

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN – DEALING WITH THE BODY

Born in the confusion of men's hungry minds it may have been that the decapitated body discovered behind Alloy's house that morning was indeed the body of Annu. Also, arising from the same confusion and hunger, Annu it was who carried the bloody knife up to Missus Margaret and Annu it was who was known to have been at the Togulo Farm penal colony about that time. All this being the case then the fact of Annu cutting off his own head as a way of escaping Jim, Annu taking his head up to Missus Margaret who must have, therefore, restored it to its rightful place, was the truth by act of faith.

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The young man, Keramugl, sleeps peacefully on Alloy's sofa. The same cheap timber frame and loose foam-rubber cushions upon which Andrew had lain the night Alloy found him exhausted in front of the house.

In the same way, one of the back cushions has been removed to make a head-rest over one of the arms, but because Keramugl is shorter than Andrew his feet do not rest upon the opposite arm. Neither is Keramugl in the same state of agitation as Andrew had been, Alloy sitting beside him removing his boots and gently laying the warm palm of his hand upon Andrew's stomach.

Alloy, of course, is not in the house, he is with Andrew, somewhere.

The young man, Keramugl, has slept through the decapitation of Tarlie. He did not hear the wordless struggle behind the house, the loving embrace a sort of choking gurgle and a wasted, cut-off intake of breath as the throat is cut and thereafter a silent determined butchering that is no more than that: an animal thing born out of pain and need, therefore exonerated, the head taken away as another fumbling, misunderstood act of love.

The young man, Keramugl, was looked upon and touched by Joseph who left him sleeping in the certain knowledge he would do the right thing when the time came. Had he not touched his lips with love in Karandawa? And there was, after all, Margaret above and the incriminating knife taken away. Keramugl is clean.

Joseph picks up the panga knife and takes it up to Margaret. He does this, not as a slave to his destiny but because upon seeing his friend lying headless upon the ground he wants her.

They sit, together, again, on the veranda, overlooking the world below, hand in hand. In the face of what appears to be a catastrophe, their inactivity and calmness would seem inappropriate to those who do not know them. And not the least aspect of this apparent

catastrophe is the possibility of Joseph being blamed for the murder. He is, after all, out of favour – to say the least – with Jim and he holds a piece of incriminating and – from Jim’s point of view – convenient evidence.

Margaret and Joseph do not indulge in a panic-stricken elimination of the evidence. Such thoughts do not even begin to form in their joint consciousness. Rather, they are calmly aware of the certainty of a progression of events that have been set in motion and in which they are to be involved.

If pressed, Margaret might express the idea that the fact of them being here together on the veranda, at this specific point in time, is enough. They have no sense, like Jim has, of moving history along – for all that they do – or, like the self-centred Andrew has, of being, however unwillingly, at the centre of things – for all that they are. Margaret and Joseph – hand in hand – are outside that sort of considered egocentricity.

So they sit holding hands. They might have kissed, mouth touching mouth, but it would not have been an erotic kiss. It would have been a kiss that said remember me and be with me; as Joseph had kissed Keramugl upon leaving him. They might have kissed had such an emphatic action been required, but it was not.

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For the duration of their marriage and of their sojourn in the house upon the hill, Margaret and Jim would eat breakfast together at a small table on the veranda. Jim was sure this hadn’t been his habit before the marriage but he accepted it as one of the things she’s done and she’s welcome to it. And he might have added – across the bar – if it makes ’er ’appy, because he’d heard people say that sort of thing about their wives. But he went along with it, not in order to make her happy but because it was another of those performances he had to go through in order to be the General Manager. In this respect he didn’t question it, any more than he questioned the dinner parties that had to be given for certain guests when they passed through – Thornley, for instance – or, for that matter, the little rituals that Mrs Livingston made him undertake in the office as part of the fucking GM business. Dogs through ’oops he might have said.

Margaret’s cooking was plain and necessary: a touch heavy on the carbohydrates if you sat too long in an air-conditioned office or on the seat of a moving vehicle; colourful vegetables, apparently rather undercooked for the delicate Anglo-Australian palate; and meat more-often-than-not, missing altogether for some reason she forgets things sometimes, like ’er mother. At the beginning she had, obviously, cooked things with the raw, unbleached palm oil that Clarence had brought her one time but Jim put his foot down. I ’ad to. It was ’er mother

in 'er and I 'ad to stamp it out. We can't eat that shit, girl, I told her and she took it straight. Never said a word but he couldn't shift her on other things and dinner he generally avoided preferring a beer or whisky down the club as a prelude to his nocturnal activities. A charred steak when Joseph did a barbecue was more his line.

"No egg then?" Jim stares intently at the pile of lightly fried rice and vegetables – stuff, he calls it – on his plate, suspecting palm oil. He stares and pokes with his fork as if this action might provoke an egg to appear. On those two or three mornings a week when an egg does appear he can still aim at her by wondering out loud – of the plate of food rather than of Margaret directly – how it was that sometimes there was an egg and sometimes there was not and by what unaccountable law the egg was sometimes fried and sometimes boiled.

Depending on his mood the world that produced Jim's breakfast was either funny, stark-raving mad or fucking stupid. Margaret's response was always one of open amusement. Amusement that ever offers love to a child. Only, of course, Jim was not especially beloved of Margaret who had said, as a girl and therefore not as the completely formed Margaret, you want your Mummy, you silly boy, or words to that effect which having been said once could not therefore be said again although Jim heard them still and it was something else he held against her.

Mrs Livingston, down in the office, found in herself, when he didn't drive her mad, the same amusement aroused by Jim's silly, self-centred and bad-tempered response to some necessary office routine which made life easier for him as well as for everyone else. But unlike Margaret, Mrs Livingston still worried about the amusement that Jim aroused, sometimes even to the extent of allowing it to upset her, desiring, therefore, as a refuge, her Ted back home. In this respect Mrs Livingston sometimes drew a cloak of clouds around her sunshine, in the process, therefore, she restricted its warming influence on her Ted, on Andrew, on the girls in the office and even on Alloy, who even in his blackest moods noticed its absence. Only after things had happened worse than Jim's self-centred silliness did she understand that she did not have to ration out her sunshine as something that might otherwise be used up.

This morning, on the morning after the night within which Tarlie has been decapitated, there is an egg. A fried egg, token, maybe, of a job well done. Jim stares at the egg, at the very yellow centre of the egg. For once he is tongue-tied. There is nothing he can say to justify himself to himself today. There is no shit he can throw at her. So, girl, what was Joseph, our erstwhile bar-boy doing? Why was he sitting beside you with that bloody bush-knife lying across his lap? He might have asked such questions had the night not existed. He could rearrange the facts as well as the next man – or woman – and thereby avoid the personal consequences of his actions. But he could not wriggle out of his involvement in this one. That would take a bit of explaining. And if he asks too many questions, she might just answer him.

He might then have to ask her if she is not somehow implicated herself. Then she might laugh in his face or, more likely, walk out on him again, challenging his very existence. Because he has an idea – a vague Jim-like idea – that without Margaret, there is no Jim. He dare not test it.

Did you kill him, then?

Did you cut off 'is 'ead?

Did you chuck 'is head into the river for it to be carried out to the ocean?

Did you call up Joseph from wherever it is inside you, you, you conjure him up to get you out of trouble?

Did you do all that? Jim?

Did you do all that? Margaret? Girl?

Are your hands sticky with the blood of Annu?

Tell me you did it. Tell me you did it. Tell me you did it, girl, then I can sort it out for you. And make you my slave in the process.

Jim stares at the centre of the egg, imagining she watches him.

Why you lookin' at me like that? He thinks, looking up suddenly so's he can catch her but of course she's turned away as quick as he can look, the sly bitch, as if butter wouldn't melt in 'er mouth. Looking at something out there don't ask me what.

He stabs the egg. Well if you don't want to talk that's your lookout but you better stop looking at me like that. You can't pin it on me. I never touched 'im and you know I didn't.

But she did know and that was the thing that got at him. She, whoever she was, knew him for the baby he was who still wanted his Mummy.

P'raps it'd be better I cut your 'ead off. Eh, girl?

Perhaps it would be.

He didn't touch the egg again. He had sandwiches sent down to the office for lunch. She didn't see him for dinner either.

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He'd laughed when he saw Joseph there with the knife in his hand. What could be more bloody perfect? And natural. Joseph and Margaret holding hands was something he did not see. A kanaka and a white woman don't hold hands: it's a fact.

Joseph was detained at – it's a fact – Jim's pleasure. Take 'im and 'old 'im 'til I tell you what to do. They did, such was Jim's authority in those last few days. No legal niceties were required: if I'd wanted your opinion 'Enry I'd 'ave asked for it. If you want to be useful, sort out Andrew and if you want my opinion, don't worry about legal niceties.

“Sammy,” he said, “you can take him. ‘E won’t cause any trouble.” That’s the beauty of it. Better not drag Tudak into it at this stage of the game. Do you think I’m bloody stupid? Not me! I keep ahead of the game. She might well know what’s going on, that one, but a wife can’t shop ‘er ‘usband, I’m telling you. The law won’t let ‘er. An’ even if it did they can’t pin anything on me. Was I there? I was not but I’ll tell you one thing about ‘er and she’s as queer as they come but I know ‘er if anyone does: she won’t say a word.

“Take ‘im up the Togulo Farm and tell ‘em to keep ‘im for me.”

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They chatted on the way, as friends do. Most likely they chatted about Jim. Joseph most likely told Sammy what he’d done and thinking back on that night when Tarlie had so publicly stood up against Jim outside Chan’s store and before the wide and knowing eyes of Tati, they would most certainly have concluded that Jim had something to do with all this, in which case it was most certain he hadn’t done it himself – decapitation required a certain amount of strength. This being the case, Joseph would have said something like you better watch yourself Sammy and Sammy would have laughed and said something along the lines of you bet I will I don’t want to lose my head as well. You can see Joseph laughing his big laugh at that and Sammy – small, compact and able to make himself very inconspicuous when required along the lines of Bune in that respect only a little bit older and a lot less certain about himself in fact existing on a lower and much less complete human plane altogether but not a bad man for all that and likely to end in the right place one day – suggesting, without thought but from the very depths of his being all the same, look, get out, run away, get on a boat to Port Markham and forget about all this. I’ll tell them you put the knife to my throat and you made me do it. Joseph laughs and says: “Why not come with me?” Sammy says: “I might, one day.”

Just beyond this space then, that would one day become what is known as a public open space – an incident of grass and trees where litter will be deposited, where public dignitaries will erect objects of civic beauty and where people will hang around for a variety of reasons, some of them known as illicit, either objectively appreciating or being indifferent to the dynamic interaction of whatever it is all around them – and at a point where the track to the Togulo Farm had been washed out resulting in a gully that was sufficiently deep and difficult for Sammy to negotiate that he had to stop the vehicle altogether and say to Joseph:

“Get out, get out and run.”

Joseph, in response to the urgent advice, laughs again and says: “Do this for me Sammy.”

"I'll do anything," Sammy replies.

"When you pick up the body of Tarlie as you are bound to do, call to Keramugl who is in the house of Alloy."

"I'll do that."

"He'll help you do the right things. You'll do that Sammy?"

"I will," says Sammy, I'll do it because by asking me to do it you have made my life significant and I will serve you and the idea of you to the end of my days.

"And you will tell Keramugl what has happened to me and you will tell him to do what Missus Margaret asks him to do."

"I will do that."

"Thank you," and Joseph gets out of the vehicle at that point on the road, mostly hidden from public view by a tangle of bush and, as it happens, barely recognisable as a road at all. "Go now Sammy, I'll walk to the Togulo Farm. It's a good place to hide."

They start their separate journeys without looking back.

So sure of Sammy's goodwill is Joseph that he no more considers it than he considers the oxygen in the air. He might think of Sammy later with some pleasure in the same way as he might appreciate the early warmth of the sun on a cold morning but at this particular moment he is filled with a more abstract sort of joy. The joy of being alive and of feeling himself walking the incline of the track up into the hills. See him as he rises in the landscape, the sea behind him becoming wider, the sky above him bigger and the wilder hills around him the reality of the earth beyond the populous activity of the coastal plain and the temporary dynamic interaction of human futility that is the town. He throws back his head, stretching his strong neck – ribbed like the trunk of the old Casuarina tree – and he laughs his big laugh, calling the name of Tarlie so that the hills take it and carry it higher into the sky and above the sea.

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"You know that fellow Master Andrew fucks? The one works for Master Clarence? Skinny bugga?"

"Yesa."

"You know 'is 'ouse?"

"Yesa."

"There's a body at the back."

"Yesa."

Jim had let the statement fall upon the assumption of an expression of surprise from Sammy, who, sometimes, momentarily, registered a human response to Jim's outrageous

instructions before snapping back to the automated mode expected of the General Manager's driver.

Thus was Jim, momentarily, disconcerted. Sufficiently so, and in an instinctive sort of way, to want to scrutinise Sammy and wonder if the fucker wasn't up to something you can't trust these kanakas further than you can see them. But Jim held back, coming to the satisfying conclusion that Sammy was incapable of independent thought and would not be other than Sammy, which meant, after all these years of having got used to him, that if I told 'im to stick 'is 'ed in a bucket of water 'e'd do it and drown if I didn't tell 'im to take it out.

Nonetheless, although Jim did not think out the idea in a way that might have occurred to someone else as amusing, or at any rate odd, a sensation did manifest itself to him as something akin to a hard and inhuman smell – such as burning plastic, for instance – suggesting that there was something unreal about Sammy's matter-of-fact response to an instruction to dispose of a body. Jim actually sensed this to the extent of shaking himself as a dog would shake the water out of its ear. And as Jim shook so again he experienced fear of the unknown and along with the fear he had an idea of Margaret – a barely perceived idea – of Margaret looking at him and he hated her for it. Fuck her.

“Yesa.”

All this happened – this massive, millions of years' worth of, degrading journey that Jim took – in a moment so small that Sammy saw nothing that was other than the Jim he'd got used to over the years also. They were standing as usual beside the vehicle outside the office to which Sammy had driven Jim after breakfast.

“Take the vehicle and deal with it. I've sent the boys ahead so there won't be any trouble.”

“Yesa.”

There wasn't; the mere suggestion of Tudak in the breeze kept the mob away and was enough to engender a ripple of fear that went through the community around Alloy's house and beyond. Along with it also the unspoken but palpable intelligence that Tarlie had been done to death by the machinations of Jim and that Joseph had taken the rap. This is what had happened and despite the fear he provoked Tudak was not blamed and Sammy only doing his job as they knew they also would continue to do. Better to forget the whole thing, keep your heads down and be glad it's not you. How else to survive? Jim was Jim is the reality of our foul existence. Challenge him and look what happens. Horrible things.

None of these ideas were spoken out but they were muttered and thought about and the shameful consequences of our existence understood only too well. And for this reason there were those who exalted Tarlie and Joseph and there were those who hated them for exposing their own nakedness and there were those who got on with whatever they had to do

and tried to pretend it was nothing to do with them. But the ideas would not go away and as they rippled ever outwards so there was an exponential multiplication of understanding and of incomprehension and of subsequent justification, explanation and jumping to the right conclusions although they didn't realise it and to the wrong conclusions even though they were sure they were the right ones even to the extent of being prepared to kill for them. In the plantation, in the boys' quarters up on the hill, even in the club mostly for the wrong reasons, the name and thence the idea of Annu was caught up in all the cross-currents of ideas and dynamic conversational or even argumentative interactions amongst the friendly, incidental or pugnacious relationships between and amongst men. Thus the idea became real and indeed it was real as much for Jim as it was for Keramugl, for Daphne, for Henry, in the few days he had left to live, and as it had been for the late and sometimes lamented Tarlie.

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Tudak returns, alone. The sleeper sleeps on. Tudak might be waiting to have a go at Keramugl but he is unaware that his angel of the night is inside the house. So, he sits alone beside the decapitated body that he has created. It is now meat, already beginning to swell and to lose its similarity to human form in the morning heat. The insects roar. The body is of interest only, it seems, to the body of flies, an irreverent thing that nonetheless plays its necessary part. The same trio of vultures circle above: small things that make the sky big.

There had been a connection, no doubt about it. Tudak had embraced Annu, briefly, as Rabis and Pen brought him to the ground, on his face, holding him, while Tudak did the job, straddling the oddly compliant body of Tarlie who had, Tudak was able to reflect later, made the job easy for him. He had been able to raise the head gently, cupping the forehead in the warm palm of his hand. He had felt its weight and understood its worth. He had held it so for millions of years and beyond, forever, even though he stretched the throat sufficiently to cut through it easily. The compliant body had made it easy because of the warm hand on his forehead. He had killed Tarlie as his first act of love.

So it was that in the moment of knowledge, Tarlie suffered no pain, the quiet choking noise he had made was not complaint or resistance or a desperate hanging on to life but laughter. After all, Tarlie was the one most likely to suffer in the moment and then only in the process of transition, the giddy hanging on to the onion above the rapidly shrinking world. Tarlie laughed at the idea and at the idea that this was indeed the Annu whom he had been seeking. Tudak's suffering lasted longer, but not for ever.

So Tudak had foolishly taken the head away with him and he had foolishly left the knife behind, for which he might yet get a flogging, which he would take. But the foolishness made

a hairline crack in the remarkably thick and hard shell around the seed that was inside what was called Tudak and through which, a tiny sliver of light barely a single vibrating ray of light barely even the most minute hint of energy suggesting light had nonetheless been able to touch the seed promising the possibility of germination.

But having detached Tarlie's head, Tudak cherished it for its own sake. He took it away and hid it. The idea of eating Tarlie's body would return but as a different idea.

Now Tudak sat beside Tarlie's body outside Alloy's house while Keramugl, the Brave, slept peacefully inside. The idea that Tudak was guarding Keramugl, protecting him, is not entirely inappropriate. In a parallel world, Keramugl, considering the events of the night before, walks out onto the little flimsy veranda, rubbing his eyes, to be confronted by Rabis and Pen slaverling on the lawn. Tudak, seeing him and recognising the angel of the night, calls off the dogs. Keramugl sits on the veranda, unaware, in his sleepiness, of what it is beside which Tudak sits. The two men – a black devil, as it were, and the angel – look at each other waiting for the revelation, the transformation, the realisation of the wondrous beauty that is a man's clean soul. In a parallel world, but in the one we inhabit Keramugl sleeps on while Tudak waits beside the decapitated body outside.

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Late morning. The heat is exhausting, as usual. The vegetation around the house and the cliff rising above, upon which Henry's house sits, are claustrophobic. The men who are entitled to live in the Junior Management Quarters have not yet returned for the lunches being cooked by women and small boys; of more necessary and immediate interest than the real smell of the decapitated body, headless and rotting out there, somewhere. Nonetheless, they all hear Jim's vehicle as it bumps and bangs over the tired ruts of the track that runs between the crowded gardens, eventually ending up outside Alloy's house in which reside people who are no longer Alloy. The same route Andrew had taken and Tarlie had taken some days later, leading them both to portentous events on their particular journeys. Remarkable, come to think of it, who has ended up at this cheap bungalow beside the river and below the cliff upon which Henry's house sits. People hear the noise, subconsciously or consciously – perhaps frozen in motion, holding a spoon or taking a pinch of salt – conditioned to know what it means. Jim himself will not be in the vehicle but it is an instrument of his devious activities all the same. No one holds it against Sammy; or against Tudak personally. Only doing their jobs.

Sammy halts the vehicle in front of Alloy's house. The ground is dry enough to take its weight. Tudak stands up a colossus in his smart uniform, stretched over his body in a way the loveable Dick will later appreciate. His muscular, meaty body nonetheless no more essentially

alive than the other which he has already, in fact, dragged to the front of the house. It is not recognisable as something that was once Tarlie, this headless, swollen piece of meat; evidence to be got rid of.

As Sammy gets out of the vehicle, so Keramugl, the young man, having been woken up by the noise and surprised into full wakefulness by the brightness of the midday sun, comes out. He recognises Sammy as Jim's driver but as no more than that, and he recognises Tudak as the terrifying vision of the night before, shrunken a little, nonetheless, by the daylight and, it must be said, by Keramugl's own new certainty and calm acceptance of things as they are. Remarkable, in fact, given his state of terror only twelve hours previously, how calmly Keramugl accepts the situation. For all he knows, at that moment, Sammy is the sort of mean little shit whom one would expect to work as a stooge for Jim. He might be another Tudak, as Keramugl has understood Tudak so far, black wickedness beyond reason or reasoning. He might, at any moment, have his lap-lap ripped off, be brutalised, tossed into the back of the vehicle and fed to the crocodiles along with whatever else it is that lies at Tudak's feet. A reasonable conclusion given the circumstances. But Keramugl is as calm as Margaret herself might be. He feels the irresistible Keramugl urge to laugh. It shows on his face.

The body lying at Tudak's feet is not recognised by Keramugl, the odd body or two, lying around, decapitated precisely so as to avoid recognition, not an unusual event in those dire days of distress and despair. Keramugl did not give it a second glance; the possibility of an attack from Sammy and Tudak was of more immediate concern, although a smile lingered on his face.

Sammy returns the smile, a rare radiant Sammy smile so that Keramugl is reassured. Tudak is another matter. What is Tudak's response to the sudden and unexpected appearance of that angelic apparition of the night before? The thing that had been taken away from him? The thing, maybe, that had helped to make that fracture into a crack or even an element of the light itself that had entered his dark being? This dumb, albeit beautiful-looking, animal who is not known to utter more than grunts and Yesa when it is spoken to, and who when response, other than immediate action that is, is required, has nothing to say. Obviously. Whatever transformation was to occur, it was not going to be a miraculous verbal articulation of Tudak. But it might be progress in the right direction.

Tudak watched – struck no dumber than usual – his mouth open a little so that his neat, regular facial features did not look as handsome as they used to do. It was, someone noted later, from about that time that Tudak began to look his age; the lines began to appear on his face, his skin lost its gloss; his shoulders looked as if they did indeed carry a burden. Margaret caught his eye and smiled.

Sammy smiles at Keramugl spilling out all that Joseph has told him to say so that Keramugl is reassured not only of Joseph's safety but also of Sammy's friendship. Jim ceases to exist and therefore the fear of Tudak is gone. The body lying at Tudak's feet is also explained and the death of Tarlie accepted as a real thing which will be considered over time, but which is not a thing that can, or should, induce rantings and ravings of self-centred grief. Keramugl thinks of Tarlie as he knows him so he laughs. The idea of Tarlie is much more real than the lump of meat at Tudak's feet. Tarlie lives, indeed. Long live Annu.

Sammy's smile radiates still more as Keramugl laughs at his words and Tudak watches. He watches the interaction between the known Sammy whom he has, heretofore, understood as a kindly, albeit indifferent, dog-handler, and the other, understood as a thing vulnerable and fragile, the young man, thick-set and built like a boxer, although he is a short man. Henry's baby-faced, pathological killer, appears to Tudak – with a vision of the naked Keramugl, the night before – as a thing so vulnerable and fragile that he wants to take it back home with him in order to keep it safe and intact. Drag it back to his hole, to his sleeping place, to pet and to hold – the way he has treated Tarlie's head, as it happens. Perhaps to kill it in the end either from jealousy of it or from indifference even, forgetting to feed it or locking it up in a place of safety and leaving it there too long. This is how Tudak's dim and uncomprehending brain responds to Keramugl at that suspended mid-day moment. He wants Keramugl for himself.

"I've come to collect the body." Or words to that effect from Sammy.

An instruction received: Tudak responds. He drags the body by the ankles towards the vehicle and drops it. He is a big, strong man and could easily have flung it over his shoulder and dumped it into the tray of the vehicle.

But he is aware – in the sense of an almost-but-not-quite incomprehensible pressure around him – of the interest in the process of the other two. He feels – as much as he can feel that sort of thing – he is being watched. And why should they not watch the beast doing its work? His bestiality has proved him so to be; Tudak the man, of no account. Get the job done and let's get on but Tudak responds to this perceived interest. He wants – not as a thought-out idea – he wants to make a connection with these two who watch him.

He drops the legs of the body he is holding by the ankles as if exhausted. He is exhausted, as it happens: dog tired of being Tudak he is – not an idea but a general feeling which he is incapable of analysing.

"Ugh," or something like that. He points to the inert weight of the body upon the ground.

Sammy and Keramugl move forward. All together they lift the body. Sammy and Keramugl take a leg each while Tudak carries the shoulders, the end with which he is already well acquainted.

They put it into the vehicle and as they do, one of the arms is left hanging over the edge. Being on that side, Keramugl takes it by the hand and thus remembers the hand of Tarlie holding his. He remembers the pressure of Tarlie's thumb telling him to be calm in the face of adversity and to resist his violent inclinations. Thinking of this, Keramugl remembers Nalin's daughter, her head held by Tarlie's large hands, one of which he holds now. Thus he looks at the body of Tarlie lying in the back of Jim's truck with no head that he can hold. Anger fills up Keramugl as these ideas flood his consciousness together with more ideas about the journey from Narangburn Plantation to Karandawa. He remembers the duplicitous Tematan, he remembers his friend the tragic but happy Weno and he remembers the white man who fed them into the belly of New Sudan. Then he remembers the kiss that Annu gave him and he remembers the fear of seeing the balus for the first time thinking that nothing can be so bad as travelling in the balus for the first time and yet here is Tarlie, his friend, lying dead in the back of Jim's vehicle. Anger fills up Keramugl so that there is nothing but the anger and the world around is a red fire he wants to fight with his bare hands and tear it apart to the death and in doing so he may bow down and worship the god of violence who is the master of the world. Then he may truly become Keramugl the Terrible whose vengeance is known to all men who will therefore fear him and no more will he be subject to his own fear. Would he not, in his youthful vigour, have scaled the cliff there and then, rushing at Henry, just coming in for his lunch, his Mozart and a little siesta, and have torn the surprised Henry apart limb from limb? He would, and the baby-faced killer would have done a good job of it. For it is true that the whole world around was silent in the midday dead heat as Keramugl thought these things.

Keramugl holds the cold hand of the body that emphatically does not belong, any more, to Tarlie, and he looks at the grisly stump that once held Tarlie's grinning face. Even the body of flies has fallen silent, moving noiselessly about its business as the vultures watch, a little nearer now, perching on a tree that hangs from the cliff. The decision alone is Keramugl's; the struggle is plain to see. He cannot let go of the hand but his other hangs loosely at his side, clenching and unclenching in the heat of his anguish.

Sammy steps forward. Tudak steps back so that he may watch the action in which he is not allowed to partake. He watches.

Sammy, smiling his Sammy smile, takes Keramugl's free hand. But as he takes it, it clenches in a spasm of resistance so he must fight with it a little. Force his fingers, his older fingers, into that clenched, crunched-up bunch of fingers that is all that is left, at this awful moment in time, of beautiful, youthful Keramugl with his wondrous clean soul.

Sammy wrestles with Keramugl. He is not going to let go. He will hold on forever if that is what is required of him. He is filled with joy is Sammy, who is, in fact, created for this very purpose of wrestling with Keramugl's dark Keramugl at this very eternal point of time within

the whole of creation, Alpha and Omega and all that, and for all time, within what we call God, those two held on to each other in this moment.

Keramugl's breathing calms down to normality, he opens his hand, he holds on to Sammy in a proper, grown-up way and he smiles his angelic Keramugl smile, the lower lip large and protruding somewhat. His Keramugl laugh bursts forth as such an explosion of heat in the hot day that Tudak feels a searing pain.

Does some rat come forward to screw it up?

No, not this time. This time it is not a small thing. Margaret is up there, above even Henry's house with its Mozart and Ming china about which she cares nothing. This is something that will happen in a right way. The only rat around is Jim and in respect of Keramugl, Sammy and Tudak at this moment, which will last forever, Jim does not exist.

And, Keramugl holds on to the hand of the body that was once that of Tarlie, because the stage directions have not specified how he should let go and because there is, as a little part of Keramugl's consciousness, an idea that it would be irreverent to let the hand drop against the side of Jim's vehicle with a thud.

So, fed up with watching, Tudak steps forward and takes the hand, detaches it from the other and holds on to Keramugl – hand in living hand. Has he done it in imitation of Sammy? Has he done it as a dog instinctively licks a hand that might feed it? Who knows but, and this is the great thing, he does it. Not only does he do it but also he holds on to Keramugl as if he might hold on forever. So Tudak holding Keramugl's hand who is holding Sammy's hand. And, therefore, it holds; there is no conscious decision by Tudak to let go as there was by Jim that day after the fire.

Tumbling through Tudak's Tudak-ness, which is beginning to take shape, are a cascade of ideas; less conscious and specific, more muddled and more difficult to hang on to than those that had troubled Keramugl only seconds before but ideas all the same: of being flogged in the Togulo Farm; of being both spoiled and mistreated by Jim; of lying on the burnt ground and watching Andrew-Alloy walk away; of being nothing to them and equally irrelevant to the likes of Bune and those others getting away from him and whom he nonetheless wanted to hold for reasons that were obscure to him; of watching Annu walk away, in the night; of watching Annu take this one away from him making him aware for the first time in his existence of a limitless space within him which he had, until that moment, assumed was filled with himself; an emptiness that had, through habit, driven him to a childish anger which had made him want to smash what he could not have, and which had made him destroy Annu and want him at the same time. And now the emptiness inside him was filling up with a pain that expanded from his stomach into his chest like a memory of something dear to him which had been lost. And the pain moved up into Tudak's chest as a real thing that threatened to burst

into his head and overwhelm him as an emotion. This was a new thing to Tudak and he thought he was dying; only, in fact, he was crying for the first time so that he hung on to Keramugl's hand all the more because the hand, like the onion, would save him. It would, as was also predestined, save him for the time when he would pick up the body of the other boy and find it also worthy.

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They worked together to dispose of Tarlie's body. The idea of some kind of burial was a non-starter without the head. Tudak admitted to having it but expressed in mono-syllables a desire to hang on to it that could not be reasoned against. Eating the body was a distinct consideration because had this been done the head itself would have been saved as a sentimental memory, something to be preserved and placed on the metaphorical mantelpiece. The idea of ingesting Tarlie, using his nutrients and maintaining actual parts of him in their own tissues and shitting out the waste to fertilise the trees was attractive. Time counted against this however: apart from the eating itself, that must not be rushed and that should be part of a reverential meal followed by a riotous party, there was the work of butchering and cooking. It was a twenty-four hour job at best, not counting sending out the invitations.

Feeding to the crocs was, therefore, the best thing. In this way the body would be respectfully returned to the earth.

The decision having been made, therefore, Jim's vehicle is understood to be driving through Akaranda – although no one wanted to know what it was doing. It drove past the tank farm and out along the old coast road towards Lingalinga Plantation. Wanei, the caretaker, is well known to Sammy. He will cooperate, Sammy knows that.

Lingalinga is on the other side of Akaranda. A long way, almost as far as Cape Hereford, where the soil is not much good because of the raised coral reefs upon which the land is formed and because the volcanic dust rarely drifts in that direction. So there is not much interest from the agro-industrial . . . interests. Pockets of good alluvial stuff, all the same, for those who are interested in farming. A coconut palm and cattle sort of place, Andrew said later. He was right for once in his life.

The plantation is owned by Chan who bought it in the days when he was Jim's employer. Although, like Jim, Chan has moved up in the world – the company trade store, his store in town and his property investments down South – he hangs on to the place because at one time he thought he'd use it at weekends but he never does. Fact is, and with good reason, he's afraid: better to stay in his house in Akaranda secured by his own Togulo boys.

One of the rooms in the dilapidated plantation house – a two-roomed wooden bungalow with wide sagging verandas and views of the sea – is occupied by the aforementioned Wanei.

With Chan's blessing, although she has nothing to be afraid of, Helen, the volunteer school teacher who will become significant later, visits Lingalinga every month or two, on a Saturday or if there is a public holiday. She travels out on her little motor-scooter which is very slow and which takes about three hours to arrive but that's part of the fun. She swims and walks, spends the night and returns the following morning after another swim. For a while she studied the bird-life but gave it up as a waste of time. I'd rather watch the sea and the sky. The sea fascinates her. Wanei fascinates her also. He has one eye and a wicked smile. He catches fish and cooks them for her and he sits at her feet ready to take advantage of the smallest sign; but she's a sensible girl and he is a good man for all that he sometimes eats people.

At the back of Lingalinga Plantation low limestone cliffs guard a plain which was once part of the sea-bed, exposed by a seismic shift not long ago. At their foot runs another lazy river, but shorter than the other one. It issues into a swamp more or less brackish and frequented by crocodiles famed for their gargantuan size even though no one has seen them since the seismic shift. Lingalinga is at the more sparsely populated end of Van Island thanks to the thinness of the soil, through which protrude the coral limestone rocks. Fishermen inclined to fish in the swamp are warned off by Wanei's stories of the gargantuan, man-eating crocodiles.

Wanei had taken Helen into the swamp a couple of times in his canoe so that she could see the birds. She had laughed at his stories about the crocodiles so he had laughed as well and he had been happy to catch her a fish which they'd cooked on the beach over a driftwood fire under the stars. He didn't ask her to pay, the pleasure of her company being sufficient for his needs. There was something about Helen that tamed Wanei and made him want to serve her. He'd watch her with his one eye and wonder, under the stars, why.

As a result of Wanei's magic, the swamp was sacred. A body dropped here is taken in minutes, he says, so long as you don't stop to watch.

Thus the men, now including Wanei – the grinning, white-teeth flashing, one-eyed, silent, knowing, humorous little bastard who could act the servile lackey in the days past when Chan'd bring his friends for drinking and gambling parties, and the charming, bossy servant to Helen in the days present when she comes to make him thoughtful – carry the body down a track through long grass and past pandanus palms. They reach a sort of beach that is more mud than sand but drier in this dry weather than it usually is. They deposit the body – even less human-looking now than it was and looking nothing like Tarlie so that it is no more Tarlie for Keramugl than it is any old lump of meat for the crocs – and depart without ceremony in single file, Sammy leading and Wanei bringing up the rear. Wanei looks back, squinting his

one eye. He grins and snaps his teeth. He'll be back later to check that the deed has been done, he tells them.

Thank you very much, Wanei, says Sammy. They wave goodbye and return to Akaranda. Keramugl is oppressed by the wide straight road between the oil palms, the mill chimneys dribbling smoke into a flat, heavy sky. He would rather have stayed at Lingalinga with Wanei and wonders why he didn't. Weno is one of the answers he gets and thinking of Weno he thinks of Margaret and he is happy. Sammy drops Keramugl off before he reports back to Jim that the dirty job has been done. He thinks of the day when he will have saved enough money to settle on a little farm somewhere. Then he'll walk out on Jim without warning even if it means losing a month's wages. He'll leave the keys in the vehicle and he'll walk down the road whistling on what will be the happiest day of his life. He thinks he might go back to Lingalinga and do something with Wanei.

Tudak jumps out of the back of the vehicle as lightly as usual landing on the ground as if it is sprung. The moment he is on the ground, Rabis and Pen join him so that he feels once more the burden he cannot shake off and does not understand. He feels for a cigarette and immediately, on cue, the despicable Rabis, or possibly the odious Pen, supplies one as the other lights it. But Tudak is watching Keramugl walk into the distance. He wants to follow. It is remarkable; he'd serve the young man, Keramugl, given the chance. He starts off but as he does so a familiar command stops him: "Oi, boys, I got a job for you."

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