiling like a miniature chandelier.

On the close cropped lawn in front of the house there is a tiny altar table with a free standing silver cross. Two Wedding Certificates, a silver ink well, a blotter and two pens with new J nibs have been neatly set out. The certificates are held down from the wind by a leather bound Register of Weddings.

By the rock garden two oiled plough discs rest on flat stones to make a barbecue and nearby, resting on a stump is an ice bucket with the necks of four bottles of sparkling wine poking up like the funnels of the Titanic.

Another uniformed ranger has run out an extension cord from the veranda and is attaching it to a gramophone. 'That's Dave Rushworth,' says Bob, "my best man – and my boss." Dave turns out to be their only guest. He is a tanned fit-looking man in his forties.

Brandt hears someone breaking up branches for firewood and turns to see an elderly cleric wearing a dog's collar and a shabby grey suit. He comes over slapping the bark dust from his trousers. "You're going to be our witness?" he asks.

"Yes, I have that honour," says Brandt. The minister fixes him with a long stare and Brandt has to restrain himself from looking away.

"You must be on the Snowy Scheme," he says slowly.

"I'm a blasting engineer."

"That'd be right. I could tell straight away you'd be on the Scheme. There's something about you blokes. You walk like heroes and you're all a zac short of a quid."

Brandt looks at him with incomprehension. "Short of a quid?" he says. One thing you could not say about the Snowy men was that they lacked spare cash.

'By that I mean you're all off yer rocker,' explains the minister. "You take maniacal risks." And I should know. I've buried too many of your cobbers over the past couple of years. But good on you, mate. I suppose the human ceiling is raised a bit higher for men like you. I dips my lid to you. You're doing bloody great work for Australia. You've found something bigger to do in the world beyond the petty concerns of most people's lives."

The minister goes off to get more wood. Feeling redundant, Brandt follows after him and starts cracking branches over his knees.

...

The service is short. "Look into each other's eyes when you say your vows," says the minister. "Come on, Bob – you too, Jill, Don't look at me, just repeat to each other what I say."

Brandt swallows and closes his eyes. An inner anguish is seizing him; a feeling of vertigo. He has a vision of the porthole and the ghastly bride clinging to the hull and staring all the while at him.

And then there's the subject of vows. His marriage to Brigitte brings its usual pain but it reminds him of another vow he made on a Spring Day in 1938 in the Felderhermhalle.

I vow to you, Adolf Hitler, as Führer and Chancellor of the German Reich, loyalty and bravery. I vow to you and to the leaders you set for me, absolute allegiance until death. So help me, God.

After the war he learnt that Obengruppenführer Krüger had committed suicide. Was that "absolute allegiance until death"? And if it were, why did he not recommend it for Ernst Frick?

...

Bob and Jill's tiny reception is held under the silky oak which overspreads the lawn. Bob turns to Brandt. "What about your future, Otto? I 'spose you'll shoot through when you've done yer two years."

"Shoot through?" The term conveys nothing to Brandt, except that it makes him feels slightly uneasy.

"What I mean is you'll be going back to Germany."

"I am not sure," lies Brand. He knows full well that returning to Europe is not an option for him. He crushes a gum leaf in his hand and catches the scent of eucalyptus oil. "I suppose I have an ethical problem. About remaining in Australia, I mean. Germany is in ruins. I think I should return to help rebuild it." The words are hypocritical but their sentiment is not.

"That's where you're wrong mate," says Dave. "We need you more right here in Australia. Don't you worry about Germany. She'll recover. The Yanks will get behind her with their big money. They have to. Germany's backyard fence is the Iron Curtain. Uncle Sam wants a buffer zone and she's prepared to pay for it. But over here it's different. We have to do everything ourselves. There's only seven million of us in this country and we need as many good white migrants as we can get. There's the Yellow Peril to our North and most of them are Commos. Too right they are. No, Otto, we need you to stay right here. By the way, do you live in one of the Snowy camps? What sort of quarters have you got?"

"I live at Island Bend. I'm lucky. I've been promoted so I've my own cabin and ..".

Dave interrupts. "No, mate. Not good enough. Get yourself a place of your own. Buy a few thousand acres."

"You mean *here*?" The idea never occurred to him.

"Well maybe not in the State Park, you can't do that. But nearby. Strewth Otto this is one humdinger of a place to live. And farming properties are cheap, very cheap. During the Depression there were a lot of foreclosures around here. A lot of these places haven't been lived in since the late thirties. It's a golden opportunity, mate."

"It won't be plain sailing," says Jill trying not to spill champagne on her wedding dress. "You'll miss the greenness of Europe – and the old world animals – but not the rabbits." They laugh. "But seriously, Otto, you'll love the wild life. Everyone from overseas tells me how everything over here is so different. You only have to kick over a stone – even the bugs are different!"

"It's a bonzer new country, mate," says Bob. "A young country."

Brandt picks another leaf and folds it carefully between his fingers. "So you're telling me Australia is a chance for humanity to make a fresh start. Is that how you see it?"

"Exactly, mate. Too right I do. I think..."

Jill interrupts him. "Are you married, Otto?"

"No."

"Perhaps not such a good thing over here," says Bob. "People talk. Get yerself a sheila, Otto. Have kids. Put down some roots." He reaches across to grasp Jill's hand.

From the forest there's a *crack* - like a pistol shot. Brandt swings around, one hand shaking.

"Only a whip bird," says Jill. She looks at his startled face and smiles.

"Anyway, as I was saying, Otto," says Dave. "Get yourself a stake in the land. Be part of us. We're called the lucky country. It's the best place in the world to live."

"But how would you know, Dave? You've never been outside Australia?" Jill's eyes are mischievous.

"Well it just is. What say you, Reverend?"

The minister nods. "Yes, I reckon it's the best country in the world."

"I might make a go of it after all," says Brandt.

"Righto!" says Dave. He shakes Brandt's hand.

"Thought you might say that," says the Minister. "Good on you." Otto. He shakes his hand and so does Bob.

"Make sure you become an Australian citizen," says the minister.

Brandt looks across to the east where a wash of late afternoon sun has given the mountains an orange glow.

Yes, it is a good country, he thinks to himself. *And owning a farm around here a man could hide from the world for the rest of his life.* Alone, that is. Having a wife is out of the question.

He hears a crackle and blue sparks as something is electrocuted in the bug trap.

...

Brandt follows the road climbing back to the Alpine Zone. As the solemn shadowy twilight descends into night the headlights pick out flashes of snowdrifts. The brittle arc of the sickle moon

throws up grotesques of lone mountain trees, their tops brushed to flatness by centuries of high winds.

He halts the vehicle on a ridge. Despite the cold he gets out and looks up at the Southern Cross poised low over Mount Kosciusko. Overhead the far galaxies are making their timeless circuit. He drops his gaze across the valley to another ridge where a string of yellow light bulbs mark the perimeter of Island Bend Camp.

Camp! The word turns his stomach. For Brandt the sight of Island Bend evokes the horror of one particular afternoon in 1943 when a newly promoted, Ernst Frick had been overlooking another camp.

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How easily colour fades from the past. More and more the memories smudge into black white and grey like newsreels. He is at a concentration camp in Southern Poland, stationed here for a week to take part in one of Himmler's "training" courses".

Kommandant Huber's villa has a broad balcony separated from the noisy reception room by high French windows. Standing, deep in thought Frick is startled when Huber himself taps his shoulder. He spins around, clicks his heels, springs to attention and salutes. Huber carries a glass of Schnapps which is shaking in his pale hand. His face is orange and puffy like an oversized clementine. Huber is not alone; a paunchy colonel has followed him onto the balcony.

"Ernst, I want you to meet SS Standartenführer Köhler."

Köhler returns a tired salute, then addresses the Kommandant. "A pretty villa you have, Huber. I see the balcony is new."

"Yes, Ilse designed it to give us a view of the garden .. and, oh yes, to provide an observation deck for me to overlook the camp."

"And what of you, Sturmbannführer Frick? Are you on leave?" The man knows full well that he'd be on leave if he hadn't been ordered to attend this damned Course.

"Yes, Herr Standartenführer."

"Is not your beautiful wife with you today?"

"No, sir but I have stolen Brigitte away from Berlin for a week". He doesn't like Köhler talking about his wife. "She has never been to Poland. We have a room in the Chopin Hotel in Lvov." Frick changes the subject. "Will you be doing the Course yourself, Herr Standartenführer?"

"Heavens no, Frick. I'm actually running it!" Köhler laughs. So does Huber but in his case it sounds sounds forced. When Köhler stops laughing, Huber stops too and nearly chokes himself. He gulps down some more Schnapps which sets off a coughing fit. This brings Ilse Huber hurrying out dragging their little daughter by the hand.

Köhler takes Ilse's arm. "Don't you worry about your husband, my dear. He'll survive us all. And whom do we have here?" He stoops and lifts up the child. "What is your name, Fräulein?"

"Karina."

From her scowl it is obvious that she detests being suspended in the air by this fat old man who reeks of cigar smoke and Polish vodka. Perhaps Köhler realises this too or it might have been the child was becoming too heavy for him because he lowers her down again and then of all things he starts to interrogate her.

“How old are you, Karina?”

“She’s three, nearly four, Standartenführer,” says Frau Huber.

“Please allow the child to speak for herself. I asked you how old you are, Fräulein.”

“Three.”

“You have a beautiful house, Karina, Do you like your house?”

“Yes.”

“You have a beautiful garden to play in. Do you like playing in the garden?”

“No.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Because we have the Jews here.”

Köhler shoots an amused glance at the parents, then he turns to the child again. “I don’t understand, Karina. Why do you have Jews in your garden?”

“They have to work.”

Köhler looked out over the garden to where four men in striped overalls are digging out spring weeds. Suddenly brightening up, Karina rushes over to the railing and waves to the prisoners. Two of them give single waves back then go back to working furiously on the weeds.

“Mummy shoots them,” says Karina swinging around to look for her mother, but Frau Huber has disappeared inside..

Brandt hears the Island Bend generator start up and he draws heavily on his cigarette. The cabin lights begin to glow in the camp but they are not bright enough to diminish the light of Venus over the western crags or the reddish moon to the south. He closes his eyes tightly but fails to block out the images of what happened next at the Hubers’ villa.

Several more of the SS drift out onto the balcony. There is not a single rank below Sturmscharführer. What for God’s sake is the High Command thinking of? Are they all mad? Why, when the Third Reich is fighting for its very existence, have these senior officers been ordered to attend a training course on incinerating dead bodies?

“Mummy!” Karina squirms through the coppice of crisply ironed trousers and black polished boots to the smirking Ilse who’s arrived on the balcony cradling a small Flobert parlour rifle.

“Time for the shooting gallery,” mutters Huber, as Ilse kneels down and steadies the rifle barrel on the railing. She closes one eye. All eyes turn to the garden below.

One of the Jews is an elderly man raking weeds along the path.

TWOU!

The Jew buckles over.

TWOU! TWOU!

Frick can hardly believe it. Dear God help us. In front of the child! He stares down and sees that the old man's neck is a gaping ruin.

"Mummy! The other Jews are running away! The dreadful girl is leaping up and down in exasperation.

TWOU!

A second Jew falls over. Grasping his upper leg he attempts to crawl towards the open tool shed. Another Jew, just a lad, runs across to help him.

TWOU! TWOU!

He too falls down clutching his abdomen and vomiting blood.

The fourth Jew rushes towards the shed.

TWOU!

The bullet splits a thigh bone and he crashes down. All four Jews are now squirming in agony on the ground.

Frick grinds his teeth. He stares at his feet and holds his breath to avoid being sick.

"Good shooting, Mummy!" screams Karina, clapping her cherubic hands. A few of the guests raggedly join in until they are stunned silent by four loud cracks from a Luger. The gardeners lay still. Huber clips the pistol back into its holster, then grabs the railing with clenched hands. His cheeks are rigid and greyish-yellow.

Standartenführer Köhler raises his glass. "Your Good Health, Kommandant," he says in a loud but controlled voice.

"Good Health, Herr Kommandant," rumbles the sycophantic echo.

"Good shooting, Daddy," says Karina running to give her father a hug.

Frick escapes inside and goes over to the drinks table where an SS Hauptmann pours him another schnapps. He loathes Frau Huber. He loathes her cow-like eyes which never sit well with her perpetual smirk. But worse, so much worse, she has annihilated the innocence of her own small daughter and continues to revel in doing so.

Yes, he detests Frau Huber with a fury. How can he, an officer of the Third Reich who has taken an oath to eliminate its enemies have anything in common with a fiend like Ilse Huber, a warped civilian who kills prisoners for no other reason than she enjoys it.

“Ernst?” Huber has snared him like a rabbit. The last thing he needs at the moment is a chummy exchange with her husband. Under the artificial light Huber’s cheeks have turned a bilious olive green. “God, Ernst. What have we been doing? That is my wife out there. And our child!” Huber flinches at another ‘twou’ followed by two more. “Don’t you know what she’s doing now? She’s shooting prisoners in the camp itself.”

‘Then why the hell don’t you stop her?’ thinks Frick. ‘You’re the Kommandant. Are you so totally blind to your own cowardice?’ But of course Frick knows he is also a coward for not saying it aloud.

“What is the range of that weapon, Herr Kommandant?”

Forty metres? A hundred? Not always enough to kill but then she wounds them, so of course one of ours has to go and finish them off. That’s the woman I married, Ernst. What’s happening to us?” There was a moment of calm, then he asked: And you, Ernst. You have a daughter too. How old is she?”

“Cordula is four.”

Huber stares out to the balcony in horror. “Get out of all this, Ernst. Transfer to some Wehrmacht unit. They’re so desperate for more troops in Russia they’ll let you go now. Learn to sleep again.”

“I sleep very well, Herr Kommandant.”

“Do you? Really? I don’t believe you, Ernst. You’re not one of them. In our game only automatons like Eichmann can do what we do and still sleep at nights. I’m going to Russia.”

Frick glances at Huber’s flaccid paunch and hears the tremor in his voice. “With great respect, Herr Kommandant, you won’t last the first month of the Russian Winter.”

Huber smiles revealing rows of tobacco stained teeth. “Do you know something, Frick? I don’t really want to. I’m morally ruined. I’m damned. History will remember me for allowing Jewish babies to be chucked into the air as target practice for the Hitler Youth.”

Huber gulps his schnapps like a man dying of thirst. “You don’t know half of it,” he went on. “Back in February we had a Gestapo Commissar in the camp who sliced a ten year old boy in half. One stroke with an axe! Can you guess why he did it? For a bet, Ernst! He did it for a bet! Then afterwards he blames the Führer. He said our Führer once remarked that because nature is cruel, we can be cruel too.

“Of course I don’t know if he said it or not,” continues Huber, “but it’s all over for me. I’m a lost cause but there might still be a chance for you. Join me and let’s be real soldiers.”

He shakes his head. “Something else you should know, Ernst. The madness deepens. This so-called ‘Course’ we are on is supposed to teach us how to dispose of corpses by the hundred and yet we have an industrial plant at Auschwitz-Birkenau already processing five thousand a day! I’ve seen it in operation, Ernst. They extract eighty kilograms of gold teeth in a week. All from Jews. They stick hooks into their mouths to rip them out. Can you imagine how heavy the wooden crates are? This week they’re going to show us a film on how to make phosphate fertilizer from human ashes. Think about it, Ernst. The precious human form revered by Leonardo and Michelangelo converted into road ash and fertiliser! It’s all madness, Ernst. Madness! Dear blessed God. We first rob them of their humanity then what we do to them afterwards becomes an assembly line rolling with the ease of an elegant nightmare.”

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On the second evening of the course he returns to the Chopin Hotel to find Brigitte's suitcase and hat boxes packed by the door. His wife is sitting on the bed, her arms around a weeping Cordula.

"What is going on?"

"Poland is a very big colony," said Brigitte slowly. "And there are so very few German colonists. We Germans are trying so hard to be like the English in India that we form evil little clubs where no one has a private life."

His voice had trembled with apprehension. "Brigitte, what is it ...?"

"Be silent!" As she raises her voice, their child jumps with alarm but Brigitte holds her closer. "Today in one of our 'clubs,' I met your Ilsa Huber."

"My Ilsa Huber? Frau Huber? That woman is .."

"Will you not listen to me? What a fool I was to actually believe that my husband was an honourable army officer. I must be the only SS wife who never guessed the truth." She fumbles with a cigarette. He offers to light it for her but she swings away from him and with trembling fingers strikes a match herself.

She inhales rapidly and when she speaks again her voice is low, the words sound flat. "Ilsa Huber told me what men like you are really doing to the Jewish men, women and children and their old people. Hans Frank tells us they are just being resettled. Resettled? Oh yes, Frau Huber got so much pleasure from telling me what's really happening. She went into all the details." Brigitte's voice falters and he moves towards her and Cordula.

"Don't you dare touch either of us. Do you hear me? You are the monster in every child's worst dream. You even stink of death. It sticks to you like paint. You will never scrape it off. And what are they teaching on your course. Isn't it all about ashes? Ashes! For Christ sake. Ashes! How appropriate in your case, when everything in your life, everything you touch, Ernst Frick, turns to ashes!"

Like a fool he still tries to approach them.

Keep away. Don't you understand? We don't want to see you ever again." At this Cordula covers her face with her hands and cries.

Now there is a rap on the door. "Enter," says Brigitte, her voice like steel. The porter comes over to grab the luggage and she steps back to let him leave the room.

"Monster!" hisses Brigitte as she grasps Cordula's hand and drags the sobbing child out of his life forever.

Her words hang in the air like the dying chimes of a single bell. "Everything you touch, Ernst Frick, turns to ashes."

The resonance is there still. For a moment he finds himself disoriented between past and present but now he finds himself hunched over the steering wheel of a British Land Rover, his cheeks wet and his eyes smarting. At last he straightens up and turns the ignition.

He drives a few hundred yards then abandons the vehicle on the shoulder of the road and tramps off in the snow towards a broken knoll with frost-split boulders and stunted trees. His back is bowed as though it can no longer bear the burden of his body, The wind moans about him like an unhallowed spirit and exacerbates the blinding torment of remorse without redemption.

To what end has he wasted the gift of his youth? To an insanity worse than any tyranny in history. Even the Russian Communists have their grand capital works, their railways, dams, bridges and altruistic ideals – perverted yes to ideology but just still able to harness the yearnings of the good. What had the Nazis left the world? Desecration. Where was their art, their medicine, their architecture? The “industrial complex” of Treblinka epitomised it all – it was nothing but a factory of death designed to extract the chemical remains of nine hundred thousand bodies.

At the top of the ridge the wind howls like an angry dog. Rising between two boulders the size of whales, an ancient snow gum has trained its growth to the lee of the freezing southerly winds. Between the granite and the tree there is just enough space for him to find a shelter. Self loathing pounds his brain like ocean waves on a beach. Across the valley the pendulous lights of Island Bend shed auras of dirty yellow over the cabins and tents.

But here among the rocks is a purer world where the air is crisp and without the slightest hint of anything not native to the high country. In its solitude Brandt bellows his anguish, and guilt, beating his head on the tree trunk, beating it so hard and so repeatedly that the hot blood seeps through his hair and runs down into his eyes until, nearly senseless, he collapses in the snow.

How long has he been lying here? The wind has eased, he can hear the putt putt of the camp generator which brings him back to the present. Frantically he gathers up the soft wet snow and smothers his face in it. It reminds him of the first time when he did this by a sawpit in Poland. The anguish engulfs him twice over.

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As soon Brandt returns to Island Bend, he takes a shower to cleanse the abrasions on his head, then changes his clothes and goes across to the mess hall. A kind of normalcy returns and as always he is obsessed with news from Europe. On the German language pages of the bulletin board there is a brief story about a double suicide near Soviet Occupied Weimar.

This morning the bodies of Weimar residents Helmut and Christa Frick were discovered hanging in the Thuringian Forest. It is believed that Herr and Frau Frick had been suffering from depression since 1946 after their son's posthumous indictment for crimes against humanity.

So his parents are dead. He cannot grieve for them; he is already too emotionally drained. Before the war he remembered when their church had just affirmed its allegiance to the National Socialist German Christian League. They were both tense, caught like terrified fish in a glass tank neither moving forwards nor backwards merely quivering their gills. But had they put up the slightest resistance to the assault on their Christian faith? Two kingdoms reigned in Germany: the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of Hitler. However unintentionally, his parents had sided with the Kingdom of Hitler. In the narthex of their church was one of Himmler's favourite dictums. Brandt remembered that it was carved in yellow beech wood and heavy Gothic script. It read:

'The swastika in our breasts, the cross in our hearts.'

Like all adult residents of Weimar his parents would have been forced by the Americans to witness Buchenwald after its liberation. The mayor and his wife hanged themselves and now, seven years later, his parents have followed their example.

The newspaper had referred to them as simply Helmut and Christa Frick. How strange the Christian names sound when they are chained together like that. Despite a sepia wedding photograph on a shelf above the hearth, he had never once pictured them as a couple.

He feels an immediate yearning to find an umbilical connection to innocence, to flee backwards to childhood, to the beech woods and the running brooks and to his story books, the fairy-tales his mother used to read to him. No perhaps not the books. Definitely not the books. Their stories always include a forest with a crooked house in it, an evil crooked house. God protect all children from the horrors that lurk in every fairy tale. There is always horror. If there is no horror, how can it be a fairy tale?

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On his free Saturday morning Brandt tries not to think of his parents and goes out to his Land Rover housed in one of the government sheds. Maintaining the vehicle is a diversion which can suspend the relentless passage of time. If he were another Snowy man he might occupy himself with gambling or visiting the prostitutes up from Sydney or adding his pennyworth to the pooled ignorance of the pub.

The Land Rover has become his one hobby. Today he rotates the wheels before setting off for Cooma to buy some new elastic-sided boots, a wide leather belt and some imported American blue jeans. He parks outside the nineteenth century gaol and walks down to Sharp Street.

He returns with his purchases which include a wrapped ham salad roll. As he fumbles for his keys, he gazes up at the prison and sees the barred windows above the high granite wall. The sight makes him feel light-headed and he reaches out to a lamp post for support. Someone touches his shoulder. "Are you all right, mate?"

Brandt opens his eyes on the blue uniform of a prison warder. "I celebrated a bit last night. Overdid it."

"Okey, doke, mate. Take care of yourself. Too roo."

The warder goes on duty through a side gate.

Brandt slumps into the driver's seat of the Land Rover. For a few minutes he watches the residents of Cooma going about their lives. Women form the majority, with string bags full of newspaper-wrapped parcels from the butchers and delicatessens, bright orbs of fruit bulging out as if intent on escaping and rolling down the road to Cooma Creek and on to a fruit nirvana. There are so many children, the youngest peering out from their strollers, the toddlers on tricycles or tin scooters. 'The Post-War Baby Boom' is on the lips of every politician, manufacturer and school head. There is music in the walk of most adults and those in the teen years. He can identify their moods by the swing of their arms and the thrust of their chins and whether their mouths lift or droop at the corners.

His mind turns to the 'waifs' from the Syrenia and in particular, Alan Gilbert. How is Australia treating a boy like him? He imagines Alan somewhere out in the back of beyond stuck in some religious institution. Alan is bright. Will they be giving the boy a decent education? But Alan's fate

should not concern him. He of all men, should not be occupying his mind with an innocent like Alan Gilbert.

He drives out of Cooma, parks under a pepper tree on the Kosciusko Road, and sits on a stump in the shade to eat his salad roll. This is a mistake. Mosquitoes sting his ankles and the stump is infested with angry red ants.

Five dark birds with strong beaks are perched on a single branch above him in the pepper tree. *Kra-ro-lon!* sings one. *Kra-ro-lon ! Kra-ro-lon!* The others are joining in, a dissonant clanging like empty glass bottles being carted along a pot-holed road. He tosses his salad roll into the grass and the birds swoop down on it and tear at each other, shrieking like harpies.