

**The Peggy Chapman-Andrews  
First Novel Award 2014**

**RUNNER-UP**

***The Last Migration***

by Ian Nettleton

There won't be any violence. That's what Murray said. Right from the start he promised Lee that. Just a ride to a town on the other side of the Munday Munday Plains – 400 k or so. A place on the map, near a dried up reservoir. We pick this bloke up, bring him back to town. Simple.

And no violence? said Lee.

Yeah.

They were out on the porch in the early evening, Murray sitting on an aluminium camper chair, Lee resting against the side of the house. Across the yard the low tin fence, and over the road the dark shapes of bungalows in the grainy twilight.

And do we tell Roy?

No, we don't tell Roy, said Murray. Roy doesn't need to know. Jeez, you know what he's like. We'll set off early. Before it's light. Do you think you can manage that?

Lee nodded. He looked at his brother's large hands, the oil under the fingernails and in the creases of his fingers, the muscle of his arms, shining with a sheen of dirt and sweat, small black and brown bruises. Under his fold up chair, two hand-sized dumbbells.

Lee pulled his jeans up with the belt loops. Murray was strong, but he was getting thick around the middle, what with being five years older, while Lee enjoyed how tight his skin felt against his stomach muscles. He was barefoot, and felt the heat of the day in the boards. The house was settling, the tin roof tangling and the wooden walls cracking.

And we just bring him back?

What did I tell you? We take him to the Pioneer. Take him round the back, deliver him to one of Jonny Peplinski's men, and he pays us five hundred dollars.

Jonny Peplinski?

Yeah. He paused a moment. I could ask someone else. You don't have to come.

No. No, I'm cool.

Murray watched him, then he slapped both his palms together.

Okay.

He picked up the dumbbells, tested their weight, and began raising them to his chest, lowering them to his side. Blowing through his nostrils. Lee pushed away from the house wall and walked towards the front door.

Unless, that is, you get bitten by a white tail. You should wear some shoes, you mullet. Better get some food and sleep. We'll be off early. Lee! Lee turned and looked back. This isn't turning doughnuts in the desert, yeah? This is money. Alright?

Yeah, I got you.

Lee pulled open the fly wire and went into the house. His mother was sitting at the table in the kitchen, watching the TV that was bolted to the wall above the fridge. These days she always

watched TV. A fireman in a yellow florescent jacket took up the screen. Yeah, back pain? I know all about it.

That's right, she said, and nodded her head.

She used to be slim and pretty, but her pills had turned her into a fat little woman, and he didn't like to see it. She had jowls, and she wore the same old dress for days. Something in him ached when he saw her looking up at the TV like that. He pulled on his socks and pale canvas pumps at a chair by the door.

I'll be back in a bit, mum, he said, and she raised a hand without looking his way.

It can get you down. Chronic pain. You ask yerself, Is this ever going to end?

He walked up Lode Street, into the Hungry Jack. The only customer was an old man with the bottoms of his trousers tucked into his grey socks, a cane resting against a chair, sitting slouched over an egg bun, yoke dripping onto the plate. From behind the counter a conversation about artificial sweeteners. A tall boy with a bad complexion doing most of the talking.

Sweeteners are bad for you in certain situations.

Really? How can it be worse than sugar?

Aspergers. If you're a pregnant woman it can affect the fetus.

Really?

Really. It's been proven.

A large girl he used to know from school was working at the tiled floor with a mop, pulling along a red plastic bucket on wheels. Allie. Or was it Abby? Abby. On her feet a pair of yellow and red canvas shoes that had soaked up some of the filthy water so there was a dark tide mark just below the eyelets.

He bought an XXXL burger and nuggets, and a flat white. They were going to make some money. He slipped into a seat by the window overlooking the street. Five hundred dollars. The town hall bell tolled nine o'clock. The sound had always depressed him. Come to church. Go to bed. Get up for school. Hurrying him along to the next thing he didn't want to do. But tonight, for the first time, it was the sound of a new life. A turning point. He tipped a good two spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee.

Aspergers, he said to himself, and he thought of Roy with his books and lists and the way he ordered things in his bedroom so everything was where it should be. He's different, his mum always said. He's a sensitive soul.

Across the street a cat ran along the pavement, followed by another. The first cat turned, backing against the pale painted wall of the Pioneer's Club. Lee took a large bite out of his burger.

Hey Lee, said Abby, when she'd finished the square of floor.

He nodded his head.

How y'doin? she said.

She pushed away a lank piece of hair that was stuck to her damp forehead.

Oh, alright, yeah. She didn't move. She stood there watching him. After a moment he added: Yerself?

Yeah, mate. Taking it steady. She looked at the bucket by her feet. I'm doing a course in journalism. On the internet. I'm funding myself, mostly. Dad's chipping in.

Yeah?

The cats suddenly made a dash across the street. The doors to the Pioneer Club opened, light onto the pavement, and Lucy Bail walked out. The deputy of police's daughter. She was wearing a tight yellow cardigan, a short skirt with roses printed on it, shiny black boots to her knees. Her thighs were pale. She walked around a dusty station wagon parked at the kerb and climbed in.

A boy followed her out, skinny, with short sandy hair, a sports bag over one shoulder. He took a moment on the pavement while he lit a cigarette, head to one side. Poser, thought Lee.

He shook the match and flipped it into the gutter, and a thin trail of smoke came from his mouth as he pulled open the car door. He slung the bag onto the back seat. Lee shifted his focus, and looked at himself in the plate glass of Hungry Jacks. He looked okay. But Lucy Bail, she was so fucking hard.

Writing fer the newspapers. It's a distance course all the way from England.

Lee took another bite of the burger, felt grease and sauce run onto his chin. The boy got into the car.

Hm-mm.

Abby pushed the mop bucket to one side and sat on a seat at the next table.

Yeah. I'm thinking like maybe I'll get to work on a paper in Melbourne? Maybe the Herald Sun, eh? What do you think about that, Lee?

Yeah. Yeah, that'd be cool.

He took another look at Abby. Her eyes were large and brown, the corneas faintly pink. At school she'd had bad acne, but it seemed to have cleared up. When the fair came to town a few years ago she asked him to go on the Waltzer with her. When he refused she said she'd pay. Just the two of them. He remembered she was wearing makeup that night. She looked like one of the painted dolls on the shooting range. Smiling at him from the other side of the car as it turned on its rails.

How about you, Lee?

He remembered on the Waltzer, as it spun round and faced out to the crowd of onlookers for one moment, how she waved a triumphant hand to a group of girls – all the ones who never had any luck with the boys at school. It was then he realised he'd been bought and paid for, and for the rest of the ride he avoided looking at her, sitting with his jaw set, his head resting back, watching the coloured bulbs passing overhead.

Ah shit, Abby, I don't know. I've some plans.

He turned his back to her and looked out through the window once again. The boy had started up the engine and was pulling away, turning the car in a wide arc. He listened as the car accelerated away, the exhaust blowing.

I think we've made a mistake, said Harry.

It wasn't an important statement. He knew they were lost, and had been for four or more hours. It was seeing the sun finally sink below the desert in a last burn of yellow that made him say it. His head was lolling against the headrest, the weight of his back slumped into the bucket seat. He could smell and taste a day of heat, dust, unwashed clothes. The back of his neck was slick with sweat. He'd stopped leaning forward to peel the shirt from his back. All the feeling had gone in his lower spine.

The numerals on the speedometer glowed orange behind a thin film of dirt, the needle wavering at a steady seventy kilometres per hour. The rev meter had stuck on zero and no tapping with his knuckles would shift it.

The remains of desert flies spotted the windscreen. Sometimes larger insects hit the glass, leaving a liquid green smear that turned to a dry paste the wipers couldn't remove. The whole car rattled with loose stones. Now it was growing dark the road rushed towards him in the headlights.

With the sun going down, the dead plain of the desert land was turning a dark purple, spindly trees in silhouette, apparitional ghost gums passing the window.

We've made a mistake, he said again, and this time a little louder.

Fifty kilometres back they'd passed a row of tins on posts like animal heads – letterboxes made of milk urns, two litre oil drums, clapboard bird houses – at the beginning of a track leading up to a sheep station. That was the last time he'd seen another vehicle – a large red Toyota truck that flashed reflective sunlight as it turned up the track, pulling a trailer, a red dust spume behind as it rocked up the hill. And then twenty minutes ago he'd seen what looked like a road, and in a moment's decision he'd turned the wheel.

For a while it was as good a road as the one he'd left, but now the surface was less even. There were potholes, showers of stones that sprayed up from its surface. The further along the road he drove, the more it was turning to dust.

He felt a shimmer of coolness across his skin and looked in the rear-view mirror. Angela was asleep, resting her head against a rolled up fleece, mouth slightly open, moving a little with the car's motion. He could see her white, perfect teeth. Her skin so dark.

He touched his shirt pocket, and felt the packet of Silk Cut he'd brought all the way from England, the book of matches from Singapore. He put his hand back on the wheel, and gripped it a little tighter. Even though his mouth ached for the taste of smoke. He hadn't felt this need for over a year, but his few short days in Sydney had been intense and unpleasant enough to send him to the nearest store in Kings Cross. Anyone who smokes is weak. Angela told him that, but her opinion really didn't matter now.

You asleep? he said, in a low voice.

No answer. The analogue clock set into the dashboard said 8.55pm.

A trickle of sweat ran down his forehead, into his eyebrow. He blinked, and the sweat went into his eye. There was a sharp, acid tang, and he pressed the heel of his hand against the socket. At the same moment one of the tyres caught against something solid with a whump, and the wheel pulled against his hand. The car's body shook sideways, and sent a new scattering of grit. He heard a deep sigh from behind him, and then Angela was leaning against the back of the passenger seat, her eyes half closed, frown lines on her forehead.

Where are we?

I'm not sure.

He blinked his eye a number of times. The pain continued. He licked a finger end, and rubbed it against the closed eyelid.

You're not sure?

He blinked again, rapidly, and the pain spread across the cornea. There were bright points of light in his vision. The road was beginning to rise, the tyres growling against a loose surface.

No, I'm not sure. The pain in his eye continued, though it was diluting. A tear pooled, making his sight quiver. Angela was breathing heavily through her nose. The last time I looked we were about sixty kilometres away.

Away? Away from where?

From the nearest town.

Wasn't that close to the ranges?

Yes. Yes, it was close to the ranges.

Angela looked out through the windscreen.

Well I don't see them.

Harry shook his head. He closed his eye, kept it closed.

I thought this was the turning.

A tear ran down his cheek. The pain in his eye became a dulling throb.

He felt a sudden shift of the suspension, an uneven jolt as one of the wheels went into one of the holes in the road. Angela reached forward, took the map from the passenger's seat and flapped it open. She studied it, and took short breaths. On the far horizon there were low hills, purple against the thin stream of cloud.

There should have been a road, he said. She turned the map round. He cleared his throat. We should be okay, he said.

That's right. No one ever died in the outback.

She looked at Harry for a long moment. The tyres rumbled over the track, vibrations through the steering column.

He kept his eyes ahead. The darkness was coming quickly now. When he'd started on this road it had been sealed. Surely it would become more substantial soon. It was flattening out. All he needed was a glimpse of some streetlights or some evidence of a sheep station, an outhouse, but there was nothing.

The nearest place is Bordertown, she said. There's a turning twenty kay after that, but it sweeps round a range for a hundred kay. She folded the map in half in one quick movement. This doesn't look like a road.

She turned and looked back the way they had come.

If you'd been awake you could have given me directions.

What, so it's my fault?

I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that I've been driving for over four hours now without a break.

She folded her arms on the seat and paused a moment. Harry could feel pinpricks of sweat on his forehead.

And why do you think you've been driving that long? Who planned the route? Who missed the turning?

I thought this was right. It started off as a sealed road. There hasn't been a turning till now. I'd have seen one if there'd been one.

But now she doubted him his mind went back to the track that led up the hill to the sheep station. Perhaps what he'd seen was just another farm track. One of the thousand secret routes that led off into the deeper plains of the outback. His face heated up.

So I'm to blame, she said, nodding her head vigorously now. Even while I'm asleep. It's me, isn't it? Yes, I'm to blame.

Can we just relax a bit, Angela? It doesn't matter. We'll get to the next town. I'll turn the car round. We've got enough petrol.

He tapped the window over the fuel gauge.

And if there's nowhere to stay? If there's nothing there but a petrol station and a caravan park? What if it doesn't exist anymore? What if it's a ghost town, Harry? What if there's nothing out here?

It was at that moment that he saw them, just ten yards ahead, gathering on the road. He put his foot on the brake, and Angela grunted as her chest hit lightly against the back of the seat. The car shook as it came to a stop with a hiss of grit under the tyres. A drift of dust shifted into the air ahead and moved through the beams of the headlights.

They sat quietly for a moment, the sound of the engine rising and falling, struggling to keep firing now his foot was off the accelerator.

Dingoes, said Angela.

There were six of them. They all turned their heads to stare, their eyes white discs of light. Harry made his breathing shallow as if he might disturb them.

One of the dogs was larger than the others. As it panted its tongue hung between its front teeth like a loose slice of meat. It looked into the darkening desert to the right. Then it turned and moved into the roadside trees. The other dogs followed, moving off with a slow ease.

We should go, Harry, said Angela, finally. We're in the middle of nowhere. Her voice was flat and taut.

Harry nodded his head. He watched the retreating animals as they gathered speed now, running between the low, dry bushes. For a short time he lost sight of them, but then he saw them again, moving fast among the barren trees. Because they were pale, and because the light was so poor, they became transparent. The trace of animal outlines. The spirits of wild dogs.

He put the car into reverse, and pulled back slowly. The rear wheels dropped with a gentle thump as they rolled off the road into the roadside dust. The headlights shone through the trees. He put the brake on and sat forward, hands on the wheel, chin resting in the dip between two knuckles. His contact lenses had dried onto his eyes, so that there was a faint, milky mist. He blinked, then squinted to help himself see.

In the headlights the thin pale trunks of trees close to the car. One tree had grown into a bloated, grotesque shape, its trunk expanded and split as though it had erupted. Fallen eucalypts like lengths of bone. The land rose up into a series of fluted mounds with deep fumeroles and basins, the valves of ancient volcanic activity.

Can you see that? He pointed through the windscreen. Out there?

I want us to go, Harry.

No, look, Angela.

She leant forward again.

It's a car.

That's right, said Harry.

He had seen wrecks at the side of the road a number of times since leaving Sydney, some of them fifty years old or more, abandoned on a disused track, in the corner of a field of pasture, in the shade of an outbuilding. Something about this one was different. From where he sat it looked as if the car had been driven into a tree. He pulled on the lever, and the door clicked open.

Harry. Harry, what are you doing?

I'm just going to look.

She was leaning on the back of the passenger seat again.

What?

I'm going to see what's in the car.

It's a wreck, Harry.

He pushed the door. It was heavy – he hadn't realised till now, but with the back wheels off the track, the car was on a tilt – and it took an extra effort to get it open. He stepped outside. The air was cooler. The wind blew sand along the track. The creak of warped tree trunks like rope pulled taut. Sand sifted along the low lying earth.

What if the dogs come back? she hissed from inside the car.

He reached in, under the dashboard, and took hold of a heavy duty power torch. He tested its weight.

I won't be long, said Harry.

He pushed the door to and walked across the track. He took in the open air, the temperature beginning to fall at last. He walked slowly down the slope, dry earth breaking up and falling away from him. The underside of the cloud across the horizon darkening every moment, blooming the colour of blood, the colour of iron ore. The faint smell of manure, from the dogs, from wild goats, from whatever passed here unseen at night.

The ground flattened, small rocks, tall and wiry tufts of grass, far apart from each other to show there had been no rain out here for a long time. He turned on the torch. Stones rattling against each other as he disturbed them, his shoes sinking in the red dirt where the halo of light fell. Walking through a sparsely planted orchard of dead trees.

When he reached the car, in the blue shadows of the flumes, he stood for a moment. There was a deep hum in the air like tinnitus. A burnt out four door Nissan resting with its front axle against a gum tree. A black flare up the side of the tree. The car had deep burn marks above the wheel arches where the tyres had burnt away. The exposed wheels rested in the dirt. A heavy, poisonous smell in the air of oil, melted plastic and rubber.

He moved his light over the vehicle. Much of the paintwork had burnt away, a grey silver exposed. The metal in the dashboard had sagged, and there were oily pools of plastic that had run as liquid and set with a dull shine. Grey and white ash hung like wax from the wipers and the exposed steering column, and was deep as polluted snow in the foot well. The figure in the driver's seat was sitting with his head against the rest, his mouth open, a black, life sized effigy.

There was another in the passenger's seat. They were both sitting perfectly upright, but the one in the passenger seat had turned his head away. His arms were thin, his hands drawn up to his chest.

Insects the size and colour of grass seeds moved over the interior, spilling out of the holes in doors. Broken glass on the bonnet like pieces of ice. The sound of insects moved in and out like breathing. As Harry walked around the vehicle, the dark crust of earth broke under his feet.

Harry?

He brought the torchlight round in an arc through the stark white branches, pointing it back towards the road. Angela was standing beside the car, moving from foot to foot. A sound came from a bird somewhere in the dark, something like, Watch out! Watch out!

Harry?

His head was beginning to throb with the smell of the wreck, a dull beat, a wave of heat and slowly building nausea.

Harry?

He shone the torch on the figure in the passenger seat. The deep dark sockets where the eyes had burnt away, the oily black of the head, an exposed skullcap. He dipped the torch and the figure disappeared. He stepped back as if he'd been shoved.

The flies seemed to multiply. They landed on his face, his scalp, in his ears - a sound like electric razors. He kept moving back, rubbing his free hand over his face, through his hair, sweat breaking out, his breath tightening. His foot slipped into a hole, and a sharp pain went through his ankle.

Harry?

He started walking. He knew not to run, though the car lights seemed far away, blinking between the branches of the trees. He favoured the ankle that hurt as he trod on the hard, uneven ground. Blind insects ran across the earth as his torchlight illuminated them. Flies caught in the beam in silver flashes.

He climbed the slope to the track with some difficulty, his feet slipping, grit falling into his shoes. When he reached the track Angela came up close to him. She looked at him as though she was suddenly wary of him.

Like you said, just a wreck.

She shook her head, looking him closely in the eyes.

There's something else.

She looked past him, into the desert, and her face had a pale glow from the last light that was filtering away in the west. The air was growing colder. He walked to the car, touching the bonnet with a hand, and rested himself there, the springs settling with his weight.

Tell me what it was, Harry.

I'll tell you later.

Tell me now.

He held up a hand. He took the packet of Silk Cut out of his shirt pocket and pulled out a flattened cigarette. He pinched it all the way down its length. When he took out a book of matches Angela turned her head and walked round him to the back door.

When you're finished giving yourself cancer I'd like to go. I'm freezing, and if we're not lost out here for good, I'd like to find a bed for the night.

The car shook when she closed the door. He opened the matchbook. Changi Airport in gold letters. He tore off a cardboard match and struck it. He closed his eyes, and the light flared red and arterial through his eyelids. The world became a small place – the hiss of burning paper, the smooth smoke in his lungs and the lightness as the nicotine went into his system. Something to take away the taste in his mouth.

Crabs as large as hubcaps. A whole pool full of them, heavy skulled, red as ox blood, cratered with barnacles. When he walks towards them they move away from him, slipping over each other, stirring up the deep green residue in the bowl of the pool as they attempt to hide in the recess of the cavern wall. Their eyes glitter as they watch him approach, and their collective fear excites him. He picks up a rock from the floor of the cavern.

Don't you run away from me.

The bed shook, a voice in the dark.

Get up, Lee. We've got to go.

The smell of car oil on his brother's skin, his laboured breathing. He felt two short, sharp slaps on his face.

Come on.

Then the mattress shook, and he was gone. Lee pulled himself round and sat on the edge of the bed and waited there, his head heavy, his eyes closed.

He heard the fridge door hit the work surface in the kitchen, and a low Damn! Through the thin partition wall he heard his mother roll in her bed. He waited, heard the high pitched whine in the air but nothing else. He opened his mouth wide and yawned, and the whine in his ears filled the room for a moment.

As he sat there he thought about Lucy, standing outside the Pioneer. The way she stood against the car, her cardigan tight against her body. He thought about her driving out of town with the boy. Maybe to the closed mine. Somewhere no one could see them. The boy undoing the buttons. He put a hand down his boxers and held his testicles, like a handful of warm dough. He took hold of his penis. He began to slowly pull on it. His mum turned again, the creak of the old springs. A dull rap on the kitchen table.

Come on, Lee, he whispered to himself in the dark. We're going to make some money. He stood and snapped his boxers against his stomach.

Out in the back yard Murray was filling plastic containers from the standing pipe, water gushing and spluttering over his hand, finger hooked into the plastic loop, tendons tight on his arm as the level rose.

Why'd we need to be so early? said Lee.

Murray looked up at him from his stooped position.

We've got to get to him before he leaves and no one can find him. And keep your voice down.

How long's this going to take?

We'll be there by tomorrow night if we drive straight.

Do I get to drive?

Murray put the bottle down with a thump on the concrete drive.

Well, we'll wait till we're out in the desert. Then, when I'm certain you won't be able to hit anything, I'll let you have the wheel.

A large moth fluttered into the light over the back door. It landed on the hot bulb, quivering there, incandescent. A moment later it tanged against the tin cowl, then flew off into the dark.

It's cold, said Lee, holding his elbows.

It soon won't be. We're going to need the esky. There's some beers in the fridge. But when you get them, don't, for fucksake, wake Roy. We don't want him getting all weepy and worried.

What do you reckon I am? Stupid?

Don't put me in that awkward position.

After he said this he gave Lee a grin.

Lee was carrying the esky out of the back door when he stopped and glanced over the neighbour's fence. An old habit from when he sneaked out of the house as a boy. There she was, Mrs Wheeler, sitting by the open window in her nightdress.

What are you up to, you little bastard? she said, as though it was daylight.

As he walked away she raised her voice.

Hey? What have you got there? Yes, I can see you. I can see you!

When is that old fucker going to die?

Harry drove them into Bordertown on a road straight out of the desert. A wire fence and concrete posts bordered the redundant mine. On the opposite side were shacks with tin roofs, screened porches, on land overgrown with pale grass, corrugated garden walls leaning sideways, brick and tin chimneys. A car on cinderblocks, a horse box on sunken wheels.

There were no streetlights or pavements until they reached the main street. Here there were shops under the deep shadows of the verandas cast by sodium lights, brickwork ground floors, and upper floors of wood. A pool and snooker hall. Station wagons and Utes parked at angles to the kerb. Dick Smiths Electronics. A red neon sign fixed to the window switched on and off slowly, spelling out Merry Christmas. A glowing Homer Simpson in a Santa outfit.

There was a bar, The Watering Hole, with a door open, two men standing under the veranda light, one leaning against the wall, smoke rising up and drifting, illuminated, hanging in the air above their heads. As the car went by one of the men walked to the end of the veranda to watch them as they passed.

Harry pulled up outside a two storey Victorian building. A sign by the pavement read Crane's Hotel. At the front of the house, dense bushes were leaning over the stone wall onto the concrete pavement as if the heat of the day had been too much. When he turned the engine off the quiet was sudden and immediate.

Well, said Harry, we won't be sleeping in the car.

It looks deserted, said Angela.

There's a light in the basement.

I can't see it.

There. Through the weeds.

The house was uncommonly tall for the street, with a steep, buckled shale roof. Harry got out of the car. He walked along the front. A yellow light glowed dimly deep inside the house, and showed through the heavy lace in a front window. He went up the front steps, his feet going tup tup tup tup, rubber soles against the wood.

He pressed the doorbell, and an electric buzzer sounded in a room somewhere at the back of the house. The porch roof was thick with cobwebs and the wings of insects like delicate veined winter leaves. Between the pillars a piece of wire had been tacked with unlit Christmas lights, and by the front door a wooden chair, the varnish peeling off in thin papery curls. By its side was a collection of beer bottles, dulled with a thick layering of road dirt and dust.

He looked back at the car. Angela stared up at him from the back window, an expression on her face as if she'd bitten a fly.

That's right, he said. Don't, whatever you do, knock yourself out.

The light came on above his head, and a woman opened the front door, pulling it inwards, keeping the fly wire between them. She was wearing a coat thrown over a nightdress, and her dyed red hair was tied back.

It's almost eleven o'clock, she said. Sam's in bed. He'll be around at 6.30 as usual. Come back at 6.30 if you want to speak to him.

We just got here. I saw the sign. We need somewhere to stay.

She brought her face close to the fly wire. A nerve twitched in the corner of her mouth and she blinked her eyes as a thought activated behind them.

You've just arrived?

Harry pointed towards the car.

We've been travelling all day.

Well that may be so, but Sam's gone to bed and I'm just about to follow him.

She stood there a moment longer. She sucked in her thin upper lip and chewed it – an action that might have been habitual since childhood. A small revelation of her younger self.

When you say we, what precisely do you mean?

Me and my wife.

She leaned sideways and looked into the street.

The room she showed them to was a large one on the first floor. It had a three-quarter bed under the window, a single pushed into the corner. When Harry dropped the case onto it the springs sang.

The air conditioning doesn't work, said Mrs Crane, standing in the doorway and looking at Angela, then Harry. She pointed to the box unit fixed to the wall, with its thin metal fins. If it gets too hot, turn on the fan. You can slide the windows open. There's screens so you won't let the mozzies in. The bathroom's down the corridor.

The fan hung from the ceiling, a great copper propeller.

I suppose you're hungry. All I've got is cold sausage.

We'll be okay, said Angela. We just need to get some sleep.

Alright.

When Mrs Crane had gone downstairs Angela took her toiletry bag from a case and left the room. Harry stood by the largest window and looked out onto the street. A cloud of flies moved around each light. A bird flew across the street in an angular movement as though it was caught on a wire. It moved in a zigzag, then vanished from view into the dark between two buildings.

He saw again the grinning face, the patch of bone, the hands held against the chest. The way the lips were pulled back, as though the man was remembering a joke. The bird reappeared, rising into the sky, then flitting in and out of view as it crossed shadows and pale facades, and as it darted beneath the window he saw it for what it was – a large, loose moving bat. It swept up, into a palm tree that stood in front of a low wooden building across from the hotel.

The door opened and Angela came back in. She closed the door and leant against it. The shadow of her small breasts pressed against her white shirt, and he felt a pang in his groin. But she wasn't looking at him. She was looking around the bedroom.

It stinks of old drains, she said.

It's not too bad.

It smells like someone pissed in here.

There were bleached, worn floorboards, a thin rug, a chest of drawers with glass over doilies, a solitary sink on the wall with an exposed pipe. A mirror above the sink with greasy fingerprints.

What do we do about sleeping? he said. She gave him a look. I mean, there's a single, but it's narrow, and the mattress looks worn out.

He touched the window with his fingers, feeling his skin stick to the glass. The room felt like a closed oven.

Harry, don't start again.

I'm just thinking.

Harry, we haven't seen each other for six months. What do you think I am?

I'm just thinking this once.

Harry, I'm sick of this. Now I'm tired.

He walked over to the sink, and looked at himself. He looked pale, dark under the eyes, and old. Old. A toilet flushed somewhere under his feet, and then the sound of water running, a whining of the pipes in the roof.

In the bathroom he could smell the liquid soap Angela used. He wanted to breathe it in, a rose scent along with the faint odour of her sweat.

I want to put my mouth all over you, he once said to her. I want to put my mouth all over you, she replied. Do you really want the same thing? I might. I might just be repeating what you said. Her face raised, a smile, eyes closed. Then he took her upstairs and put a pillow against the side of the blind so no one could see into the bedroom. Then he took off all her clothes. She used to let out cries every time, in those times when she couldn't hold it in.

He lay on the narrow bed in the dark fully clothed, his hands down the front of his shorts, holding himself, and listened to the cicadas. He listened to Angela's light breathing from the double bed. Beneath him he heard a door opening and closing, and a deep voice speaking for a moment. He fell asleep. When he woke there was a line of saliva on his cheek, a damp area on the pillow. He rolled over, pulled the sheets down and got under them. Throughout these movements his arms were heavy like sand bags. Then he slept again.

When he woke there was a deep blue light in the window. Something whining by his pillow. Without thinking he brought his hand up quickly and thumped his ear, and the shock of the pain and the sound woke him fully. He waited a moment, seeing the imperfections in his eyes like coils of smoke against the pale wooden ceiling. Then there it was again – the angry whine, next to his ear.

God damn you little shit.

He threw the sheets back and walked unsteadily to the corridor. There was a pure deep orange on the rim of the horizon through the window, the rooftops still in darkness, molten red on something metallic on the hill above the town. The walls in the corridor were showing a rose pink glow. He went to the bathroom and urinated heavily. The end of his penis hurt like he was passing ground glass. He stood there a while. The wall throbbed, a pulse in his head grew and subsided.

After washing he went down the stairs and along the hall towards the back of the house. In the kitchen there was a table so worn the wood was rubbed smooth. A yellow flypaper spotted with flies hanging by the window, weighted by its cardboard cap. A hob with a samovar steaming on it. By the window a plywood door with a transparent cat flap, a plastic window and a brown, torn fly wire.

Two men walked across the dry lawn in the half light, one with a metal tool kit that hung from his fingers. Both were in work clothes. One of them was wearing a cap. A cigarette glowed in his mouth. A moment later a pit bull terrier padded along, low to the ground, an oversized head and heavy jaw, its tail short and thin like a deflated balloon.

Everywhere there's a dog, said Harry.

He poured a coffee into a stained mug. He couldn't see the sugar anywhere and he didn't want to open any cupboards, so he drank it black. It was bitter and strong, and only lukewarm, and he

chewed on the grounds with his front teeth. He felt like he'd had no sleep at all. Like gravity had doubled in the night. He swallowed the coffee like medicine.

A rattle and a deep huffing came from outside. The cat flap opened inwards. He leant forward and tapped on the window. The dog looked up at him, and rolled its white clown eyes, irises as brown as conkers. Saliva hung in threads from its yellow fangs, illuminated by the porch light. It let out a bark, jolting its head up, and backed away, paws skittering on the concrete path.

Shut up, you little mutt! A shrill voice from round the side of the house.

The dog turned its head and sniffed at the air. It looked at Harry again and gave him another deep bark, a little less certain this time, then walked off, legs bowed and sagging belly close to the ground, back across the lawn and out of view. When he looked through the kitchen window Harry could see Mrs Crane, sitting on a chair with a blanket up to her waist.

He stepped outside. When she looked at him it was with a full look, appraising but also familiar. She was older than he'd thought, but her skin was still smooth, her cheek bones strong.

Have you been sleeping out here?

Only a while. My hubby rolls around sometimes.

She smoothed the back of her neck slowly, her cotton dress pulling against the large breasts that had rolled to either side of her ribcage.

He was restless last night, but I bet he's sleeping now. Now there's things to be done.

Whose is the dog?

Ah, it's the men mending the fence. They're early. I told them not to come early. But they're here. They won't start knockin till eight.

She raised herself from the chair and stretched, the dress pulled tight again. It looked too deliberate an action, and Harry looked away, across the lawn.

I was going to make breakfast, she said. If you want to join me.

He sat at the table with her and ate a slice of boiled ham on toasted bread with salted butter she'd made herself. It's cheaper and better, she said. I make my own bread too. He drank another coffee – a fresh one this time – and once he'd finished he sat back and breathed in the cool morning air. He could smell flour and coffee and something sweet that reminded him of when he was a boy, though he couldn't think what that something was.

I came here to live with my children, but they all moved to Sydney, and I stayed on with my husband till he died ten years ago. We set up this place and, pop! He dies. How about that? I got the whole place to myself, including the mortgage. She pointed with a butter knife towards the door just inside the hallway. We're newly weds. Second hubby. It's never too late, eh.

This guy we're looking for, said Murray. He's Jonny Peplinski's cousin from Melbourne.

You spoke to Jonny Peplinski? You actually talked to him?

Well yeah. He asked me into his office. It was a poky room. All he has is a plywood desk. You'd think he'd splash out.

In the wing mirror the lights of town were still winking in the shallow valley. The sun was yet to rise, and the air was cool. When Murray drove close to the roadside, grit rattled against the car and dust twisted up on the road behind them and folded away into the dark as though something was following and breathing in the cold air.

I heard Jonny murdered a boy when he was fourteen.

I heard that too. Murray turned to Lee. It's just talk. It's what happens in a small town when you're a stranger and there isn't enough money to keep people from idle chatter. Anyhow, who cares what he did in Melbourne. He's an old man now. At least fifty and showing it.

He took a rollup from his shirt pocket and put it into the corner of his mouth.

He's not as bad as they paint him. He had a couple of sheilas in his office. He was pure kindness itself. Do you want more tea? Are you sure? Can we do anything more for you? He had me waiting there while he fussed over them and he couldn't do enough. One of the ladies had a baby in her lap. He was doing all the baby talk. Hey little Mikey. How yer doin little Mikey? I was almost embarrassed.

Lee put his feet up on the seat, and rested his knees against the dashboard. He'd heard a lot of talk about Joe Peplinski. When he first arrived in the town he had a gang of Abboes come and work for him, taking crates of drink and other packages to Minindee. One of the Abboes by the name of Bungalow Bill went missing – he was walked out of a bar in downtown Minindee by a couple of men. Lee heard he'd been fiddling Jonny. The upshot was that sometime later someone's remains were found, out in the desert. It couldn't be said for certain that it was Bill, for it was burnt up and animals had been at it, but Bill never turned up again in Bordertown or Menindee.

Well, I don't know, said Lee. Maybe he's changed. But I wouldn't want to get on his wrong side. That's all.

Yer a worrit, said Murray. Nothing's going to go wrong. I get the feeling Jonny doesn't even like his cousin. But he is family, so we've got to go careful.

He switched on the cab light and in its glow he lit the rollup from the lighter between the seats, touching the paper to the red electric coil. There was the faintest bloom of colour on the ridges, sixty miles away, but the land they travelled through was as cold and grey as a moon.

It was only half-light when Harry left the hotel. The streetlights were still lit, but they made a dull, cold glow in the grey dawn. When he stepped off the pavement the drop surprised him, sending a jolt through his body that knocked his heart. The street was wide, and took a long time to cross.

He passed the electronics shop with Merry Christmas still turning on and off in its window, a bakery with Award Winning Pies, an oversized emporium with a first floor balcony.

Outside the police station was a glass covered notice board. National Missing Persons Week. A two-year-old boy had vanished from a back yard in McLaren. A twenty-year-old girl had been found dead in Queensland. She'd been hitchhiking all the way to Darwin. There was a picture of her, smiling in the sunlight of a suburban lawn, in a zip up fleece and chinos. Go back in time and warn her. Tell the

girl in the turn-ups to stay at home, or take another route. A card in the corner gave Harry an address: Out of office hours contact Terrance Bail 3 Argot Street.

Terrance sat and looked at him for a while. On his dining table was a half-eaten baguette and a mug of tea with I'm The Boss in red letters. While Harry spoke Terrance rested back in his wooden chair, chin on his chest. His eyebrows were slightly raised as if he was listening to an elaborate lie and wanted Harry to know he knew that. His glasses were large and reflected back at Harry like TV screens. He had a moustache that needed trimming.

Finally he leaned forward in his chair with a creak of wood and gave a small sigh.

Two dead men. Where did you say?

An hour or two back that way, to the east. When we got back to the main road I saw a derelict house.

I know the place. A bloke used to live out there on his own. He raised his eyebrows higher. Yet he used to come into town to drink. Talked the legs off an iron pot. That is something I never understood.

He raised his head, tilted to one side, inviting comment.

Perhaps he was lonely.

Terrance nodded his head.

Well he ought to have been.

He turned and reached for the phone on the wall. He dialed while talking, the phone between ear and shoulder. Want a coffee? No? Then to the phone. Ah, yeah, is Chief Inspector Tyler there? I'll hold on. Yeah, it's important. Yeah, that's right. It's Terrance here.

Behind the officer's head was a hook on the wall by the aluminium sink with a black leather holster hanging from it, the butt of a gun fastened down with a flap and black stud.

Terrance picked up his sandwich again, and was looking at it, wondering whether to risk another bite. Through the telephone ear piece Harry could hear thin music. The air conditioner whirred, a small box on the wall that made the room feel like a walk-in fridge.

Terrance drove his four-by-four at a steady fifty kilometres an hour, down the centre of the road. It was full daylight now. The high, thin cloud was already burning away. Terrance sat forwards, chin close to the wheel, checking the bush land to left and right.

Never drive to the side if you can help it, yeah? He had to speak loud over the sound of the Ute engine. That way you avoid kangas. You want to see the damage a kanga does to a car grill. When you hit one, you have to twist the wheel. It'll cut them in half. Sometimes you think you've run over one and it's still turning in the road. Sometimes it's stuck under the vehicle.

Terrance's mobile was in a cradle on the dashboard. It lit up and began a low hum. He touched it with a forefinger.

Yeah.

Hello Terrance.

He leant forward to check the name on the screen, straightened up and smiled.

What's the emergency?

Oh, just checking on you. Somebody has to.

Do they? And that'd be your job.

That's right. That's what I get paid for.

Is it, indeed? You earning a wage. That's a novelty. Are we a little bored this morning?

Terrance! Can't a girl show her concern?

She can if she hasn't got schoolwork to do. And it's dad to you.

Okay. Dad. And it's college work. I left school, remember? I'm all grown up.

Hm. I must have been sleeping when that happened. Speaking of which, where were you so late last night?

The mobile was silent a moment, a faint hiss.

Well, that's one of those imponderables, Terrance.

Dad.

Dad. Got to go. Time for my breakfast. Byee.

The screen faded. Terrance shook his head.

I don't know where they get it from. Are they born with it, or do they learn from each other?

I have no idea, said Harry

They approached the derelict house. It stood in silhouette, light showing through its part boarded windows right through from the broken roof. Terrance turned down the track and soon Harry could see the land that had been invisible in the night. A wide and sparse desert, bushes low to the ground, bare patches of dark vegetation, white trees like totems. Thin pale traces of lines and patterns across the land's surface where it had sunk and broken in rifts.

See the hills over there? They're over sixty miles away, said Terrance. They're over the state line, in South Australia. You can see the bend. You know. He indicated with his hand, described an arc. The curvature. Of the earth. That's how wide the plain is.

Up ahead a long grey station wagon was parked at the side of the track. A man in pale trousers and a blue denim shirt was leaning against the bonnet, watching as they drew up. He had a mass of white hair that moved stiffly in the wind.

Looks as if the chief is already here, said Terrance, and reached into the well in the door for his cap. He cleared his throat.

He turned the engine off and jumped out, grit rasping under his boots, and pushed the door to. He raised a hand in the bright morning air.

Mornin Chief.

He walked over slowly, and stooped to listen to what the chief had to say. The wind rose and fell over the dry stony earth, the white sentinel trees, the car resting as before, thirty metres from the road.

There was a toot of a car horn. The chief waved at Harry, motioning to him to join them. Harry opened his door. He felt the heat rising up from the ground, the wind blowing his shirt against his chest. He walked over, and the chief watched him approach.

This is the bloke who found the car, said Terrance.

Tyler's eyes were pale blue, like a boy's, while the skin of his face was thin and finely lined, dust in the creases.

You drove down here after you turned off the road at the Cottam house. Harry looked from the chief to Terrance. The shack on the hill. You turned down from there. Last night.

That's right. I thought this was a road.

Well it used to be a road. What made you stop here?

Dingoes. There were five or six of them.

The chief turned and looked back down the track

Across here?

That's right.

The chief nodded.

Mind accompanying us to the car?

He led the way down the side of the track. The flies were worse than in the night. They never stopped coming. All three men waved their hands about their faces as they walked.

Chief Tyler stood looking at the car and was still for a moment. He blew out his cheeks.

A Nissan Bluebird. He pointed at the bumper. It must have been a bonfire. The plates are melted out of recognition. You see that?

He took hold of the nearest door handle and gave it a pull. The door remained fast. He walked round and tried the other, with the same result. He pointed at the bonnet.

Think we can get it open?

Terrance pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and wrapped it round his hand. He appraised the situation, took a deep breath, then he reached in past the head of the blackened body. Sweat glistened on his face.

Can't see a lever.

He stepped back again, let the air out of his lungs, pushed it all out.

Have another look. Down by the seat.

Can't we prise it open? Lever it with a bar?

Tyler turned to Harry.

You didn't see anybody out here? You didn't pass any car on the way?

No.

And this is how you found it? He looked at Harry. Alright. Come on.

As they walked back to the track, he said to Terrance:

I want as much as we can get from here before we have to leave. Get your digital camera and Polaroid.

When Lee walked into the hotel bar it was easy for him to see who the out-of-towner was straight away. There were six ladies, all the same comfortable size, sitting on low sofas that had been turned to face each other. They sat knitting and talking. Below the red cedarwood ceiling, fans turned slowly, and people sat in cane chairs by pillars painted the colour of nicotine - reading a newspaper, drinking late afternoon coffee or iced water, blotting at a forehead or neck with a handkerchief or shirt sleeve.

But it was the man at the horseshoe bar that Lee noticed, a squat man with bulging eyes. Receding, sandy waxed hair brushed back from his forehead. He had a newspaper open in his lap and was sipping from a tumbler. He watched Lee right from the moment he walked in. He had the tumbler to his mouth to cover his face.

Big place for a small town, thought Lee. The floor was carpeted in a rough, twist pile. There were palm plants in heavy glazed pots, paintings on the walls of deserts with tussocks of weeds and howling dingoes, and moons over ranges. As if there wasn't enough desert outside. There was a TV on low above the bar - adverts for health insurance.

He sat in the middle of the bar and ordered a bottle of Victoria Beer from a girl in a starched white shirt. She had a black bob of hair, and an easy smile. While she bent to take his drink from the glass fronted fridge he pictured her on a bed, her arms flung behind her, her shirt unbuttoned.

Good air con, eh? he said. It's bloody hot out there.

Really? she said, and she kept smiling. At the same time she took his money and placed his change in a tray on the bar. He'd never seen that before. Coins in a tray.

Oh yeah, it's gotta be forty degrees. I'm sweating like a pig. But I'm sure this'll help.

He raised the bottle and drank half its contents. He only stopped to take a breath. He felt the beer burn cold down his throat and hit his stomach. The man along the bar was back reading his paper. Murray said if the man's there, wait and see what happens. Let me know if he leaves. Just send me a text when he does. And if he doesn't leave, stay there a while until he forgets you're there.

He took the money he had out of his pocket. He laid a five-dollar bill out on the bar and spread it with his fingers. He took another long swallow of beer, then he rested back. Things were changing at long, long last. And change, even bad change, was better than no change at all.

It wasn't long before the light through the windows turned red, colouring the papered walls pink. A short time later three men and a woman came in from the street and ordered iced drinks, and for a while there was activity and noise. They told the girl behind the bar that they were touring in a converted bus and were heading for Alice Springs.

We've a cockatoo with us, the woman said. Stevie bought it me at the Gold Coast. We put it out at night, in a cage. We're a regular mobile house.

She placed a hand on the bony chest of the man next to her, but he took little notice, looking in a sullen way at his glass. The woman had a green vest top on and had heavy, tanned arms, but she was still attractive. Her breasts moved loosely when she shifted on the barstool, and her eyes were quick to take in the fact that Lee noticed. She gave him a smile. One of the men – skinny, but taller than the others – kept coming up behind her and putting his arms round her, but she hardly seemed to notice.

Lee wanted to sleep with so many women. He wanted to pull this woman's vest top over her head to see what she was like naked, take hold of her breasts, squeeze them hard. He felt a twinge between his legs, so strong it was painful. The girl behind the bar rang up an amount at the till. She had slender fingers, a serious, thoughtful face. He'd be able to lift her onto a kitchen surface, she was so small.

The light outside drained away, and the bar grew dark. The globe lights hanging from the ceiling came on and the girl behind the counter turned off the fans. The taller man and the woman went behind the screens to play the pokies. He heard them laughing – the man's laugh was the loudest, as if he wanted everyone in the bar to hear him and know he was with the woman with the vest top. Yeah, keep on dreaming, mate, Lee murmured, and took another swig of beer.

He turned to look for the toilet. There was a white door in the wall with a fancy figure on it made of brass. The man at the end of the bar was still reading his newspaper, open at the sports, making a note in places with a biro. Lee twisted off his seat, and went through to the toilet, and stood there, swaying, urinating, feeling like he was doing something. He was making money at this very moment. He spat into the urinal and washed the spit towards the drain hole. When he walked back into the bar the man had gone.

Shit.

A sign on the wall pointed to a door, *Guests* in italics. He went through and ran up a narrow staircase, two steps at a time. At the top he turned left. Staring at him were the glazed eyes of a possum, crouched on a piece of wood in a glass case.

Round a corner he came to a corridor that was so long it went on into the dark like a fairground illusion with mirrors, doors on either side, pale lights in the ceiling barely lighting the lime green walls. When he walked forward the boards groaned, a deep listing sound as though the whole hotel was a ship. Sweat ran down the groove of his back.

Each doorknob brass, discoloured with the grease and sweat of so many hands. The numbers were printed in italic, peeling off in places or gone altogether. He listened and touched the wall with his fingertips. The place smelt of wood rot and carbolic.

Shit, I've lost him, Lee whispered. He strained to listen, to catch any sound. Murray's going to kill me.

A strip of light appeared suddenly on the carpet, a few steps away from Lee, and the man stepped into the corridor. Despite the heat he was wearing a moleskin sports coat. In his hand he held a carpetbag and a green felt hat with a silk band. When he saw Lee he gave him a smile. Most of his teeth were missing, and his sight was out of true, so that it was difficult to tell which eye to look at.

G'day. How you doing? the man said.

He started forward and Lee stepped into his path. The man stopped and stood there a moment.

I need to ask you something, said Lee.

Well listen, I'm in a hurry, said the man.

Lee might have let him go at that, but the man leant against the wall and slid along it in an attempt to get past. Lee put his hands on the man's shoulders, and the man dropped his bag and grasped Lee by his shoulders and started pushing, Lee resisting him. Now both were grunting, feet set against the thin carpet.

What are you doing? the man said, and let out a false laugh.

He pushed all the harder, his head against Lee's chin, the smell of hair wax, cheap hotel soap, his breath rank like rotten wood. His moleskin coat felt old and oily. The man got hold of a fistful of Lee's T-shirt. The material tore along the seam. Lee forced his own head down, feet planted wide. The man's cheek rasped against his like sandpaper and it struck Lee for the first time that he might just have a knife.

The man wheeled Lee around, sideways, into the wall – a deep crack of a join in the framework, the rattle of plaster broken loose in the cavity. Someone shouting, Hey! from inside the room.

The man relaxed his grip. Suddenly there was no resistance. They stood there, resting against each other. They straightened up together, the old man blinking at him with bloody eyes, sweat glistening on his face, thin hair standing up like straw. The man's breath whistled.

You two finished making love?

Murray stood at the man's back, a gun pressed into his fleshy neck. The man's eyes rolled sideways, his mouth part way open. Murray motioned with his head.

I think we'll go out the back way, yeah?

Most people don't travel this way. They're usually going the other way. Out of town and never looking back.

Mrs Crane pulled open the back door and pushed the fly wire with her foot, and carried the metal bucket full of ash out into the back yard. When she returned she put a fire blackened kettle on top of the stove.

Some people turn up to see what's left of the mines. Old miners take them out in minibuses for the tourist office. They don't get paid, except for petrol. There was ash on her forearms. But what's there to see? The slagheap and the winding gear. A few galleries and a cafeteria. People don't stay in town for long. And all the while our young people... She pointed off down an imaginary road. Ziiiiip. It makes running a hotel difficult.

The smell of meat fat on the hot plate and burning wood that cracked and spat inside the stove window. Angela had her arms crossed on the table. A night's sleep, and still weary. Harry had been gone a while now. Not that it mattered. It gave her room to breathe.

Mrs Crane took a lettuce the size of a cricket ball from the fridge. She cut into it with a broad flat knife, exposing the serried white and green folds in cross section, tight as the head of a flower. She cut slices of sausage on a slab of wood.

Yes, I should think it would.

Two years ago I said to Sam, I want to go south, to Adelaide, visit my sister? Sam's Mr Crane's given name. He said, You go there, you'll never come back. That's what he said. Go there, and I never want to see you again. So I didn't go. I haven't seen her for over ten years. I'm no longer sure I know what she looks like.

Mrs Crane glanced towards the door that led to the hallway.

The same things happened last month, after mother died. She had the room you're in now.

Angela pinched the front of her blouse.

Our bedroom?

I've whitewashed since. Don't worry. And the mattresses are fresh. It's sad, but she was gone from us long before she left. So, after the funeral, and we'd sorted through her belongings, I said, Sam, I want to go to Adelaide. I need some fresh sea air, some fresh sights. He told me, If you go, I'll change the locks.

She watched Angela.

I'm sorry about your mum, said Angela.

Mrs Crane waved a hand.

She wore herself out in the end. She'd just sit there at the window and shout at anything that went by. A dog, a bird. It got really wearing. In the end I couldn't make her stop. I think she was ready. She used to say they'll have to shoot me. Still, the house is a bit too quiet without her. It's good to have new people.

The vents of the Ute hummed, blowing out chilled air. In the distance Harry could see the raised ground of the mine, the hoist at the highest point and a dry house and rolling stock standing against the blue sky. A postbox went past, a milk churn on a white tree stump with the names Schulz and McLehan and 594 painted in red, under the thin shade of a leafless tree.

They passed the petrol station on the edge of the town, the two antique pumps standing side by side, pale with dust, a tin building behind with Crash Repairs painted like graffiti along its side.

There was oil on the road back there, said Terrance. You might want your car looked at. Might have bashed it when you turned.

They pulled up outside the Crane's Hotel.

Will you need me again? said Harry.

If you call at the servo they'll have a look at your car. When you're done, come and see me at the police station. Some time this afternoon. We'll get down what happened, what you saw.

Harry climbed out, and as he walked towards the front steps Terrance wound down his window.

Can you keep it to yourself for now? I mean, yeah, talk to your wife, but that's all, yeah? Chances are it's a local in the wreck.

The car pulled away and off down the street.

In the bathroom Harry filled the sink and doused the back of his head so the water flattened his hair and ran down his face, soaking into his shirt. He splashed himself several times, letting water fall onto the wooden floor and his clothes. In the bowl the sediment of red dust rose like smoke and settled around the plug. He leaned with his hands against the bowl, and looked at his face in the mirror – the veins in his eyes like cracks in enamel, the pale lines on his skin from squinting into the sun.

The man's eyes had burnt away, and still he continued to stare out through the place where the windscreen had been. His mouth was wide open as though shouting something. His hair was burnt away. His skull shrunk with the intensity of heat.

From behind him there was the creak of wood – someone's weight on the stairs. He pulled his shirt flap up and dried his face with it. When he walked out onto the landing Angela was standing by the door to the bedroom.

What happened? What did they say?

They just wanted to see.

So, can we leave?

The sun had cleared her complexion from a pale skin with adolescent pimples around the mouth to a healthy smoky colour. Her eyes a clear white.

Not right away. Before she could respond, as her eyes began to lose their clarity, he added: I have to help them fill out a report. And the car needs looking at. I doubt we'll be here more than a day.

In her face a boredom that had been growing since he arrived. A disinterest. Many years ago he had said to himself, whatever you do, don't ever let this girl get the upper hand. Don't ever put yourself at her mercy. Every relationship is unequal, its value related to how much or how little you have to lose.

She walked into the bedroom and he stood there in the corridor. There had been a time when she came to him. When he could walk into a room and she would leave whatever she was doing to join him. It might have always been the way, except for the events of one night that changed the course of their life together. A hot night in August in the centre of Norwich. They had both gone to a club on the Prince of Wales Road and he'd lost her for the last part of the evening but barely noticed, sitting at the tables by the bar with his university friends.

It was when he walked out of the doors just after 2am and crossed the road that he saw her, pressed into a doorway by someone in a smart jacket and trousers. He crossed the road in front of a private taxi, the sound of its horn causing Angela to turn her head. The street was full of people catching cabs, crowding into kebab shops, police in twos with stab jackets, street pastors with bright vests with Jesus Cares in black lettering, but somehow she saw him straight away and stepped smartly onto the pavement.

He walked her up the hill in a burning anger, incapable of talking till they reached the taxi rank by the market. Once they were in the queue the argument began, nonsensical and convoluted, somehow culminating in her being the wronged party:

You ignored me all night. If you don't want to spend time with me, why are we going out?

If I make you that unhappy, why don't you finish with me?

Okay, she said. We're finished.

He stayed with her till they reached the head of the queue, and by this time she was crying. When she climbed into the taxi she turned to look at him and he felt a terrible pity so that, without another thought, he climbed in after her. That night, in the bedroom she had slept in since she was a child, he proposed to her. He realised she had taken him seriously the following week at work, when people started approaching him to congratulate him.

On his wedding day he walked to the registry office from his house with his brother. It was a cold day, despite the sun. There was news of snowfall in the south. The wind cut through Harry's suit – a blue Italian linen. They crossed the bridge over Grapes Hill and walked past the toy shop where, five years before, he had taken his thesis to a man behind a curtain to bind in black material.

They passed the knapped flint tower of St. Giles and Harry wondered, again, why he wasn't marrying in a church. It was what he had always imagined, but Angela had said she would feel like a hypocrite. It would be always on my mind, she said. It would feel like I was doing something wrong.

The upstairs room of the registry office was painted a pale cream all the way to the orange coving, high above their heads, tall sash windows that looked out on rooftops and a timber frame house that had once been a high class brothel. The registrar and her assistant stood at a table, before rows of plastic chairs. As everyone filed in, music played on a portable CD player on the head table. Angela had chosen The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba. It seemed too hurried for a wedding, and as soon as everyone was seated the registrar leant over and pressed a button and the music stopped in the middle of a bar. Harry could smell a chemical carpet cleaner, and there was a continuous low drone from a vent in the ceiling and he was aware of this for most of the ceremony.

The registrar took up a yellow book and began the order of service. There was no mention of God, only legalities and vows. He would remember afterwards a sudden and brief surge of emotion when he realised he was married, and whoops and clapping that sounded sharp in his ears, and the way his hand shook so he could hardly sign the register. And that the registrar's signature was highly ornate, but that she filled in the wrong date.

Does that mean we aren't legal? Angela asked later.

The music was turned on again, this time something by Dido, and while the people stood and stretched and chatted and took photographs, Angela held Harry's lapels and rubbed the blue linen between finger and thumb and, without looking at him, asked:

Are you happy?

Murray?

Yeah?

Is he going to be alright? He won't die, will he?

The red light flickered in the dashboard. Lee rested his hands on the top of the steering wheel, and over his knuckles he saw roadside rocks speed by, the poles of telegraph wires and a fence that ran on for many miles. Murray didn't speak straight away. Lee looked at him, a quick glance.

No, there's enough air.

They travelled on a little longer.

Murray? Murray?

Yeah what?

Well, it's just that he's an old fellah.

He's fifty-three. He's not that old. Dad was nearly fifty-three, as solid as an iron bark. It's no age.

The car hit a pothole in the road and the red light flickered again. They travelled a few more kilometres before he spoke.

Eh, Murray.

Ah, shit, Lee, are y'goin to talk all the way back?

Well no...

Good, cause your getting on me tits now.

What about that gun?

Murray leaned back and stretched, and Lee could smell stale sweat coming from his shirt.

Y'didn't know I had that, did you?

He reached into a plastic bag in the foot well and pulled out the revolver. He pushed the chamber out to the side and gave it a spin, then shook the gun sideways so the chamber clunked back into position.

Aint she a beauty though, eh? He held it up so Lee could see. Even in Murray's hand it seemed oversized – large and heavy. It packs a wallop, I can tell you.

He had a smile on his face, the first time since leaving the hotel. He turned the gun sideways and rubbed the barrel and frame with his hand.

Let's have a look, said Lee.

You keep your mind on your driving. I'll let you see it later.

Strewth, Murray, come on.

Murray was quiet a moment. The car wheels rumbled along the road, the stony desert went by.

Alright. Let's take the next dirt road and I'll show you what it can do.

They pulled up and Murray leapt out and directed Lee to move the car off the track, examining the ground, kicking stones. Lee watched him in the headlights, the gun hanging from his right hand. As he turned the wheel the grit crackled under the slow moving tyres. Murray directed him to turn, and a tree came into existence twenty metres away. Murray held a hand up and Lee braked. The red light flickered again. He switched off the ignition and the car instantly shuddered to a stop, right down to the exhaust at the back. The headlights dimmed. Murray walked over to the car, patting the bonnet as he came round to the passenger's side.

Alright, champ. Hop out. Leave the lights on.

Lee followed Murray. They walked from the car to where the tree stood – a white gum, solid as limestone, fifteen metres tall. Murray slapped the smooth trunk.

Let's see, shall we?

He crouched down and sifted the loose ground with his fingers, rolling stones and pieces of wood as pale and light as the bones of desert birds. He selected a dark piece of volcanic residue and stood.

Okay.

He put the rock against the smooth wood and turned it, scoring a circular line but leaving little impression. He looked at Lee, then tried again, then he threw the stone to one side. Ah, fuck it. Alright.

He strode away in a straight line, with his boots kicking up dust in the white light from the car. The light gave him an aura. A brutish but touching transfiguration.

Move over will you? I don't want to hit your fat head. This made him laugh so he bent and then rocked back, and his bad mood was gone again. Come on, move away. No, over here, you nonce.

Lee walked in a wide curve, squinting with anticipation of the gun going off. The way he used to when his father lit fireworks on Australia Day. He stood by Murray. Murray had the gun in his right hand, hanging by his side, and was staring at the tree. When he lifted the gun, using both hands to

steady it, the light shone down the barrel off the blued metal. Lee felt a tingling in his stomach and a feeling all over his skin so tense that he felt he might collapse in a fit.

Best get behind me and put your fingers in your ears.

He put his palms either side of his head, heard a roar inside. The sound of surf on a shingle beach. The tree was stark white, a deep darkness behind, as if this was the only piece of land left in the world. The wind blowing in the space where the world they had known had once stood. Murray held the gun as far from himself as he could.

The gun let off a hollow explosion, and there were bright flashes either side of the cylinder. A moment later a side of the tree erupted into a pale dust cloud, like spores from a puffball. The sound of the revolver vanished. Lee looked behind him, with a sudden fear that they were being watched, but there was no one there.

When he turned again Murray was looking at the gun in his hand as if he was looking at it for the first time. Grey smoke trailed out of the end, and blue smoke hung about him in the air. He held the barrel near his nose and sniffed at it. He turned suddenly, remembering Lee.

See, I told you.

His voice was small, astonished. Lee held out his hand.

Let's have a go, Murray.

You don't know how.

You just pulled the trigger. Come on, Murray, it can't be that hard.

Murray looked at him a moment. He handed the gun over, butt first, barrel pointing to the ground. When Lee took hold of it Murray didn't let go straight away.

Don't shoot your foot off.

Lee held the gun at his side, tested its weight. His forefinger against the curve of the trigger. He felt excitement and dread, and an electric feeling up his arm that pulsed from the gun. He raised it and looked from the backsight to the foresight at the end of the barrel.

Use both hands or you'll break your nose. You saw what it did. You don't want it knocking you out.

He raised his left hand to cradle the gun, setting his teeth so his jaw muscles tightened. His heart thumped hard in his chest.

Okay, I'm going to...

The gun jumped in his hands. A terrible sound, a bolt through his upper body as though he'd run suddenly into a wall. The bullet was lost somewhere in the dark ahead of him. Particles turning in the air with the gas that escaped the muzzle and the chamber. The flash stayed on his retina, a bright white flare with a darker corona, in the dead space ahead of him.

Murray sat forward in his seat and turned the key once again. The starter motor gave out a raw sound and stopped dead. The red light glowed then faded.

Well, we aren't going anywhere tonight.

Lee had his knees against his chest, his feet on the passenger seat. His jacket was zipped up under his chin.

It's freezing out here. His fingers were clammy. He drew his elbows in. It'll be fine if they find us in a year's time, won't it?

Ah, we'll be okay. Let the engine cool down and it'll start, no worries.

Where'd you get this piece of shit car, anyway?

This little beaut? Murray slapped the molded dashboard with his hand, and the sound travelled through the wiring. I bought this for \$200 from Wan the Chinese kid. I just need to let the engine cool. It'll start up. I should have drawn the heat off with the blowers. We'll just be a day late. What's a day?

A low boom came from behind them.

Shouldn't we check on him?

Murray took a blister pack out of his shirt pocket and pushed out two painkillers. He chewed the tablets and turned his head slowly.

Nah. He's quietening down. He'll be alright. Tomorrow he'll be off our hands. And we'll be \$500 the richer.

He turned in his seat, reached towards the back seat and lifted the lid of the esky. The ice was rumbling around in there, half of it turned to water. He brought out a bottle of beer, shook it and twisted off the top.

And if he dies.

Then we're in deep shit. Another boom from the boot. Another. But he sounds alive enough to me.

An hour later, Murray was asleep, a beer bottle in hand. He could sleep anywhere. Late night in the corner of a bar, on a bench waiting for a train. Anywhere.

Lee stepped out of the car and sat on the bonnet and rolled himself a cigarette, the sky open to him, so many stars that he stared till he felt lost in them. He blew smoke into the air, poured his own constellations. Waited while they drifted away.

When he'd finished he threw the stub, a cascade of red embers when it hit the ground. He walked round to the back of the car. He stood a moment and listened. He crouched down, tapped the boot with his finger.

Ey, mate, you still in there?

He put his head to one side. He tried to cut out the sounds of the desert, the blood rushing in his ears. He thought he heard a whispering.

You speakin mate?

Something moved across a rock. All the skin on his face became tight. The release button was chrome plated, and had worn through the years. There was a key slot across the stub.

Y'there?

He said this so quiet he could barely hear himself. Then he turned and looked behind him in the desert. A wind rose up some distance away like something living. As a boy he had heard it from the porch or while lying in his bed at night, and known it was something large searching in the dead brush, past the water tank and red dirt, in the uninhabited land past the tin fencing that bordered their yard at the back of the house.

He heard the creaking of his own boots as he walked over to the side door and climbed into the passenger seat. We should get out of here, he thought. The wind shifted direction in the distance and he wished he was in the house and had never left it.

He turned his back on Murray and his low, deep nasal breathing, the beginning of a snore like water draining off down a pipe. The sound he heard in the middle of the night through the thin partition walls. He pulled his knees up, made himself as tight as he could. Looked out through the glass at the surface of the monochrome land, the slow moving star systems.

It's bloody cold, he whispered.

The light was pale, with ragged clouds that fanned out across the sky above the low rooftops and the post office clock tower. Harry sat back onto the pavement and placed a hand against the side of the car. He lowered himself so his shoulder touched the pavement. The front hubcap was dented like a Christmas decoration. In the grit of the road there was a dark patch.

He stood and climbed into the car. Sweat broke out in instant pinpricks on his forehead in the contained heat. He turned the ignition and the car jumped forward. He pulled the gear lever and tried again, and moved the car a few metres.

He got out and stood in the sun, looking at the dark patch on the road. As he stood there a Ute with canvas stretched over a piece of machinery moved at a slow pace along the line of shops, a boy in the back hanging on to the ties, an older man in a white hat at the wheel. The boy watched Harry as they passed. He watched Harry all the way until the Ute swung in and parked. The boy jumped off, nimble as an ape. The older man climbed out and walked across the street, attended by the boy.

Harry brought his hands together, and rubbed them, one against the other. His skin felt uncomfortable, like it was covered in goose fat. He climbed back into the car and started the engine. He engaged the clutch and pulled away.

The man was in his twenties, wearing a stained grey T-shirt and overalls loose to his waist. He came out of the shadows of the garage, into the light, squinting at Harry like a schoolboy. He raised his head in greeting.

How are you?

Harry nodded.

Fine. Yourself?

The man looked past Harry, at the car parked by the plate glass window of the station, next to the trays of newspapers.

I think it's got an oil leak, said Harry.

The man pulled a filthy cloth out of his pocket, wiped his oily hands on it, then wiped it across his nose. Then he shook his head. He walked over to the car, not lifting his feet, dragging them in the dust. He pushed at the side of the car with his foot. He was wearing weathered tennis shoes. He rested a hand on the bonnet and eased himself to a kneeling position. All his movements were slow, with a strange and beguiling intensity.

What's the engine sound like?

It's been misfiring since we bought it.

And where was that?

He bent his head at an angle to see underneath.

At a car market in Sydney. In Woolloomooloo.

Ah yeah. The car market. You didn't get it from a dealer at a backpacker's, did yeh? They'll stitch you up.

He placed a hand on the ground. With his free hand he reached under, and felt around for a moment. When he brought his hand back out his fingers were covered in a dark liquid. He brought them to his nose, then looked at Harry.

The oil's milky. See that? That means it's mixing oil and water. That's more than a break in the oil pipe.

He reached under again, breathing heavily. Harry's head began to throb, and specks of darkness moved around in the sunlight. He looked across from the garage, past a drinks dispenser, the two petrol pumps, thin and silver in the sunlight, back down the street.

The road was busier now. A silver station wagon was moving along, following the line of telegraph posts that rose up from the veranda on the left side of the street. The shadows were a flat black, cut clean. Out to the west, low-lying ranges made hazy by the blue and grey heat. Nearer, to the northwest, great hills, suddenly rising up, eruptions on the flat outback plane.

The mechanic turned over, head and chest hidden now by the car. His T-shirt rode up, his belly showing white and egg like. Then the sound of boots, and Terrance came round the side of the building, wearing a bush hat with a check strip above the brim, a pale blue shirt and Raybans.

How are you? he said, walking up to the car, and stopping by the mechanic's legs. He went down on his haunches. You sleeping under there, Ron?

Yeah. Your mother kept me up all night.

Terrance looked at Harry, mock horror on his face. The mechanic shuffled forward and his head appeared, a smear of black across his clear brow. His expression was as neutral as it had been for Harry. Terrance pointed at the car.

How long to get this fixed?

As long as.

Yeah, but how long?

Ron shook his head as if Terrance's question was ludicrous. Terrance sighed, and took his glasses off.

A day? Two?

Could be.

Terrance looked at Harry and raised his eyebrows.

And what'll be your prognosis?

Well, nurse, it could be the seal on the gasket.

Could be?

He looked to Harry, back to Terrance.

Could be something simpler.

Could it?

Yeah. It could, said Ron. He looked at Harry. Where are you staying?

The Cranes Hotel, said Terrance.

Did you just throw your voice? You should take that on the road, you'd make a fortune. Where's your keys?

In the ignition, said Harry.

Alright, I can't promise anything but leave it with me.

Terrance looked at Ron a moment longer. Then he nodded his head and stood up slowly, with a faint grunt. He placed his glasses in his breast pocket, put his head back and rolled it, bringing up his shoulders and pushing back his elbows, hands in the middle of his back. He accompanied Harry along the street, and they stood together by the steps to the hotel.

It helps for Ron to know we're acquainted. He pinched his hat at its peak with thumb and forefinger, removed it, examining the band. He has two accounts running in his head, one for strangers, one for everyone else. No different to the rest of the world, eh?

He placed the hat back on his head.

About the car in the desert. Those kinds of accidents are more common than you might think. More people die from car fires than domestic fires. There are at least six combustible fluids under the

bonnet. All it takes is a broken fuel line, loose wiring, cracked insulation. Sometimes someone's driving along and sees smoke coming through the vents. They pull over, get their extinguisher, lift the bonnet. It's the worst thing they could do. It feeds oxygen to the flames. It goes up, and it takes them with it. I've seen it before.

He looked up into the sky.

Still, there's some details we can't account for in this case. Imponderables, as my daughter might say.

He cleared his throat and spat into the dust. He pulled his shirt straight. Then he gave a great sigh, scraped the ground with his heel till the spit was gone.

Well, drop round some time this afternoon.

Angela was sitting out on the veranda at the side of the house, on a striped chair by a side door, reading a cheap yellow paperback. The sunlight glowed in a bright strip along the tiled floor. Angela had tucked her bare feet under her so that the whole of her was in the shade. She looked up as he approached and watched him as he seated himself in a whicker chair.

So what's happening? she said.

It shouldn't be too expensive. Maybe a hundred dollars.

I mean, how long?

I doubt it'll be today. He's an SUV to work on before he gets to ours.

He could hear a lazy knock knock knock from the other side of the house, the low voice of one man calling to another. A slim black cat came out of the doorway behind Angela's chair. It looked at them a moment, then moved along the wall below the kitchen window, slipped through the wooden railings and dropped into the garden and out of view.

Another day in paradise, said Angela. She turned a page, turned several, and started reading again. There were footsteps at the back, the sound of the door hinges squealing. Through the window he heard Mrs Crane.

Well, yeah, it's the heat. Ah, yeah, I heard. It's too young to lose his teeth. But at least he's got his life. It's always a worry with children. She should get him to Dr Ringer. He's a little lamb, that's what he is. A little lamb.

The voice becoming thinner, trailing away into the interior of the house. Harry rested his head against the rim of the chair and closed his eyes. The sunlight flared red. The heat seemed to be growing, radiating up from the tiles and from the walls.

It made no difference where you were, what part of the distant world. It always came back to this. A news item, a photograph in a magazine, a piece of music, an overheard comment and the present fell away and you were there once again. And every time it was a relief, however painful or uncomfortable.

He saw the incubator as clear as if he was standing in the hospital. The baby was close to the glass partition. Its innards, a large handful of grey intestinal tract in a plastic bag, resting on the thin mattress beside him. He lay on his side and his chest rose and fell quickly, his fingers spread out as though to take hold of something. Perhaps it would have been better if he'd been stillborn. Perhaps, but perhaps that would have been worse. At least they got the chance to hear him cry. And he cried a great deal, in those days at the hospital, in a room full of incubators.

Whenever they visited, they put on robes and face masks, stood over him as his hands wound and his face creased up. Until the last time, when for some reason Harry went alone. He stood in the corridor, looking through the glass into the room. The male nurse who met him there was irritable when he asked where the baby was.

To this day he fantasied about going back and meeting that nurse once again, telling him what he thought of him. As if that would make a difference.

He put his hand to his mouth and there was a sharp pain in his throat. When it came it was hard to stop. He looked at Angela, reading her novel. He stood quickly and turned and walked round to the front of the house, and stood watching the cars that passed by in the bright sunlight.

He stared at the fine grains of dirt that shifted as he breathed, tiny particles like yeast grains, his face pressed into the earth. This was what he saw first. His vision opened out slowly, along with the growing throb of pain behind his left eye. The underside of the car, a dark grey with oil and road dirt, the black coil of a rear wheel suspension, the exhaust with red layers of rust like lichen.

He turned over slowly and lay on his side. He heard a whine like someone playing a saw harp, and felt a pain in his chest. He lay there a moment. It was hard to breathe. There was something on the ground beside him. The car's mottled silver jack handle. Fresh blood on the socket end, and a spill of blood in the dust. His blood.

He curled round on himself, feeling the dirt through his jeans, and brought his knees to his chest, let out a slow groan. The joint in his jaw was loose, and saliva ran from his mouth.

He'd seen a man with a broken jaw once, his mouth wired into a scream. He'd been sitting at the back of the lorry on the way home from the mines, rocked to sleep by the sway of the vehicle, and fell over the side, full on his face in the road. When he was a boy. Don't stare, dad told him. The man sitting on a bench outside the labour exchange. He knew he was being watched, and his eyes moved from side to side as though he was looking for a place to hide.

Lee moved his hand slowly. There was no strength in his arm. The pain behind his eye came and went, close and then receding, coming close again. When he raised his hand to his mouth he disturbed desert flies that had settled on the wound. He pressed his forefinger and thumb into his eye sockets and squeezed, and saw white flashes like flares and grey forms moving in the brief darkness.

He opened his mouth but nothing came out. He turned onto his back, his face towards the sun, and he listened to the breath leaving his lips, his eyes closed tight, behind his eyelids a deep burning red. Finally he let out a long, drawn out breath.

You're a fuckin idjit, Lee. His voice raw as an old man's. An idjit.

Murray had gone off to take a shit, and Lee had wandered to the back of the car and asked, How are you? You awake in there? And there was no sound. He looked across the bright open land at Murray, a dark distorted figure, lengthened by the heat, the boiling air. You awake?

He'd crouched and listened. Heard a low sound, a weak whispering like someone praying. The button of the catch, the electroplating coming off through all its years of wear. Putting the heel of his hand on the bumper. The wind stirring behind him. They had a whole day of travel ahead of them. Already the flies were everywhere, the ground dry and heat pouring out of it as the sun rose and burnt away the trail of cloud.

Eh mate? A look over his shoulder. A shake of his head. He put his thumb against the button. Mate? Drew closer, listening. You alright? Nothing now. No sound at all. He pushed the button, lifted the boot, and something uncoiled itself fast as a snake, and he felt an impact on the side of his head and the taste of blood flooding his mouth.

Idjit, he whispered. He heard his own heart, louder than the rest of the world, a thoom thoom thoom and a responding beat from somewhere, vibrations under his head. The flap of leather, rapid breathing.

He opened his eyes, saw Murray running, his head down, hands pumping, trying to build up a speed that seemed to elude him. Lee watched him, running through the thin swaying grass, the heat rising in waves that slowly engulfed him, till the sun made him flat and thin. Then he had to close his eyes at the sharp rainbow spines of light, rolled his head in the dust.

I have royally fucked up.

Then he heard a voice, a shouting in the distance. And then nothing but the dry wind blowing. If he stayed still the heat wasn't too much. If he stayed still he was wrapped up in it, like a boy in a bed, ill and kept home from school. Aching but comfortable in his room. The burr of a lawn mower, his mum's voice bright like it used to be, calling his name. Lee! Lee! Something soft in his mouth like a feather. He bit down, tasted something bad, spat a fly sideways onto the desert floor.

He lifted his knees, his heavy pale brown boots in the air. His muscles were shaking. He rolled forward with a dry shift of dust, using the weight of his soles, so he was sitting, and as his head came forward, the pain came too. He groaned and lights went off and on. Then it subsided, and he sat there, breathing and waiting.

He looked at his legs in his jeans, knees akimbo, the rumpled material, the dirt in the creases, the broken line of the cotton stitching, the worn boots facing outwards. Spatters of blood on the denim like creosote and already dry. He lifted his hand, touched his forehead, and looked at his finger ends. A deep, bright red, with black dirt and pieces of straw.

A sound went off across the coarse grass and dried out kindling, like one rock hit against another. He waited, keeping his breath dampened, listening.

After a moment he began to take in more breath, but this was arrested by another sound, higher pitched – like the snap of a dry picket fence post. His heart welted in his chest.

He brought his right leg towards him, bending his knee, then the left, and with his left arm he pushed himself and stood. The whole movement took more effort than any movement he'd made before, and he swayed there, hands on his knees. The dark interior of the car boot yawned, the spare tyre, a yellow toolbox, Jerry cans, a soiled groundsheet.

He raised his head slowly. Across the top of the grass, against the blue of the sky, he saw a figure in the distance. It was like an optical illusion. It moved, yet it stayed where it was. It vanished in the morning haze, the streams of air, the heat carrying seeds and dust motes. Then it reappeared, dark coat flapping, quivering in the heat.

He turned towards the car. His breath whistled. The rays of the sun moved across his sight like wheel spokes. He took hold of the chrome handle but it was too hot. He wrapped his hand in his sleeve and hooked the handle, pressed the button, but the door wouldn't open, even though he pulled so the blood throbbed in his head. He heard his own voice, a whimpering that he thought he'd left behind with boyhood, as he repeatedly tugged at the handle.

Then the rubber seal came away like duct tape, and the door opened. He climbed inside, head first, the heat in there a hot shroud. The plastic seating burnt his bare palms. He bent to look, but there were no keys in the ignition.

He pulled open the glove compartment and scooped everything out, CDs, tapes, sweet wrappers, into the foot well. He slid along and checked in the compartment by the steering column. Some dollar coins and cents fell and clattered against the silver doorframe. Then he lay perfectly still and listened. Aside from the rushing sound of blood in his ears he could hear heavy breathing close by the car.

He squinted back through the open door. Just the blue sky. Then a shuffling of grit, the breathing closer now, and then the figure stepped in and blocked the light, leaning against the car, which listed sideways.

Well what? A few breaths. What the fuck? More breathing. What the fuck are you doing down there?

Murray?

Lee pulled himself up slowly to a sitting position. Murray stood there, his face slick with sweat, the coat hanging over his arm. He moved his lips as if swilling mouth wash and spat a pink mouthful into the dust. He wouldn't look Lee in the eye. He drew the back of his hand across his forehead and looked at it.

Murray?

He threw the keys onto the passenger seat. A crease appeared in his brow as though a wave of pain had struck, then he blew out some air.

Alright Lee. His voice quiet. Open the bonnet.

Lee pulled the lever under the dashboard, heard the quake of its release. Murray opened the back door and dropped the coat onto the seat. He walked to the front of the car, turned his back and sat against the bonnet. His arms hung by his side as if he had no use for them. The wind blew. His hair was ruffled and dusty. Moving his head ever so slowly. Three birds wheeled across the air in the distance and he followed their path.

He tolled on the bonnet with his knuckles. He stood away from the car and turned and looked in at Lee, his figure divided by the arc of dust on the windscreen. He pointed towards the steering wheel, made a twisting motion with his hand, then searched under the rim of the bonnet with his fingers and hefted it up. Lee put the key in the ignition and turned it. He touched the pedal. The car shuddered and stopped, gave a dry sound and stopped again.

The third time it shuddered into life. The engine speeded up and slowed down as Murray played with the timing. It speeded up so much it became a one-pitched whine. Then it settled, and Murray dropped the bonnet.

He walked round to the boot and closed it. Lee watched him in the mirror. His every movement seemed distracted. He came back round to the passenger seat. He got in slowly, with a small explosion of air from his nostrils.

Come on. Put it in gear and let's get out of here.

Lee turned his head to look across the plane. Dust blew off the rise and spiralled in the clear air.

Now, fer fucksake!

Okay, okay.

He snapped the seat back. He pushed on the clutch pedal and put the engine in gear. As he raised the pedal Murray leaned back and said, almost in a whisper, It's okay. Just get us out of here. The tyres rumbled slowly on the hard earth. Lee let out the clutch and turned the wheel. In the rearview mirror a pale ghost of dust particles rose up, then the tyres caught and they moved away.