

The Last Fishermen Novella

By Nick Ashton-Jones

Taken from the novel dedicated to my son Oliver, not forgetting also the man who hanged himself in N2 and who thereby initiated the project.

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BRAVERY

1 TIVU MAN

His father had hugged him. But what Leo most remembered was the discomfort of being pressed against the breast-pocket button of his father's shirt. It missed his eye by an inch and in all the years that followed in New South Wales, he thought of the button as a concentration of all the things that were going to happen in his life starting at some undefined point, that was beyond New South Wales. In the times when he thought he was in the wrong time he'd touch the place on his cheek, just below the eye, where the button had pressed and remember his father. His father's clothes smelt of the smoke that comes from a small fire set to boil water or cook a bit of food: the characteristic smell of the place he remembered only when the homesickness for Tivu set in. Then he thought about the button pressing quite painfully into his cheek just below the eye.

At first the excitement of going out into the great world had overwhelmed the home-leaving of the place that filled his head with the idea of this is where I come from, which developed into the idea of this is what I am I am a Tivu man, the song he sang in the bewildering times when he felt ecstatic, drunk on the thin Aussie air knowing, as he swung into a high, that he would then think of Tivu.

2 A GOOD MAN

“Christ,” said the man, “who are we going to send up there?” To that dump of human souls, he might have added, because he’d heard it called a white man’s grave, “although it is not Vietnam.” He laughed at his joke thankful that the Americans had done the dirty work.

“Calcott?” Said the other as if, using the toe of his not so clean shoe, he was shifting the desiccated remains of a small dead animal to a place where they would be less obvious. “His family,” he added as the afterthought that it was, “can go with him. The kid isn’t at school yet.” This was not the case because Benjamin, the kid, who would become Ben, had completed some years at primary school and was said by his teacher, a New Zealander who had escaped the asylum by a whisper, to have settled down well.

“Jesus,” said the first man, “that’s not a bad idea. He’ll do as he’s told and we can find a replacement easily enough. Someone,” he added, after a pause, “who can do the donkey work. It’s only the books.”

“Yes,” replied the other. “Do you fancy some lunch? We can charge it.”

“OK.”

Ed Calcott – he preferred not to be called Edward – was sent up north to Van, offshore of New Sudan to do the books for the big plantation project that was one of the assets of the company down south. An asset, as it happened, which the company down south would off-load as soon as the conditions were right and when, as the blasphemous man pointed out, we can make a killing. The job was more than doing the books. Ed had to sort out the mess made by his predecessor and then consolidate records – financial and technical – for the various divisions of the project. This also involved the development of the staff who would keep things going when he was gone. Ed Calcott did a good job.

But Ed Calcott was also a good man, at whom other men laughed in order to cover up their own deficiencies. He was a kind man who did not go in for drinking or for making disparaging comments about women. He did not, either, disparage the aboriginal inhabitants of the continent that the pseudo-manly men only wished to cover up with dreary suburb and desolate mine dump because they were afraid of the demanding ideas around which they had temporarily camped.

Of course, the reason Ed went to Van Island was so that his son Ben could meet and befriend the motherless boy Leo, whose father was a plantation manager for the company. About the time of Ed's return to New South Wales, Leo's father moved to the isolated island of Tivu where he would restore the rundown copra and cocoa plantation that dominated the island and from where it was necessary, at a later date, to send Leo down south for his education.

3 D H LAWRENCE

If you want to know about Ed Calcott's antecedents then read a book by DH Lawrence called Kangaroo in which there are a couple of subsidiary characters, Jack and Victoria, who – to use Lawrence's phrase – have no insides. They are the type who will mindlessly follow a leader who reflects their prejudices and who supplies an easy answer to life's insoluble questions. They may make good neighbours but they make dangerously docile citizens blind to the ugliness that their material existence lays over the pristine beauty of Australia as a litter of tin cans and 'fag-end streets': a sentimental English suburb gone mad in limitless space. If they were living in Germany, which Lawrence knew better than Australia, Jack and Victoria would support the Nazis – as any post-1945 reader of Kangaroo quickly concludes – Jack, less the good neighbour, reporting, apparently with reluctance, the Jewish family living on the other side of the hedge; later, as a good and docile citizen – the only-obeying-orders type, the only-doing-my-job type – he will be materially involved in the final solution in a way that is detached but effective. Jack, as the book explains, retains the blind killer instinct he realised in the trenches of the First World War. By their mediocrity and lack of imagination, by their slavish adherence to a rotten idea, Jack and Victoria enhance the primary characters, Lovat and Harriet, who are Lawrence and his wife, Frieda.¹

¹ Lovat/Lawrence and Harriet/Frieda, by contrast, have proper 'insides' and are forever – often tiresomely – striving to know themselves free from social dictate and from political movement and to rise above society rather than submit to its human failure. In his non-fiction life Lawrence was not so perfectly straightforward: he was all these things, he was more, and he was less. He was extraordinarily charismatic and it was said by some of those close to him that a light went out when he died, although Frieda – having lived so close – clearly found some relief in his absence. He could be kindness itself and he was deeply compassionate but saw nothing wrong in abusing his friends as characters in his books, stripping them stark naked for all the world to see. He had a vicious temper and struggled to control the fundamental darkness inside him.

4 EXTERIOR UNCERTAIN

Anyway, this is the past: now Jack and Victoria are approaching middle-age. They have dismissed the political folly of their youth. Jack has established a petrol and motor-service station on a main road running up the coast north of Sydney and along which a straggling suburb is growing. Somewhere behind the service station and up a shallow slope of dark skeleton trees and grass dry when it is not burned black, he has built a brick bungalow. It has a veranda at the front looking towards the service station below. It also, therefore, has a view of the country beyond the main road that is dusty Australian bush becoming dreary Australian suburb. In the opposite direction, towards which Jack and Victoria do not look, are rocky hills and behind them the fearful void they call the outback.² Later the veranda will be closed in to become what they will call a sun-lounge because the stench and the noise of the service-service station and of the increasingly busy main road makes sitting in the open something to be avoided. The trees that might have immediately surrounded the house have been removed as a fire risk but otherwise sparse savannah woodland remains, containing, beneath the roar of the not-so-distant traffic, a remnant of primeval silence. The trees also form a barrier against what Jack describes as 'nosey parkers'. Victoria would invite them in for a cup of tea if she wasn't afraid of Jack. She has planted a garden; or rather she has laid out a geometric pattern of flower beds over some of the more willing soil near the house and filled certain parts of it with roses and other struggling shrubs. The thorns of the rose stems she feels not through the thick material of her gardening gloves.

Before the motorcars came, before the brick bungalows sat on the land, the bush was kept clean by small and friendly fires set by the aboriginal inhabitants. In those days, the pervading smell, during the dry part of the year, was not petrol fumes but wood smoke; a gentle revelation of the guardians of the land. European settlers, having banished the aboriginal inhabitants, banished the fires also as something else they could not control so that the debris of bush builds up year by year promising the conflagration to come. And as the debris builds up so too does the barrier that surrounds what Jack and Victoria have built.

² Thanks to Geoffrey Moorhouse.

Victoria, inside the house, is oppressed by the outside. As the years go by, the curtains are opened later in the morning and closed earlier in the afternoon. She prefers the cosy certainty of the interior – listening to the radio, reading magazines, cooking tasty meals from magazines for Jack – to the exterior uncertainty. Inside the house, she raises the child whom she would not have allowed to escape had she been able to hold it. The child is Edward; Teddy or Ed having been tried and discarded as inappropriate for one such as Edward was expected to be. The father, who is Jack, has manifestly failed, both inside the house and out of it, to pull himself together according to youthful promise, described by Victoria as Something Big soon after Lovat and Harriet abandoned Australia. She said it because she had to express a belief in something. Jack didn't like it: "stow it," he'd replied, thinking also of Lovat. He was about to hit his wife but seeing her flinch for the first time, he held back. She hadn't dared open her mouth since, retreating into the interior of the house in order to forget about youthful promise.

Jack knows that the service-station and the bungalow constitute something that is nowhere near big enough to justify his existence, the nature of which he had begun to think about in the trenches of the First World War and, short of acceptable conclusions, had given up about the time DHL died and a year or three before the brief period of fumbling intimacy that petered out with Victoria's pregnancy that might as well have been the beginning of her menopause she'd got that old. But what Jack did accept was that the purpose of his life would remain a mystery. It was a relief but you couldn't discuss such matters with a woman who was your wife – she might not like it – which was another thing that came to separate him from Victoria who might have been Vicky had he known her better or even at all.

5 DESIRE FOR REALITY

Unlike his parents, Edward could not be contained within the house.

His mother, her part by this time played out, allowed him the run of the large garden, the occasional intricate patterns of which were interesting if inconclusive to the child who felt oppressed by the knowledge that they had been laid down as a distraction from the consideration of the truth for which the uncorrupted child's mind yearned. The meaningless formality of the garden rubbed against the child's instinctive nihilism and desire for reality. So Edward, the child, wanted to destroy the garden and he made a grab at the flowers but there was a rose drew his attention on the way. It had a yellow heart and five washed-out pink and white petals. It smiled at him invitingly. He wanted to touch it but as he reached out his arm caught the thorn; he jerked back in amazement and pain, and to his further alarm the petals fell away leaving only a dusty yellow heart unworthy of attention. Holding the great breath of indignation he had taken in, he watched the bubble of bright red blood on the baby white skin of his arm before letting out a sigh of wonder. This was more interesting than anything and thus holding out his arm in front of his eyes he saw a gap in the trees that revealed somewhere else. He looked up into the branches of the trees and away from the flower beds and away from the hot colours of the flowers and into the sky and he felt the existence of something bigger beyond.

Now the street in which Jack and Victoria had put up the house in which they sat out their separate lives was, at this time, no more than a suggestion of the street that was to come. In the gazetteer it was marked as a solid yellow line and it had a name, sign-posted on the main road – marked red on the gazetteer – but beyond the sign-post you followed the marks made by Jack's motorcar and upon reaching the incline upon which the house sat realised you'd lost your way. The street indeed existed in the minds of less than half a dozen settlers who had dropped their bricks along the length of what might, by act of faith, become a street, the common ground that would link together the scattering of bungalows in which sentences would be served, the common desire – when not put off until another day – being that we are neighbours, we come from common stock, we are white and we will stick together and keep the others out because we are the settlers of this new land or some such parody of faith or romance and because the desire to embrace shared failure endures.

It is a small thing to follow the easy path where car tires have pressed the dusty, pulverised soil. But mostly he keeps his eyes on the ancient rocky hills beyond, which he sees through the temporary branches of the trees. It is a small thing also, this putting of one foot in front of the other, a process that moves his body towards the hills that become no bigger and that are not expected to be even when they are reached.

From the house comes the shriek of a mother who shrinks from the great continent out the back. But the wild boy hears it not above the silence he is entering. He sees only the sunlit peaks, the shadowy vales, the secrets that will soon be revealed but that are, in a sudden climax of colour, wiped out and he is sitting on a beach in New Sudan under the shade of a coconut palm that might, any minute, drop a coconut onto the top of his head. He is watching his son – about eleven years old – who is tentatively making contact with another boy, about the same age, only broader and browner and altogether older-looking. They are on the edge of the great ocean that they are about, it seems, to enter.

Victoria runs down to the garage bare-footed and she gets Jack into a state of resentment against herself and against the child so that he furiously gets into the car, having told her to go back to the house. He drives up the track. Had he walked he would have hit the child on the back of the head with the flat of his hand thereby doing more damage – at that point – than he does by hitting it with the car. He does, in fact – although he does not register the fact – see the padding infant a moment before: therefore, he might have stopped short but does not. He is relieved he has not run it over despite that the fault would not have been his. He carries the unconscious thing up to the house hating both his wife and his son for what he has done. He hands the child over to his wife with the words: “Fucking Ed – ‘e’s yours.” From that day on Edward, or from now on, having failed, Ed, is the weapon his parents use to destroy each other: the mother will try to possess Ed as she cannot possess the father and the father will lay upon Ed the blows he cannot lay upon the mother.

6 SUBURB

After that they stayed inside.

Jack stayed inside the office behind the service station at the windows of which the bush pressed: secondary, tertiary, quaternary and succeeding generations of bush periodically hacked back by a surviving 'abo' employed specifically to hack back the bush nourished in the exterior vicinity of the door by urine, fag-ends and a variety of waste products generated by the man inside. It was assumed by the 'abo' to be what white men produced. "They produce," he implied, "a lot more rubbish than we do. It is, apparently, what they are made for."

Inside, the otherwise bare walls of the office were hung with calendars advertising Ford and Holden motorcars and sparsely dressed girls in artistic poses who had some sort of relationship with the pneumatic qualities of motorcar tyres. Jack was not particularly interested in the sparsely dressed girls but he thought he was. The same delusion drove him to make forays – his own word – into Sydney two or three times a year with the aim of expressing the manliness he could not express to Victoria beyond a feeling that he had a good reason to hit her – for her own good like. He'd start with a drink down at the harbour and generally end up in the same place driving back late with some magazine wrapped in brown paper that provided more waste for nourishing the bush out the back of the office. He tore up the magazines into little pieces, not wishing, one might have supposed, to corrupt the 'abo'. In this way 'outside' for Jack became the inside of the car, of a bar, and, otherwise, the inside of his head where there dwelt the few ghosts of the past: his mates in the trenches and the mates he'd failed to locate thereafter.

Later, the population of the suburban district Jack and Victoria had helped to create grew large enough to support a bus that stopped at the end of the road beside the service station at eleven minutes past every hour between the hours of six – for the early shire council workers – and nine – for the late night revellers. Victoria liked to get inside the bus that moved inside the safe passage of the streets defined by rows of bungalows towards the conglomeration of buildings marked black on the shire map with a name the recognition of which by the post office made it more real than the less ephemeral bush that it had replaced. Victoria felt safe inside the suburb, her own house a bit superior because of the extra space. "It's nice to have

neighbours,” she ventured to another similar looking woman on the bus, thinking of Lovat and Harriet, “but you don’t want them that close, if you see what I mean.”

“Yes,” replied the other who felt, all the same, that she’d been snubbed for suggesting that she might indeed have come too close.

In his curiosity the nascent Ed was like his father had been as a young man who read *Das Kapital*, Thomas Carlyle’s cantankerous history of the French Revolution and some of the novels of George Eliot none of which he found to have much relevance to a Sydney suburb cut off from both sea and outback. More books at high school and in the public library reached by the same bus Victoria took to the concentration or, rather, conglomeration, of buildings that constituted the so-called town of Castleton. Ed knew only the modern suburb, the sky and the old trees around the house. The service-station was not part of his domain. He was, however, growing in his awareness of the spaces beyond the buildings knowing that the time would come when he would escape. Lovat and Harriet would have recognised Ed as having the sort of inside with which something might be done.

From the outside, and even to themselves, the Calcott family conformed to suburban type. They came together for the tasty meals Victoria cooked and they would even ask each other what sort of day they had had although they didn’t listen to the answers. Otherwise there was not much dialogue, Jack playing the strong silent type who brought home the bacon and who was not, therefore, to be challenged.

7 POET

Ed developed into the sort of boy who read poetry out loud and thus built up a small following of similar boys who clustered around him keeping together for safety's sake. The others despised them but kept their distance afraid of the possible outcome of a collision. About this time it was assumed Ed would become, if he was not already, a poet. But this time round it was not convenient. Instead, he was good at mathematics upon which he concentrated because it pleased him to work out a solution that could not be challenged by intellectual debate: "You can put the answer to one side and move on," he said when he was nineteen years old and knew all the answers. Later he expanded: "That is, I mean, the safe and solid side, the foundation upon which all the rest is built." And he erroneously suggested that his mathematics was like TS Eliot's job with the bank without which the apparently free-thinking poems would not have been written. Much later, after Leo, he said he thought TS Eliot's world was rather contained but he did not enlarge upon the idea or even know what he meant.

One evening Ed's father, Jack, did not come home for tea. They found him slumped over his desk apparently dead of a heart attack while reading or, rather, looking at the pictures in one of the magazines he thought he ought to look at. Ed had never seen anything like it but he was surprised rather than shocked by the picture of the naked man flogging a naked woman who was tied to a table in an undignified position and apparently enjoying the experience. He was surprised also by his desire to laugh. He gave the magazine to the 'abo', who was hanging around at the time. The 'abo' did laugh, loud and most derisively. A bit later, before they sold the business, but not the land – Victoria, his mother, was surprisingly adamant on that point – Ed burned the contents of the office. Victoria died a couple of years later. Ed found her in her chair, also slumped. The magazine on her knee contained knitting patterns for things she might have knitted had there been a need. This time round Ed recognised a desire to feel sad but not much. The 'abo' suggested they burn down the house and only later did Ed see the wisdom of the suggestion.

By this time Ed had so arranged his life that he was training to be an accountant in Sydney. He travelled into the city each day by train. He lived alone in the house but he did not feel morbid about it. He knew it was a temporary solution. A woman came every day on the bus that stopped at the end of the road. When he got

home in the evenings she had gone leaving a note beside his dinner place on the kitchen table that might or might not say: "it's in the oven, Mrs Evans." She left his washed clothes neatly folded on the foot of his single bed. Sometimes there was another note that said: "I took your other suit to the dry cleaners you can pick it up Saturday or I'll get it Tuesday, Mrs Evans." She didn't come weekends. The 'abo' kept the garden clear of leaves and cut the grass he'd have preferred a fire together they kept back the bush and ignored the intricate patterns of Victoria's flowerbeds. Ed was a good-looking man behind his circular glasses but being short for an Australian of those strapping days he was not considered handsome. But, he was well-made; women looked at him until they saw the expression of surprise on his face that they forgave thanks to his fine teeth thinking him decent enough I could make a husband of him. He was made junior partner of the small firm where he had trained. On Sunday mornings in a religious mood he'd go swimming at the local baths early before the crowds. Kept himself fit for something. Monday morning perhaps. One evening leaving the bus-stop behind he saw unusual foot prints in the dusty track that trailed beside the metalled road and then worked its way towards the house his parents had built. High heeled shoes that took him into his own or, rather, his mother's kitchen. That she had died for him, he now appreciated as he walked through the door. A young woman was sat at the kitchen table a girl rather who had not yet succeeded in satisfactorily pulling herself together. "Mum died," she said, pushing the dark hair out of her face to have a good look at him. He smiled despite the apparent tragedy that neither of them bothered to recognise because Mrs Evans had, he later also appreciated, died for the pair of them, the babies, and had often thought about just such a scenario. "I'm Dot," she continued as if she wasn't quite sure, "do you want me to 'do' for you?"

"Yes please," he replied, "I can pay you the same." He paused: "Five shillings more if you like."

"I don't mind," she said so it was fixed.

It was domesticity that attracted him and because she was what was called, in those days, simple-minded, he did not have to discuss things with her or thought he did not have to. He married her because he was a good man who was also kind. She responded by becoming less simple but by no means complicated. She was the type who did not apply make-up to her face and who would make the hanging of clothes to dry upon a line a work of art. She liked to wander around the garden but she did

not look at things or appeared not to. It was likely, however, Ed thought, that she saw the rocky hills and might one day reach them. She liked the morning best and smiled at him as he sat on the veranda sipping his coffee. They had a child Benjamin – inevitably Ben – who was not put between his parents as Ed had been but who, rather, formed the third point of a sturdy triangular relationship of three equal but generally silent poets. It seemed that there would not be another child. That the triangle was too impregnable for the balanced psychological development of his son Ed began to consider about the time he started the short contract in New Sudan. “I don’t want Ben to be tied too closely to us,” he said to Dot who smiled back at him, “he needs something that will pull him away.” Someone, he thought, who would enter the triangle and perhaps break it apart and amaze us.

“Yes,” replied Dot, thinking of the washing line. “The wind will do.”

“Something,” said Ed in order to fill her deficiency, “that will make him fly.”

“That will make us all fly,” she replied, thinking of the wind snatching at the clothes.

So by convoluted ways they went to New Sudan for a short while where Ed saw the towering mountains and the distant horizon called the sea. Also, Ben met Leo and eventually Leo was to spend seven years with them. Dot was too big for the small island and would have drowned had not Ed held her so tight he almost killed her. In those days, his wife did her duty while she waited to return to the large dry continent that had created her as something extraordinary.

8 THE CHOICE IS YOURS

There were no mountains, there was no sea, there was no heat to match the colourless, limitless landscape and there were no trees . . . to speak of, except, that is, for the thin papery things in the distance that might have been something else. There was, however, the sky, which was familiar.

Then, a bit later, when he was sitting in the back of the car beside Ben whom he had forgotten or, rather, whom he would have to recreate, and when the man, who was driving and who also may have been Ben's father, had asked some inevitable questions to which he had supplied the necessary answers, the landscape began to contain more buildings until it was filled with buildings. Also there were motorcars that, it seemed, were a necessary adjunct to the buildings.

And, although they were confined within one particular motorcar, it was clear that they were part of a greater mass of motorcars over which the man who may have been Ben's father had little if any influence and the boys in the back, none whatsoever. And, for the first time in his life, Leo considered the idea that he was controlled by something bigger than himself of which he was incomprehensively a part. My actions, and my thoughts, are unable to influence anything. But the car did at last come to a halt on a portion of dry ground, neither quite driveway nor lawn, before a bungalow that had to come to rest upon some sort of hill or uprising that might be, for all Leo knew, and rather hoped would be, the prelude to a more permanent upland region. When the tide comes in, the sea will wash around this house in which I have to live, and those other buildings, beyond what might be trees, albeit unworthy representatives of their breed, will become submerged.

The silence inside the car had, by this time, become fixed but not uncomfortably so because Ben's father did not ask any more obvious questions. After all, the boy whom he had brought in order to break up the home and perhaps obliterate some, if not all, of its inhabitants, was not obliged to meet expectations.

"Here we are then," were the first real words spoken by Ben's father because he wanted to welcome the boy who was looking at the woman standing on the veranda steps. She had, it seemed, paused half way down in order to look at the strangers emerging from the car. She stood awkwardly with one hand, bent backwards at the wrist, holding the balustrade upon which she almost but not quite sat. With the other hand she held a piece of her dark hair, which she might have

been thoughtfully chewing. She seemed to be scrutinising them intensely but she was, in fact, merely screwing up her eyes against the sun while trying to see what they were doing. She was a slim woman who was also young. She wore a sack-like printed frock and a narrow pinafore apron that was of a more indeterminate colour. Her feet, like Victoria's had been, were bare. As Leo approached she smiled and held out her hands for him to take. He held them before saying:

“I'm Leo,” so that she could respond:

“I'm Dot. I'm your mother but only if you want.” She watched the boy, who was more than a boy if not a man, smile back at her. Then, echoing the phrase constantly used by the man who called himself her husband and whom she rather liked but did not yet love she said: “But the choice is yours.” So she dropped Leo's hands, turned back towards the house and danced up the steps pleased to have done the right thing. Leo looked back at Ben's father who was smiling: “She likes you,” he said, “and you can call me . . . I am Ben's father. You can call me . . . You can call me Ed.”

Leo thought: ‘Yes, that will do. And then he said: “I like her,” thinking: So this is what the world is like.

Later, after the car had been put under the cover of some corrugated iron saved from a minor but essential renovation of the house, and after Ed had said we've put you in with Ben but you can have your own room whenever you want the choice is yours, and after he had looked at the night sky and understood that it was no longer familiar because the stars were less insistent having, apparently, given up some sort of unequal struggle, and after Ben had said no, they could not get beyond the trees because it was someone else's yard so that they both felt trapped inside something, Leo lay in bed beside Ben while his father remained on the airstrip on Tivu and stood there unmoving for the seven years that followed watching the plane grow small in the sky. In which case, there was no point in writing even though Ed insisted that the choice is yours, your father would like to hear from you so that indeed forced, short, disingenuous missives accompanied Ed's detailed accounts of Leo's life in Castleton which, in turn, elicited responses mostly along the lines of weather reports and promises to write more later. Leo preferred to leave his father on the airstrip for later consideration and perhaps even removal while he lived his unavoidable life in Castleton. I am, after all, a Tivu man, he reminded himself in times of need.

This was something inside Ed's head, that could be worked out later, the choice, obviously, being Leo's although, getting to know Leo as he did and even becoming fond of him to a point that was nearly love but less of course than he was bound to feel for Ben, he imagined Leo settling in or somewhere around Sydney in order to lead a proper sort of life and anyways your father'll have to come down eventually when he retires there being no medical services up there. "What does he do about a dentist?" He added as if to clinch the argument. Leo, however, had either gone or had missed the point altogether being at that age where all points are blunted by thick adolescent skin. Ed would have understood this had he been able to rid himself of the feeling that they were not good enough for Leo or, at any rate, too odd for him. But, determined to pierce someone's skin, and having lost sight of Leo, he said to Ben: "Leo'll do what he likes and we can't stop him and neither do we have the right to but," and here he paused knowing he was about to lie, "it'll break your mother's heart when he does go." Of course, all this was later and meanwhile Ben was not fat and he did not wear glasses but he was the sort of kid who'd be easier to describe if he could've been described as having just those characteristics. And rather than being oppressed by evidence that Leo may have been stronger, better at sports and more charismatic, Ben hero-worshipped him in much the same way as his father came to do. Ben's mother, Dot, on the other hand, having practiced on Ben's father, Ed, saw through both of the boys and knew from the beginning that they were equally worthy albeit in different ways, and that she also could leave them, if she chose and as she assumed she would do when she had come to love her husband sufficiently.

9 BEN'S MOTHER

"Your mum . . ."

"What?"

"She's amazing."

"Is she?" Ben had not considered his mother as any more than his mother to whom he had naturally clung as a small boy but who now embarrassed him because of her clothes. For this good reason he contrived to make sure that she was unaware of the occasions on which parents might be expected to visit the school. This stratagem was, he now supposed, lying in the same bed, going to be less easy with Leo around who, apparently, was not inclined to be ashamed of Dot Calcott. Rather, it seemed that he must admire her. The possibility of not being ashamed of his mother but rather, perhaps, even, embracing her was an idea that might have perplexed Ben before the advent of Leo who – and Ben would swear to this in the later years of his life – brought with him something you could smell like the inside of the palm house in Botanical Gardens, Sydney, in winter. There was also about Leo, Ben was able to express, about the same time, an aliveness that was overpowering to the extent that you felt lightheaded for the first moment or two of realisation. "You could get drunk on him," Ben said, "if you wanted to, and, I tell you, he taught me to think and to later express – because I wanted to – what I was thinking."

So Ben thought about his mother as he fell asleep and may well have dreamt about her had he not dreamed of Leo, who lay beside him, eyes wide open for a while trying to catch something that may have been the sound of the sea or, just as likely, the city roaring all around.

He did dream of the sea. He dreamed he was swimming in the sea far from the land he was trying to reach that might have been Tivu or, somewhere else.

The two boys went down to breakfast where Ed was waiting for them, reading, as expected, the morning paper, about a murder in Parramatta and a subsequent arson which, the police suspected, had something to do with disturbing or even destroying the evidence. He looked at them as they sat at the table to investigate, with studied indifference, packets of breakfast cereal. It was clear to his father that Ben had already begun to refine towards his more essential self, spots less visible or, rather, more reassuring upon a face that was less rounded and less milky than it had once seemed destined to be, albeit less confident-looking than the chunky,

downy brownness of Leo whose hair is silver if not gold in the low, bright winter sunshine that comes in by the kitchen window. It seemed to Ed on this particular morning after he had failed to completely annex Leo to the family that the light was particularly illuminating and indeed he did suspect that the boys would become men before he was ready for them.

“Boys!”

“Yes Sir!”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes Sir.” If the boys did not look at each other and grin then Dot smiled for all of them, unable to contain the love she felt.

They ate breakfast in silence, conversation deemed pointless, if not dishonest, unless specific information was to be imparted. Ed rustled his paper. He coughed:

“It says here,” he said, “that there was a murder in Parramatta yesterday, or perhaps the day before.”

This information, after all, was true, at any rate inasmuch as the paper had printed the story.

The two boys did grin at each other. Parramatta was nothing to them but Ed’s efforts to generate conversation were amusing.

Dot, standing beside the dresser, hands behind her back, was, apparently, waiting for orders. It was her usual pose. Ed would have invited her to join them but the choice being hers, he did not press the point. Leo, because he had asked her, understood her preference for watching: she had explained to him that standing beside the dresser gave her a better opportunity to do so. After they’d gone she’d sit at the table drinking tea and reading the newspaper in order to appreciate the wider world of New South Wales and even beyond, although murders in Parramatta did not interest her particularly. “Parramatta,” she pointed out to her husband that evening as he came through the front door, “is not China.”

“Your mother does what she likes,” Leo had, early on in their friendship, informed Ben whose eyes, therefore, had been opened more widely. In the beginning, Leo had assumed that Dot was a servant in the household and that like Kumba, the old house-boy on Tivu, she too slept on a mat in a storeroom somewhere smelling faintly of alcohol but able and willing to do what was required. “But,” he explained to Ben, after Dot had enlightened him, “that’s not the case: your

mother is the centre of the house and your father dances around her.” And in the process of working this out he had begun to understand that his father was not the omnipotent presence on Tivu he had taken for granted. Kumba, and others perhaps, held a more central place.

“A murder,” Dot said, “is, after all, a point of view. You can’t hang a man for it.”

The boys looked at Ed who was looking at his wife. He would not denigrate her publically, or in private for that matter. In their early life together he had not wanted to hurt her feelings but now he was beginning to understand that it was his feelings that were being spared. So he spoke as if he did understand her:

“No you can’t hang a man for what he did not do.”

“Or,” his wife replied, “for what didn’t happen. A man’s death is not his murder.”

“But if he is killed?”

“Then it is all on the other side and what is done is done.”

“Macbeth,” said Ben, surprising even himself. “We did it last year.”

“Yes,” said his mother looking at him with recognition, “and the rest is vengeance. The killer must look to himself and reach his own conclusions. It is not our business.”

“But justice,” said Ed, “has to be seen . . .”

Dot cut him off with a scream of laughter.

They waited for her to stop, which, having achieved her purpose, she did: “Ask your friend about that,” she said, and looked at Ed who looked back at his paper, raising it to hide his face.

Ed’s ‘friend’ was the abo who had, about the time of Dot’s advent, gone walkabout in the direction of the mountains. He had not said a word to Dot who was, as it happened, the last person to have looked at him before his journey but he had looked into her eyes with such understanding that there was no doubt about his intentions. “He’ll be back,” she’d said to Ed at the time.

“Who?”

“Your friend.”

The boys waited to see what would happen, their eyes fixed on Dot who held, as they now understood well, the centre of the stage. One time she had poured the contents of the water jug over Ed’s head. That time he’d dropped the paper and looked at her with an expression the boys interpreted as delight and wonder. It was,

they understood later, pure and unconditional love. Ed did, in fact, wish to die of love for someone, Dot being the only candidate strong enough, he sensed, to carry the burden.

Dot seemed to have lost interest. This was disappointing because, so far, Dot had not disappointed them. In fact her willingness not to disappoint was the fertile ground upon which their love for her grew although, of course, she would have laughed at the idea: “A mother’s first duty,” she had said, another time, “is not to surprise her children. The second, if you must know, is to die for them and one day, at the right time, I will do that, even if I am ninety years old.”

This time, however, she walked over to Ed and stood contritely before him until he dropped the paper a little to look over the top at her as if – the boys were quite sure of this – begging for another jug of water. “My lover,” she said, dramatically, “I choose you,” and she took his head and pressed it – as Ben described it later – to her bosom, which was, at that time of her life, a lot less than ample. Ed’s glasses were displaced so that he looked up blankly into his wife’s eyes not quite sure what he was seeing. Ben giggled, Leo watched and then joined in the general laughter imagining his father similarly pressed against Dot’s bosom. He felt the button against his cheek.

10 INDIFFERENCE TO RIDICULE

By this time the two boys had chosen to be friends and Leo had, therefore, chosen not to take the separate room offered him. Another reason was because having chosen to be a Tivu man it was obvious that he was not going to stay and would not need a separate room. For the time being, however, he was here in New South Wales and would have to live accordingly. But his rules did also apply: he told Ben that they would walk to school.

“Why?”

“Because we have to be ready for the day when the cars stop running.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But the choice is yours.”

So the boys walked the two or three, or even four, kilometres to school according to route, and Ben came to understand that regardless of the cars the necessary object was the measurement of distance between one place and a destination. The object is, he was able to write at a stage in his life when Leo and all those days in Castleton were a fading but hardly irrelevant memory, to move your body by its own exertions and thereby learn about the relationship between your body and the ground beneath your feet. My mother, I am sure, would have understood, adding her bare feet to the equation.

Now it so happened that Leo had been taken into the Calcott family only a couple of days before the beginning of the new school year being thrown in at the deep end, a useful principle by which Ed lived in spite of the fact that the boy's father would not have considered such a necessity. Ben's protestations based on the inbred New South Wales habit of running with the herd were not brushed aside so much as ignored by Leo and they had both joyfully waved at bus loads of school children rushing by astonished that non-abos should be walking. Leo's apparently brave dismissal of the implied censure and likely ridicule was based on ignorance of the social mores of the suburbs. By the time he had learned, his apparent nonchalance was admired and his intermittent detachment – as Tivu man – an unnecessary first line of defence, as it happened, went by unnoticed. As Ben's pet, Leo raised Ben's status. By the time Ben became his, the boys had walked beyond the cat-calls of children in buses. Realising the strength of indifference to ridicule, they understood, by a process of dynamic interaction that was beyond their youthful

ability to express, the fragility of the human psyche. In this way they were more able to give than to receive and were most likely to give something good. In this way also, Leo taught Ben, by example, to be brave.

11 BRAVERY

Bravery may also have been the characteristic required by the boys when they went along with Ed's ideas about adventure in the bush. The courage, that is, to endure the raised eyebrows of Dot who, having glanced at their naked knees, bush hats and bush shirts, had to be left behind, in order, so it seemed, to prepare a nourishing meal with which to feed the men upon their return. "The choice, I assume," she said, "is mine." Ed was reassured by her eyebrows. "Because if it's adventures you want," she continued, "there are plenty to be found at home." She winked at the boys grotesquely. They glanced at each other not daring to look at Ed. "Our neighbours also," she added, "would oblige, but your friend," and here she looked at Ed, who did not avoid her, "would be leading you to wherever it is you want to be led. Personally I am content to wait here for whatever might come."

She gave them sandwiches and waved briefly to the back of a departing car before returning to rearrange the washing on the line. The day, which had started with a bluster, settled down to what it was supposed to be. The washing hung forlornly, waiting for the heat.

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The old road followed the track made by the earliest European settlers who had begun to penetrate the interior in order to find a New Life only to discover a variation of the old that was, at times, even less comfortable. At any rate they had come, but the silence, it was said, in those prehistoric days, was enough to kill you. Other, less sensitive souls, did not notice and even began to consider new possibilities until, with the coming of the post office, they understood that taxes had still to be paid and sons sent off to fight wars. After all, it is us makes the noise and we will have to penetrate deeper into the interior in order to find the silence we crave to destroy.

In spite of hardships, even because of them, farms were haphazardly arranged in the little valleys between the gentle-seeming, wooded hills, which would at times burst into flames. In time the fires were accepted as the truth, but before the thin top soil was exhausted, the suburbs came, sub-division yielding a better return than cows or cabbages. A more reassuring landscape of brick bungalows and motorcars presented a pattern that could be better understood but that was still subject to taxes and, it would be learned, fire.

A new road, built to relieve the old, therefore looped in a great arc around the relatively hilly country over which the better parts of Castleton were scattered. It passed through the flat inland country where the soil was sandy, the top-soil – for all useful purposes – absent, and the vegetation, scanty scrub rather than woodland, barely sufficient to generate a good burn. Rabbit country if it was anything and not many rabbits. The horizons – not so much limitless as disappearing, for most of the year, into the brown dust that at some point up-there became the brown sky, a brighter or unpleasantly blinding portion of which suggested the sun – were beyond comprehension.

On clear days, and indicating the direction in which the interior of the continent lay, and beyond that Perth, the rocky hills were visible. Some days you could have grabbed them, a couple of hours walk at most but tantalizingly near though they appeared they were unattainable to anyone unwilling to proceed. Most days, however, the hills were invisible, if they existed at all, and in this respect the new road safe. Move along the road southeast and you'll end up in Sydney or, anyways, in the inner suburbs most likely Parramatta. Go northwest and you'll meet the safety of the old road and the motels on the outer edge of Castleton.

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Ed wants them to feel safe before he turns the car into a side road barely more than a track after ten metres or so. It passes through scrub that obscures the horizontal view. Above, however, in that early part of the day, the sky is a hazy blue, cool-looking and watery. Ed has already pointed out its beauty and the boys have reluctantly agreed that it is worthy of notice. The track takes them to a dusty clearing that, Ed explains, is the official carpark for one of the smaller national parks. "We must park here," he says, "because we are not allowed to drive any nearer to what is designated as a site sacred to the aboriginal people of this continent. What do you think of that?"

Adolescent thoughts have not yet been sufficiently arranged to offer a response.

Ed gets out of the car. The boys follow his example.

"I'll carry the rucksack," says Ed, "because the walk takes about an hour, or even a little longer, which is appropriate given that the distance discourages the sort of careless tourist who drops litter. Perhaps one of you can carry it back when it is empty of our lunch."

The boys make the expected comments and they set off, Ed taking the lead, Leo, the rear.

“Look out for the snakes.”

They look at their boots.

“Am I going too fast?”

“No,” they chorus.

“You’re going too slow,” says Ben.

“I doubt it,” replies the father, “the thing is to conserve your energy. What do you think, Leo?”

“I think we should walk faster. The sun isn’t up yet. I don’t feel it on my back.” This is the time to defeat distances.

Leo has not meant to upset Ed’s equilibrium and in the process of restoring it, Ed is jocular: “That sounds like Tivu talk?”

“No,” Leo denies but remembers things he has been told: “Cover as much ground as you can before the sun hits your back”, he quotes. “As soon as you feel it, slow down and look for somewhere to rest. Start walking again in the dark, if you want to get anywhere alive. A full moon is best.”

“Your father?” Ed sounds incredulous without meaning to be. He questions not the possible wisdom but rather the existence of Leo’s father, at any rate as a man who might have useful ideas even if they are not his own. ‘I wish,’ he wants to say ‘your father was dead and buried up there on Tivu so that you might consider me as a substitute.’

“Yes,” Leo replies.

More likely Deni, but the idea remains inspiring. The speed at which they walk picks up perceptibly. Ben turns to look at Leo who looks above the bush hat on Ed’s head. “Leo,” he whispers, caressing his friend with a word.

“Ben,” comes the grateful reply.

They walk a narrow passage through the dense scrub that might as well extend for ever on both sides, concealing everything or, just as likely, nothing.

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In less than the hour predicted, the Tivu magic having, by Leo’s agency, apparently, worked, Ed says: “Can you see the rock ahead?”

They have seen the rock ahead because it is expected but still, it rises impressively above the scrub that also rises to involve trees that might be described

as more than adequate: a level-topped, rusty-coloured affair, golden where it catches the sun above the dry vegetation. It drops from view as trees thin out and tall yellow grass takes over. The soil under foot is solid and even damp. “Here,” says Ed, “you could cut a proper sod.” The boys laugh silently.

But for all their exploding youth, the boys do not care to admit their thoughts until the rock exposes itself unashamed in front of them. Then, Leo, wishing to console Ed in some small way without committing himself, says: “I can feel the sun on my back. Can you?”

“You bet,” laughs Ed. “Can you hear the insects?” That do indeed roar.

Close up the rock is less than was intended not much higher than a tall house but it is substantial in the insubstantial bush. Leo senses that it is no less substantial than the heat that hits his back. There is an equal solidity that links the rock to the heat. Both, Leo knows, will teach him things.

The rock appears to sit in a depression, which is, in periods of exceptional rain, Ed explains, a small lake. The ground is never less than damp. “The rock’s roots,” he continues, “go down deep and there are caves in which the aboriginal inhabitants of this continent would take shelter in the old days.”

“From the rain?” asks Ben, looking at the sky from which no rain has fallen for months. He thinks not of the rock but of his parents who are more real; he worries that his father may be ridiculous in the eyes of Leo. His mother, he remembers, therefore, is no longer ridiculous. He would rather be with her now than here in the bush with his father whom he suspects. Until that day out with Leo and my father I had known my mother only through my father’s interpretation. Since I was a small boy he’d stood between us. He’d tell me I should treat her with care and thoughtfulness because she wasn’t like other people and could be easily damaged. I know it was because he loved her and I know he wanted to love me but it was he who made think of my mother as something odd. When I started school I wanted my mother to be like other mothers and therefore because my father said she was different I began to be ashamed of her. I visualised her as a china ornament – Bo Peep kneeling beside one of her sheep – who could be knocked off the shelf upon which she’d been placed and smashed to smithereens. It was inevitable that I should drop her. Being with Leo opened my eyes. He understood my mother as the anchor on which we all hung. Stronger than my father. I wanted to be like Leo so I looked at

my mother the way he did and I saw wonderful things. But both my parents were good. Leo showed me that.

At this point in his life Ben wants only to walk away. He envies Leo's detachment from parental influence. It would be better, he thinks, if I went to this place called Tivu. Fuck the rock.

"No," replies Ed, who also wants his son to be more like Leo. He wishes his son would say more. But he does not know what he wants his son to say. He remembers the small, malleable boy whom he would pick up and hug. "What do you think, Leo?" he says.

There they are, the three men, standing at the foot of the rock, frowning up into the bright sky. Men's faces, closed in and suspicious. One is older in years; a compassionate and in some ways considerate man yet not wise or else not wise enough, restrained as he has been, like his father before him, by the 'tin cans and dead-end streets.' He is a child. The others, less in years, resist his love, in which they thoughtlessly bask, and therefore, are becoming wise and will be wiser.

All three are under observation.

Leo doesn't want to talk. He doesn't want to be spoken to. He is thinking about the rock, about its roots reaching deep into the earth and its summit reaching high into the sky. He doesn't want to be a gaping tourist. He doesn't want to be lectured to by Ed. He doesn't want this rock second-hand. He wants to experience its reality for himself. He wants to know what is inside the cave and he wants to see the view from the top before Ed tells him what it will be like. His father would have said little or nothing.

"Leo?" Ed repeated.

"I think," said Leo because he had to respond, "they'd have sheltered from the sun, like now, waiting for the cooler night. What do you say, Ben?" he added, looking sideways at Ed's son with a smirk.

"Yeah," says Ben, who jeers at his father whom he loves and would protect, with his fists, had he known how. "I reckon they'd've walked in the rain."

Thus Leo remembers rain on Tivu where the men strip down to their underpants and stuff their clothes into plastic bags, casually going on with their lives naked, the water collecting as intimate rivulets on impervious, oily skin. He remembers a time with his father at the end of an unusually dry spell: they are sitting on the beach mesmerized by a thunderous black wall of vaporous steam moving

towards them, filling the view, the smell of the coming water intoxicating, the hot, stinging sand, swirling around them, the first, heavy, experimental drops of water hesitantly testing the resistance of the palm fronds above. Rising, unbearable excitement relieved by his father's sudden reaction. 'Wait, stay here, don't move,' he reassures, leaving the boy spell-bound by the roaring, rushing rain, joyfully afraid but brave also barely able to contain himself he wants to dance. 'Catch,' says the surprising man who is also his father grinning at him as he throws a piece of soap at the boy who catches it miraculously because he can't break the link with his father who now crouches like the athlete waiting, tense and ready, watching for the moment. The rain hits, sudden, cold, breathlessly and they're up ready, tearing off their clothes to wash in the rain. The boy watches the man for his cue and follows, first his hair and head, shoulders, down the sides. The father rubs the boy's back, the boy reaches for the man, then wriggles – 'don't miss the cracks' – and down to his feet while watching – 'it's like this, it's like that'. The soapy water runs off startlingly white bodies, disappearing into the sodden washed sand. Come on, naked, hand in hand, in the grey thrashing rain that would otherwise take them they rush to the house the boy scooped up onto the veranda and pushed through a door where he will be enveloped in a large towel and rubbed back to his old childish self. The rain falls upon an empty beach.

Leo moves out of line towards the rock.

Ed watches him, knowing that unless he mentions Dot's sandwiches in the bag on his back, there is nothing he can say that will make any difference. He smiles at his own foolishness.

Ben smiles also. He smiles at his friend, Leo, whom he knows would turn and smile back at him if required. But Ben limits his reverence to watching the boy becoming a man pushing through the throbbing mid-day heat. The silence is terrific. The restless scrub stretches and stirs in the heat.

I knew, as my father did not, that Leo wanted to, and was determined to, climb the rock. Nothing, least of all my father, was going to stop him. I knew also – although, at the time, the idea did not form itself clearly in my head – that Leo wanted to climb the rock alone. I watched him with a sort of reverence which, all the same, did not either raise Leo above the ordinary or diminish me to anything less than extraordinary. Had Leo stumbled I would have saved him by sheer willpower.

Leo touches the rock, reaching up out of the dank shadow in which he stands. The light catches his hand turning it to gold.

The boy climbs.

He emerges from the shadows,
To become – briefly – a golden man,
Who is, for a moment, unconditionally loved.

And loving Leo, at last, in this right way, Ed is able to love Leo's father also, who, he understands, as a surprising revelation, must have had a significant hand in creating Leo, the boy, and with whom Leo, the man, is bound to have an unbreakable bond even if it is dismissed.

Ed opens his mouth to call to Leo but before a sound is emitted he stops it, knowing he has no right. Thus he sees that Leo has climbed a good way up the side of the rock, beyond recall.

Ed turns to look at the other boy, who is in the process also of growing into a man who will be taller than his father. This is the son who has been given me. And thinking thus, Ed learns that the tenderness he feels for his son, mingled with feelings of fear for his son's safety and feelings of gratitude towards his son's mother, who is – by remarkable coincidence – also his wife and the woman who chose him if he had not chosen her, constitute the love he has, heretofore, not recognised as being the love he has desired to receive from Leo. And thinking thus, Ed continues to smile with a sense that the warmth of his smile is extending down the length of his throat and into his chest and down to his stomach churning with an energy that – cartoon like – may at any minute shoot down his legs and into his feet that will glow through his boots as two bright yellow lights that may lift him up and over onto his back and into a ridiculous position. And Ben, therefore, hears his father laugh out loud while he is looking at the golden Leo moving with ease up the side of the rock and back into the shadows.

Ed sees his son shoot him an indulgent smile.

I want that boy, that young man, who is my son and Dot's son to experience life beyond the confines of the suburb not necessarily as a physical separation – although it might very well be separated by thousands of miles or only as far as those rocks I remember seeing once, perhaps in a dream, somewhere in the possible beyond – because you can catch that experience as the music that moves through my head now as I think about these things that is not a physical separation

from the suburb but yet is something as great as setting out in a small boat upon a stormy sea to reach somewhere like Tivu or as fantastic as climbing a sunlit rock not much taller than a three story house, which that boy or rather that man is climbing now.³ Thus Ed remembers his time on Van island.

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He remembers his excitement when they told him he'd got the job he'd not expected to get. You've got the job one of them'd said, smiling. He looked clean and young in his grey suit and white shirt. Like a Jehovah's Witness. A fringe of fair, almost silver, hair above a pink and white face that might have been spotty only Ed couldn't remember because he was already thinking of Dot back home and of what he'd say to her, imagining himself sliding across the linoleum in his socks, dropping onto his knees and burying his face into her lap. She'd stroke his head like she did, as a separate thing a puppy on her lap. So he didn't take in the picture of the other man either, sitting on the other side of the table in the big, silent room, high above the city, the ocean, blue, beyond, a sunny day, a glorious day, a breeze moving fluffy clouds and white sails in the harbour. Something like that. He'd tell her: now my life will start up there on Van Island off-shore of New Sudan. The other man, who might also have been fair and pink-faced too only more so or more likely swarthy and dark-haired a shadow across the lower half of his face, now Ed thought about it, a blue suit and a pink shirt the other half of the Jehovah's Witness pair they have to go around in pairs to avoid temptation. This one was smiling also but at his friend, or accomplice, it seemed, they might have been in love. He said:

"Let's go to lunch."

"And celebrate," said the other, who had taken a shine to him, Ed thought, at the time.

They'd taken him to the sort of place Ed had seen only in the cinema and on the TV an extravagant moustachioed man talking in an American accent about a story that would be told concerning the unlikely outcome of a case of mistaken identity: a gentleman's club panelled walls, old pictures hung on rusty wall-paper, the ceilings brown with cigar smoke, hushed conversation, smutty jokes and sniggering, black and white waiters cats on rubber paws.

³ Beethoven: Opus 59, Rasumovsky Quartet No.1. First movement (Alban Berg Quartet, 1979).

That's what he remembers but thinking back there had been women in hats and sun shining through the windows the beer they'd drunk had been warm and the wine was a nice little number despite the Hunter Valley and coal mines, at which they'd sniggered as if it was a dirty joke.

"Know Newcastle?"

"No."

"I'm not surprised. It's a dump. You're better off on Van," said the one.

"You won't miss Sydney either," said the other.

"Except, perhaps, the Botanic Gardens," replied his friend.

"In the winter."

More sniggering and fumbling until, aware of Ed's fascination, they had straightened their faces in order to watch something that was somewhere behind him until they had both grinned at him for all, now Ed thought about it again, as if they knew something he didn't.

"Any questions?"

It had been said but by whom, Ed could not remember because he hadn't any questions to ask then or, for that matter, now about what was supposed to have been the beginning of his life but that had turned out not to be because, as Dot had suggested but did not state, it had started, and had been running, not unsatisfactorily, for some years.

No, there was nothing he wanted to ask although he'd been about to admit that the whole thing was a mistake and he was sorry he'd wasted their time when they stood up, in unison, without suggesting port and a cigar and coffee in the lounge, and more or less carried him out onto the street and into a waiting taxi.

"Where d'you live?" said the pink one.

"In Castleton," he answered.

"Never heard of it," said the other looking at the taxi driver. "If you know where Castleton is, my good man, then please take this gentleman there and then on to his front door. We're going to the Botanic Gardens." Ed left them on the pavement, laughing at the joke.

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I went to Van and I did a good job and I made no effort to look at the moon or climb the mountains but we'd go down to the beach Sundays like the other expat families and we'd go to the club on Friday nights like the other expat families and we

lived in an air-conditioned bungalow like the other expat families and I'd worked in an air-conditioned office like the other expat husbands who'd left their wives at home like I'd left my wife, Dot, at home.

Ed remembers, or, rather, he consciously recalls, because he knows exactly what he did and has, up until this moment of his son shooting him an indulgent smile, been unwilling to admit that he had not communicated with his wife for the eighteen months of their sojourn on Van Island, although they had acted out the charade of being the perfect expat family and had in the process drifted apart, which was, perhaps, the reason why Benjamin, who'd about that time become Ben, had wandered away from his parents to make his pact with the other man's son, Leo. At the time Ed had wondered of what fantastic elaboration Leo was the diminutive. Now he was satisfied that Leo was enough.

Ben had taken up with Leo but what Dot had been doing for all the hours, those substantial portions of the days when they were not together, remained a mystery. As did, come to think of it, what she had been doing when she was plainly in view, when they were in close proximity but when he was busy acting the part of the expat manager, the accountant, essentially the financial controller because the general manager of the project, a large and shambling great man who had a great reputation behind him, had said to him: you do it you know what it's all about I need to concentrate on the technical stuff and make sure we hit the targets I myself have set. Let me have a weekly summary. "Can you do that?"

"Yes I can," Ed replied, thinking I'd like to get to know this man with the uncertain eyes who is still looking for what he will never find. But, although Ed enabled the great man to meet the financial targets, circumstances had defeated his other ambitions as they worked hard together at being the men's men they were expected to be; Dot, as it were, off the radar screen despite appearances she disappeared only to reappear towards the end of the afternoon of the day on which the three of them went down to the beach and the parents watched the child, the boy – as Ed, at any rate, remembers – a tiny thing on the beach, tentatively approach the water's edge, testing it. The other boy comes to meet him. Ed watched and watched, wanting to stand up to retrieve his boy but Dot pulled him back, in the process, reappearing to him again. No, he thinks now, basking in the memory of his son's indulgent smile, she was always there: it was me drifted away, disappeared for a while.

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Therefore, I am and although I am not at all certain in most things, I am happy within my life despite and perhaps because of my ignorance.

My wife has taught me to be happy with what I have and regardless of where it is set on the other side of the new road that swings around the suburb my father and mother helped to create, because they had to sit down somewhere, fifty years ago.

A remarkable idea, now that I have thought of it.

And today I have brought the boys out here to test the rock that I have come to know about in a guide book – not much more than a pamphlet – describing the national parks and monuments of Australia. Places I want to know about but that I do not want to defile. They do not belong to me.

Thus Ed warms to his wife, Dot, who is waiting for him back there in the house his parents built, where she has destroyed the old blinds and curtains, drawing in the light from above and opening it out to the light of the garden that is, as Ed sees it in his mind's eye, more than a garden: the intricate flowerbeds his mother attempted have gone without a trace, and the contours of the land have been exposed, warm and rounded, rugged where the ancient yellow rocks show through, the garden's spaciousness contained by the belt of woodland through which the neighbouring houses are glimpsed, their shapes and sounds exposed also to her view, their night-time lights twinkling for her. She is an oddity, our neighbour who runs around on her bare feet, but she exists, from our point of view, for us, our awareness of her makes her ours and thereby enriches our lives. She is the household goddess to whom we would pray if only we knew how.

Ed is moved by the idea of his wife. He wants her, he wants to go to her now, he wants to expose his shame to her so that her limitless understanding will absolve him of his sins that are nothing as he thinks about her there in the bush beneath the rock bathed in the warm sunlight.

I am but a small thing in the universe subject to and indeed happy to be subject to an infinitely greater thing beyond, beyond my comprehension. But I do comprehend my sin committed on Van Island as I worked at being a man's man drinking beer in the club and laughing at smutty jokes disparaging women that I did not understand but pretended to understand and thought about learning to sail a boat thereby resisting the wind and in the process forgetting my life.

My carelessness, my callousness and self-regard allowed the points of the triangle to move so far apart that the very curvature of the earth if nothing else made us invisible to each other. Then, miraculously, but more likely arising from a desire rooted deep within the three of us, the boy Leo dropped into the centre of the triangle so that, to start with, our view of him connected us until he brought us close enough to see each other. Is that it? I'm not sure. Perhaps he keeps us apart? Or will do.

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Inevitably, Ed glances again at Ben, who is radiantly watching Leo who is now high up on the side of the rock, precarious-seeming, determined. The boy falls away from the rock, pushing himself out to freefall. Ed's heart jumps. He wants to call out but he stops his mouth. Too late, more accurately: too early. Leo looks down at Ben, the boys connected by line of sight. Ed sees the boy's smile. He waves and is predictably ignored. The boy disappears over the sunlit edge.

Leo, his sturdy young legs, his swelling calves, pushes at the rock, which has the monumental audacity to resist him. He is nonetheless able to pull himself out of the shadows and onto the sunny upland about sixty feet above the ground, perhaps a little more it might as well be sixty thousand so elevated does he feel above the insect people below, the ant men who, he understands, could move mountains if only he could explain the trick to them.⁴

The top of the rock is plateau country, in places polished glassy-smooth and in others roughly carved. A place to lie down and take in the stored warmth and wisdom of the rock; a place broken open to reveal something of the interior and within which a tiny seed had once lodged, about the time of Ed's birth. Encased in bat shit, and protected from the midday sun, it waited until sufficient moisture had accumulated to risk the adventure of life, thriving to become a gangling boy of a tree beneath which another boy, less gangling, more compact and sturdy, confident, might choose to shelter from the sun made more vicious by its exposure to his eyes.

Beneath the midday sun, Leo looks across a hazy sea towards the jumble of bronze, sun-shot rocks on the horizon. He stretches out his arm and takes them. They crumble, the dust dribbling through his fingers to drift on the warm air towards the interior and beyond to settle, as dreams, upon the prosaic windowsill of a house on the outskirts of Perth where the dratted dust is washed away by an over-zealous

⁴ Thanks to PW

housewife. He looks along the youthful arrogance of his extended arm: the gentle brownness, the swelling strength, the blond down that will give him the hairy forearms he cannot wait to have. He feels his omnipotence, on top of the rock above the whole world that he rules. He looks at the extension of himself: extended arm terminated by fist, clenched; mimicking the range of rocky hills casually obliterated. The hand, which emphatically, and which also wonderfully, belongs to him, expands before his amazed eyes as the slow expansion of the flower of his knowledge flowing out from him to mingle with all the knowledge of the world. Thus he learns humility and is astonished by the vast possibilities of the world and therefore, of his life. I am a small thing but significant all the same. Between the fingers of his yet faultless hand he sees the rock he has failed to destroy.

Seeing the rocks defiant the boy is filled with confidence and with a humorous, tolerant love for the smallness of the world below. Wow, does he not love the rocks out there, beyond, on the horizon, marking the beginning of the interior that has – he knows with certainty – no end. And at the right time I will reach those rocks and I will scramble across their surface, dislodging a few forgiving fragments, thereby diminishing them, but ever so slightly. And from the top I will look back and see the smaller but no less earthbound rock upon which I now stand, or else I will look further into the interior and, perhaps, go there. He looks upon the ephemeral ground below and sees the ant men who will not betray him when the time comes.

He stamps upon the rock. It vibrates. He deliberately senses the substance beneath his feet knowing he can move it with the rubber grip of his boots. There, it moves, the bush an undulating sea into which he might dive and swim to his father waiting for him beside the airstrip on Tivu.

The descent is therefore less certain. Knowing he is watched, he watches his hands hold on to the rock in desperation. He feels for a footing that tests his weight. The rock is, after all, not trustworthy. To prove its invincibility it will throw him down onto the worthless ground to join the trampled vegetation and tourist litter.

There is, thinks Leo, as he jumps down, grinning at Ben, his legs trembling, nothing noble about being a man.

Ed wants to rush forward but hangs back, blissfully aware of his redundancy. Instead, the informed man finds the shade of the rock and sleeps. Waking some hours later he is aware of the 'abo' who has emerged – it seems – from inside the rock.

12 ANTHONY

The 'abo' is known, in Castleton, as Anthony. He received the name about the time Jack Calcott, Ed's father, built the service station. There are reasons for this that are not significant here. Beyond Castleton, Anthony has other names more appropriate to the various activities into which he is sometimes absorbed. Certain types of people who call themselves Australians resent the existence of Anthony. Others, on the other hand, while recognising his humility, accept his superior wisdom and are willing to love him should he allow it.

Anthony is a spare, gangling man of knots, pieces of string and suitable ideas. He feels the world through the soles of his feet; through the palms of his healing hands the extended fingers of which will often discern the truth, even unwillingly. He sees the world with eyes set deep in the hollows of his head around which there hovers a halo of sorts into which significant things are lodged including a teaspoon.

Trousers hang on Anthony's exposed haunches as his tee-shirt hangs on coat-hanger shoulders, the two items of coordinated clothing coming apart in times of expanded movement to reveal a knotted, polished wooden navel that certain types of worthy persons find fascinating. Those who desire to know more about Anthony's beginnings will, through interested contact, learn about the times and dreams before the beginning.

Emerging from the shadow of the rock, the smooth patches on Anthony's otherwise dusty skin catch the sun, exposing gold. He smiles a large smile in the direction of Ed who is bound to smile back at Anthony whose appearance is not surprising. Had it not been for Castleton in the background Ed would have gratefully hugged the smoky man. As things stand, Anthony approaches him with large strides. His eyes, bright inside the caverns of his head, fix on Ed's, the connection restored, if need be.

Having confronted Ed, and, indeed, comforted him, Anthony gestures to the boys with a shoulder, extending the attached arm, pointing a long and bony finger and opening out his hand in presentation. There you are, you who are, as is apparent, absorbed in each other as friends who might be lovers. The boys turn, together, to meet Anthony's open hand, fingers extended to them. Thus they walk towards his invitation ignoring Ed who is, in any event, blasted out of existence. He

is, from now on, the happy onlooker, the retired parent having done or not done what he was supposed to have done.

Anthony is a man from whom few words are expected. He smiles at Ben and winks. The two are acquainted. Anthony has been familiar to Ben since Ben first staggered across the rough grass and dusty patches of what was once his grandmother's attempted lawn. Bashing his head, or another exposed body part, upon the rock that had worn through the temporary earth, his gasp of indignation, in preparation for a blast of infantile fury, was stopped in mid-expression by the sense of someone watching, who was not his mother, and upon whose ancestral right (one might say) of passage, suburban aspirations had been set. This right, as it happens, is a line of communication that connects – as a fragment of something more elaborate – the rock, upon which Leo has so recently stood in order to survey the possibilities of life, to a position upon the earth where, in the times before, necessarily, now, remembered as dreams, relevant events have occurred involving the movements of people, the raising of dust and the laying down of magic that has since been absorbed into what the current crop of Castleton youth – Leo and Ben amongst them – refer to as 'The Drag'. Anthony, therefore, often passed through Ben's infantile life. Less often, but more significantly, Anthony's presence was – and still is – manifested by his burnt black body reclining, lizard-like, upon the yellow, sandy rock rubbed into shapes by the shifting of Anthony himself and of his ancestors before him. From this position a connection was established between his interested eyes and the captivated eyes of the child. Thereby, the passing of the sometimes indifferent man and the occasionally reclining man was as influential a part of Ben's development as were the call of the birds, the scent of his mother, the view of the more distant trees and the constant muffled roar of the traffic on the main road. As intended, the youthful Ben dreamed of the man he later labelled as Anthony but otherwise forgot. There was no verbal or physical contact between the two but one incident marked Ben for life: a sunny morning, the baby lying, tummy down, upon the warm scratchy grass, becomes aware that the direction of the line of sight that usually connects him to the lizard-man sunning itself upon the rock has shifted to his mother sitting on the veranda steps. Outraged, he screams, pretending pain in order to break the connection between the two persons above him, determined to obliterate their omnipotence and substitute his own. His efforts, if not entirely successful, not only create a bond, but also cause, as an ancillary emotion, an

explosion of mirth that vibrates through the years of his early adolescence to this necessary point in time and place where Ben is standing, as intended, with Anthony and Leo under the shadow of the rock. Ben says therefore to Leo:

“This is the man I’d have told you about if I’d known we’d meet today,” adding, by way of unnecessary parenthesis, “he’s the gardener.” So had he rationalised the otherwise unexplained position of Anthony in his life.

This surprises Leo because the characteristic of the space surrounding the Calcott house is that it is not a garden. At any rate not a garden in a Castleton sense, which at this point in the narrative need not be explained. Anthony does not deny the epithet and therefore collects another name, no less appropriate than the others. Leo, however, rejects the unnecessary, and therefore associates Anthony with the rock from which he has emerged. He says:

“I’m Leo.”

“From across the sea,” replies Anthony who understands Leo’s marine temperament in contrast to his own land-based reality and who therefore does not explain that he is sometimes called Anthony. ‘There is no need, he implies by the expansion of his eyes, ‘to delve into the mysteries of names; that adventure can wait. “And you are Ben’s friend,” he insists, opening his mouth widely and giving each word the importance it deserves.

“Yes,” Leo nods willingly, accepting the dancing man for what he is. He is therefore inclined to love Anthony.

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Anthony shifts his feet, turns towards Ed at whom he gazes. Ed stares back until he is forced to suggest the lunch contained within the rucksack. Anthony smiles widely and nods approval: “I will fetch the billy for the tea,” he says.

“But I do not have the things,” replies Ed.

Anthony ignores him. He disappears into a crevice at the foot of the rock. The others, outside, watch for a moment or two and then look at one another, their thoughts dominated by Anthony for whom Leo and Ben will obey Ed, if only he will tell them what to do. They wait for more interesting things to happen.

“I have brought water,” says Ed.

The boys watch him helplessly.

“But not enough,” he adds, “for tea or. . .” He gives up. “Do you want some now?”

“No”

“Leo?”

Indeed not. The boy blushes. The idea is preposterous not to say bad-mannered.

Anthony reappears. He carries a shallow rectangular billy, as scoured clean as a billy can be. Also, a grubby cotton bag that will contain other necessary things.

Ed has removed the rucksack now lying discarded somewhere. He is again aware of his redundancy. He wants to sit down and sleep for a few moments or for ever. He watches Leo walk into the nearby scrub followed by Ben and thus he is forced to watch Anthony who is using his wide hands to sweep and pat down a patch of willing earth sheltered by the rock. This place thinks Ed, to comfort himself, has been used before, perhaps for thousands of years. I would point out this interesting probability to the boys if only they would listen but they have travelled beyond me. The boys return and by a process that is well-known if not always achieved a fire is made inside a neat triangle of small rocks upon which, it is clear, the billy will be placed.

“I have water,” says Ed, “in water bottles.”

Ben looks at him with reproach, and then smiles: “Do we not have it?” I remember my father, who looked incredulous because the billy was already boiling the water Anthony had fetched from the rock, which contained, at its base, a sort of dribbling spring which produced enough water with which to fill the billy and – so Anthony had indicated – sufficient to keep the earth around moister than the nearby bush. Leo had made the fire on his own while Anthony watched him.

Ed looks from his son to Leo who is squatting beside the fire doing expert things to it. Has the boy produced the water by way of some trick he has brought us from Tivu? Is it another manifestation of his father’s adequacy, which would otherwise be questionable?

Anthony joins Leo and the pair of them make way for Ben who ignores his father. The three of them mess around. The tea leaves are wrapped in a little package of eucalyptus leaves that dances around on top of the richly darkening water. An intoxicating odour of eucalyptus and smoke fills the air in which Ed is excluded from the chatty comradeship of the laughing men who, he has no doubt, crack a joke or two about the Botanic Gardens in Sydney. Ed wants to sit down in order to study them more intensely but is afraid he may thereby startle the timid bush

animals he is watching, whose aggressive, dark eyes challenge their own pulsating hearts. They have nothing to do with him. He has invaded their territory. Should he not tiptoe away, his clumsy human feet noisily crushing the innocent detritus below? Anthony looks over his shoulder, the boys laugh, and Ben stirs the tea with a stick as Leo pours in the condensed milk. They watch its slow swirling absorption. Macbeth again, thinks Ed remembering mother and son fondly and then with a hot passion that threatens to overwhelm him. He wants to cry out I will give you all the love I am able to give. Thus he subsides into the idea that his love is not enough and that he would have to die for them in order to prove something that they might not understand, or, not want to.

“Here, Dad.” The grinning boy presents the steaming billy. “Take a swig.”

Ed sips the pungent, too sweet, sticky substance, surprisingly cool and in which bits of ash float. “Hmm,” he says, “wonderful. Food for the Gods,” which indeed it is, if any gods exist, which is unlikely, the universe being too large for such man-made things. After all, it is only Ed who is about to say something prosaic like ‘there’re sandwiches in the bag and some Mars bars,’ which, as is expected, he does say in order that they may laugh at him and thereby create a connection.

Anthony raises an arm, the sinewy muscles of his triceps a marvel of creation as they catch the light of the sun now past its best. Ed is momentarily blinded. The wide hand beckons and would scoop Ed up as likely as it would exclude him but they have shifted their bums to make room so that Ed is able to approach handing out sandwiches of Coon cheese and Spam that Dot has made and to which she has occasionally added mustard enabling the boys to complain and wonder why Ed would spoil something good with his false adult wisdom, but it ends up as jam with slices of Queensland banana, the nursery making more sense and the need for another sugar boost accepted.

As is expected of him Ed does succeed in breaking up the party, unable not to disapprove of the boys pissing on the embers that Anthony has stamped down with his naked feet. They laugh again about the Botanic Gardens and it is clear that Ed must either return to Van or else establish his authority here. “It is time,” he says, “we left.” Farewells are inappropriate so they walk away from the man who will make himself available when required. But because there is no pressing need, Leo and Ben muck about in order to thwart Ed’s intentions. When they reach the car night has fallen. The main road and the glittering lights of Castleton cannot be avoided.

The rock obscures the house from the night-time intruders who do not, at first, see Dot sitting on the steps. As they approach she makes room for them to pass, intending, apparently, to remain outside. The boys, with the tactfulness of youth, pass by. Ed sits down beside her, struggling to think of something appropriate to say. She smiles. Having re-arranged the clothes upon the line, she has sat most of the day watching the spaces around the rock upon which Anthony might have been lounging had he not been elsewhere.

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As usual the light expands to fill the intimate spaces and then spills out over the washing line to obliterate Castleton beyond. The universe is distilled to herself sitting on the warm woodenness of the worn steps, to the curvature of the earth, to the washing line, and to whatever else is made real by her choosing to see it. She stands up about the time Leo chooses to climb the rock. She takes the steps one by one. Behind her is pure light, gold where it touches her. The earth is small beneath her feet naked. She also moves the earth, as the acrobatic lady in her glittering sequined costume is able to roll the ball beneath her practised feet. Thus she conjures up the warm, yellow, sandy rock out of the light because that is what she wants and she shapes it with her hands as Anthony shapes it with his body, as Anthony's ancestors shaped it with their dreams and with their feet standing upon it, surveying the surrounding scrubland. Jack Calcott had, at one time, considered blasting the rock out of existence until he learned that it connected to the permanence beneath the inconsequential soil. "I'd 'ave 'ad to blast the entire planet," he'd laughed at a time when he was still able to communicate. The idea did not seem preposterous and he'd 'ave liked to 'ave 'ad a go at blasting the whole blasted world realising totally the blasted Flanders fields of happy memory.

Parting the clothes – Ed's blue shirt and a white pillow slip – she sees, across the bright, white heat, the boy. He stands on top of the high, anvil-shaped rock. Legs astride, hands on hips, he surveys the world he owns. Floating in the haze, far beyond, are the greater rocks from which Anthony has come and to which he will return. She smiles also at the other boy who stands at the foot of the anvil rock staring upwards. Dot smiles, accepting also her husband beside her because they are willingly connected. There is Ben, for a start, and Leo and Anthony. As long as they remain receptive they will consider what Anthony suggests despite the fact that

he does not oppress. It is not, she understands but does not express, only herself who is connected.

She stands up, resting her hand on the top of his head from which she could have knocked the bush hat had he not already removed it for her. Her hand lingers. Then she is gone leaving Ed staring into the night, at the ghostly, moon-lit washing. He takes the hat from his lap, stands up, and tosses it onto the rock where it will lie until retrieved for other purposes. He follows his wife into the house.

The night insects call.

A bat passes through a shaft of light.

13 FAMILIAR RHYTHM

Dot prepares a great pan of pasta and makes a damper from flour and water and salt to which she adds milk and spices. It will ensure that boys' stomachs are filled for the duration. Ed makes a mess of green vegetables, tomatoes, potatoes, tomato purée, olive oil and tabasco sauce to which he will add sour cream when he has rendered it down to a sort of porridge. Ben and Leo lay the table while eating the damper. They work together with the familiar rhythm of which they are unaware. The outside sounds penetrate the willing house of shadows and incidental light. The city around has its way but temporarily. The resilient rock prevails.

Seated around the table the men attacking the food four-square compared to Dot's incidental attitude – askance because she is waiting to do something else. Ed offers a bottle of red wine, his wisdom at last come to an end. Stuffed, the boys leave without a word. Ben feels he would like to belch at his father but thinks better of it. He thinks of his mother to whom he will explain things later. He looks at her. She winks then, looks at his father.

“You’re right,” he says to Leo when they are in bed, “my mum is amazing.”

“So is your dad,” replies Leo.

“You mean it?”

“Yes.”

So Ben is satisfied and Leo thinks of his own father and of how he will talk to him when he returns to Tivu.

THE END