# BEEKEEPER

Anthony Delaney

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Book design by Anthony Delaney.

anthonyleedelaney@gmail.com

For Ken.

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, “what have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?” my friend suggested, "but these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "they do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil."

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance,* 1841

If the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail.

— Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Science,* 1966

# ONE

I will not write safely, but I do hope to write wisely. I hope that as I cross the tumbled bedrock and am seeped with chilling rapids, that I first observe myself as having done it; there is as much value in living presently as there is in its examination, for you cannot have one without the other, not if you wish for it to remain with you. All resources, all veins, all bracken, have their value in perfection: as I fathom that anyone can observe without approval, converse without endorsement, and reflect without persuasion. You are as rigid in character as any one of us, so long as you wish to be at peace with your own spine — nature's most superlative combination of strength and flexibility. Whatever your afflictions, curses, demons, or hauntings, know this: you alone are seven octillion atoms of enduring homeostasis. May you never feel helpless, for you are never without help, and may you never fear your own death, for you will never experience it.

The titular trait of all involved players is shared equally. Though diverse in its manifestation, it is within all humans: powerful enough to usurp all reserves of built-up trust, to betray the memory of demonstrated tenderness, to wither us to our most brittle and hollow and to root itself there perpetually as the most stubborn thorn of our mental evolution. It is a catastrophic blind spot of our psyche that we know so little about what motivations lie behind our decisions. From early on we are taught that 'I don't know' is an unacceptable answer. It is no wonder how frustrated we become with ourselves, and others, as the majority of the time we know next to nothing.

Before we proceed, there is something you must understand: I cannot speak, but I can write. In the past, there was a tooth-grinding vitriol in the process of my communication, the

mastication of ruminant concepts spat through a trembling charcoal pencil. Growing sore in the hands through the disuse of my jaw. If I could talk, I would have been much the same as any other door-slamming adolescent, slinging acid from a vibrant tongue. I'd been bewitched with a pervasive grumpiness, a sort of mental progeria, that led me to viewing other children as childish and most adults as irresponsible.

You'll have to find your own justification if my words get too ornate and metaphysical — you'll end up nauseated if you don't. In doing such intimate dealings with the self from an early age, internal transactions endeavouring to encroach upon my capacities, there's been an awful lot of back dives into my silent waters. Dealing with the self, skewering and collating my person, caused me to discern that people are fractal and you cannot ever truly meet their end. You cannot shake my hand and determine you have met me. I doubt I'd have let you touch my hand regardless. I've only accepted recently that an initial handshake is useful in persuasion. I always knew this, I just did not care to do it until recently.

Moonlight dappling the shore, black water lapping over the stones. Knotted and gnarled, a lone, barren tree rising from its stillness. The mirror image skewering the lake in two. A spruce bending, pale transience caught between its needles, casting patterns on my bare knees. The breeze carrying honeysuckle. My fingers are deep in grey, slushy sand. Within the moist grit they curl around a buried stone. I cast it overhand, wounding my shoulder, and there's a deep, weighted splash.

Still water moves in an argyle pattern.

When it was just myself and my mother, living beside the interchange, I was an object whose worth was processed through others' reassurement. Einstein only began speaking in full sentences at five. My value discerned through the suggestion I may be a statistical anomaly, a

modern genius incubating. When five came and went, and I never spoke, it became clearer to her who I was really going to be.

Green curves, wax sheen, textured lines dispersing light. A tangy wooden scent. Creating a city from unit blocks for my marbles to live in. My mother getting off the phone, Clara would you like a sandwich, me grunting. The grunt meaning yes. Raining outside, cold inside, wearing something knitted. Green and orange and pink. The stitches dyed and woven, downturned V-shapes, reminding me of rabbit ears.

Drinking hot chocolate with white mittens on.

There are certain means, these days, to assist me with speaking. I avoid them. It would bring me ease in certain scenarios, but it is not a possibility that I'd want anybody to become comfortable with. There is a mental effort in speaking aloud as there is in processing anything to be spoken at all, the former insurmountable, the latter a nuisance. It is not in my interests to torture and exhaust myself for the convenience of others. Applying these conveniences to everyday conversation, wherein I pick various words to string together basic sentences, would invariably lead to the expectation I participate in the sort of small talk that only neurotypical people benefit from.

The overpasses and underpasses rumbled through all hours. The interchange boasted constant traffic, from vehicles and errants alike. Its construction was completed during my twelfth year alive, and my mother was one of the few in its immediate vicinity who were not displaced from their homes. Right up against its border, we bore the brunt of its imposition: a permanent, shadowed gloom through the day, a thunderous rattling through the night. It cut straight into the city centre, decimating businesses and livelihoods, destroying and segregating communities. People were rendered homeless in its wake.

Our two-storey red-brick was glued on the edge of the block. The backyard was a thin alley shared by a restaurant, the front yard was the motorway. I watched the kitchen staff argue from my bedroom window many nights, the erratic rain of clashing glass bottles as bloated black trash bags were hauled into the dumpster. The dishwasher would usually be the one removing the trash, dragging it behind him while a chef occupied a doorway of yellow light, hurling abuse and preparing a cigarette. The dishwasher would brace himself against the dumpster and mutter about the thanklessness of his job. She would flick ash at him, he would smash a bottle, smoke would curl out from behind her teeth when she laughed. I once saw them kissing. It didn't make them like each other.

The dishwasher would sometimes return to the dumpster in the early hours. He'd grip the edge and balance over the side with his waist. Using one arm, he'd rifle around through the bags, and retrieve whatever it was he'd been looking for. Often it was food. Perfectly good food, still packaged in unopened plastic. He'd come away with armfuls, after a point he began bringing bags to carry it all. Other times, it was kitchenware or tableware, which he would place very carefully in the dumpster when initially throwing it away. I once saw him retrieve a set of champagne glasses, and not one of them had broken. He held an enormous grin that night. I watched him do this until he left that place, and I don't think he was ever caught.

Hey, girl, the chef speaking through her smoke. That's her up there, she thinks we can't see her with the light off. Girl, you shouldn't be up at an hour like this. Keep that window closed when I've got one of these, would you? She's showing the cigarette to me. Matter of fact, don't ever go touching one. They're horrible. Horrible, not good for you.

They make the sky go grey.

Petroleum soot blackened the sidewalks. There were few weeds between the cracks, because they couldn't make it in the first place. Tacky grey circles speckling the pavement, mummified chewing gum. On my walks to school, I stopped to observe the graffiti. Localised to the columns and foundations of the interstate, it was an ever-evolving tangle of colourful signatures and artworks in an otherwise dreary, polluted hollow. A constable came to our school this year to warn us about crime. People who do graffiti are criminals. I'm not sure why the graffiti was so unwelcome. It made for something to look at.

I would run my hands over the fences I passed. They were old, antique wrought iron, and chipped orange in many places. I'd get rust flakes under my fingernails. Cool metal soothed my palms, and the points stimulated my fingertips to press on them. I tended to dawdle and was frequently late for that reason. I couldn't help my transfixion on the sprouting weeds between the iron, long grasses and curling vines, and in the bigger picture, unkempt lawns with vastly different appearances. One yard could be mostly dried mud with a few stagnant puddles surrounded by a sparse afterthought of grass islands, another could be a flourishing ecosphere of seeded saplings, knee-high dandelions, stretches of clovers, spiny shrubs, and ivy ensnaring and choking every former item. In summertime I'd have to sprint past these yards so my throat didn't close. Landscapers were periodically sent out after these people were threatened with eviction due to the state of their yards. Those who couldn't pay had their homes boarded up. I once saw my old neighbours sneaking back into their house through a window, hauling out blankets, clothes, and tins of canned food, and carrying them to their car. I stood watching them, my hands wrapped around the prongs of their fence.

That's Diane's kid, the one who don't talk. Oh, so it is. Hey, kid, if you're gonna stand and watch, you may as well help. Come over here. Creaking gate, flax tickling my shins, dry

footsteps. Two aluminium tins, one in each hand. Carry these to the car. Can you take more? Stack them like that. Put them in the boot. Yeah, like that. We've gotta be quick. Hey, she could fit into the basement through the vent. We've got some stuff down there, but it's all locked and closed off, can you wriggle through and hop down? The cover is pried off, revealing a square gap in the cement. I go in backwards, gripping the ledge, and fall to the floor. I land on my feet, but fall to my knees. It is very painful and I start to bleed. Can you see the plastic? The thing wrapped in plastic? Throw it up to me. Yes, god, thank you, thank god. That's everything we needed. How do we get her back out?

Ah, shit.

With the accumulation of hoarded clutter, there wasn't a clear path from one point to the next. I spent a long time clawing my way over piles of ruined items towards the basement door. It was boarded from the other side. One end of a nail was poking through the door frame, so I began pounding on it with the handle of a pan. It cracked and splintered the wood, but ended up deeply embedded and impossible to manoeuvre. Beneath a matting of cobwebs and dirt, I noticed the corner of a plastic card resting on the stairs. I knew I might remove the screws in the hinges with it. Slotting it into the face, I attempted to turn the bolt. My forearms burned and my fingertips turned white. Rust and dirt curled out from the sides of the two screws I did manage to remove, but the rest were too tight or completely out of reach. A sheer drop to my left warned me to avoid stacking items at the top of the staircase.

I turned my attention to climbing out of the vent hole. An old, gutted dresser was light enough that I could push it below. I dug through the piles in search of enough books and magazines to form a stairway. I slipped on an unstable surface and a rotten crate collapsed beneath me. A nail shot through my foot.

We'll come back for you soon, okay?

Cold, grey. An empty space for me to sit on the concrete. My name screams above me for hours, carried through the gaping vent by glacial currents. Screaming screaming. Screaming screaming.

Suppose someone works in a sweatshop manufacturing technology. Back when computers were first invented, those highly specialised people pioneering them had a simultaneously fundamental and advanced understanding of what they were doing.

Nowadays, sweatshop workers are numerous, suffering under low wages and dangerous, exhausting, soul-destroying conditions. It's clear very few of these workers would have an advanced understanding, let alone a passion for, the nature of computing. Yet, they can still build computers, because they are told what to do and how to do it. But, they build computers in a 'different' way — with an enormous blind spot in their knowledge.

Say someone decides to get into a trade, such as plumbing. A plumber will know that human beings require septic tanks, drainage systems, clean running water, heated water, etc. It will require intelligence, attention, and dedication for them to learn the ins and outs of how to repair, install, and manage these systems, yet could they have reinvented plumbing from the ground up?

It took humanity until approximately 2,600 B.C. to figure out how to use pipes for water, and then another thousand years to figure out how to heat it. Though this knowledge seems a given now, there remains a gap between the initial problem and its now-obvious solution.

Within that gap, is a certain process of thought and invention which spans thousands upon thousands of years of humanity's trial-and-error. There are, therefore, secrets within the history of invention that may well be lost forever, or if we're very lucky, simply rediscovered.

Knowledge could be lost due to the taken-for-granted information we currently have, which so frequently glosses over the assumed ‘obvious’ fundamentals. This may well become a massive issue thousands of years into the future. Imagine if our highly advanced technologies stopped functioning on a baseline level. It would be like writing in programs ten times as advanced as Python, and slowly forgetting what binary code is, or even how computers physically work.

The concept I am outlining here is my own derivative interpretation of “Gall’s Law”: all complex systems that work evolved from simpler systems that worked. The beauty of this fact is also its greatest pressure-point. As the amount of information in this world expands, so too does the strain on our education systems to adequately condense it. At one point in human history, it was possible to read every book that had ever been printed. Now, as knowledge advances, people’s understandings are forced into becoming increasingly specialised and narrowed.

The biggest danger is that information can be lost. The more people that retain this information mentally, and are able to pass it on effectively, truthfully, and comprehensively, the safer we are. This ties into why people are planning out long-term nuclear waste messages. We think it’s a given now that radiation is dangerous, we think we’ve documented it well enough, yet… we have lost many ancient languages. We have wonders of the world from just a few thousand years ago. The things humanity does, even when documented, are forgotten and erased, leaving us with questions which may someday lead to life-threatening ignorance.

Perhaps, at that age, I was no better suited to treat the wound as any of my primitive ancestors. However, my ancestors may well have been less panicked by it. The more immediate matter was certainly the entrapment, considering its complexity required as much attention as possible to ensure my survival, but I believed myself to be incapacitated by the injury.

I've never been one to ask for help, and not only because I am non-verbal. It comes, in part, from a deprival of essentials and luxuries alike in my youth. Still, I always harboured curiosity, be it mostly beyond the school walls. Daniel and I couldn't get enough of the pine copses and rolling meadows which extended far beyond our property. We used to go very far into the wilderness. Off the trails, away from any roads, we weren't truly present until the sounds of any distant cars had completely ebbed away. That was our personal Point Nemo. Those lands beyond our drywall and insulation were what I truly thought of as my home.

Our grace was being out of the house. It didn't matter who we were, what we did, or where we came from, so long as we were out there. We were just entities, belonging. Existing as was our birthright, and being familiarised by the inherent natural majesty of our birthplace. At home on this planet, but beyond that, as an unshakeable part of it: Homosapiens of the family Hominidae, of the order Primates, of the class Mammalia, of the kingdom Animilia.

Daniel loved finding dead things. He especially loved bones, which were the only variation of a cadaver which I could stomach. He'd pick off any remnants from the bones, and dry them by the firepit if they'd been slimy. Then, he'd show them off to me. One thing I never stopped marvelling upon was the structure of the ribcage. How, even in some of the smallest manifestations of life, we may see the direct clues of our descendence. We are to birds and fish what lavender is to lilac. We can walk two steps outside and soak up that evidence with every sense we have.

My mother divorced my father when I was five, and took us to live beneath the overpass. It was over a decade before I saw him again. He only cared if we were a stone's throw at dinner time. That was important to him. Yes, he loved us very much. That's where all the damage comes

from. I don't know if I'd be sitting here telling you this — that I'd even have a story at all — had I thought my father never loved me.

Dissociation is a lot like stalling a car. At each turning point in life there is a blind spot both in front of and behind you. There is a period where the road you've travelled begins to disappear from view, yet what's in front of you is still obscured. You are entirely in the hands of fate, then, and rely on good faith alone that whatever comes into view is a greater path than the one already taken. It is not a bearable situation for the amygdala. In purgatory, you may only choose to move forward, or to stop in place. Nothing passed can be returned to. Nothing ahead can be known. You have two pedals: the accelerator and the brake. To cease your momentum is as daunting as it is to increase it. When you take too long to decide, and begin to lose control, the urge to take any action overpowers the drift. The primitive mind slams both pedals in unison. The car stalls.

Neurologist Sigmund Freud coined the terms Id, Ego, and Superego to describe the different developments and layers of human consciousness. The id is our instinctual desires, the first layer of consciousness in the infant. It controls emotion, aggression, and bodily needs. It's unconscious, inaccessible, yet is the level where all of our behaviours first manifest. A baby screams when it is hungry, thirsty, soiled, or in pain. This is what keeps the baby alive. If the baby cannot cry when it is hungry, how is the parent to know if it hasn't starved in the middle of the night? It might deprive the parent of sleep for the first year of the child's life, but the child needs food more than the parent does sleep. Now you may understand why a child would protest at being struck. For the human body is hardwired from birth to protect itself, particularly from pain, a child will initially become indignant at their parent — that who they cried to from birth, for they are neurobiologically wired to look first to their parent for security and safety of the

person — at having physically harmed them. It will take several consecutive strikings for a child's id to be overruled by another person.

I did not scream for my mother.

I lay bleeding, unresponsive, and allowed the shadows to pass the grate a hundred times. I grit my teeth at my own mind and wondered if its true intent was to kill me. What I wish I could tell myself then is that consciousness is not a fundamental element of our nature, it is a happy accident of evolution. Our true, primitive, unconscious mind can and will choose to take over whenever it deems necessary, to overrule our own choices and even dismantle our understanding of who we are entirely.

Take drowning. If your head is forced under water for long enough, in which you cannot surface, your body does not die from asphyxiation. It does not run out of air the same way it does if you were in a room filled with carbon monoxide. You die from *drowning:* water filling the lungs, *causing* asphyxiation. Do you consciously choose to breathe this water into your lungs? Not if you are aiming to survive. So, how do you ultimately end up drowning? Because the unconscious mind makes the true, executive decisions. Just as it controls your heart rate, regulates your temperature, breathes as a background process, digests food and distributes nutrients: your unconscious mind overrides any and all context when it believes it must. The unconscious mind does not perceive the water around you. It is designed to act when you are deprived of air long enough, and it has no capacity to discern whether or not you are underwater, only that you need air *now,* and the only way to get it is to *breathe.* In this metaphor, then, you can perceive the essence of why consciousness became so prevalent in the course of natural selection. Without conscious understanding that we are underwater, we could be submerged with no awareness and attempt to take our next breath as usual. With conscious awareness, we are

given a profound capacity: choice. We can choose to *hold* our breath until it may be possible for us to surface. This is why consciousness, an accident of evolution, prevailed.

You exist within yourself only so far as the mind allows you to. You are at the mercy of which chemicals the mind chooses to release, which neuron pathways are the thickest, which cards you've been dealt in your wiring. What we are lucky in is our capacity to *choose* to pursue activities that will promote the release of serotonin and dopamine, and our ability to rebalance the chemical deficiency through medications. Unfortunately, even in making these choices, the unconscious mind attempts to overrule us. It is very, very hard to convince the unconscious mind that there are life rings on the surface of the water. It does not even know you are underwater, nor what it means to be underwater. It will scream at you, louder and louder, to take that breath, aggressively convulsing your lungs in the attempt to goad you into doing it, until ultimately, it wins the arm-wrestle, slams the back of your hand down on the table, and now you are dead.

It was not inherently trying to kill you. It was making a decision for you.

I do not have a clear memory of how I was rescued, only that it happened after several days, once those who had abandoned me could no longer bear it on their conscience. My mother was incredibly upset with me. She had passed that grate many times, day and night, and I had not called out to her a single time. At some level, in spite of what she claimed to understand about psychology and neurology, she still believed that I *could* speak if a situation were dire enough. I figured then she was disappointed in me, and I was disappointed in myself, as I had yet to learn of how common it is for children to die in silence.

I understand now that she was terrified.

As I recovered, a unit of specialists rotated through the home. This had not happened since I was seven, which was the point where my mother gave up seeking solutions. They sat with me,

spoke to me, and sought my engagement. Though I remained pleasant, I have always been incapable of feigning any reaction which is expected of me; I don't have much capacity to discern what said expectation is. I became fond of one in particular, however, as his visits persisted.

Mr. Forbes was a very kind man in his late thirties. He often joined me to sketch silently. His techniques were crude and lacked discipline, which I liked very much. There was little self-consciousness to him, but plenty of caution.

When charcoal tarred his fingers, he was qualmless about wiping them across his linen shirt. His clean face would grow as sooted as a miner's, with dark smudges across his forehead, nose, and cheeks. With an untrained hand, he made little marks on the parchment, one small etch after another; his outlines all trembled as a consequence. I never once noticed him pull a line in one fell swoop.

"It's really quite amazing how you draw," he said. We faced one-another in a pair of wing chairs at an offset angle. His drawing pad lay at rest upon his crossed legs. "You don't draw from the outside-in."

What he was referring to was my use of values. I have always drawn from values, the light and shadow I directly perceive, without much regard for the signifier nor the signified. People generally draw objects by simplifying their shapes, constructing them from outlines — which *is* the far wiser option to draft a drawing. I may have been exceptional with values, but I had little grasp on form and proportion, and a profound weakness in composition and originality. Still, values are what define an image to the immediate eye, which is why their proper use is generally found impressive.

“Perhaps the way we draw can tell us something about who we are as people. I don’t know how to make something look three-dimensional, how to bring it out of the page. My shading at times is too dark, and other times, barely visible. When I realise I’m shading too light, I overcompensate, and ruin the image by grinding a 6B into the page with no way of erasing it. Then, the next time I draw, I add shadows lightly and painstakingly, but once I step back from the image, I can barely make out any of the work I’ve done. I draw the outlines the boldest, because that is my first impression of the world, as angles and shapes and forms. Yet as my art teacher always scolded me, there are no harsh outlines in real life. Even my best attempts at realism look like a bad cartoon.” He hadn’t looked up once from his page. “I don’t draw from the outside-in or the inside-out, but rather, from the safety of the boundary. I don’t know whether that means I’m a bit of a coward, or if I just prefer a clear line in the sand. Nonetheless, it could make me a great cartoonist if I put my mind to it. You draw from the inside-out. Maybe that tells us something about you, maybe not. But I think there is some truth to it.”

I don’t think I’m as sensitive a soul as some have construed me as being. It’s not so much a thick skin as a completely oblivious, checked-out skin. I don’t tend to have much investment in any form of relationship, not because I don’t care, but because I am so often in my own world that I don’t have much room for anyone else. Perhaps this is the source of my guilt, my unintentionally callous ignorance, but I know my wiring well enough to outright state that I burdened myself with a great deal of things from a young age and inadvertently failed at fixing most any of them.

Mr. Forbes gave a pleasant little shrug and smiled absently out the window. Gold hit his face, even as shadows rumbled from the overpass. It eluded me how much my mother had told him; he seemed to know very much and very little simultaneously. I knew he was playing his cards close,

but his purpose seemed noble, earnest. What I *could* glean is that he was there to help me process something, unlike many prior specialists whose sole intent was to get me to speak. I initially figured it was because I had been trapped in a cellar for several days, but even long after the wound healed, he stayed.

One day, while both rapt in our gouache paintings, he began to decorate his hand and fingers with various colours.

"I have a daughter, a few years older than you," he said, dotting blue along each knuckle. "You're a lot alike. Quiet, introspective, observant. And very empathic." He striped his fingers in mint green. "When she was your age, I received a call from her school. I was beside myself when I heard what they had to say. She'd been told in her morning class that a group of girls in her grade had invited her to eat lunch with them. My daughter found it hard to make friends at that time, and was very self-conscious that she always ate lunch alone. So, she was overjoyed."

He dipped his brush in a reddish-orange, and painted wiggly lines on the back of his hand.

"When she sat down with the group, everyone stared at her. Like she had done something unforgivable. The group began to insult her, belittle her, throw food at her, and humiliate her in front of a crowd of other students. She was so mortified, I couldn't get her to go to school for three days. She couldn't understand what happened, why they'd invited her to eat lunch with them. I thought initially it was a cruel joke devised by said group, an intentional conspiracy to trap her in a mortifying scenario." He painted a large purple triangle near his thumb. "In actuality, that group of girls had no idea, before the moment she sat down next to them, that my daughter even existed. The invitation was not extended by any girl in that group, but from a completely different person. My daughter had *mistaken* one table for another, and sat at the wrong one."

Mr. Forbes used black paint to outline the shapes he'd drawn.

"She never accepted that she made a mistake. I never tried to persuade her to. It would be too devastating. She was not led towards cruelty and mockery on purpose, rather, by merely presenting herself to the world as who she is. By sitting down, in good faith, at the wrong table. That was all it took to paint a target on her back for the next six years."

He sat back and stared at the abstraction on his hand.

"She has suffered from seizures ever since."

I met his gaze for a moment slightly longer than brief. He gave a crestfallen sigh.

"My daughter. Whose trusting, amicable gesture, threatened a group of potential friends. My dear daughter, taught a falsehood about the world, because of the impression that trust is nestled in distrust, and that protection is gained only through attack."

# TWO

The walls of the hangar thrummed: they were alive. Between two layers of wooden slats — old wood, grey wood, gnarled and notched and weathered wood — lay a crawling infestation, a writhing colony, a golden hive. The bees had installed themselves months ago. A hole in a slat was their passage, they wriggled in and out, stepped over one-another's bodies, hovered around nearby, walked aimlessly along the outside walls.

I stared. Loose in my grip was a toolbox, it jangled the keyring on my belt, the keys scratched silver lines into the red paint. Grass swallowed my boots, came up to my knees, morning dew seeped into the denim. Bees investigated: buzzed around my ears, nipped at the corroded edge of my kit, lost themselves in forests of arm hair. I investigated: peered closer at the hole, took a step forward, tapped once on the wood. The bees hummed warily. I exhaled, approached the front of the hangar, glanced at grey skies. Rain speckled my glasses. With one hand, I cleaned my circular lenses on my shirt tail, then fiddled an old key off my ring, unlocked the imposing doors. I averted guilty eyes from the nose of an A-36A aeroplane. The toolbox clattered as it was laid down. I pulled the doors shut as rain struck them, then went back the way I came, up the slippery hill.

Droplets seeped into the shoulders of my plaid. I walked the boundary line, ran fingers along the loose and disarrayed wires of my fence, tapped on rotted and moulded wooden stakes. I squelched into several pockets of mud along the way. I shook my feet to fling clumps about the place, then dragged the toe of my boot along the ground to clean it with the dew-covered grass. My cottage peered down at me as I ascended. A brown picket framed the backyard, the gate

heaved and complained on its stuck hinges as I opened it. Grime-eaten windows, dirt-covered sills, chipped red bricks half-overtaken by vines which did not stay hacked back for long, roughed-up shingles, desperate flowerbeds; my miserable poppies lay flat and withered, stalks stretched along the ground like dying men whose last instinct was to aimlessly crawl. I elbowed into my home. My boots scuffed the filthy doorstep, I didn't care to remove them as I tramped through the kitchen. Gloom permeated the cottage. I wrestled a bee box from beneath a pile of miscellaneous things: rescued books, a rain jacket, old clothes swaddled in plastic bags, a dirty plate joined by a knife and fork. I rummaged around for my smoker, along with a bucket and a few scraping tools.

I arrived back at the hole and set my items on a grassless patch of ground, dry due to the overhanging roof. I returned to the large hangar doors, nudged them open, averted my guilty eyes from the nose of the A-36A, retrieved my lonely toolbox. Faced again with the hole, I sent several puffs of smoke into it as well as in gaps between the wood, then opened my kit, took out a hammer, slid its claw beneath a loose nail. It barely resisted as I worked it out. It fell into the gravel beneath my boots. I repeated the process with three other nails, then gently worked the slat with the hole away from the other boards. Its back crawled with insects. I leaned it quietly against the wall, turned my attention to what I'd uncovered.

Not much could be seen, as it was very dark in there. What light did make its way in revealed thick honeycomb structures aswarm with bees, which hung down behind the absent board like stalactites. I took down more boards, was stung several times — twice on the arms, one on the cheek — until I had a good amount of access. The bees were generally complaisant.

Old honeycomb was removed with my scraping tool, shaken of stray bees, placed into the bucket. I worked my way toward the sections the colony was centred around, which wriggled

and writhed with thousands upon thousands of the insects. I removed larger chunks, cautious of where I placed my fingers, shook the bees downward into the bee box. They clattered inside with a satisfying thud. When the queen ended up in the box, she was followed inside by the shaken-down hordes; those still interested in the hanger hive were stragglers rather than clusters. I took a chunk of abandoned honeycomb in my hand, triple-checked it for bees, then sunk my teeth into the wax cells. Honey erupted into my mouth, seeped along my gums, coated my tongue. A golden strand hung down as I pulled the chunk away.

"Hugh. Thought I'd find you here," said my fiancée, arms wrapped around herself, hands balled up in cream cardigan sleeves. I chucked the honeycomb into the bucket.

"You didn't go?"

Diane shook her head. Her auburn bob blew across her face, strands of hair stuck themselves to her lipstick. She pulled them off, brushed her hair back with a pale hand.

"More bees?" she asked. "Did yours go rogue?"

"Not sure where these came from," I mumbled. "Mine behave themselves."

"Hmm," she laughed, rubbing her sleeve-covered hands together.

"It's cold out here. Y' should head in."

"No, no, I'm okay," she matched my quiet volume. I glanced at her, drew my eyes away when she glanced back. "Um, yeah, they didn't roster me today. Again. Drove all the way there just to get sent home."

"Well, at least it wasn't a special trip."

"Yeah," she breathed, and looked at my work, tilted her sharp jaw to peer up between the walls. "Well, you've got 'em all out, pretty much. Want me to carry the box? Keep you from developing too much of an allergy? Hugh, I can see the welts, so don't make that face, 'cause

half of it is ballooning up." She hoisted the bee box into her arms. "C'mon, let's get you some antihistamine."

"To think I'd set out to work on the plane," I sighed as I followed Diane.

"You say that every morning."

My father talked incessantly about the war, up until the day he died, a sweltering January afternoon in 1959. Hospital curtains danced around an open window. Myself, Diane, and our son Daniel had been there, when he was just a tot. Diane took Daniel home a few hours before my father decided to go.

"Reminds me of my time in Greece," Dad gravelled.

"Oh?"

"Layin out accordion wire in the rain. Wehrmacht bombers circlin' around, hoverin' like wasps."

"Did they drop any?" I adjusted Dad's bedsheet.

"Nah," Dad swatted my hands away. "Nah, just prowlin' about. We were right on the front though, put right forward. Damn lucky we didn't face em off straight away, our first taste, all that. We were shit scared, but always in good spirits. That's what made our battalion different, we were always in good spirits. Only a few days before we fell back where we saw the Germans head-on. We were shit scared. It was always rainin'. War calls for it, calls for rain, the torrential kind, farkin' buckets of it. It was absolutely pissin' down when we were called to get the hell out of there, and there was this plan to blow up a bridge, to slow the Germans down, but we weren't over the bridge, we were in asshole levels of dark, slippin' and slidin' about, mud-caked, pursued by Nazi foot soldiers."

"What happened?" I asked, knowing the answer.

“We showed up just as the order was given to blow it to smithereens!” Dad began to cough. He hacked tar-like phlegm from the back of his throat, then swallowed it. “Need darts.”

“Dad, you’re in a hospital,” I said, voice low.

“Bah, I’m on my deathbed, boy.” I fished a pack of menthols from my pocket. “Aye, when’d you pick it up?”

I adjusted my glasses as he struck a match. “A few years ago. Diane doesn’t know. It’s only occasional.”

“That why you walk ‘round with a whole pack? I weren’t born yesterday.”

“You don’t need that whole thing.” I tried to take the cigarette. Dad swatted me away again.

“I’m a dead man,” he retorted. “Where can I ash?” He looked around the room, tapped his cigarette into the bouquet of chrysanthemums my aunt had brought.

My father couldn’t even be made small by terminal cancer or an oppressing hospital room. He masculinized flowers, made a menthol cigarette into a man’s hobby, and I, though never involved in the military, instinctively stood to attention in his presence. A broad, brown face dotted with freckles, salt-and-pepper curls cropped incredibly short, swollen round deltoids, thick crudely-tattooed forearms, monstrous hands which gripped at the bedsheet, the cigarette wasting away between his trunk-like fingers. I stared at it yearningly.

“Nobody else ever brings me durries. See, you’re different, cause I trained you up.”

That he did. “Beer,” he would say from the lounge, and I would come in with a cold beer from the fridge and a cup with ice. “Durry,” he would say from the lounge, and I would rustle through the jacket he'd hung on the coat-rack for his Camels and place the pack in his hand, along with a box of matches. “Stick around, boy,” he would say, sometimes, after asking for a

smoke, and I would stand at attention, every single time knowing what was coming, hoping that this would be the time it wouldn't come.

"Dad," I said, arms on the railing of the hospital bed. "How long…?"

"Oh, I'm goin' soon, boy." His head hit the pillow. His forehead twinkled, sweat glistened in a star-like way. He gazed up at the ceiling as though observing the night sky. "You hear I'm not breathin' right, aye? Yeah, not long now." My eyes welled with tears. "Nah, nah, don't do that. Don't start cryin'."

I wiped my eyes with a pocket square.

Dad smiled at me. "This don't have to be scary. It's a nice send-off. Death's my brother. Fightin' gave him to me."

"Are you scared?"

My dad didn't say anything for a moment. He passed the last of the cigarette to me, I took it gratefully. "I'm in good spirits," he decided.

He died minutes later.

The year I had found the beehive in the hangar, 1962, Daniel had just turned five. The morning I had found the beehive in the hangar, the 28th of January, was Daniel's first day of school. He learned only two things on January 28th, 1962: what the word 'appropriate' meant, and what detention was.

He was in and out of the latter the entire day; by three o'clock he had been typecast as the troublemaker and often seemed to be in trouble before he'd even done anything. The teacher's smile would drop when she had to face him, which she only did when he was being 'disruptive', such as using his scissors to carve notches into his desk, flinging pencils at the blackboard, and pulling up his shirt to show off an outie belly button. Many of the kids gave him a wide berth,

but some were drawn to his brazen personality, though could only handle him in short bursts before he became more tiresome than amusing.

At the end of the day, Daniel was waiting in class for Diane to appear in the doorway. The crowd of children gradually fragmented, turned to stragglers rather than a cluster, as parents arrived to take them home. Daniel was the last one left, it was twenty past three and there was no sign of his mother. I skidded into the doorway.

“I’m terribly sorry,” I said to his teacher. “Hi Clara. Mum was going to come get you, but work called and needed her straight away, so I had to come. Um, I’m Hugh.” His teacher took my hand.

“Rachel Moore,” she replied. “Nice to meet you.”

I barely spoke above a whisper. “How’s Clara doing? Is she taking to things okay?”

Ms. Moore hesitated. “She’s energetic.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

“Hyperactive,” she clarified.

My face fell. Daniel’s eyes darted between us. Ms. Moore glanced at Daniel, then turned her back to him, and quietly filled me in on Daniel’s first day.

We made our way to my beige-coloured A40 Farina. I opened the door for Daniel, helped him into his booster seat, then slid into the driver’s side and sparked a cigarette.

“Not for children,” I mumbled around the fag, glanced out the rear window as I pulled onto the road. “Don’t tell your mother about it.”

Daniel kicked his feet against the dashboard.

“Please stop that.”

He kicked again. I sighed. Daniel looked at me.

“Ms. Moore told me you got in trouble today.”

Daniel stared out the window.

“She doesn’t hate you.” I turned off the main road, where townhouses thinned into paddocks. “Not at all. She just doesn’t know what to make of you. You’re…” I glanced to my right, out the window, and threw my cigarette onto the dirt road. “You’re adjusting just as much as she is. I think, once she gets to know you, she’ll come to love you, like your mother and I love you. I do have a treat at home for you. For your first day.”

Daniel didn’t respond.

“You’ll have to wait and see,” I said. There was a long silence as we rattled along the road, disturbed the dirt, stirred up clouds of dust behind the vehicle. The smell of cut grass breezed through the open window. “I’m sorry that you didn’t have a better first day, Clara. These things… well, they can be romanticised. We didn’t want to set you up with too many expectations. I didn’t have a great time at school, growing up. But I’d like you to have fun.” The car crawled up the hill, through the open gate, past the hangar. “I think your version of fun can be overwhelming for people.”

The car creaked to a stop. I turned to face Daniel, looked him in the eyes for the first time since I’d picked him up. I brushed Daniel’s floppy brown hair from his face. “You…” Daniel pushed my hand away. “Everybody has feelings. It’s important to be nice to people. You don’t want to hurt anyone, do you?” Daniel gave a non-commital shrug. “Clara. You gave the girl with pigtails a nosebleed. Ms. Moore was punishing you.” I exited the car, made my way to the passenger’s side, unclicked Daniel’s seatbelt. I lifted him from the car and placed him on the ground. Daniel followed me into the cottage.

“I need you to promise me something.” I squatted down to Daniel’s height. My knees clicked. “Try to be nicer. I know you weren’t trying to be mean. But some people are sensitive to certain things. It’s not your fault you didn’t know that, though it wasn’t okay to hurt that girl, either. You understand? Some people are delicate. You need to adjust yourself for them.”

Daniel stared past me.

“People are different. That’s what makes them so special, so interesting. Maybe the girl with the pigtails would make for a great friend, but you just don’t know it yet. I think you should show her that you’re sorry. How about this: promise me you’ll apologise to her tomorrow, and I’ll give you your treat.”

Daniel processed the information. His eyes, for a brief moment, met mine, indicating that he was in agreement. I stood up, rummaged in the top cupboard. I pulled a chocolate bar from its hiding place. I bent down and handed it to Daniel.

“When you’ve finished that, I’d love your help feeding the sheep. Molly’s been missing you.”

Daniel only frowned.

My apiary was on the north edge of my property and contained fifteen beehives. They’d been closer and fewer in number initially, but after having Daniel they’d been moved as far as possible from the cottage to gradually multiply. A mānuka forest overshadowed the boundary and stretched a few acres back in unclaimed land. It was unlikely the land would ever be purchased, as it slanted downward into a small valley with a creek which wouldn’t be effective to farm. I often considered the mānuka forest, and the land it grew on, to be mine.

Mānuka honey is quite the commodity in Aotearoa. It’s widely celebrated, often for its supposed medicinal qualities, and goes for a fair price from market stalls and grocery shelves. It

is viscous, dark coloured, more earthy and rich than most honey. Daniel didn't like it much. He preferred the drizzlier honey from the store.

I didn't touch or at all jostle the hive I'd rescued from the hangar, and kept it separate from the bee yard. It'd need a while to establish itself, and to annoy the bees at all could cause them to abandon the hive and move elsewhere. They were also crawling with mites, which I had found after inspecting their larvae when I rescued them. I'd inserted mite strips into the box the same day.

The other hives were fair game. Typically I'd harvest somewhat later in the summer, but the supers were teeming with honey, the wax caps fully formed over each cell, and my stocks needed to be replenished for an upcoming fair. I harvested the honey about once a year or so, or whenever there was a considerable honey surplus in the supers. I removed the rocks atop the outer cover and smoked inside the super, then pulled out a frame and held it over my homemade uncapping tank. I used my uncapping knife to slice the wax caps from the comb. I started from the bottom of the frame and sawed in a gentle upward motion. I had a hot bucket of water at my side, which I submerged the knife in when not using it to keep it warm. Honey oozed from the cells into the plastic tank. The wax was caught on a mesh screen, while the honey dripped through it.

I worked until the tank was full and heavy. I lugged it into the cottage, carried it to my work room. The beeswax was stored in plastic containers and set aside in the cupboard. It would soon be turned into soaps, candles, and lip balms, but was also sold as is for anyone who was interested. I unboxed the mason jars which had been delivered that morning and worked to fill them with my harvested honey. Once I'd finished, I began to stick labels on the jars, but grew bored and decided to take a break.

Diane was in the kitchen, which gave me a fright.

“I thought you were at work,” I said.

“It’s been hectic,” she grumbled, sitting on the floor amid the contents of the junk cabinet. “They can’t fucking make up their minds when they want me. I managed to squeeze in two hours today but it’s like they’re elbowing me out.”

“Any idea why?” I slumped down next to her. Diane shook her head.

“It’s a bloody dry cleaners, not parliament. How can you be high and mighty about your staff at a place like that? They should be thanking me for giving them my time.”

“Well, they pay you.”

“No hours is no pay, mister.”

“Well, don’t worry too much, I’m having a great harvest so far,” I tried. “I’ve already got a hundred bottles.”

“Wow,” Diane smiled. There was a long silence.

“Reorganising the junk cabinet?”

“Yep.”

“How exactly does one organise junk?”

“By size and colour,” she responded.

“Not by category?”

Diane stared at her progress. “Shit.”

“Ha.”

“Is Clara feeling better?”

“Not really. But I think things have improved through the week.”

“I’m worried she’s not adjusting,” Diane said, pulling a pipe wrench from the back of the cabinet. “Is this the one you were looking for?”

“That’s where it went.” I placed it behind me. “And… I don’t know, Diane. I don’t want her to feel like she can’t express himself in her own way…”

“But I don’t want her being violent in the classroom.”

“It wasn’t intentional.”

“She knew what she was doing.”

“Diane, she’s five.”

“And she can be a real goblin when she wants to.”

“Assuming malice incites malice.”

Diane ducked out of the cabinet and sat back on her haunches. She eyed me with a sort of frustrated amusement. “Do you always have to act like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you having a PhD means anything to me.”

“I’m well aware it means nothing to you.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you don’t call me doctor.”

Diane laughed, in that loud, head-thrown-back way that occurred not when something was particularly funny, but rather when she was really charmed by me. I smiled timidly back at her.

“You have to actually finish your thesis before I call you that.” She cupped my jaw, ran a thumb across my cheek. “But soon, you will be Dr. Lawrence Walker, whose child beats up other children on the playground to express herself.”

“It’s not like that,” I continued to smile, though I felt sad.

“We’re disagreeing, Hugh.” She caught my gaze, I nodded meekly. “This is about how we want to parent our daughter. We need to keep this healthy.”

Diane was all about keeping things healthy: relationships, parenting, the temple of mind, body, and soul. She also talked often about toxicity: toxic foods, toxic people, the toxic waste the government pumped into the water supply. She had turned 27 that year, and I was 25, though I looked older. I’d started going grey a few years back. I had a freshly obtained Master’s degree, specialising in entomology. She didn’t believe in formal education.

“Well, to clarify my stance, I think it’s a good sign that she is communicating at all.”

“She almost broke a little girl’s nose, Hugh.”

“I think she might be a genius.”

“God,” she sighed and stood up. I watched her helplessly, she leaned over the sink, back to me. “I want to understand where you’re coming from, I do, but to me, this looks like a pretty black and white issue.”

“I’m afraid she might get boxed in as violent. She clearly *wants* to communicate, and accidents do happen. I don’t want her to be punished for accidents that weren’t her intention. It enforces a warped concept about what ‘fairness’ is. We can only do so much when it comes to how the school handles her, but I want home to be a safe place for her to communicate, to be able to voice her concerns.”

“Yes,” Diane said. “I understand that. I was more worried about the other girl, really.”

“That’s reasonable,” I said, as she tugged me gently towards her by the elbow.

“I used to get picked on, sometimes it can be reasonless, as though the bullies themselves don’t even know why they’re doing it, so I just…”

“I know.” I hovered over her as she pawed at the front of my shirt. “But I want to approach this from the side of… an appeal to empathy, rather than… just telling her right from wrong.”

“Right.” Diane smiled brightly at me. “I’m in the mood for a sort-out.”

“I could tell.”

“Let’s tidy up the lounge, shall we?”

“That’s a big job,” I said. Diane raised her eyebrows at me. “I’ll get the bin bags.”

My father was named Manaaki. He’d raised me for the first few years on his own, as my mother had died during childbirth. I grew up in the Wairarapa; our home was shack-like, riddled with termites, and built on a terrible wooden foundation. When I was five and my father was somewhere in Egypt, our home was knocked loose by a 7.2 earthquake, then flattened entirely by the following 6.8.

“Stay in the doorway,” said my grandmother, her knuckles too stiff from arthritis to get a good grip on the frame. A deep rumble from below had set us both on edge, which turned to alarm when a sharp jolt destabilised us. I stood between my nana’s legs, watched as the dish-rack she’d been using walked off the counter and crashed to the floor. “My china,” she’d mourned. Several hours later, we were hit by the second quake.

The house rocked in circular motions. I shot out of bed and rushed to my nana. The dishes in the cabinet rattled as though petrified. Cracks appeared in the walls, the dining table and chairs walked towards us, a crucified Jesus fell from his hook. The house went dark, light flashed from fallen power lines. There was a terrible grating sound from above, seconds later our chimney collapsed through the ceiling, drove debris and soot about the ruined lounge. A bitter wind howled through the roofless shack, the earthquake’s violence unceasing as it tore down our walls.

Nana shielded me with her body as I sobbed in terror.

At 11:25pm, we finally came apart, trembling as we surveyed the damage.

“Nana.” Swollen tears slid down my cheeks.

“Our house,” she replied.

For three kilometres we walked in darkness along the distorted main road. It took over half an hour to reach Masterton. Through the blackened streets people carried lanterns, cast light upon dishevelled buildings. Most remained standing, some had collapsed entirely. A shop on Queen Street had only lost its front wall, leaving the interior of both floors entirely exposed. Soldiers paid us no mind as they shoved past, checking the wreckages one by one.

As we passed St Matthew's Church, I was astonished by the chaotic, spiny appearance of wooden boards which stuck out unnaturally from a mound of bricks. The chapel had collapsed; a whole wall of the church had caved in and left behind a gaping two-storey hole.

Manaaki remained unaware of the earthquakes for several weeks, maybe more. The battalion had been evacuated to Egypt in June, 1942, after a vicious affair on the island of Crete. The Fallschirmjäger had invaded the island via an airborne campaign. They lurched from numerous Ju 52s, landed distantly from the battalion's area using parachutes.

The Allied forces had prepared for the attack — it was the first time they’d ever been able to do so. Two weeks prior, the Enigma machine had decrypted German messages for the first time and revealed Germany’s intention to capture Crete with the use of paratroopers. Therefore the Fallschirmjäger were, much to their bewilderment, met with violent resistance.

Parachutes dotted the sky. The falling clusters resembled the swarms of seagulls which sometimes appeared high above Manaaki’s shack when the sea got too rough. They disappeared somewhere beyond a view-obstructing hill. Manaaki watched, a strand of straw between his teeth, as he kneeled to roll his trousers above his knees. His Tommy helmet fell forward, he

tipped it back with a thumb. Beside him, his friend Henare reassembled his rifle. His horizon-cast eyes reflected the oncoming storm.

Manaaki joined a platoon to attack the Fallschirmjäger. They approached with firearms towards a house on the shore, where twenty-or-so Germans were holed up inside. The coast was soon alive with gunfire. By the time they were through, half the Nazis were corpses, the other half had surrendered. Nobody in Manaaki's platoon was killed.

The battalion found their way around bayonets not long after, in retaliation to a grenade which had been thrown by a supposedly surrendered German. The grenade wounded a couple Kiwis, which sparked Manaaki's battalion to carry out a bayonet charge.

Manaaki's mud-encrusted boots struck the ground with heavy thuds as he lurched over a bank and brandished his bayonet. The battalion rained down upon the unsuspecting paratroopers, stuck them through the chests and skulls. Manaaki cried out as his blade crunched through the eye socket of a clumsy soldier who appeared more boy than man. He twisted the weapon, made sure to really drive it into his brain. Henare took a similar approach as his bayonet slid through the roof of his enemy's mouth and burst out the top of his head.

Over a week later, the battalion broke out the bayonets for a much larger battle, where hundreds of Nazis were carved, slashed, and stabbed, left to either bleed to death or get trampled trying. Manaaki watched as Henare wrestled with a German, was too late to take action before Henare's neck was jerked sideways with an unforgettable snap. He fell limp to the ground, wide-eyed, slack-jawed. Manaaki stared at the Nazi culprit, who had already moved on, discarded the soul in the grass like a slapped mosquito. He jumped the soldier from behind, wrenched his elbow around his throat, the German's legs dangled off the ground.

“Gott im Himmel!” the Nazi gagged, his fingernails gouged into Manaaki’s forearm. “Hilfe! Jemand, hilft mir! Ich kann nicht atmen!” Manaaki squeezed and squeezed as the man thrashed. His eyes bulged from their sockets. “I surrender! I surrender!” Manaaki dropped the German to the ground. “Oh, viel danke! Danke, danke, danke—” he was cut off as his heart was impaled. Manaaki stood over him with the bayonet, a fierce sight against the storm which swirled above, eyes wide with vengeance, heart searing with pain. In the final seconds of his life, the Nazi shared Manaaki’s anguish.

Manaaki was later evacuated to Egypt via ship with half of his battalion. It’s entirely possible that while our house in the Wairarapa fell to pieces, he sat atop the Great Pyramid of Giza, carving his name into the tip with a pocket knife.

We lived with our aunt in Masterton until 1945. Her name was Mahuika, and she spent much of her time practising whakairo. Carved bone and pounamu jewellery could be found on every surface, and the peppery scent of native timber permeated the home. When not carving, Mahuika was fretting about my father. Her venting, though often spoken in my direction, was never truly intended for my consumption.

“He’s probably got himself killed today. I can just feel it.”

“Now you stop that,” Nana scolded. “That’s my baby.”

“He was always running into things head-on, bloody fool. Can’t believe how eager he was to go fight. Like everything’s a game.”

“Quit speaking like that in front of the boy,” Nana said, and the matter would be dropped for the rest of the afternoon.

When the news came that Germany had surrendered, the children piled out of the school in droves, ran home to celebrate with their families. I rushed down the streets of town to my aunt’s

home, and half-expected to be greeted at the door by my father. Manaaki wasn't there, and he wouldn't be until next January. In the time until then, he sent only one letter from overseas, brief and clipped in its address, informing the family he was fine and that he would be home soon. Mahuika was relieved for about two minutes, she jumped about the house, waved the envelope and hollered in joy, then soured as her attention turned to the letter's tone.

When I saw Manaaki for the first time in five years, it was in a nearby field I'd been led to by Auntie Mahuika. I'd been roused awake by Nana and told to dress right away; I'd only ever seen her eyes that wide once, during the quakes. There, in the field, was a lone plane. It was olive coloured, red-nosed, with a big white star on its side. The way it was tilted reminded me of a puppy begging for food.

"Whose plane is this?" I asked, wondering whether to feign excitement. Sometimes Mahuika showed me things I didn't care about, but I needed to pretend to care because if I didn't it would upset her. If she'd dragged me out all that way just to see this plane, I would need to get into the spirit of it pretty soon.

"Don't you see the man in the cockpit?" Mahuika asked with a grin. I squinted against the morning sun. There certainly was a shadow. The door opened and a large man in beige dismounted the plane. I knew from his shape alone it was my father, and ran to see him.

"Dad?"

"Huey!" Manaaki lifted me into his arms and placed me in the seat of the plane. "Check it out! A-36A."

"Whose plane is this?"

"Who do you think?" Dad grinned. I looked at him. His grin faltered. "Well, it's mine, of course!"

“I thought you were a foot soldier?”

“Yeah!”

“But…”

“Check out all the buttons! Farkin hard stuff. But I made it up here just fine. Flew up from Wellington.” Manaaki regarded me as I inspected the cockpit. “You’ve got bloody tall! I barely recognised you, boy. How old are you now? Eight?”

“Ten.”

“Jesus…”

Mahuika joined her brother by the wing of the plane. They’d clearly greeted one-another earlier that morning, because their conversation soon turned into playful shoves and wild giggling, mainly from Manaaki while his sister shouted at him. I stared at the insides of the plane.

“Now, boy,” Dad said a couple minutes later as he placed me on the ground. “I heard about our house a few years back by letter, but it’s alright, cause the army made sure we’d have a property when I got home.”

The property in question was further down the North Island, in the Akatarawas, which is situated at the upper limit of the Hutt Valley. It was around 10 acres and was going for cheap since the soil was too acidic and deficient in phosphate and lime to farm effectively. Generally, the area was populated by loggers and those keeping livestock. A handout had allowed Manaaki to afford the land. We flew down in the A-36A, which was treacherous and turbulent due to what I suspected was my dad’s very limited knowledge of aviation, but it only took us about fifteen minutes to travel the distance due to the sheer velocity of the aircraft.

“We’re not even at top speed!” Dad had exclaimed.

I gazed down at the patchwork land, squares in various shades of green and beige. My father took me above the clouds for a few minutes. The chill was almost unbearable, but the view was serene and ethereal. It was heaven. It just was. The sun cast the clouds in gold, like a sea above the seas, a secret ocean in the sky.

The plane was kept under a thick tarp through the summer months while Dad built the hangar. I was enlisted to help: I held the supports straight in their holes as he poured cement, pressed the boards to the frame as he hammered, carried sheets of tin from a delivery ute down the drive as he drank beer in the sunshine. Any time even a drop of rain would occur Dad would become tense and difficult to speak to, worried about whether the tarp would hold up and how the half-built hangar would take a thunderstorm, if at all.

I learned many details about Manaaki's time in the war during the building of the hangar, including gruesome deaths and stories which frequently framed him as the sole hero. I wasn't sure how much of it to believe. There was no way the battalion showed up 'in the nick of time' so often for things, especially when those things included explosions. However, I knew from experience to keep my goddamn mouth shut, so that's just what I did. Through all those details, not once was the plane explained: where it came from, who owned it, how Dad came into possession of it, how he learned to fly it, whether the army would want it back, whether they were even allowed to have it in the first place. I did not ask a single question about it, up until the day the hangar was finished and we were rolling the plane through its imposing doorway.

"Dad, is this plane even yours?"

Manaaki pretended not to hear me.

Diane and I had been engaged since she'd learned she was pregnant at 21. It was one of those prolonged engagements which extended ceaselessly from an excitable past, to a distracted

present, to an obscure future. Diane's surname was Raines, though she often introduced herself as Diane Walker.

Diane's immediate family was massive enough — she'd grown up with four other sisters — but her extended family was utterly abundant. She had cousins whose names she didn't know. There were Raines spread throughout the country and beyond, several lived in Australia, others dotted the planet in all sorts of nooks and crannies. Gatherings were a nightmare in the best possible way, with Christmas Day as their most beloved disaster.

The radio blared Johnny Devlin, much to the chagrin of the older guests, as steaks and patties cooked on the barbecue. Children ran between the adult's legs and searched for chocolates the family had hid for them around the property. Diane sat with me, her sisters, parents, cousins, aunts, and uncles around a massive deck table. Smoke rose like a campfire with the sheer amount of cigarettes. Diane sipped a fruity cocktail and looked out over the bright sea, laughed at the anecdotes her family relayed. I smiled meekly, and remained quiet unless spoken to.

"When's Clara starting school?" asked Diane's sister, Janet.

"Late January," Diane responded.

"I can't believe it, she was only a wee babe last I remember."

"It'll be nice, of course. Gives Hugh far more spare time," she said with a nod at me.

"You still working on that thesis, Hugh?"

"Yes," I nodded at the table. Janet whipped my arm.

"Don't be so modest, smarty-pants. What's that on, anyway?"

"Er, well… I don't suppose there's an awful lot to tell…" I cast a pleading look at Diane, who smirked quietly. "You'll be bored within seconds, I'm sure. There's an entomologist, Karl Von Frisch, who wrote this work about a decade ago, well, in English at least… *The Dancing*

*Bees*. In it, he describes… discovered, a great deal of things about bees, primarily about their navigation. They have this amazing ability to perceive both space and time, and communicate about the locations of certain flowers by performing these sorts of… dances. In developing off of his work, I'm investigating the, well, patterns of bee behaviour, in particular the dynamics of a beehive. There's a lot of… mathematics to it."

"Sounds quite complex," Janet nodded, her gaze absent.

"Well, I'd never known there was quite so much to it," Diane added quickly, and wrapped herself around my arm. "You'd think they were quite mindless creatures, like ants."

"Ants are actually deeply complex," I said.

"Really?" Diane's brother laughed. "With the way they scatter about when you're trying to squish them?"

"There's a brain in there," I continued, though it was mumbled into my drink.

"The size of a bloody pin-prick."

"I think it's arrogant," I began as I whipped my head up, though kept my eyes fixed on the table, "to assume that a small brain is one which is severely limited, to the point of severe retardation."

Diane's nails dug into my arm. Her family cast glances at one-another.

"Alright, Hugh? It's just a bug, mate," said Janet.

I continued to pointedly avoid eye-contact, and felt my mouth twitch into a disbelieving grin. "Are you one to think… that anybody who can't… *communicate* with you, is incapable of being conscious?"

Diane pulled me up by the arm and led me into the house. "You're embarrassing me."

“How could they ask me about the subject in one stroke, then in the next condemn my research?”

“That’s not what they were saying. Be quiet, they’re all looking at you. What the hell are you so worked up for?”

“Is the problem not apparent?”

“This is about something else,” Diane said, and tugged me further out of sight, into the bathroom. She shut the door. “This is about Clara, isn’t it?”

“No.”

“You’re trying to get back at me about what I said.”

“What you said?” I frowned.

“About Clara not being ready for school.”

I stared. “Diane, I’m mad about the ants.”

She laughed indignantly. “If you so desperately want her to be your perfect little girl, you may as well keep her out of school, because her behaviour will only get worse. Let her grow up the way you did.” I continued to stare. “Who here understands psychology? Who here knows how people project the things they refuse to say in candour? It’s obviously not about the ants, Hugh, who gives a shit about the ants? This is like bloody Easter, just like bloody Easter!”

“What happened at Easter?”

“We had to leave early because of you.”

“Clara was tired.”

“Because you decided she was tired! You just used her as an excuse to go home because you don’t like my family!”

“Where did you get that idea?”

“See, you’re not even denying it, you’re just trying to make me seem like I’m being crazy.”

“You’re not being crazy. I’m just telling you the truth, it’s really only about the ants. I wasn’t bothered by what you said about Clara.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Are you… *trying* to upset me?”

Diane scoffed and left the bathroom. I made to follow her out, but stopped when I sighted a white-tailed spider trembling in the basin. I reached into the sink, it tried to dart away. I caught it by using my other hand like a wall, and scooped it into my palm. It bit me immediately. I opened the window and placed it on the outer sill, where it wandered out of sight.

The following summer, Daniel and I had hiked several kilometres along the cliffs of Paekakariki before Daniel began to feel dizzy. I sat him on a flat stone and, as his breathing grew more and more laboured, fumbled within my bag for his water bottle.

I bent myself at the knees, practically folded in half as I squatted on the dusty trail. With haste, I fed the tip of the bottle to Daniel, and briefly harkened back to well-worn memories of how I would cradle him as a baby and feed him his bottle.

From our vantage point on the hill, an expansive ocean was in view. The waves crashed violently, with thunderous claps, to the rock faces of the nearby cliffs, and approximately once every two or so minutes I would have to remind Daniel to keep his distance from the edge.

“You feeling any better?” I hid my grave concern, the deep-seated panic of *what if it’s something serious*. It resided, like a tide pulling backwards, the moment Daniel met my eyes. “We’ll take a rest here and have a snack, shall we?”

As we pressed on, Daniel regained thrice his prior energy, the origin of which would forever elude me, with my stiff lower back and knots in my shoulders. Bordering the pathway was a

variety of flora, leafy shrubbery and thorny thickets and blooming flowers, and I pointed out each one, delicately introducing them to Daniel as though they were a close relative or family friend that hadn't yet had the pleasure to meet him. Daniel fought away yawns as I directed his attention to different sorts of mosses and grasses, textures of tree bark, levels of gloss on leaves, and went so far as to pick up sticks from the trail and ask Daniel to guess which tree they came from. Daniel, of course, made no attempt. I didn't have much of an idea myself.

I could tell he was finding it hard not to tune me out. Every thirty or so seconds, Daniel would have to very consciously drag his attention away from the view of the sea, the distant hills which faded into the golden mist, the waves which pushed and pulled, the crescent moon which had persisted into the daytime, and refocus on my words. It simply didn't captivate him. Perhaps it was the language I used, and the general way I explained things; though not entirely over Daniel's head, it was filtered through my academic lens, for I only really discussed botany and entomology with others in the field, rather than spoken of in a way that was sympathetic and informative to young children. No matter how it was explained, Daniel just wasn't interested enough in it to pay much attention.

"I noticed a hive, right up there," I pointed, and Daniel followed my finger. "It's the big brown thing. Did you know that bees collect their pollen from flowers? You'll know then that plants create pollen in order to reproduce with other plants, and that a bee, by harvesting this pollen, which it does by collecting it in its pollen baskets, which are located on the rear legs of the bee, will then distribute this pollen among other flowers, unintentionally, for the pollen will rub off on any flower they land on. It's interesting, as plants and bees, while they evolved individually from one-another, have somehow managed to coordinate this sort of teamwork, and

it's the true evidence that nature is this gorgeous, brimming, unintentional orchestra. Life, in every sense of itself, was an accident.

"Not to say that bees and flowers don't communicate, of course. It's still sort of ambiguous, but some bees seem able to trigger flowers into releasing pollen… maybe through some sort of pheromone, or the frequency of their beating wings. You know, some bees start to develop a palette. They enjoy the taste of some flowers over others, and if they get into the habit of visiting a certain type of flower, the flower will actually respond by rewarding them, because more bees means more reproduction for the plant. It's such a harmonious representation of the give-and-take of life. They help each other without exchanging a word, and they do it so delicately. Karl Von Frisch actually discovered that bees and humans don't experience much difference when tasting sweet things… bees are only mildly more sensitive to sweet flavours than us. And they can see all colours except red, did you know that?"

Daniel walked ahead of me.

"Can you see the sheep and cows?" I asked when we'd arrived at the picnic site.

Daniel was peeling an orange with his stubby little fingernails. Juice ran down his arm and dripped onto his overalls, as well as the flannel picnic blanket. He sucked it loudly off his skin.

I craned my neck, "from where we're sitting the sheep and cows are both in sight. They're the dark specks in the distance, just over there."

Daniel didn't turn his head, now sucking the soul out of his fruit. A cool breeze ruffled the grass around me. In discomfort, I shifted my weight, felt the texture of the brittle grass and the loose pebbles in the dry soil beneath the surface of the blanket.

"Would you like your juice?" I held up a plastic bottle. Daniel ignored me. "Okay. Would you like your cheese and crackers?" Ignored again.

I fished in the square wicker basket, and pulled out a bag of chocolate chip cookies. Daniel held up his hands in a grabby motion. I smiled in fond relief and passed Daniel a couple.

“Did Mummy explain everything to you?”

Daniel squeezed the pips out of his orange.

I wrung my hands together. “You’ll have to, um, make a decision. I’m sure Mummy told you that no matter what you decide, we both love you very much, and we both promise to be there for you, through everything.”

Daniel brought his knees to his chest, fiddled with the straps of his overalls, and messily scratched at his dark hair.

“Mummy’s moving away. Further up the country. If you’d like, you can stay with me, but I understand if you want to be with her.” Daniel gazed at the grass, picked out the longest blades he could find. He folded them over each-other and attempted to make some sort of plait, though it fell apart quickly.

“You’d rather live with Mummy, right? That’s okay. If I were you, I’d pick the same option.”

Daniel put his chin in his palms and tried to meet my eyes. It was my eyes, this time, which failed to meet his. He returned to his grass-crafts, this time trying to make a bracelet, though the fragile blades kept snapping near the knots.

“It won’t, um,” I cleared my throat, which was suddenly quite tight, “it won’t make me sad. I’d prefer you go with Mum, actually, because she said she’ll be moving closer to where her family lives. Your family.”

Daniel directly contrasted the bright afternoon rays, for his features were rather dark and sunken for a child his age. Our doctor had assured Diane and I that there was nothing to worry about health-wise, and he would grow into his looks. He hopped over the path as we made our

way down the opposite side we'd come up, overalls as red as a nearby field of poppies, t-shirt as yellow as the dandelions.

"Be careful not to slip."

Daniel matched his pace to mine.

"I know your mother thinks you're too young to understand why we're divorcing. I don't agree with that, though. Your mother and I love each other very much, so I promise, it's not because we're angry or fighting."

Daniel hopped his way to the next stone.

"It's more that… There's different kinds of love in the world. You love your friends, but you wouldn't marry them, right? Well, you love Mum and Dad, but it's not in the same way you'd love a friend, or a girlfriend. So, your mother and I found out, the way I love her isn't exactly… the way that I'm supposed to love her."

The look in Daniel's eyes conveyed a sense of frustration, and I was right there with him. In truth, I didn't know myself why it mattered. I loved Diane enough to be with her forever — so what if it wasn't the typical sort of love?

I wanted an unromantic love, an untouching, unspeaking connection. Not a love compelled by presence and physicality, nor confessions and pining. I wanted a table between us, legs crossed, gazes caught in a distant, intimate process of gleaning the other's intellect.

I did not want to be held, kissed, or fallen for. I wanted to be married-unmarried, alone-unalone. I wanted to find an equity in the rapture of both speaking and listening. I cared little for the flesh; any experiment had affirmed this curiosity fruitless.

Growing up, when I pictured fatherhood, I was always a single parent. I sometimes envisioned a wife and co-parent vaguely, an expectation as it were, but did so without passion.

I wondered whether this was due to my constant assumption that I must do everything myself, for I naturally expected everyone to fail and disappoint me, or if I was authentically loveless. I wanted to see myself with an intellectual partner. Someone to awe and inawe. Though if our psychological clicking was rather closer to the comradery of two academics, as opposed to two lovers, then perhaps I needed to find a different label to call it.

“It’s not something people can control, Clara. The heart is always said to be mysterious. I promise I’ll visit, as often as you want me to,” I said, and took Daniel’s hand as the downward path got steeper. “Just walking now, please.”

On Daniel’s final day at the farm I knelt at the base of a gorse bush, sawing its thick trunk with vigour. Behind me lay a mountain of shrubbery, not only bushes of gorse but blackberry, mistflower, Darwin's barberry, and other such invasive species. The process of clearing the section was thankless, tedious, painful, and slow. Daniel wasn’t interested in helping, but I never would have let him regardless.

“Some of these blackberries are ripe,” I said, out of breath, as I dusted my knees and reached toward the spiny branches. “You take some for yourself, and some for your mother. Here, hold out your hand.”

Daniel collected the blackberries. Some of the drupelets were still a little red and underdeveloped among their darkened surroundings, which he knew well would make for a rather sour experience. He took them away regardless and made his way up the slope, though upon reaching the hangar stopped beside it. He approached the doors, tugged on the large lock I had bought after Diane had mentioned the plane to the wrong sort of people. The attached chain jangled, brushed orange rust on the back of his hand. Daniel wiped it on his pants, then looked down. He noticed a cluster of mushrooms which had sprung up beside a drainpipe. He dropped

to his knees in the dirt and inspected them closer. They had golden caps with blue splotches, and long white stems. Daniel poked at the fungus, then plucked one. He dropped it to the dirt, stood up, and kicked the entire cluster. The mushrooms burst from the ground and flung about the place. He then continued up the hill, eating the blackberries as he went.

In the subsequent years, I was subject to a string of both personal and national misfortunes. Late 1963 marked the shocking death of the American president, and though like most Kiwis I had little awareness of American affairs, I still felt, when I stepped out into the world, that the air had changed.

The Vietnam War followed, and though Holyoake chose to contribute only the bare minimum to keeping in alliance with the US, I laid a little lower than usual. Tensions were supposedly rising, as I heard both over the radio and on the phone with Diane, though I experienced little of these sentiments in the flesh as I spent a great deal of my time alone. She persuaded me a year later to invest in my first television, pointing me to a new programme called *Country Calendar.* It wasn't long afterward that I'd had to sell the device due to the crash in wool export prices and my growing poverty.

A mine exploded in Rūnanga, killing 19. Two major shipwrecks occurred in the span of two years, *Kaitawa* and *Wahine,* killing 29 and 53 respectively. A shallow 7.1 earthquake in Īnangahua Junction, which claimed five lives, jolted all the way up to my property. Though only having experienced a mild shaking, I suffered from neurotic fits for months afterward.

The radio fed me more and more. Apartheid meant Māori All Blacks were prohibited from playing in South Africa, until 1970 when they were accepted as 'honorary whites.' They then lost to the Springboks in three out of four test matches. Alternating opinions rose, people segregated themselves, tension hummed in the air. I switched to the pirate station Radio Hauraki,

where I found more agreeable sentiments, despite their broadcasts being recorded a week behind and thus not being as up-to-date on news. However, I was used to lagging behind in life.

I sat by the radio every night, my feeble hand wrapped around a sweating lager, the house warmed only by a stove. My thesis long-forgotten, my scholarly identity reduced, for lack of funding, to the struggling farmer, to the fair-going craftsman, to the nervous recluse… I sat, listened, drank, and was alone. Most of my sheep had been sold, half the estate had been reclaimed by the invasive briars, fences decayed, paint flaked, cobblestones grew spongy with moss, the Farina's battery had died with disuse. I shared boundaries with a dairy farmer and a logger, who initially traded for my wool but were harder to persuade with honey. I grew thinner, meeker. At moments of true desperation I had geared up to sell the plane, but aside from the bees, it was all I really had.

The bees were the only thing I wouldn't neglect. My hives remained healthy throughout the entire decade I'd fallen out of contact with Daniel, with any money not spent on essentials going into keeping them functional. They paid back, of course, but it had grown increasingly difficult for me to leave the home for fairs and markets due to the condition of my mind.

Then Diane died. She'd called me two days prior to her death complaining of a lump on the side of her throat, which had seemingly sprung up overnight and was already the size of a golf ball. It was Diane's sister, Judy, who got into correspondence with me, her voice miniscule and heart-wrenched.

"We're all trying to work out… when we can all be available for her service…"

"I'll come up anytime, anytime."

"Oh, good," she sniffled. "It's going to be quite small. Um, intimate."

"Okay," I replied.

“Do you know what her favourite flowers were?”

“She… she didn’t much care for flowers.”

“Well, what would she grow in the garden?”

“I would grow poppies.”

“Okay,” Judy replied, and cried into the phone until I changed the subject.

“Where’s Clara?”

There was a long pause. “In school right now, but my sister’s picking her up. I don’t think she knows yet… my sister called the headmaster, I think she’ll be pulled aside when she arrives…”

“Can you ring me when she’s home? When she’s ready to speak to me, that is.”

“She may not be for a while.” Her tone was stilted, tentative. “You haven’t talked to her in a… well, a long time…”

“Yes,” I whispered, and hunched over my crowded counter, casting my eyes through the dirt-caked window. An orange sunset glinted behind the distant mountains, pushed them back and back in warm, pale hues.

“She’s… changed,” Judy clarified.

“The last thing I expect is for her to be herself. Especially with being 14, now.”

“She’s 16.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, clenched a fist by the side of my head. The line was silent for a long moment. “I don’t *want* it to have been that long.”

“Why did you leave it?” she implored.

“I wanted it to be her choice.”

We fell silent, strangled by something unspeakable.

# THREE

Dad did a double-take when he saw me.

Above arrangements of white lilies and wreaths of wisteria, he peered through his horn-rimmed glasses and scratchy tweed. His hunched shoulders and kinked neck had worsened through the years, but remained familiar, and his slender brown fingers perched like spiders upon a white tablecloth. Said fingers jolted in hesitation when he saw me, and he took a step to the side, bobbed backward a moment, then resolved towards me in a near-trip.

“Clara,” he crooned. The closer he grew, the further he shrunk back, his hands grasped tightly near his chest. I did not remember this man, not this version of him. Clothing slouched from his frail, bony shoulders, his wrists swallowed in gaping cuffs.

He did not hug me.

He stood, instead, with desolation to his spectre. For a strange moment I yearned to take his hand, or to hold him by the elbow as though to walk him down the aisle. Craning his head, he took his surroundings in for the first time, gazing upon the eggshell archways of the church, where further wisteria had been hung, and his face was stained by an angel. There were a hundred beams of colour draped upon us, and we were latticed in the shadow of frames. I gazed at the patterns on the back of my hand and thought of Mr. Forbes, then looked at my father, and he looked at me.

He stuck to my side, not knowing anyone else very well. It seemed it had been just as long for everyone there as it had for me. As I toured myself through the venue, inspecting photographs, arrangements, and clusters of relatives, he followed limply in tow, subdued and

unspeaking. I stood at my mother's casket. It held a faint grey colour and its latches were silver. I was not to be a pallbearer.

My mother lay before us. Her sallow, leathery face was far removed from the flesh and blood I'd been familiar with, and it made me sick to see such a crude imitation of her humanity. Dad stepped away, but I felt him watching me. I did not touch my mother. It would mean as little to me as to touch a wax figure. But I did inspect her. Closer than I'd ever had a chance to before. I did not know about the beauty mark beneath her left eye, proximal to the bridge of her nose. The acne scars just below her cheekbones were mystic to me. I had never noticed the thinness of her auburn eyebrows, nor the dimpled quirk to her lips that remained with her even in death. I leaned further in, and studied her features in rapture.

Judy placed a hand on the lip of the casket, and rested a pinky on the back of my hand. "I think her spirit knew it was autumn." I stared into my mother's closed eyes. Darkened a pinkish-bronze, her eyelids glimmered faintly if one moved one's head. "I think she'd had it up to here with the gutters."

I allowed my head to be pulled to her chest, and my scalp was rewarded with tears.

My father, meek and subdued, was a ghost in his machine. His watch haunted him more than I. There was an inaudible, telltale hum to his standing, this flurried mechanism of the collective as each synapse fed a daisy-chain of thought; useless thought, the sort of absenteeism towards himself that in some ways led to her death. When he watched me, he was in search of something within himself. That awareness never left me. Family would touch his elbow and he'd wince, his trance intercepted, so he'd talk without talking until they resigned.

"It's considered an invasive species in parts of China and the U.S. It doesn't mind poor soil, as it's very hardy, so it can grow just about anywhere, though it hates nitrogen so it's best to have

a soil high in phosphate. It can take decades to bloom at all from seed. Even then, it may be temperamental about blooming, though there are ways to force its maturity. Wisteria actually does better when it's stressed. If you prune its roots, deprive it of water, and physically abuse its trunk, it can mature a lot faster."

He talked through people as though they weren't there. Their tastes, moods, and temperaments meant nothing. Instead, their worth was valued in how long they could tolerate him.

My chronic neurosis has never been a secret — but it holds no capacity to stake an eternal claim. I persistently exhibit a burrowing excavation into myself, mistaking the aim of this search to be the uncovering of whatever it is that's supposedly 'wrong' with me. The fractal is antithetical to the fragment; wholeness is infinity in the most literal sense. You may see yourself as infinite divided points, but this dispersal is forever connected via dimension, the higher planes, the bulk of yourself. I have never gone long without being convinced that something in my mind is faulty. Whether I choose to pathologize it under a label, the answer is never beyond temporary. The relief sought is not an act of self-compassion, but of obsession and compulsion.

Yes, seeking relief: it functions as the following dynamic, one which we all suffer from in varying degrees and forms. An inner critic will state something abusive towards myself. I will experience a moment of cognitive dissonance wherein two sides of myself, both predominantly unconscious, battle for the correct evaluation of the criticism. We have the authentic self, who knows how to weed out rubbish (but can only weed out so much of it when it's buried beneath a landfill), and the passive self, who acts as a doormat for the inner critic because he believes it is for the best to absorb the punishment. Why does this self believe so? Because it runs on liquid guilt. The critic feeds the passive and vice versa. Minor errors from years, even decades past, are

the quickest paths to hauntings when the authentic self is drowned out with enough reasons to doubt his truest nature. It is a scam of the mind, the embellishment of a thousand faux pas or honest and atoned-for errors via hiding them, as one hides a stack of one dollar bills under a hundred dollar bill, beneath one or two major life-errors that are intrinsic to human nature and necessary for mental development.

So then, the passive self, with all the evidence stacked against it and lacking in counterpoints, accepts any punishment bestowed in hopes of attaining relief and forgiveness from the guilt and shame. The critic feeds off the passive self's submission, in order to feel some semblance of power within the circumstances it finds itself helpless. The critic is no different from the insecure bully, who cannot manage its rampant stress, sadness, and confusion in any other form than to lash out.

The self-abuse manifests in a multitude of forms. The physical: to cut, to punch, to burn, to pick, to pull hair, to rip off nails, to neglect needs, to withhold sleep or food, to remain in a situation one does not wish to be in, to overwork, to over- or under-exercise. The emotional: to expose oneself to things one knows will upset them, to remain fixated on a task one does not want to do, to distance oneself from friendships, to be convinced of one's own evil, to pursue shocking content, to seek patterns in the negative, to self-defeat, to withdraw in the assumption of failure, to not believe in one's capabilities, to self-sabotage.

In dealing with an inner critic, which in of itself is an elusive thing to recognise and isolate in the first place, the options are greatly unclear. How do you remove a thorn from *inside* yourself? How do you unravel and separate an aspect of your thinking that you believed intrinsic, for *decades,* and considered as familiar a part of yourself as air is familiar to the lungs?

It is unrealistic to ever expect to cease the internal monologue *entirely.* The many avenues of dealing with depressive symptoms can be successfully exhausted to treat a myriad of issues. Just as depression is a fluid arrangement of varying ailments, so do its instigators and remedies fluctuate. Due to these fluctuations, pinpointing the specific cause of an episode of depression can be somewhat futile. Perhaps, the cause itself does not need to be known at all. If identified, it is unlikely to be any new information to yourself, and it's probable that the matter is unchangeable (at least, in the short term). It is most likely that there are tens or even hundreds of causes that contribute to a major depressive disorder, and the inner critic functions as the mind's awareness to these causes, calling attention to each and every one for it deems them to be equally worthy of your focus. Wonder not, now, why depression and anxiety are so highly comorbid. What is the inner critic *truly* doing, rather than the oversimplification that all depressed people exist in an ouroboric inner state of sado-masochism?

The human being is neurochemically wired to survive. To pursue as painless, comfortable, and happy an existence for itself as possible. The understandably vast and dominating view of suicide is that it is caused by a desire for death. I don't believe it is so simple, much the same that the inner critic does not solely exist to torture you. People do not become depressed because they made the conscious decision to seek unhappiness over happiness. They become depressed because they have *not found* happiness in spite of seeking it. They do not believe they have the capacity to attain that which all life is wired to seek, fed feel-good endorphins and chemicals to reward life-sustaining behaviours, those same chemicals which a depressed person's brain is deficient in. Therefore, the depressed person's mind does not supply them any motivation to continue sustaining their life, and as their mood gets lower and lower with increased self-neglect, ultimately, they die.

They do not choose to die. Their mind has simply run out of any capacity to produce the reward chemicals that motivate us to continue living. It is not a desire for death, but a conclusion, come to in the face of what is *perceived* and *felt* as the only logical option. Words cannot express the true grief of this phenomenon, that human beings can be starved by their own minds of the chemical motivation that allows them to sustain themselves. People think themselves so much less animal than anything else, to function on an entirely separate operating system than the primordial life they split from. Yet we can ultimately be reduced to electricity, chemicals, and meat. A depressed mind is created by a complicated and individual set of circumstances and experiences and predispositions, yes, but this one net can be cast to 280 million people currently living with depression on this Earth. It is a health condition, not a matter of personality, inborn neurosis, nor conscious choice in perceiving only negative stimuli. It is chemical because *we* are chemical, and if you have ever perceived even one thought of yours to have been formed on a higher level than chemical reactions and electronic currents, you are simply mistaken.

Who is the critic? Is it the unconscious mind? Not quite, I don't think. I believe the critic to be the *mediator* between the conscious and unconscious mind. It is that who translates chemistry into thought, and delivers its messages to us. This understanding of the critic reveals the only logical conclusion of its nature, being that it is a neutral party. The critic is not truly a critic, but a messenger. It is much like an unmoderated chat forum.

Any and all messages are displayed on screen in equally sized boxes, in chronological order, no matter their nature. It is up to the reader of these messages to discern their importance, whether they agree, what's spam and what's trolling and what's constructive criticism. Present someone with ten messages a day, and they can work through them fairly quickly. But the mind

does not have ten thoughts a day. It has thousands upon thousands of individual thoughts, and those with depression and anxiety can expect a particularly overwhelming amount of them.

After a point, a person trying to catch up on the forum may start to skim-read. They start to gloss over repeated topics, lose the capacity or motive to question the nature of such common talking points, and begin to store them in the unconscious mind. They might see some argument or ideology brought up so often that, though they were initially neutral or may have even disagreed with it, they see it enough now that it becomes familiar, and ultimately acceptable, and even *true,* to them. Then, as more and more messages come in, and there's just far too much to even bother reading at this point, they notice that the discussions most necessary to staying up-to-date with the forum are those which focus on the outrageous and negative.

As the amount of messages remains high, the instinct is to skim over the neutral or positive posts in favour of the more-important, predominantly negative messages. No news is good news: the negativity bias in the human mind is instilled not from some inherent human pessimism, but rather, because of our conditioning that negativity is inherently correlated with importance. The negative simply holds more weight. A lot of people feign kindness and approval out of politeness, empty compliments handed out as automatically as a *'how are you?'* When somebody chooses to say something negative to you, it sticks out far more, because not only is it uncommon and therefore more attention-grabbing, it is associated with valuable information that keeps us in the know.

Consider, now, the mind's messenger: the so-called critic. It is not solely delivering you negative messages; in fact, it delivers all forms of messages. It will call you useless and pathetic in the same breath it calls you a profound genius. It will throw a great deal of neutral nonsense at you in between all these encoded thoughts, and annoy you to death by singing songs and forcibly

conjuring mental imagery you'd rather not see. When I refer to the 'critic' and the 'authentic', what I believe I'm really saying is that the critic is the messenger while it delivers negative messages, and the authentic is the messenger delivering anything else. But it is all one in the same, in terms of the cognitive process.

A healthy mind also receives negative messages, but the vast difference is this: the healthy mind is *moderated.* Whether learned through experience or by example, the healthy mind recognises the importance of boundaries. A healthy mind is chemically balanced, able to accurately filter that which does, and does not, serve its survival, comfort, and happiness. It allows negative messages through so long as they are constructive or important, and will sometimes filter out positive messages if they are unhelpful or unintentionally destructive. A depressed mind not only struggles to do this, but much like an unmoderated forum, attracts an overwhelmingly depraved and negative user base. The depressed mind generates an even higher influx of negative messages than a healthy mind.

A process of *rejecting* a message caught by the filter is not the same as *ignoring* a message outright. Ignoring an unfiltered message is what actually allows it to be *accepted* and published to the website for anyone to read. Considering a message caught in a filter or reported by a user necessitates *reading* the message; it must be processed for a moderator to decide whether it's appropriate or valuable. Sometimes filtered messages turn out to be appropriate, other times dangerous messages that got through have to be reported by users.

Thoughts are messages relayed to you via a mediator that must interpret hundreds of trillions of atomic reactions every second. Though the brain has the capacity to overrule you, and though your consciousness offers you very little control in terms of the functions of the brain, the purpose it has developed to serve is the opportunity of *choice.* You cannot control the chemical

reactions generated in your unconscious mind, it is simply not possible. You cannot even control how these reactions are translated into messages by the mediator. Your role is to accept that you will receive all sorts of different thoughts, and understand that not all of them are going to be useful or relevant, and that to face them directly, consider them, and choose consciously whether or not to permit them, is the only method to exhibiting control over your psyche's sanctum, and recognising that to consider a thought does not inherently mean to accept it.

I can see a wrecked campsite, or the interior of a mobile home. I can smell the oil on the cement floor in Waiouru, or the rotten sheep carcasses dotting the windswept hills. I can touch the spiralled fleece of a lamb, or the dry horn of a ram's skull. I can go back in time to totter across the jutting stones of a creek. Shallow water running over slick stones, thin and flat, good for attempting to skim. Craggy cliffs with lines of clay, sharp scrub and brittle leaves. Writhing black eels and water up to my ankles. Bush walks, beach days, disappointment during both. I never left happy. Dry grass in the middle of nowhere. Pickup trucks, a leaf-filled outdoor pool, lots of kids my age. I'd sit away from the activity growing familiar with my knees. Piling fistfulls of grass up beside me into a small mound.

It's not the life people correlate with me. I'm closer to an ironic Beatnik than someone tortured by the whisking between poverty-line suburbia and un-idyllic farmland. Having eventually found everything to do on a screen, it's a marvel my time before the internet is blearier than my life after it.

There is nothing *less* nothing than being online. Though, it is a commitment to it, when you sacrifice your *own* everything to let the screen show you *everything*. I yearn now to be back at a bonfire in a trashed campsite with strange company. To walk the rotten posts of a dry bank,

tugging on the loose wire. To be bored in some context of boredom. To be doing *nothing* in life, than *everything* in *non-life.*

Everyone is advised to play the same game, but when put in practice it's nauseating and obvious to look at. The constant vying urge for a shred of anyone's attention when the landscape is so shattered, so saturated in content. Every piece of the soul is exhausted by numbers. Billions of pairs of eyes that could simply never hold everything in.

It is of unquestioned and unshakeable importance that everyone is *known.* To have, once and for all, comfort in money, attention to personality, vastness in company, and devotion towards your being. That this will always be maintainable and never have any chance of backsliding. A perfectly balanced life, achieved with no grievances, a happy story of dedication and acceptance, wide-open gates and beckoning hands. Having your place. You are just so excellent. A pioneer in your field. Life is fair. People are only known because they were just so exceptional that it was only natural they were noticed en masse. There was no effort required. No bribing, no selling-out, no algorithms, no marketing, nothing. Everyone just knew how great they were because great people need no introduction.

Everyone figuring out what everyone else is doing. Hearing things through the grapevine. Making plans to make more things for other people to hear about. Showing up at parties with those same people. Thinking it will be easy to hold onto your identity. The parts of you that make you proud. Then, like moving back into your parent's house, regressing. Nothing's changed, nobody. Wondering, as you leave after an hour, if they all felt the same.

Depriving the human of the source material. Archetypes.

Who stuck to cliques and who branched away, and envying those who were entirely forgotten. Who hid from the ghosts of those who never think about them at all, for the sole

reason that they hid. When I compartmentalise the homogenous mentality into its individual persons, those I may have taken issue with or been bullied by at one point or another, occupy an immediate case of redemption. Nobody as an individual seems capable of what I have committed their group to.

We love to elaborately manifest mundane horror. An objective, tangible monster, an identifiable and therefore vanquishable threat. It's always watching you, chasing you down from every direction. For the same reason a child sits up in the night and imagines there's something in the closet, we imagine this presence.

The child is never relieved to find the closet empty.

"To an extent, a plant cutting can be grown in water alone. But if starved of earth, it will be incapable of grounding itself, of embedding firmly in a soil foundation. The plant placed in water may give the appearance of true growth, but it will never fruit, nor flower, nor flourish." Dad was hovering at the edge of a conversation, speaking more to the sides and backs of heads than to any individual. "Growing a cutting in water, inside the home, is easier, cleaner, and safer than planting it in the soil outside. However, it may also demand extra attention. In your anxiety you may overcompensate, by too frequently topping up the water of the plant, exposing the plant to constant sun, and continually pruning it of insects and other pests that may invade its space. With all this upkeep, the plant could appear happy, giving you the impression that it never actually needed soil in the first place. But just because the plant is surviving, it doesn't mean it's happy. Even though it can live without soil, it will still be starved of nutrients and stability.

"Yet if the plant goes so long with your upkeep, and you come to notice it isn't fruiting, or isn't further developing, or has borne you no beautiful flowers for repayment of all your efforts, well, this might upset you. This upset might lead to indignance, feeling the plant has been

ungrateful after the extent of your efforts. You keep the plant's water topped up, you put it in the sun all day long, you drop manure straight into the water, you spray it with chemicals to kill the pests: yet, though it is alive, it will never come to fruit."

Abraham Maslow was a psychologist who chose to flip the understanding of psychology on its head: instead of focusing on mental health through the sole analysis of those who experience mental health problems, he instead forged a path in understanding positive psychology. That is to say, what is the common denominator within the lives of those who are happy, peaceful, and self-fulfilled?

He came away with a hierarchy of needs. The lower rung corresponds to the most basic needs every human being requires before they can even think of worrying about any of the rungs above. This is why starvation was such a profoundly effective method of psychological torture in the concentration camps. This is why slaves rarely found the will to escape; their backs were gaping open with wounds from the whips and their bodies were kept just fed enough they could work, but just frail enough they could not run.

If you look at Maslow's pyramid, you can discern that things such as self-esteem cannot be attained within a person who has not attained everything from the lower rungs. A person who does not have access to clean water is not in a psychological place to be able to feel happy in their life. It's a concept rooted in the most primitive aspects of our natures, it is a fact that keeps us alive in the most fundamental sense. If we do not have water, we die. It makes sense that our brain would motivate us so heavily through desperate, negative feelings to find water when we are extremely thirsty, so that we do not die. Same as a person without shelter: we die when exposed to the elements. It makes sense, then, to understand what makes homelessness such a miserable, cyclical, and barely-escapable experience.

I was in the car with Dad. The world sustained a low roar.

Dad's arms crossed over one-another when he steered. He pinched the radio dial, and it shrieked. It made him nervous for some reason. He couldn't settle on a station; his eyes lolled from road to rearview to radio to side mirror. His lower lip had curled between his teeth.

"Once the back section has drainage, that stuff can move out of your old room," he said. "It's just getting your uncle to come down here and get that done, I don't know when."

A profound ache welled within me.

When the Farina finished its crawl up the steep gamble of Dad's driveway, the engine was culled with a theatrical jerk. Dad smoothed his jacket and stepped sideways from the vehicle. He opened my door. I stayed seated, staring into nothing.

"Surely it hasn't changed that much." He tried to smile, then clarified, "we're here."

I removed the seat-belt I'd been chewing on and wiped saliva on my pants. Dad found this off-putting, but said nothing. The house gave the impression it had been ransacked: it was greatly upturned and disorganised, with newspapers, receipts, letters, bottles, and other garbage forming islands upon the floor. Dad led me through with seeming indifference, then we ascended to the loft. My old room had been swallowed by plant pots, rolls of clear polythene and black tarp, galvanised steel beams propped against the walls, 25kg bags of potting mix, mulch, and fertiliser, and various sealed buckets of suspect scents — likely containing sheep pellets of his own collection. The room was otherwise tidy, least compared with the situation downstairs. Dad hung back as I stepped into the room. He leaned against the doorway on an elbow, rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, and peered in every direction but mine.

“Clara,” he whimpered, his eyes honeyed in curtain-sullied light. Dust danced between us as if we were figures in a snow globe. His stance shifted, and the entire house released a sharp crack at the adjustment. “This is not the life I meant for you.”

We ate dinner in separate rooms. He didn’t have a television. Instead he sat in a folding chair just inside the back doorway, with the door propped open with a cinder block, and listened to the radio with a paper plate balanced on his bare knees.

Whenever I thought of anything, did anything at all, it felt like I had to share a brain with my mother. I wondered what this dinner would taste like in her mouth, what her tongue and teeth would feel in every sinking bite. Whether the rarity’s seeping blood would feel too animalistic to be comforting, or too comforting to be animalistic. Dad ate steak like an uncomfortable animal. Translucent brown fluid squirted from his sinking teeth, and his handkerchiefs only served to smear it. It embarrassed him, his hunger, but not his desperation. So he would swallow, sigh, glance around, then bite another enormous chunk. He’d usually thump his chest for a few minutes afterwards, and breathe from the top of his lungs for a half-hour until it slowly settled back to his diaphragm. Having observed his winded, sharp-chested breathing, I grew to over-masticate. To ruminate.

Whenever I go to parties, I hate being inside where most of the people are. All those voices rising and rising, but never seeming to fall, like a bubble of tension that never has a chance to burst. It was sidetrack after sidetrack and not one coherent thing could ever truly be said. I’d sit outside and hope to get people alone. Not a small group, not even two or three other people. One-on-one. Something school rarely ever gave me the chance to achieve. It was that rare opportunity to truly acknowledge them. Hey. You’re here too.

When you are silent, all your life, the only thing people know how to do when you're around is fill that silence for themselves. When they're alone with you, it allows the quiet intimacy of peeking under the superficial veil of assumption. Surpassing and navigating the stereotypes that only seem to exist in that specific zeitgeist of adolescence. Hey, you're here too, and you're real to me. I hope I am real to you. I hope I exist outside of what you know me as, at least for the ten minutes we're out here alone.

I am afraid of people. I need them, and that is what scares me. I want to play cat's cradle with their thoughts. I just want to know more. I don't know if there is a biological limit to the amount of information the mind can store, but the way learning from somebody makes me feel is of far more importance than what I have learned from them. That *feeling,* the mind can store that forever. That I can be changed in minutes, changed in assumption, perspective, relation, that I was given the penultimate gift of life, the opportunity to *have* them. That other. To have shared a brain with them, if for only minutes.

I am rigid with love. It makes me want to die. I cannot describe how differently love is for me as how it is defined. My love is nothing like any common description could ever capture. It is not romantic, it is not platonic, it is not familial, it is not sexual, yet it is love, powerful, permeating, *debilitating* love. Love that makes me think as often of near-strangers as I do of family. Love that has me keeping tabs on most anyone I've ever met. Love that puts me in any situation, at any time, at any place, that surpasses all anxiety, doubt, and self-consciousness. Love that has me eager. To unify in the interests of another person. To mirror a creature in its habits, to speak to it in its own tongue, to lower myself to the eyeline of an ant, to raise blinded eyes to meet the searing gaze of the sun. I need to be with you. I need to be among you. This need is disabling, I cannot empathise well enough. It controls me, and in that sense I despise it.

Before dawn broke I slid outside into the drizzling rain and let mud cake my hems. I drank water from a rust-eaten cistern pump and sat on the ground by the hangar. The rot had worsened upon the doors, consuming them from the bottom-up, and now a gap — as large as a half-metre at some points — nullified the purpose for the hangar's oversized padlock and dangling brindled chains. I rolled under to observe that the plane was exactly where I remembered it, though now a spectre, draped in an off-white sheet mottled with mildew. Crawling within the darkness, I perceived a great deal of golden-capped mushrooms sprouting from the dirt.

And the plane loomed: a megalodon in the forgotten black of the Mariana.

# FOUR

Daniel doesn't know how I survived, but I sense his urge to know. All lives involved experienced a usurping of stability, yet Diane had family to turn to — I had nothing at all.

In tandem, is my scrutiny towards *his* survival. If she ever told Daniel about the poisoning, I was never given any evidence that he knows. At least, knows the extent of it, knows that it was the driving stake alone, and that all other arguments for the family's fracturing were a distraction.

A bee suit hung pristine in the loft closet, which I had no access to, nor any use for. At least twenty years old, it had been worn only a handful of times, all of which by Diane. There was simply no reason for me to wear it. Bees are docile, gentle, and possess high levels of social insight which transcend well beyond insects alone. They harbour compassion and appreciation, with the capacity to store memories of human faces and the awareness of what those faces have done for them. Though this statement will be strange to most — it really can't be helped — the relationship a beekeeper has with his bees is one of the highest forms of intimacy I can imagine.

In the late morning I went to check on the hives. I imagined Daniel would still be sleeping, and decided not to disturb him. I fought gravity all the way up the grade, trampling spiny beige grasses which sprung right back up. I spotted a distant green-grey lump partially obscured by the sloping terrain. As I drew nearer, it seemed to rock in and out of view like a vessel on the waves, yet remained entirely still, and I grew anxious at its collapsed, defeated form. Bees appeared with increasing frequency, crawling on my arms, across my lips, in my ears. I waved them away and ascended the final slope, where the obscure lump now lay before me. Not a quarter acre from the

setup of hives, was a ewe. Large clusters of dark brown bees formed islands across her body, with stragglers wriggling between them.

I lowered myself before her, one knee resting in the dirt. Her front hooves were folded limply together, her rear legs splayed. Much of her fleece had crumbled from her body, and lay scattered around her. Her limbs, bony and barren, were of a sickly jaundiced hue. The carrion in some areas had collapsed entirely, exposing vertebrae, ribs, and joints — the areas with the highest concentration of bees. What repulsed me most was their gravitation towards her eye socket, which was obscured entirely by a writhing black ball of the insects, with lumps travelling beneath the skin of her eyelids. Evidently, she had been the target of a wild pig. A pair of gaping slits suggested the travel of a large tusk from her trachea to the side of her spinal cord.

Despite the state of her decay, she could not have been there any longer than two days — when I last came to check on the bees, and saw nothing out of the ordinary. The wild pig may have toyed with her corpse since killing it, thus dragging it from a more obscure spot into the open. The distance it had been brought must have been staggering, as I was not able to smell it prior. I stood and collected myself.

The minute I returned home, I knocked on Daniel's door. "Clara? I'll be out with the rifle all day. If you head outside at all, stay within the gate, and wear something bright." In the case he wasn't yet awake, I slid a note beneath his door. When I made to head downstairs, I got the sense that I ought to check on him. I opened the door a crack, and there observed his sleeping form beneath his duvet. I closed the door again, glad to have written the note.

I kept my weapons in my bedroom closet, along with my father's standard issue revolver in the nightstand. I retrieved my Remington and laid it at the end of my bed, then took stock of my ammunition. I was not a particularly well-armed marksman, but for a lone boar, the few rounds I

did have ought to suffice. Double checking the safety was engaged, I attached the sling, then set the safety to the middle position so I could open the bolt and inspect the magazine. I loaded four cartridges, then pressed down on them so I could slide the bolt back over without putting one in the chamber just yet. I gathered my remaining cartridges into the front pocket of my bush shirt.

The air had shifted when I returned outside. The scent of rot, inscrutable from my position not twenty minutes ago, hit me straight away, as the blustering wind now rolled down the gradient. I carried the gun low across my waist, and headed towards the mānuka grove, in anticipation that I may find a den.

It was a foolish decision to go alone. I know that on reflection. I whispered through the sun-bleached meadow and made my way to the treeline, where the canopies were too sparse to dim the land, but low enough to dapple the light on a sharp angle, causing the morning shadows to stretch long into oblivion. My skin grew brindled as I stepped beneath the leaves. At this point I opted to load a round into the chamber. Though it was unlikely to come to it, I had to be prepared to safeguard my life.

When it grew to early afternoon, and that loaded round remained yet in the chamber, I came to recognise I was ravenous. At this point I opted to backtrack a circuit that would lead me to the lower end of the property, and picked blackberries as I went. Though it had only just gone autumn, a deep chill had already settled in the air. The sunlight, direct as it was, barely warmed me at all. The hairs on my neck stood on end.

Perhaps there was more to the chill I felt than the weather, because soon enough, I got the feeling that something wasn't right. The crescendo of birdsong had all at once dropped to an uncompromising silence. The insects ceased buzzing. It was off-putting at an instinctual level, to hear nothing but the subtle creak of branches, and my own breath, caught shallow in my throat. I

was near-deafened by the release of the safety, nothing more than a subtle click. I could hear the blood flowing in my jugular.

Deep in the thicket, a shadow flashed. I readied my gun, and aimed in its direction. When I lowered my eye to the barrel, my depth-of-field was disturbed by my lenses. I lifted them to my forehead, but they fell back to my nose. I lifted them again, they slipped lower. Irritated, I folded them into my shirt pocket, the frames rattled against the spare cartridges. With my focus returned to the distance, I steeled myself for the re-emergence of the shadow. A far rustling discomforted me, as I could not locate the source of it. No foliage moved to complement the sound, and yet it persisted, and drew nearer. I held off for as long as possible, my eyes locked on any twitch of a grass-blade or sway of a leaf in the breeze. I spun, too, in case my brain had been deceived by the direction of the sound, but garnered no further information, even as the intensity of the sound grew, and drew close. I ultimately lost my nerve, made my best estimation of its source, and fired. The shot cracked the sky, and with it carried a sudden beating of wings, the panicked bleating of distant sheep, and hundreds of movements in the undergrowth as rodents and amphibians fled. I lowered my weapon and returned my glasses to my face. Before I moved, I pulled the bolt back, caught the case, and pushed back the bolt to load another round. The world slowly subdued into another silence, but less oppressive — nothing was in the area anymore. Nothing held its breath.

I stalked in the direction of the shot for quite a way, but there was nothing along the line. After ultimately finding the round embedded in a splintered trunk, I relented, in hopes I had scared the creature off for a good while.

When I cut through the paddock, I paid attention to the positions of each member of the flock. Though spread wide over the terrain, the majority were accounted for, and did not appear

particularly disturbed — even by the recent shot. I gathered that the killer was yet to have terrorised the flock itself, and rather picked off a weak straggler who, for whatever reason, wandered off in the night. I continued on my path until my attention was drawn to the distant hum of an engine, which cut out seconds later. I was not anticipating any visitors, but it carried from the drive, so I headed that way in case it was the rural postie or a neighbour.

Yet when the driveway emerged into view, it held no vehicle other than mine. Whoever had arrived must have grown impatient, or assumed nobody was home. Daniel did not open the door for anyone; if he did, there wouldn't have been any talking happening, regardless. I allowed my guard to lower.

On the doorstep, I pulled back the bolt to remove the unfired round, emptied the magazine, then closed the bolt and engaged the safety all the way. Once indoors, I placed the rifle on the dining table. The rounds clattered as I fished them from my shirt, and when they were dumped in a heap on the water-stained veneer, several rebelled away in arcs. One slipped from the edge and sprung off the ground, before rolling to its resting place by the table's leg. I bent to retrieve it, and when I raised myself, I was startled by the appearance of Daniel at the base of the stairs.

He did not appear to be himself. Something in his features disturbed me greatly, as I was instinctually familiar with the appearance of my son, even if I had been deprived of it for a great deal of time. There was a faraway look to him that led to an uncanniness, where he felt half recognisable, and half like a stranger.

"What've you done?" I managed, and stepped towards him. He was unresponsive, his eyes fixed well past me, recessed deep into the sockets of his skull. Pallid and faintly tinged-green, his illness was undeniable. "Write it for me, Clara. Can you write it?" I hurriedly slid him my open diary. Daniel took no action, but when I pressed a pencil into his hand, he was loosely able to

grip it. Finally, his eyes gained traction, and lowered to the empty page. I watched, with bated breath, his trembling attempt to write a word.

STUNG

"Where? Show me where." I moved closer to inspect him. He shrunk away, but it was delayed and half-hearted. I looked him over, but found nothing out of the ordinary. No stings, no swelling, no injuries at all. I assumed it was hidden somewhere beneath his clothing, but he wasn't making the process easy for me. After an exhaustive examination, I relented. "*Were* you stung?"

Daniel wrote again.

NO

"I'll have to call for a doctor. Sit there, now, don't stand up."

Daniel moaned, protesting me.

*"Why,* Clara? Do you know what the matter is?"

The last day Daniel spent on the farm was the day that nearly killed him. Up until that point, splitting up with Diane had felt reversible, a temporary phase of life. We'd worked through enough in the past that I'd assumed nothing could truly come between us. There was too much, at that point, built on the foundation of the relationship. I've always believed that Diane felt the same. That day in 1962 culled any hope of redemption.

Diane and I searched for hours. I was the last one who'd seen him, when I'd sent him, with a handful of ripe blackberries, back towards the house. The distance between the gorse I'd been clearing and our home was not substantial, and there was no real reason that I couldn't have kept him in my sight the entire time. But I didn't. We searched the house from top to bottom, even clearing away mountains of clutter from in front of long-closed closets, in case he'd crawled over

a pile and became trapped somewhere. We searched the paddock, in case he'd been investigating the lambs. We checked the grove, in case he'd gone to sit in the shade. Perhaps he was curious about the beehives. Perhaps he wanted to play by the creek. Perhaps he'd gone to a neighbouring property. Is he hiding from us? Is he in a cupboard somewhere, or lying beneath his bed? We checked the house again. We opened every cabinet in the kitchen, upturned every piece of furniture; the potential hiding spots became increasingly illogical, as our memory of him shrunk smaller and smaller, a false hope that he may be discovered only if we pushed the boundaries of our own assumptions. We were just about turning over stones when Diane asked whether I'd checked the hangar. I'd told her there was no possible way Daniel could have ended up in the hangar — it was bolted shut.

Diane looked at me, and I looked at her.

We found Daniel lying in blood. Diane's certainty of him being dead was only challenged when he moved, faintly, to turn his half-lidded gaze towards us. At that time, he hadn't learned to write, and was effectively not able to communicate at all.

He'd gashed an artery open on a blade of the Apache's propeller. A hollow crate had been pushed beneath the raised nose of the plane, which had been saturated with a spray of blood. He'd been curious about the propeller, and wanted to see it spin. It's likely that it kicked — for whatever reason related to the deterioration of the plane, the propeller, if spun in the same direction it spins in flight, can move with more force than anticipated when the plane's ignition is supposedly off. It could be that the ignition wiring was faulty, not grounded correctly, and fuel was still in the cylinder. It was one moment alone, a sudden jerk of the heavy blades, that caused him to lose about a third of the blood in his body. He'd clung to life all that time by some miracle, barely responsive once we found him.

When I gazed at Daniel now, a decade older, I saw the same sickness, the same sunken eyes.

“Were you in the hangar?” I asked.

YES

I filled the kettle and lit the element with a match. As the water boiled, I stepped outside, and pinched a handful of mint leaves from the neglected front garden. After returning indoors and pressing the leaves between my palms, I dropped them into the kettle. A brown ceramic mug emerged for Daniel. When the kettle had finished boiling, I stood over it, steeping it for several minutes. Then, I strained it into the mug, and took the drink to Daniel. He reached for it weakly, and took a delicate sip.

“It’s just boiled, give it a minute.” I slid out the opposing chair and sat in uncertainty. Daniel leaned over the mug and closed his eyes, allowing the steam to hit his face. “Please don’t do these things to my heart.”

Daniel was unresponsive.

I pressed my forehead into my palm and just watched him. I couldn’t tell if he was aware of me. His state of mind was far removed from the reality I needed him to be in. There wasn’t anything I could say, regardless, that could control his compulsions. I’d heard enough from Diane over the years, and it was as though all she had learned about psychology had been nullified entirely by Daniel’s mind, to the extent she felt spited by it, threatened by her incapacity to read — to *know* — her own offspring.

I had not anticipated that he would be foolish enough to go near those mushrooms again. The low dose he’d accidentally ingested as a toddler was enough to impair his judgement, and his understanding of the rules in place surrounding the hangar. His altered thinking had led to an ingenious method of entry, where he’d crawled between the two layers of wooden slats where I’d

temporarily gouged a hole to deal with the beehive within. He'd shimmied sideways along the narrow gap until finding a set of horizontal wooden beams to place his feet on, and scaled all the way to where the wall broke open to the rafters. There, he'd swung himself over the edge, and climbed back down the horizontal beams on the other side. At least, that's always been our theory. There had been no reason to check the hangar, not to a person with any sensibility. If Diane hadn't instilled that doubt in me, Daniel may well have rotted there.

When Daniel's eyes briefly swept over my face, I convinced myself that I'd gleaned humility. But truly, there was no way of knowing; it's like that with anyone, but with Daniel, it's a great deal easier to accept.

I was compelled to ask him what I ought to do with him, but held back. I envisioned, instead, what experience he must have had to cause such a shell-shocked appearance, and mulled over why he wrote STUNG of all things.

My ruminations were disturbed by a choked sob. My head whipped to observe Daniel. His eyes held no expression at all, but were fixed on the table, and tears glistened on the backs of his clasped hands. If I were to cover the expression in his eyes, and see only the lower half of his face, I would feel my heart speared in empathic anguish; his mouth was contorted in a gape of terror, and snot hung from his nostrils. When I followed his gaze I was gouged all at once with dread, as it was fixed on the rifle, laid as a sideways division between us. I spoke with urgency.

"I was hunting a boar. I was firing at a boar. It killed a ewe of ours, I'd been out looking for it all morning. You hadn't seen the note I left? That's what that shot was. That was the shot."

Finally, albeit a subtle hue, did colour return to his face.

“Were you out there?” I quivered, and reached a hand towards him. I lay my palm flat on the table. “You weren’t outside, in the grove, were you? When you heard the shot, had you been out there?”

He wrote nothing. I’m not sure if he could remember, nor if he had the capacity to tell at the time. I realised soon after I was glad of it.

There is one answer to that question that I have never wanted to know.

# FIVE

Dad told me not to go looking for the dead ewe, that it would only upset me. When I stood before it, it rather served to compel me. Bees do not behave in this manner, scavenging like ants or maggots or beetles. Dad was more preoccupied with his disappointment than he was in discerning the origin of this behaviour, whereas I only wondered what had forced them towards dietary means other than nectar and pollen.

Such were the drastic changes in my life that I grew desolate, and as such, sought the outer boundaries of the novel. Anything which shocked or scorned was a viable point of investigation. When living with my mother, tutors bore through our home most days of the week to supplement my alternative education. Dad did not have the means for this, and as I was of age to leave school, it was understood without discussion that I was done. I sensed Dad's expectation that I become a farmhand. He would never say it outright, but what other use was there for me? Not only did my mutism lend to dwindling job prospects, the remoteness of the location rendered even the closest options as impossibilities. What was I to do, other than rot?

I spent the first two weeks studying values with charcoal. I mirrored the spiny peaks of a fur blanket, casting their roots in the blackest shadows, and shimmered the light among the folds. I blocked in the impression of hairs and did not detail the individual, instead thinking in clumps, thinking in shapes. I investigated the canopies in the grove, blackening leaves against the sun which broke between them. I became fascinated by the symmetry of insects and flowers, and followed both around the property as they woke and slept. I drew the rotting ewe. I drew what I saw.

It was the clusters of bees which drew my ultimate focus. I remembered them being pale when I was a child, but now their bodies were a shiny dark brown, almost black. I sat with a charcoal pad and observed them for hours, how they burrowed beneath the eyes of the ewe and festered beneath its flesh. The bees which remained superficial exhibited a consumption process of first salivating on the meat, before tearing chunks with their teeth, swallowing it, and storing it in their crops. The bees would sometimes regurgitate the meat several times before it finally settled in their throat, wherein they would return to the hive. I had not seen a single bee with pollen collected on its legs. I'd also noticed that the bees I had seen crawling on our few remaining flowers were of an entirely different colour and species, appearing as the far lighter domesticated honey bees I'd known as a child. It was the right time of year, albeit a little late, for Dad to have harvested from the hives — yet they remained untouched.

I pulled the rocks off the roof one-by-one, and removed the outer and inner covers. Bees flew in my face and landed on my skin, but none stung me. When I carefully lifted one of the super's frames, I saw that almost no honey had been produced. The small amount present was a thick, dark brown fluid with a rancid odour. I hastily returned the frame and covers to the box, piling on the rocks with revulsion, and stepped away. The last of the bees left my body, and I realised then that they had no stingers at all. Their oversized mandibles were enough of a threat.

I was loitering by the toaster when Dad slid his boots off at the door. He glanced at me, removed his windbreaker, and draped it on the back of a dining chair. As he did this, he inspected the charcoal pad I'd left open on the table.

"Jesus, Clara, that's unpleasant." He flipped through the pages. "You're very talented."

The toaster creaked. I held my hands above the dimly-glowing slits. He continued flipping in silence, then stopped for long enough that I was prompted to turn around. My upclose studies of

the bees, featuring their anatomy, symmetry, and behaviours, had transfixed him. My toast sprung up, he took no notice.

"These are not the bees I knew," he remarked, and sunk into a chair. "In all my years of studying entomology, I have never known anything like them to be in this country. They have the characteristics of the genus *Trigona,* but that genera is exclusive to South America. They can't possibly be wasps, nor carpenter bees, nor mason bees. There's no mistaking that they've been introduced, somehow. I don't know how long ago they took over, how many years it's been. It seemed to happen slowly, too slowly to note — then all at once, there they were.

"If that boar is to keep killing our lambs, and the bees are to continue eating flesh, I fear we're soon to be condemned. There's no money in wool, meat isn't sustainable, the honey is foul, and there's no pollinators. Your uncle should be here next week to deal with the drainage, then we can set up the greenhouse. At this point, it's my only hope of keeping *anything* alive."

We both knew that 'anything' bore a fierce burden.

I wondered about Dad's intention for the bees. It would only make sense that they were exterminated, but Dad would rebuke this. Though the difference appears drastic to someone far-removed, my father was struggling with the differentiation. Though not the same bees, they still felt like *his* bees, and in this sense he thought them loyal to him, and capable of being bargained with. If he were to introduce them to higher quality crops, free of diseases and pests, perhaps he could facilitate a transition back to their original nature. It wouldn't do to start from scratch, nor to potentially extinct a priorly undiscovered species. Dad showed little appreciation of his discovery, due to his captivation with the boar, but in time it would grow to inspire him. Presently subject to his brood, Dad began to devise various methods of trapping and destroying the lamb-killer. He considered, too, that it ought to be tracked, in case it had established a den. It

was too bad the government no longer paid ten cents to any hunter who brought the snout and tail of a pig (originally a tail was sufficient, until farmers started cutting off their tails without killing them), as Dad could have switched his income source to pig-hunting for a time. Once a common pest, they'd become increasingly rare over the past few decades, after the government incentivised a thinning of the population.

I sat across from Dad and ate my toast. He was disengaged entirely from me, his eyes tracking like a slow pendulum across the surface of the table. Then, he twitched into a half-stand, and his hand shot to his back pocket. He placed a carton of cigarettes on the table, followed by a box of matches. He lit a fag and pointedly looked away from me. I reached across the table. His eyes shot to my hand, but he didn't move. The paraphernalia slid towards me, I plucked a cigarette for myself, struck a match, and let it flare the end. He said nothing, just looked at me for a while, then picked up a ceramic ashtray from his side of the table and placed it between us.

"You don't get that from your mother," he commented, and flashed a wry expression. He tapped the cover of my drawing pad with his fingertips. "You should pursue this."

We didn't look at one-another.

It rained for the following few days, which I spent in the loft, watching the sheep from my only window. I'd left it slightly open to hear the rain better, and to invite in the scent of it, which renovated the dense atmosphere of dust and mildew. I'd also been gradually unpacking my things, making room for them among Dad's forgotten possessions. He floated into the doorway at one point, his frail forearms swallowed by beige tartan, and silently heaved one bag of potting mix after another downstairs. The absence of the bags left a visibly lighter patch on the blue-grey carpet, which was otherwise cigarette-stained and long unvacuumed. There, I placed the camphor trunk that I'd fished out from beneath a mountain of boxes and old clothing, and filled

the empty interior with my own clothing. I rotated the bed, pushed it against the wall diagonal to the door, and began to fold the old clothing to place it neatly into the cardboard boxes. I stacked them beside the staircase and hoped that Dad would deal with them.

When I pushed the bed to the corner, I discovered a rolled-up rug had been slid beneath it. I unrolled it, and though it threatened to kick up a cloud of dust, it revealed a cream and pale blue persian design which I quite liked. I rolled it back up, propped it under my arm, and took it downstairs. When I pulled it outside and began to shake it out, Dad came squelching up the path, a chunk of firewood in each hand. He threw them on the doorstep and grabbed the other end of the rug, helping me to shake it without dragging the tassels in the mud. Then, he passed me his end, allowing me to fold it up and bring it back upstairs. He retrieved the wood and ambled in behind me.

I came back down as he finished lighting the woodstove. He swung the door shut and wiped his hands on a teatowel, which he then tossed onto the seat of an armchair.

“Could you please not touch my things, Clara?”

He hadn’t turned away from the woodstove. He remained kneeled in front of the flames with his hands clasped in his lap. I made to leave the room.

“I’m not angry,” he said, nor did he sound it. “I really should have cleared your room before you moved here, I know, but it was very sudden. I’ll get onto it, I promise. I understand it’s not fair. All this change, all at once… it’s not very good for me. Those boxes you moved… I wasn’t prepared to deal with them just yet. That’s why I have things up there, out of my sight.”

I frowned deeply.

I don't know if it would be moral of me to ever take on the responsibilities of being a parent. If I did, I’d like to think that my child shall be the one creature on this earth that I shall never

snap nor snarl at, that I shall never mock nor belittle, that I shall never leave a disagreement unresolved with, nor express a negative emotion without elucidating on the purpose of that emotion. Yet — what of those emotions that cannot be identified? What of the eternal background hum of guilt, the sort with no discernible cause, which yet causes unrelenting remorse so intense it is projected as boiling rage? I think I cause people to suffer. It's perhaps where my fixation with the Devil lies: that rejection. The feeling that our stories are one in the same. I know I was the cause of all my parent's problems, and the problems they caused for me. I'm always looking for some sort of relief. It's why I always ruminate. There is no discernible reason, however, for me to think that I am a bad person.

It's guilt, worthless guilt.

I have a profound amount of weaknesses of character, yet there are also many strengths which have lain dormant. You have to ask yourself: what is your role in your own discipline? It's an easy question to answer, yet a feebleness of mind is enough to enrapture anybody in their own sickened fantasies about themselves.

We think so very much about how to improve ourselves, how best to reap the positive qualities of our character in order to improve all the world around us, yet over time this intuition fades. I have had an endless amount of epiphanies that I no longer care about. My own character is controlled by something much higher than myself, something much less aware. That river will snake itself in whichever direction it chooses, at no point does it move by my hand. I have spent too many years choosing to interpret my strongest qualities as defects.

I've always loved the Devil in symbol, never in terms of the literal. I've always hated God in the same way. Because God — if perceived in the most traditional Catholic sense of his being — is guilty too.

Dad had cognized the weight of his words moments later, but he did not take them back. Instead he watched me with a faraway sadness in his eyes, a quasi-pity which I disdained, namely for the fact that I pitied *him*. I stood and watched the fire as he brushed past me into the kitchen. The tap began to run, followed by the clatter of ceramic as he submerged his mismatched dishes. I was stunned to hear it. Since my arrival weeks ago, a sierra of unwashed dishes had converged upon itself and stacked higher, swarming upon the countertops and even migrating to the shelves, floors, and nearby tables. The water lapped against his wrists as I sat before the snapping flames, warming my spirit with the transfixion it bestowed. The white base of the flame burned a colourful afterimage onto the backs of my eyelids. I liked to stare until it was painful, then look around the room and see what I could turn blue, green, or pink. The objects warped in colours much as a healing bruise; I watched a white matchbox turn purple, and a sepia curtain become green. Ultimately I wore my eyes out and so I lay back and stared at the least cluttered corner of the room, wherein a half-sittable armchair was otherwise piled with journals, fabrics, cardboard, and what could truly be categorised as *miscellaneous*.

There also appeared to be some smaller furniture buried within the rubble, which piqued my interest, and thus I abandoned my post. Investigating further, I observed the corner of a small, chest-height walnut bookcase. It would take some manoeuvring to expel it from its dwelling, but I found I could reach it upon stepping between several plastic storage boxes. I swept a mustard cardigan, a wicker basket, and a bicycle helmet from its surface. The shelves were empty, aside the bottom which had merely absorbed the neighbouring pile of floor-garbage. When I tried to pick it up, I found it was extraordinarily heavy, in spite of its unassuming appearance.

“Clara, what did I just tell you,” Dad sighed. “Here, it’s heavy, let me.”

Dad reached his left foot over the boxes and placed it on a section of uncluttered ground. He gripped the bookshelf with both hands and shuffled it loose from the hoard. After his own failed attempt to pick it up, he frowned over his shoulder at the floor behind him, and tried to sweep a clear path with his right leg. I helped move things out of the way, then he manoeuvred it in a variation of pushing and pulling until it was free of its confinement.

"And how do you plan to get this upstairs?" I figured he was serious until he stood behind it, grabbing the top end and tilting it towards him until he held it on a diagonal. "Get the other end, you'll have to walk backwards." Dad was a lot taller than me. We pivoted around the living room's door frame and aligned ourselves with the stairs. Dad bore the brunt of the weight while I fumbled backwards for each stair, guiding it to the landing. At that point we stood it up, as the angle was too awkward to pivot it through as we were. We shuffled it into the room, leaving indentations in the carpet, until we found a spot for it beside the window. Dad bent his palms backwards by pulling on his fingers, then massaged his inner forearms.

"Anything else you want to steal?"

This question was not so serious. It felt more like a warning than an offer. Judging that about a third of the house was entirely inaccessible, and he seemed to have little clue as to what was even in those areas, I very much wanted to investigate. His bedroom was one of the worst spaces, where he'd carved out pathways between piles which reached over seven feet high. More than half of his bed was saturated with objects which could crush him at any given time. He'd only left himself enough room to curl up, jutting halfway over the edge.

Dad left, and I dusted the shelves off, then began to stack my books upon them. Slotting one after another, I aligned their backs flush to one-another, no matter the size of the book. It gave a neater appearance. My absorption was culled by a horrendous noise from afar. My initial thought

was that it was the distressed wail of an infant. I peered through the window in front of me to observe the distant sheep, which had flocked together to run in a wide arc uphill. Initially, there was no sign of any threat at all. Then, a lamb emerged from the treeline, with a broken rear leg and a throat stained pink. It shuddered forth in a panic, stumbling and falling over itself in an attempt to flee. The flock had turned to watch it from their faraway vantage, and bleated, to encourage it towards them.

I heard thumping and clattering from downstairs as Dad rushed through the house, cursing loudly. Then, the telltale sound of his rifle's bolt opening, and cartridges being loaded into the magazine. He closed the bolt, loading one into the chamber, as he emerged outside into my view. His gaze was fixed on the lamb, the rifle pointed at the ground a few feet in front of him.

An enormous, black-haired pig emerged at the edge of the grove. It was identical in size to the adult sheep, perhaps even slightly larger, and stared not at the lamb, nor the flock, but directly at my father. Two enormous tusks curled from its lower jaw, with a third smaller tusk growing uncannily from the left side. The flock continued on its ascent, and the lamb struggled further up the incline, though the boar could at any moment render its efforts in vain, if it so choosed. But it did not. It remained still, haunting my father from the treeline.

Dad raised the muzzle in a controlled manner, and in a subtle motion removed his glasses. I realised that he must be farsighted — I'd always assumed he was nearsighted. I anticipated the shot, which for a long moment didn't come. Then he fired. The boar flinched, but remained standing, and slowly started in our direction. I thought Dad had missed, but as it neared, the black hair on its shoulder began to glisten. The round had gouged the flesh and muscle, exploding it wide open, and smoke rose briefly from the wound. Yet the boar was unphased. Dad pulled the bolt back, the case flew into the grass somewhere behind him. He aimed again and

fired another round. At this, the boar turned and disappeared back into the forest. Dad lowered the rifle, staring hard across the pasture. He remained rooted in that position for well over two minutes, just staring, waiting.

He did not turn to look up at me. Undoubtedly, he knew I would be watching, and would not approve of me doing so, therefore was opting not to confirm it. He whistled at the sheep, who responded in an anxious shuffle about a metre to the right. A colossal white thunderhead drew towards us from the ridges, drowning the alpines in navy shadow. The occasional spit of rain hit the glass in silence. The sky was skewed by the border of the oncoming storm; a battalion of rain advanced towards my father.

The lamb had collapsed, halfway between the flock and the grove. Dad headed towards it. On his way, he pulled back the bolt. The case flung away from him, flashed as it caught the light, and disappeared into the grass. Once he reached the lamb, he stood over it, with his back to me. The lamb was now obscured by him, as he loomed over it, making no attempt to rescue it. He adjusted his grip on his rifle.

I shut my window, buried my face in the side of my bed, and placed my palms over my ears.

There was a muffled pop from outside.

# SIX

“Hugh, mate.”

My brother-in-law gripped my palm once his ute came shuddering to a halt. He pressed his free hand to my upper arm and bit his lip in terminal sorrow. I squeezed his palm in solidarity, then dropped my gaze, unable to make peace with the intensity held in his pale eyes. We’d barely spoken at her funeral. I thought he’d been avoiding me, until he’d heard me telling Diane’s sister about my plans for the greenhouse.

“Sorry, Douglas,” I said.

“*I’m* sorry.” He gave a fierce nod, then swivelled his head. “This is bloody *nice,* isn’t it? Great bit of land here. I’m sure it’s been great for Clara, after living under that horrible overpass for however long. How’s she faring?”

“Still settling in,” I returned.

“Right, good one. Well, how’s’bout a cuppa?” Douglas rubbed his hands and headed towards the house. I followed, disconcerted, knowing I could not interrupt him.

“It’s a mess in there, I’m afraid,” was the best I could offer. Douglas crossed the threshold, took one look around, then continued indoors, apparently unphased. I filled the kettle, lit the element, and set it to boil. He removed his swanny and work boots, slid the latter under the dining table, and relaxed into a chair, clasping his hands contentedly. I placed a pair of mugs onto the countertop — which, although not wiped clean, was emptier than I’d had it in years. “Coffee? How d’you like yours?”

“Oh, splash of milk’s perfect for me, mate,” Douglas replied. As I prepared the drinks, he draped his arm over the back of his chair and craned his neck to look behind him. “Take it Clara’s still in bed?”

“I’d say so,” I replied. I went to place his drink in front of him. His hand flashed to a forgotten pile of cork coasters, and slid one beneath the mug as I placed it. He gave me a wink. I pulled out a chair and placed my mug on top of last week’s paper.

“What, no bikkies?” he grinned, albeit sheepishly. I plated some ginger nuts and placed them between us. “Thanks a million.”

I sat across from him and smiled faintly. It was something of a shame, I supposed, that it took Diane’s death for me to have any significant contact with her family. Until I became a widower, I had never been considered as an individual, rather a package deal which was invariably attached to Diane. Douglas dipped his biscuit, then bit down on it with his back teeth.

“I reckon we route the drain pipes through a storage tank. That way, you’ve got water to irrigate the plants, without chipping into the good stuff in the cistern.”

“I wouldn’t need anything too large,” I said.

“Nah, nah, I know. Just something worth taking advantage of. Down the track, if you want to transition some of this land into crop fields, you’ll already have a solid irrigation system to build off of. Just food for thought. Now, I’ll need you to give me a hand digging the trench, it’s slow work — course, we’ll subsidise the labour cost if you do. When I’m back tomorrow I’ll bring you a polyethylene tank. You’ve got the option of 250 litres or 500 litres, but of course, the latter’s pricier.”

“Can you give me an estimate?”

“I can give you exact figures. The 250 litre tanks are $20.76, not including the extra bits like the filter screens or the overflow piping. Then, the 500 litre tanks, you’re looking at $30.24. Give or take a few cents of course, depending on the bossman’s mood that day.” Douglas gulped his coffee. “So, it’s a considerable cost on top of the labour, gravel, tiling, and such. But it’s a pretty cut-and-dried example of ‘paying for itself.’”

We discussed the pricing for a time, until I opted for the larger tank.

“I suppose we’d better get cracking in a minute. It’s half-nine and I’m yet to see my niece!”

“She’ll be up soon enough,” I replied. Douglas finished his coffee with a delighted hum.

For several hours, we worked on digging a trench along the rear of the house. We were soon enough rid of our shirts, turning lobster-red beneath the humid, overcast sky. At some point, Douglas had gone around the front of the house to inspect the spout which ran from the roof to the cistern. When he returned, it was with a casing in his palm.

“You been shooting rabbits?” He grinned.

“No,” I replied, stunned. “A wild pig’s been giving my flock hell.”

“You’re trying to take it down with a .222?” He paused, staring at the casing. “Did you manage to?”

“Fired two shots into it. May as well have been firing a slingshot. It was nearly unphased, but I managed to scare it off. For now.”

Douglas shook his head with a chuckle. “For now, indeed. Mate, a 50-grain slug is just not enough to take down that kind of game, especially with how thick their hide can be. And how far off was it? Far enough for that kind of round to lose any worthwhile velocity, I’d imagine. It’s not like the varmint-shooting of the States. Anything under 150-grain, I say forget it. What kind of rifle are you using?”

“Remington 722.”

“Shooting a pig with that sort of weapon is never going to turn out well. You’re gonna need at least a deer-stalking rifle to drop a boar, and even then, not all are suitable. You should get yourself a carbine… a .303 Jungle Carbine is great when you’re in the bush, especially. That’s what it was made for.”

“Shooting pigs?”

“Shooting people in the jungle, mate.” He grinned widely. “Course, there’s a lot more options at your disposal, but I couldn’t run you through it all. My mate owns a sports-shop; whenever the novices come through asking after this and that, it’s some solid entertainment once he gets lecturing. I ought to take you down there and get you sorted, and he’ll probably say much the same. A .303 is a fantastic, beginner-friendly rifle, and it’s a decent price, going for 25 to 30 dollars. There are subjectively better weapons for this situation, but they can run up to 200 dollars, sometimes even higher! The ammunition is a whole other situation… quite a lot of cartridges are hard to come by, or need to be imported these days, it’s a real hassle.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable. Now it makes sense why I couldn’t drop it… to think I went out into the bush on my own the other day, expecting I’d take it down with one shot.”

“One shot of a .222 will do nothing but make a pig *very* angry.”

“In all my years on this farm, I’ve almost never had to deal with them,” I pondered.

“For a man with sheep, that’s bizarre. I s’pose the population has thinned a fair amount over the decades… I hope we’re not in for a boom.”

We headed indoors, intolerant of the ramping heat. I retrieved a couple of lagers from the refrigerator. Douglas pressed his lower back against the kitchen counter, and stretched his neck in exhaustion. I handed him a teatowel to dry himself with.

“You got a pup around here?” he asked.

“Nah, it’s just me and Clara.”

“You ought to get yourself a good pighunter.”

“Yeah, another mouth to feed,” I replied.

He looked at me in despondence. “Your whole flock’ll die if you don’t act soon, mate. It can eat what it kills; keep it starved enough and you’ll barely have to train it.”

“If it goes for the lambs?”

“That’s what the gun’s for.”

“I couldn’t do that to a hound. That’s cruel.”

Douglas hummed. The casing he’d picked up emerged from his pocket. He rolled it across his knuckles. I watched him in silence for a time, his head bobbing to some invisible song, neck craned forward, eyes fixed on the ground, a cryptic smile on his face. The casing rolled back and forth, flitting over and under his palm.

“You know…” I started, and placed his bottle on the counter beside him. He flinched when it brushed his hip. “I’m thinking of selling up.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” he said, and opened his bottle with the edge of my counter. The cap spiralled across the room.

“You think I should?”

He swallowed a mouthful of froth, then wiped his chin. “No.”

“So–” I watched him sprawl out on one of the dining chairs. “What, then?”

“Look, it’s been… here, siddown. We’ve all been in the wars over her, you can’t expect to just come right. You don’t need to sell, just some extra help. I can see a real vision for this place,” he craned back, his eyes drew circles around the ceiling, “*your* vision.”

“What would that be? Brand new irrigation system, purebred hunting dog roaming about with your mate’s Lee–Enfield at his back?”

He forced a grimace into a smile. “I’m not trying to ruffle your feathers, but you need to consider investing in yourself. For the future of your family… for Clara.” I didn’t respond, so he leaned towards me. “I think there’s an awful lot more on offer than you’re capable of knowing. I think… you could be in a really good spot, but only if you make a change right now. Something’s gotta give, Hugh.” He sat back, then, and looked down his nose. “Let’s say you sell up. What’ll come next? You’ve got a bit of money in your pocket — not much, it’s nice land, but not much at all in this way — then where’ll you go? Into town? What’ll you do there? What’ll Clara do? How much money will be left over? What’ll you do with that money? Make it work for you, or is it gonna be the same-old, you keep working while it slips through your fingers?”

“There’ll be something to do.”

“Not in wool, mate.” He took a long, sombre drink. “This is an asset. The money you’ll get if you sell right now, however, will make a mockery of it.”

“This doesn’t exactly concern you.”

“That’s my niece up there. I’d say it’s a little more than a concern to me.”

I rubbed my knees, and when I spoke, my voice was small. “What do I do?”

Douglas touched my arm. “I think I should stay here a while,” I glowered at this, so he talked faster, “to help share the workload, while yourself and Clara take some time to process Diane’s death.”

“Don’t you have your *own* processing to do?”

“I’ve had family around, Hugh. You haven’t.”

Douglas tightened his hold on my arm, and tried earnestly to catch my gaze. I dodged his eyes by squeezing mine shut. “How much would I have to pay you?”

Douglas released an astonished laugh. “Nothing.” When I frowned, he rubbed my forearm with urgency. “Absolutely *nothing.* That’s what you thought I– no, no, *nothing*. You’re family. If anything, I want to support *you.”*

“D’you think I can’t take care of Clara by myself?” My tone revealed more than intended.

“I think it’s a *lot* harder without Diane.”

His expression broke a few moments later, and he left his seat to approach me. He pulled me into a rough hug, which I did not understand until he stepped away. The shoulder he’d pressed my face into was wet. I brushed my hand over my cheek, it returned to me glistening. I wiped it on my shirt and sniffed. He remained standing there, and I watched him only from my periphery. His features were blurred into minimalism; two woeful fuzzy sockets peered from the furthest reach of my vision.

“Let me do this for you,” he murmured. “Let me stay a while.”

“There’s no room for you…”

“Look around. There’s plenty.” He gestured to the hoard.

“No, there’s– it’s–”

“Let me *help* you.” He dropped his voice, and brought it close to my ear. “I refuse to let my niece live in this state. Either you let me do this, or it’s going to get much harder for you.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“The way I see it, *you’re* threatening *her.”* He pulled back far enough to look me in the eyes. I met his gaze. “I know you love her very much. Perhaps *too* much — you can’t see what you’re putting her through. The last thing I would ever want to do is separate you from her, and I want

to make that very clear. But I *will* if I have to, and if you're as good a father as I hope you are, you would stand aside and let me."

I didn't even feel my fist swing towards him. I only blinked, then he was on the kitchen floor, groaning and clutching his eye. "Douglas," I gasped, and pulled a bottle from the fridge. I stooped down beside him, he hissed and pulled back. I firmly clutched the back of his head to hold it still. He winced, but his eyes fluttered shut when I pressed the glass against his face. "I didn't even feel myself doing that— I don't know why—"

He waved a hand to silence me, then shook his head the best he could. He opened one eye. It was an unreadable glance, not quite disappointment. "Can't handle your piss, mate," he replied, then slapped my thigh twice and got off the floor with a grunt. I remained kneeled on the ground, gazing up at him. He took the bottle from my hand, slammed the edge of its cap against the counter, took a long drink, placed it on the table, then wandered out of the room.

I dragged my eyes across the tiles. A small pool of blood shone where his head had lay. I jolted when I saw my palm, stained that of a blackberry-picker.

I found him a few minutes afterwards, moving things around at the other end of the house. I didn't need to ask what he was doing, but I did watch him. He wasn't sorting, wasn't evaluating.

Douglas picked up a box containing a set of rubber gaskets. I startled both of us when I stated, "I need that."

"This? Alright, take it." He tossed it to me. It landed on a small patch of empty carpet. "I'm not going to fight you on anything," he said. I looked up, but his back was to me. "I'm just trying to make it safer."

The silence which followed, broken up by the rustling and clattering of Douglas moving my items around, was unreasonably wounding. I felt much like my chest had been carved open with

a fragment of sea-tumbled glass, which gouged bluntly into my heart, dragging lines over lines over lines. Nothing had ever tortured me so much as to watch him separate my mouse-soiled newspapers from heirloom doilies tatted by my grandmother. He did not say a word the entire time I supervised him; he spent the next hour and a half neatly folding urine-caked clothing and stacking empty boxes which rattled with hardened mouse droppings. I hovered halfway down the hallway, stupefied, with my arms raised and bent rigidly at the elbows like wings. My fists were clenched shut and could not have been pried open without significant force.

When Douglas stepped back to take a break, he revealed the extent of his work. Nothing had disappeared, been discarded, nor sorted into a throwaway pile. Everything was still there, only taking shape differently. The entire section of hallway between the far edge of my bedroom's door frame and a half-metre from where I stood showed nothing but barren, ruined carpet. Beyond the far edge of my bedroom's door frame was an extra metre of hallway in front of the water closet, where Douglas had neatly stacked everything into boxes. He went to pass me by, but stopped.

There followed about ten seconds of him opening and shutting his mouth, searching for words but finding none. I wondered if he meant to ask what was wrong with me. To level accusations of what I must have put Diane through over the years. To inform me I was fractured and impersonal and not a worthy caretaker for Daniel. I closed my eyes in preparation, but words never followed; instead, it was the warmth of his presence drawing nearer, ghosting close to my face, then moving away, to ultimately vanish.

That night, Douglas slept in his car. I lay, restless, in my bed.

# SEVEN

I found my uncle eating toast in the kitchen. When he saw me at the top of the stairs, his face cracked into elation. He waved vigorously.

“Clara! How are we? I didn’t get a chance to see you yesterday!”

He met me at the landing, and I initiated the hug with him. He picked me up and spun me until my legs swung horizontal, then placed me down, giggling. I clutched the bannister until the vertigo passed. He had not done that since I was much younger; I had not expected him to be able to do it now. His face was red from exertion. He proceeded to chatter away, unphased at my lack of response.

I liked Douglas very much. He was one of very few people whose enthusiasm could infect me, as it did now; he had an ability to make a game out of anything. I could not handle him for too long. His capacity for boredom far exceeded mine, and he often couldn’t discern my overstimulation, mistaking it for a flaw in his ability to entertain me. I craved him only in short bursts, but my craving for a person's presence rarely happened in the first place.

“You must’ve gone to bed quite early,” he commented. “Toast?” He placed two slices of bread in the toaster. When he was half-turned away, I stole a glance at his eye and saw a mottled bruise spreading from the socket to the cheekbone. When I sat at the table, he presented me with a coaster and placed a glass of water upon it. “Get that in you, it’s gonna be a scorcher.”

When the toast popped he set it in front of me, complete with a butter knife and a range of spreads. I opted for apricot jam.

“So, I’ve got some things to tell you about. Your father and I have decided that I’ll be staying here for a little while, to give you guys a hand. There’s lots to do around here.” He scrutinised me for a moment. “Won’t it feel so much nicer, once your house has a good tidy-up? Maybe not spick ‘n span, but at the very least it’ll be clean, and far easier to find stuff. Now, your room is upstairs, right? D’you mind if I have a quick look?”

He left me alone at the table. The stairs grumbled as he disappeared above me, followed by the clumping of his steps from the ceiling. He returned not long after, tracing his palm along the bannister as he descended.

“Well, that’s much better than I’d thought. A teenager who keeps a clean room is already rare enough!” He ruffled my hair and set the kettle up to boil. “Are you old enough to be drinking coffee? Want a lot of milk in there?”

He made me a very weak coffee, likely an even split between water and milk. I gazed at the table. His hand emerged into view to oppose his mug to mine, and he sat, stirring it slowly, transfixed by its umber. “You’re still drawing. I saw…” he jerked his head toward my open sketchbook. “It made me very happy when I saw that. You’ve always had so much talent… This, though…. these could be photographs.” He made to flip through the pages, but hesitated. “May I?”

I kept drinking my coffee. He took this as permission and worked through each drawing aloud, commenting on various aspects of each subject, composition, technique — in his own fashion. He fell into silence when the ewe emerged. The mug he’d raised to his lips trembled slowly back to its coaster, and his fingers left it to ghost in hesitance over the charcoal image. He rotated the page slowly, flipped to the next page then back to the ewe as though some answer would lay on the other side, then took a crackling breath and looked at me.

“That’s not what I expected from you, Clara.” His eyes flitted back down. “Is this– is it real?”

“I told her not to go near it,” Dad said from the hallway. When he came into view, it was with an extra-large garbage bag in his arms. It was completely full, and had a small split near the bottom, the corner of some square-shaped item poking through.

“What’s in the bag?” Douglas asked.

Hugh looked down at the bag, then back at Douglas and I. “Rubbish,” he responded, and stole out the front door. My uncle turned back to me, teeth clenched in a wide grin. I closed my sketchbook and pushed it aside. He didn’t pay this any mind.

“That makes me *very* happy,” he said, and sipped his coffee. “See, I had a word with him last night, about…” he gestured around the room. “Between you and me, it’s an absolute tip. I know it’s not nice to live in at all, and I’m mainly staying to help your Dad get things organised around the house. The fact he’s already motivated on his own… that’s a very good sign… and it must be such a relief for you.”

I looked at his bruise. He slowly leaned his face into his palm. I looked away.

“If you’re up for it, I’d love for you to give us a hand today. Maybe you could weed the front garden? Or, if it’s too hot out, you could sort out some of the drawers and cabinets. You don’t have to, there’s no pressure, but it would be a big help.”

I reached for my sketchbook and flipped to a blank page.

OKAY

He was delighted. “Fantastic! Really, anything you want to do, big or small, will–”

I WANT TO HARVEST THE HONEY

“Honey? What honey? Oh — from your Dad’s hives. You know how to do it?”

YES

“Well, I’m sure he’ll appreciate that. Aren’t you brave? Boy, I couldn’t handle it, I’m *terrified* of being stung…” We heard Dad walking outside. He passed the front door without entering the house. Douglas leaned back in his chair until it balanced only on its back legs. *“HUGH?”* He called.

Dad appeared. “Yes?”

“Clara would like to help with some chores today. Do you keep a bee-suit in her size?”

“What?” Dad’s hands drew close to his chest, cradling one-another as though he held an infant bird between them. “What would she be doing with the bees?”

Douglas looked between us with a puzzled smile. “Why, harvesting their honey, of course.”

Dad sighed, and stared at me softly. “There won’t be any honey this year, I’m afraid. Our bees aren’t doing very well. Something’s the matter with them, and it’s spoiled the product.”

“What, a disease?”

“I’m not sure. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever studied. I’m putting together a report.”

“That’s a huge shame,” Douglas muttered.

“Clara knows this,” Dad continued.

They both looked at me. Dad’s eyes narrowed, my uncle’s widened. “You won’t have any honey this year? None at all? Or is it just that the honey’s bad?”

“It’s… bad,” Dad said. “Bad enough that I’m not sure it’s honey at all.”

“And there’s no possible way you could sell it — not even as some sort of topical medicine, y’know, put the antibacterial spin on it?”

“I’m telling you, it’s rancid. There’s no saving it.”

“It can’t be *that* bad,” Douglas countered.

“Come see for yourself,” Dad replied. We followed Dad outside. It was spitting rain, leaving the overgrown grass glossy and slick. It made it a challenge for our shoes to find a decent grip on the incline, leading to a few slips and near-tumbles as we ascended. Dad’s flock watched in silence as we passed them by. With the apiary looming ahead, Dad increased his pace, growing distracted and tunnel-visioned. Douglas, on the other hand, froze. As I drew nearer, he took a single step backward, his hands raised in revulsion.

“It *is* real,” he said, and turned to me. “Covering her with bees — that wasn’t just your imagination. Hugh!”

Dad made his way back to us. “Poor Molly. I believe the lamb-killer got to her, but she’s too decayed to tell at this point.”

“Are the bees *eating* her?”

“No. They’re storing it in their crops, like they do with pollen.”

Dad walked away. Douglas stared down at me, blue-eyed to the extent it appeared painful, then followed after Dad.

“Instead of gathering pollen, they are gathering flesh.” Dad, with his back to us, was removing the heavy stones from the outer cover. He hadn’t brought his smoker. Douglas jumped when a slab of rock was nearly tossed on his foot. “Storing it, processing it, feeding it to their brood. Producing an excess of… what I can only describe as rotten slime.”

“What — meat honey?” Douglas, hit with the smell after Dad removed the supers, doubled over and heaved.

“No. It’s not honey at all. It’s a secretion, closer to royal jelly.” We peered inside the hive.

The honeycomb-like structures resembled clusters of pustules. A matting of membranous tendrils clutched around the brood, like fingers reaching out from a swarming abyss. The swarm

— hundreds of agitated bees jiggled over one-another in disorganised confusion. Some came to hover in the air before us like wasps. Dad reached, bare-handed, into the centre of the hive, and snapped off a chunk of the solidified membrane. Red-brown in colour, the structure was shaken of its stragglers, then handed to Douglas.

"What is this?" Douglas managed.

"I don't know," Dad replied.

I approached the supers which had been set on the ground, and knelt in front of them. Most of the frames were empty, though the bees had built up a few clusters of honeycomb. I picked away the wax, then dragged my finger across the secretion which oozed out. It was less viscous than mānuka honey, and darker in colour. I tasted it.

"Clara!" Douglas exclaimed. "Spit that out!"

I avoided Douglas' hands and tasted it again. Dad caught Douglas by the arm.

"Wait," Dad said, then lowered himself in front of me. He studied me for a moment, then stared at the supers.

"Hugh…" Douglas tried, dumbfounded, as my father copied me in tasting the fluid. "Well?"

Dad frowned deeply, eyes darting, then inspected the honeycomb closely. "I may have been mistaken."

"So they *are* making honey?"

"Not much, but I think they're still getting nectar from the mānuka grove. They're feeding their brood with carrion, yet they're also making and storing honey."

"What's the flavour like?"

Dad pondered for a moment. "Very strange, but not unpleasant. Salty, smokey. Rich. I'm not sure if it's safe. Best not to try any more; I'll have to test it."

“This is just bizarre,” Douglas said. “It’s amazing that Clara knew there would be honey.”

Dad looked at me. “Yes. She picks up on everything.”

“D’you think there’s any way you could sell this?”

“I’m not too hopeful. Even if it’s safe, there’s still barely any excess.”

“Maybe you need to bury that carcass, then. Motivate them to start getting back to normal.”

“But then they’d have nothing to eat.” The expression Dad held was pitiful. Douglas seemed disturbed. “I’d risk wiping out the entire hive.”

“Maybe that’s for the best, if you can’t make a living off them. Perhaps you need to start over.”

“I’m nearly certain this is an undiscovered species. It’s potentially the most important discovery of my career. I can’t just get rid of them.”

“But how are you going to make money?”

“If I have to, I’ll start a new hive for honeybees. But I’m not going to destroy this hive if I can help it.”

When we began to make our way back, Douglas had neglected to watch where he placed his foot. There was a horrendous crunch as his leg shot straight through the half-concealed ribcage of Molly’s corpse, which collapsed with little resistance, like the sea-logged wood of a rotten pier. He lifted his boot gradually, in a sort of delayed horror, and it came away with strings of green sinew. There was an aggressive hum from within the writhing corpse, then a small group of bees rose to flit in orbits around his face. Douglas swatted at the air and cried out, then took off running down the bank. His foot slipped on the rain-slicked grass, and he staggered forth in a leap, landing awkwardly on his right leg. A wretched crack echoed off the slopes surrounding the

basin. He fell with a scream, and plummeted down the hill. He came to rest, motionless, at the base of the incline.

There have been times where I came close to speaking aloud. As though the detached wirings within my mind somehow swung close enough to one-another to spark, only to come away. This likelihood peaked in my late teens and early twenties, before quickly degrading to a worse state than that of childhood. It felt I could not even pry my lips apart to eat, at times, in such resistance to making a sound. I don't believe it was a fear in childhood, rather it became one over time, the anxiety worsening with each close-call, each instance of trauma.

Something I've noticed throughout my life is the emptiness within words. It had always been a way to fill space, but rarely with much substance held within, nor with any particular efficiency. As I grew from early adulthood to my middle age, the extent of noise rose starkly, with little relief, little forgiveness.

I did find the benefit of this over time. I found people to send messages to, those like me who could correspond only through writing, and how it barely mattered at all from behind a screen. I found out what modern medicine now said about my condition, that I was not 'mute' but 'non-verbal,' not 'mentally retarded' but 'disabled.' I grew connected with their ideas, which reflected so greatly upon mine, that language is but a means to an end, and so little of it relies on spoken word in the way neurotypicals insist. Some of those I messaged were not wholly like me, rather semi-verbal, able to speak but only intermittently, often in specific contexts. I learned through them that a vast majority of language spoken aloud consisted of throwaway words, an unnecessary padding of what was truly being communicated, the morphing of a straightforward message into that which wound itself up so tightly that no straight lines could be discerned at all.

Supposedly the unravelling of this cluster was intuitive to a neurotypical mind, and the webs they spun were not intended as displays of extravagance nor contempt, but humility.

I discovered my capacity to ramble once I got online. The content of which, though vastly different to what is expected among small talk, was regardless a winding path of its own, following a structure clear to me but apparently not to others. It remained that this was embraced, as those who read it followed similar habits, writing at length of their own perspectives. It was so individual, so self-centred, and so intricate. Only there did I gain an appreciation of what was meant by 'community,' and began to hatch ideas.

I have always found it imperative to perceive, depict, and clarify life as it is. So rarely do people willingly identify the world at a one-to-one scale. What takes precedence is the minimisation or extravagance of all which surrounds them, adding plenty of abstraction but little-to-no grounded structure. This was a shame, for the world needs no more abstraction. Its vibrance is eternally palpable, and its morality is keenly balanced.

Dad used to tell me a story about my grandfather, who I only knew briefly before he passed away. Following the end of the Second World War, Dad lost contact with him for some time. He sent a letter or two over the next few months, but there was little inclination as to when he would return. Then, all at once, he came flying into Dad's town with a stolen plane. My grandfather always denied he'd stolen it, and though Dad knew very well he was lying, he never directly accused my grandfather of this. Instead, he helped him build a hangar to hide the plane, often working twice as hard as my grandfather to get it finished.

Dad told me that this was a more effective communication to my grandfather than words ever could be. He didn't understand for a long time, but ultimately came to realise that his father had known of his awareness that the plane was stolen all along. It had instead been a test of

obedience: Dad was allowed to know, allowed to directly assist in the deceit, and allowed to carry the torch of deception following his father's death. The only thing he wasn't allowed to do was speak of this knowledge aloud.

Telling the truths of life is rarely acceptable. I initially believed it was because people did not believe others about those truths, choosing instead to cherry-pick their perception. Perhaps there is still merit to this. What exists in tandem, though, is an advanced awareness of objective reality, to the extent the choice has been made to abstract it, thus having it explained to them is elementary to the point of being insulting.

I couldn't tell you how either view is rationed, as these things are intentionally unspoken. Even in nonverbal communications, there are unspoken rules, hatchets buried long before my time and never once exhumed. When things are subjective to that extent, I have no clue how I'm supposed to know of them, only that I'm *meant* to. I know that Dad is similar to me, even if he can speak. That which makes us the same-but-different has never been entirely clear, but I have always recognised that similar streak of darkness within him. It became most apparent in the months following Douglas' injury, who broke his fibula, fractured his wrist, and received a concussion. He stayed for some time in hospital, then returned to stay with us to finish his recovery.

I'd never seen my uncle miserable until that point. His depression came on almost immediately, and he never truly recovered. For the first few weeks he was home, he sat on the recliner in the corner of the living room, his casted leg outstretched, and stared out a dirty window to his right. Tinted orange from filth, the window was barely functional, and the view through it was unsubstantial. When he thought himself unobserved, his face was perpetually twisted into an unconscious scowl, sour and defiant. When he grew aware of your presence, it

would drop into neutrality, and he would comment vaguely on the weather or how slowly time passes. Initially I avoided him, but upon realising he would not disturb me while I was drawing, I soon spent long stretches of silence within the living room, scratching charcoal upon cardstock.

Dad served my uncle's basic needs, avoiding him at all other times. Where possible, he would have me care for Douglas instead. My father spent a great deal of this period piling objects into boxes and rubbish bags, carrying them outside, and disappearing out of view. When he returned, the objects were not with him.

Gradually, I began to observe a change within not only the house, but within my father, as the hoard's dilution became exponential; where the mountains became piles and the towers became stacks, his motivation only increased. Douglas hardly, if ever, acknowledged the effort my father was putting in. He mentioned to me, in asides, that he felt my father had been shunting me with work and not focusing enough on my wellbeing. He would then look at me for a while, perhaps in hopes I would take action, but he never defined what that action was meant to be.

Our food swung arbitrarily to extremes in quality. Though its average was diminishing to something only a touch above gruel, there would be the occasional night with an incredibly tender cut of lamb, delicately yet reverently seasoned, marinated with a glaze of rosemary, thyme, honey, and a deep smokey flavour. Though I generally held no particular regard for the flavours of my food, seeing the act of eating as nothing more than a mandatory annoyance, these meals were distinct. It was no secret where the meat was sourced from, as the flock would always be one thinner than the day prior, and there was a sense of deep psychological stress that came with it — we ate these beautiful meals in a shell-shocked silence, as though we were gnawing the flesh of our fellow man.

As Douglas recovered, his pain increased. He could no longer justify any need for the medication, read: could no longer afford it. He would slump in the corner and groan quietly, and while I pitied him, my father was impassive.

When I was nearly killed by the rudder of my father's plane, I lay for some time in a discordant state of infinite-yet-ephemeral bliss. Not only was I influenced by the psychoactive fungus I'd ingested, my body was also shutting itself down, assuming imminent death and thus replacing futile pain with a final moment of comfort. I felt my blood pulsing from the gash in my throat, saturating me, as the warm amniotic fluid of the womb, with every hot rush sending a further wave of tingling serenity through my nerves. My mind felt clear, the weight in my heart was lifted, and I lay on my back, smiling limply towards the rafters, as the propeller loomed above me and dripped blood into my eyes.

In the years since, I have been mocked many times for the twisted purple vine along my throat, and the scarred indentations of old stitches surrounding it. Some told me it looked like fish bones. Others said tally marks. I was asked if that was where they had cut out my tongue, and that's why I couldn't talk. Some said it's where they'd stitched my voice box closed. At one point the theory was that a serial killer had tried to cut my head off, but decided to let me live, though stole my voice box so I'd never be able to tell anyone what happened. I never found the rumours to be more outlandish than what had truly happened.

For a time I was obsessive over replicating that sensation; even now, fifty years on, I struggle to resist it. Though it has been mistyped as an addictive personality, or drug-seeking behaviour, I have no qualms over how the sensation is pursued. I would just as willingly let my own blood, submerge until my primal mind won the battle for air, or cut myself down from a noose at the last second, to feel that womb-like rush of comfort and familiarity. It was just that the most

convenient route to accessing this dimension grew in small, golden-capped clusters by the doors of my father's hangar.

Following several long days of Douglas' incessant moaning, I dropped to my knees in the dirt by the rust-eaten cistern pump and began to scrape at the families of mushrooms, pawing them into a white handkerchief which soon grew soiled with mud. As I crawled before the doors, I kinked my neck lower to take a look inside the hangar. I could not see the plane. I could not see anything. It was considerably darker within than I felt it should have been. I sat back, puzzled, and regarded that the sun was not blocked or disabled by anything of note.

I carefully folded the handkerchief over the mushrooms and tucked the bundle into my pocket. When I returned indoors, Dad shuffled past me in the doorway, arms wrapped around a beat-up cardboard box. He froze on the stoop, and turned on his heel to face me.

"Where were you? I hadn't even seen you slip out. Now, I told you to be careful about just disappearing without making me aware. It's not safe." He adjusted his grip on the box, tucking it under his arm, and wiped his mouth with his free hand. "Er– would you mind making your uncle a cuppa?"

I put the kettle on. As it boiled, distant clusters of golden leaves swayed as though in communication, buffeted in currents much like the limbs of a sea anemone, and then fell still again. The edge of the surrounding forest was hazed in a high fog that was actively rolling backwards from us, up into the mountains, fading them into the oblivious white sky. Pine trees stood sentinel at the height of these hills, and the sun behind them peeled hazily through their staggered limbs. I was so greatly compelled by the dreary palette before me that I was hardly cognizant during the preparation of the tea. I was disturbed by how few artistic options I held in

my arsenal for replicating what I saw before me, the trees' transitions of rust to olive, their ritualised sickness dependent on their altitude and exposure.

When I brought the tea to Douglas, he was asleep, with his head drooped on his chest. I placed the mug on a coaster beside him, before I retreated to my bedroom. With the door closed, I retrieved the handkerchief from my pocket and placed it on my bed. The edges unfolded themselves to reveal the temptation. I handled the mushrooms delicately, inspecting and evaluating them. My hand developed an isolated gravity; no sooner than the mushroom had touched my tongue, I spat it back out. It was a vastly significant draw to overcome, but it was not why I had gathered them, nor was it the right time.

I laid out the mushrooms on my windowsill, spaced evenly apart, then drew the curtains shut to obscure them. When I checked back on them a few days later, they were adequately dehydrated.

"Thank you, Clara," Douglas said, as I passed him a cup of tea. His hands were entirely cupped around the boiling mug, so hardened by manual work that the heat did not penetrate the thickened skin. "I'm so sorry to have burdened you with all this. I can't wait to be out of this damned thing." I watched him take a sip. When his pale eyes shot over the rim and met mine, he lowered his mug. "Everything okay, poppet?"

When I returned to the kitchen, it was to the sight of Dad pouring a handful of ammunition into his shirt pocket. He looked up at me, and a peculiar expression crossed his face, one that made it appear I was a stranger to him. Then, he lowered his gaze, slid a half-emptied box of ammunition from one side of the table to the other, and neatly stacked it on top of three identical boxes. His forehead glittered above a worried brow, then he placed his palms flat on the table,

leaned over them momentarily, and released a slow breath. He pushed himself off the table and came towards me.

“I’m going out. I’m not sure for how long. All I know is, I’m not coming back until that boar is dead.” He looked to the horizon through the kitchen window as he answered an unspoken question. “It’s gored another lamb. Ate most of it. I could only find the spine and some hooves. At first, it was only killing for sport, not eating them. It never killed my sheep to survive.”

Dad turned away to arm himself. Without another word, he stepped out the front door. It swung shut harshly behind him, and all at once, I was affronted by pure silence.

# EIGHT

& there I was,

stalking down the bank with my shoulders curled inwards. Beige tartan rattling in the breeze, rifle clutched close, my brow lowered: I approached that haunted treeline. I had tasted it, weeks ago, then again, and again, and again still today. The blood sought and spilled and harvested and processed and consumed and sought again.

I felt vicious.

It was approaching early evening, the sun was half-dipped into the West. Through a blank sheet I could perceive its halo, a bulb through filthy glass, flickering behind the looming woods. I closed my eyes and felt the world turn around me, the wind clothing me then to come away, as though I stood before a bedsheet on a washing line, watching as it perpetually obscured and revealed that which opposed me. It was not quite a door, not quite a portal. An illusionist. A magician.

I stepped into the trees, and every twig snapped beneath my boot. I felt strips of rotten bark crunch limply, felt the soft deciduous mattress of pine needles and leaves and soil dip beneath my weight, never to spring back up. So marked my descent. The weapon once made me feel invincible, before I recognised it as the crutch which marked my vulnerability. I would have no means to defend myself against nature's meticulous, beautiful threat. I was soft and fleshy, nearly asking to be gored. The boar's pelt evolved to be kevlar, without having any reason to need it. Bulletproof long before the coming of the bullet. The beast I stalked was built to destroy a creature like me, in a situation like this one. I was built to be a better beast.

My shadow stretched long behind me, and those of the trees concealing my path clutched forwards, draping my face and arms. My stomach began to scowl, growing turgid and discontent. I must have forgotten to eat. Just like that, it was dark, then darker still; my recollection became choppy yet I remained entirely conscious, as though my mind was skipping periods of ten seconds and seamlessly stitching the gaps closed, so I did not notice. Darker though it was, my eyes remained adjusted, and it felt at times about as bright as a gloomy day. I could observe my boots and the ground below them, able to navigate hazards, and I could see my hands clutching the rifle, no less monochromatic than my own grey flesh. Even amid this colourless scape, I found still that my vision prickled with a sort of television static. Unlike that which I saw on any regular night, dancing across my ceiling as I lay in sleepless rumination, this appeared closer to confetti, disordering and vandalising the forest.

My abdomen clenched again, intense enough for me to bear my weight against a tree until it passed. I felt a movement deep in my intestines, as though something alive were crawling within. As the breeze coated me, a freezing heat blemished beneath my clothing, and assaulted my exposed skin. Sweat was pooling behind my glasses and slipping down my nose, my throat was arid, and my guts were churning butter.

I staggered only deeper. All the bracken on the planet seemed to have materialised in my way. My trousers were snagged on every branch that brushed my shins, while the caress of their leaves belittled and tempted me alike. I felt compelled to pick the fiddleheads and eat them raw, in hopes it may soothe my hunger. Instead I shook my legs of their clutches and thought of the poetry my father wrote, and denied writing, and hid from me, and feared me discovering.

I found so many of his things while clearing the house. Diane thought the hoard was mine alone, but it was instead my inheritance, my reward and punishment for never questioning him. I

found ten diaries of his. Most were from the 1930s, with only three, one from 1925, one from 1940, and one from 1958, being the exception. The majority of his entries were mundane, written in shorthand, regarding daily tasks and to-do lists. I only found two exceptions, interjected at entirely arbitrary points in his timeline, where his entries were poetic. I could recall no detail as to their content, only that they were terrible. Ham-fisted and violent, they were as appropriate coming from him as ballet from an elephant. As I read them, and prepared to discard them, I wondered not what he was meaning to express, but rather, whose favour he was aiming to win with the gesture.

I heaved, staggered into a crouch, pressed my shoulder against a trunk, and retched violently into the undergrowth. As I spat saliva over the expulsion, the acid lingering in my oesophagus forced me into a coughing fit. I pressed my hands firmly over my stomach, yearning to soothe the agony, then set my weapon aside to lay flat on my back. A few rounds slipped from my pocket and rolled over my chest, sliding down the side of my neck. I ignored this, instead gazing into the black canopies and the stars they masked above, my throat bobbing and searing like it had been torn. I closed my eyes and felt a tear stripe down my cheek. I figured it was no different than the slime-trail of a slug, and my stomach seized again.

I scrambled to remove my trousers, only just making it in time for a stream of liquid shit to be expelled into the darkness. I cried out not only in pain, but humiliation. I tucked my chin between my knees until it was over.

I watched my hands stretch far beyond me, to clutch the dirt and pull me forward in an infantile crawl. At some point I cleaned myself with my flask and redressed, but I do not recall it. I only remember from the point the synapses unfractured, where I inched through the soil on my belly, my relief indescribable, and felt myself born again. At this point incapable of standing, I

was overcome with giddiness, and could not subdue the grin which split my face. I gazed at my fingers, entrenched in soil, and marvelled at the coolness, the moisture, the pureness of scent, and drew forward the earthen sensors in soul-bonded afference.

There were countless textures among me. Of scent and sight and thought, ruffles of sound layered into touch, layered into taste. A bush roach crossed the back of my hand, and I marvelled at the fragments of moonlight caught in its armour. It paused in the webbing of my thumb, twitched its antennae, then disappeared into the undergrowth. If I could have shadowed it for an hour, I would have done so. I wished to know it as intimately as the cabbage whites I observed as their cocoons were spun, how they joined one silk thread to another in a clueless yet genetically predefined elegance. I yearned to introduce a deep ache to my lower back, as I once had by hitching forwards to observe in stilled rapture as a moth larva created a little white sock around its tiny maggot body.

Instead I crawled, on my hands and knees, further into a distorted lens of darkness. The world bulged and shrunk depending on where my eyes would rest, and if I turned my gaze the universe took a moment to catch up, drifting back into sight as an afterthought. My thoughts, once sparse, came to me rapidly, and all which was tangible now struggled to keep up. The confetti was lengthening closer to that of ticker-tape, and developing symmetry in its ribboning display. Even when I closed my eyes, these streamers persisted, initially drawing circles then growing jagged and expansive, reaching inside themselves to become open and receptive, spreading throughout my mind and lacerating my brainstem, and I was staggering now, stood but laughably so, arms hanging limp and reacting too slowly to catch my many falls. This stagger transitioned into the canter of a wild foal, then to a follied gallop that whipped my maniacal grin against the leaves and branches, and I could no longer contain the sounds within me, the

hollering and howling and cries of triumph as I broke into a sprint, so fast I barely touched the earth at all, too fast to even risk tripping over, so fast that any detail or definition blended into all that which I left behind. I couldn't envision ever slowing down: that moment took me entirely out of time, and I ran infinitely deeper, not exhausted by the effort but invigorated by it, strengthened by that which was strenuous, energised by that which drained me dry.

Warmth spread between my legs. I did not feel any sexual pleasure from the ejaculation, rather, a sense of loving affection. It may be that they were always one in the same, or it may be that they are foundationally separate phenomena. I felt only adoration, and there was no shame to be had at all. I felt healthy, vigorous, functional, and rife with opportunity. Never before had my body been so in touch with my mind.

The trees parted, revealing a clearing, and I collapsed forward into the dirt. Only then, once I'd lifted my face to stare at a vortex of light before me, did I recognise that something was terribly wrong with me. I sat up, conscious of my torn and blood-soaked clothing, my empty flask, my missing weapon. I stared down at myself, the raw, dirty flesh of my palms, and was terrified. I knew not where I was, nor how I got there, nor where to go, only that I was ill and solitary, and had very few resources to aid myself.

& that something was in the woods with me.

My father's poetry described the murders he'd committed in the war. They read more like drinking songs, not quite limericks, but certainly not lyric poetry either. Awkward and triumphant, they existed only to gloat. I have spent years undoing the consequences of my impulsive decisions. I used to write my academic work in excessively extravagant language in hopes Diane would read my papers and be impressed by them. She never read them, and my work was often marked down for the garish use of language. Sometimes, I would write carefully

crafted lies, only to see if she would catch them. Nobody caught them. I would go on to redact these statements and publicly make amends for my apparent oversights.

So often, Diane would look beyond me, even when she attempted not to. I often caught her unconsciously craning her neck, as though I were a baluster which blocked her view. When she came to find me on the farm, and walked in on me slaughtering and dissecting our lambs, she did not hide her face in fright, nor did she approach in fascination. She only grimaced faintly, remarked on the stench, and warned me to hose myself down before returning home. I stood there, no longer a surgeon, butcher, or hunter, but an inconvenience.

I rolled onto my back, troubled by how shallow and intermittent my breaths had become, and found I was feverish in spite of the chill. I debilitated over whether to strip myself bare, and was trapped in this thought loop for quite some time, while the world lay still around me. I felt myself reckless, and foolish, and negligent, incapable of growing past my prior transgression. How could I have put myself in such a similar place, in the path of my enemy, with such thoughtless vitriol? Daniel had always known me a great deal better than I knew myself. He knew me as a threat, borne not from any malice, but my own ineptitude. I was never fit to be a father, nor was my father, nor was my father's father, and perhaps none of us ever were, perhaps we all remain children, no less curious and audacious, but infinitely more troubled and woundable with age, demanding authority not because we know so much, but because we know so little, because we fear to be washed out with the changing tides. In the same way absence grew Daniel to loathe me, absence grew me to love him. He held me in contempt for abandoning him. I saw that now.

Diane never apologised, if she could help it. She harboured an unwavering commitment to being uncompromising towards the men in her life, who in her earlier years she had allowed to control her. They spoke over her, they spoke for her, they spoke through her, and they advised

her not to speak unless spoken to. It fucked her up. Of course it would. Her father had been absent for a great deal of her youth, abandoning her mother for a far younger woman. When her father came back into Diane's life, just after her twentieth birthday, he introduced his partner as well. The woman was only five years Diane's senior.

She was drawn to me, initially, because I was so shy. She used to tell me how endearing it was for a man to be introspective, and I was so alien to what she was used to, so gentle and meek. The only time I'd ever seen her timid was when she confessed her feelings for me. It was cold, and dark, and I was walking her home from the library.

Though she told me off for offering to accompany her, she relented as we stepped outside into a damp, gloomy chill. She'd taken my arm as I led her below the only line of streetlights in the area, and glanced around, using me as a sort of barrier. The few cars which passed us by, she'd duck away from, as though expecting their tires would skew through a puddle and drench her. But it had not rained. As we moved past overgrown moorlands, we joked about ghosts and hauntings, winding one-another up about sighting spirits in the mist, glinting between the pine trees, weaving about the fence posts. We spent the latter half of the walk debating whether or not *Wuthering Heights* could be considered a ghost story, though did so in low murmurs, in fear of offending the spirits of the moor. Aptly, we were both unnerved, and this drew us closer, and fonder. When we'd just about reached her house, she noted the lights were still on, and pulled me behind a wall. Shushing me, I was informed that her mother wouldn't be happy to see her come home this late, let alone with a boy. I told her to tell her mother she had been walked home by a friend anyway, as she would feel all the worse about Diane having been out on her own. After I'd expressed this, Diane looked at me in a way I'd never see again, and told me never to come

around. She left me there, in the dark, and disappeared indoors. As I walked away, I heard yelling from within.

I entered my house to the sound of the phone ringing. When I picked it up, Diane was in tears. She'd been calling every minute since she left me there.

I flailed to roll onto my side, and vomited again. With my face half-buried in the dirt, I gazed along a black horizon of bark and earth. It was becoming increasingly difficult to perceive what was real and what was a pattern, as the two began to convene into one solid body. I found nothing profound in this, only terror, and I began to beg, perhaps aloud, that Diane make herself known to me, that she emerge from between the trees as my saviour, a spirit draped in white; haloed, but only by the moon, for she was not an angel.

I felt like a child, but could not call myself so. A child is not burdened by all that which they do not know. Still, I reached for her, cried for her, and felt that if only she were here, I would no longer be lost. I didn't know where I was, but that was nothing new. Home was a tether and a burden and an obligation, though Diane always thought of it differently. To her, it was something that could be escaped, rewritten, packed up as though it were luggage, movable across the globe with no requirements beyond conscious choice. I always felt home was something you couldn't leave behind. Diane felt it was something that could leave behind you. That you need to follow home. When it leaves, there will always be somewhere to find it; it is rare that it will return if you wait. I thought this to be needy; to Diane, home was simply needed. To expect it to remain forever with you, without compromise or pursuit, was, to her, the true neediness.

But I was not the chasing type.

Everything died. I became lucid. The insects and animals of the night were silenced, and I wondered if I had become deafened by my condition. There was a faraway, yet unmistakable, grunt.

With my face still sideways in the dirt, I was incapable of movement. I was held captive by the dearth of sound, paralysed on an instinctual, primitive basis. My tilted vision, still sparkling with spectrums of lightning, was clouded and blurred, seeing only blobs of black and grey. Part of this abyss took a form, which emerged slowly out of hiding, stepping on twigs which snapped like old bones. Its scent clarified its identity before my sight was able to. I heard the animal breathing, gruff and wheezy, as its powerful footsteps thudded closer.

The boar stopped just beyond kicking distance, and watched me with pearl-like eyes.

Although incapacitated, a small groan escaped me. The beast had come partially into focus, revealing its three stained tusks and wiry black hair. Dried blood was etched deep into the grooves of the tusks, as though the bone itself had bled, then scabbed over. The moonlight painted the force within its build, rippling across its shoulders like a broken sea. I could hardly tolerate its majesty. I felt my lucidity slipping.

She spoke. She held in her laughter. She spoke.

Diane, I never felt heard by you. I never felt heard by you, because there was nothing for you to hear. Your tantalised spirit had strained eternally for my low-hanging olive branch, ever elusive, ever oblivious; when you sought to find me in your reflection, it was only to watch me withdraw. Unspoken became unbearable, and you thought me pathetic — so I assumed. Diane, hear me now: this face is not your face. I wish you'd have raised your eyes to mine, to see me as I am. I wish that our spats were spats, and that when you said you hated me, you truly meant *me.* When we would disagree around your family, and take the disagreements around the corner to

embellish them into arguments, I wish it had been outrageous and unacceptable. I detested the knowing, sly glances among your family on our return, I loathed how things were continued as normal. I wish it hadn't healed you, just a little bit, whenever you defeated me. There should never have been that wound within you.

You burned your hand on a pan, once. You called out my name, but when I'd arrived, you stood me down in self-righteousness. When I subdued, I was scolded again; when I brought forth a wet flannel, it was slapped out of my hand. When I just stood there, you turned away and ran the faucet for a quarter of an hour. I watched you in silence.

Daniel — Clara, when you knew him; her — has never made it clear whether he understands that I alone nearly killed him, nor that this was the reason for our split. For most of his life, I believed he felt I had failed him, that I had abandoned him and left him for dead. Whether or not he does feel this way, I have always seen it as a deep truth about myself. I have a variety of different memories about the single event, all identical in the tangible events, but starkly and wildly varied in perspective when it comes to my psychology. I knew, and know, myself so little, that I have resorted to theorising about my own past intentions, seeking patterns, searching for significance in even the most meaningless of threads. The further information I seek, the more clarity I seem to lose. I would so much rather confirm that I am a monster than perpetually question whether I'm capable of being one.

Daniel, what happened when you died? If you were brought back, by whom? If there was no intervention, then by what system were you able to survive with so little blood? Did you see the light, or darkness alone?

I heard a beating of wings, followed by a nearby ruru demonstrating its call. A choir of cicadas faded in from obscurity, complimented by the occasional cricket. To this ambience, my

thoughts became grounded, and my mind harboured enough clarity to hearken back to the late afternoon. I had not eaten anything to have elicited this effect, but I had poured myself a cup of tea, the very same which Daniel had steeped.

His trances from the psychedelic mushrooms clarified very little, outwardly, of what he must have been experiencing. If it were anything like this, I had no tolerance nor forgiveness as to what he had done to me. Why he would choose to send me into this place, why he would seek to maim my mind, I could only come to the darkest conclusions. Whether he sent me to die intentionally, knowing that I would become lost, or if he had only wished to communicate his own torment, neither reason absolved him. It was a despicable, childish, cruel, and abusive action. Had I the means to stand and face the way I came, in that moment, I could be certain I would turn and stalk the other direction, down into the gorge, down into the riverbed, and sit chest-deep in the water to blanch my boiling rage.

Had I not been kind? Had I not exhausted all of my means to accommodate? Had I not sacrificed enough of myself?

I knew that if I survived, I'd pulverise every last one of the toadstools. I would kick their heads and send them rolling, and crush their stalks beneath my boots. I would pave over the area, or perhaps using fungicide would be enough, and if I ever caught Daniel near the hangar again, he would be sent to live with my sister-in-law. Douglas could bugger off with him, for all I cared. How could anyone invade my privacy in this way, be arrogant enough to override my consent, revoke my autonomy, strip me barren, and send me to die? The spiritual and emotional ramifications had already proven too much, but this additional thought spiralled me into something of a fugue state. I grew bewitched by the mysticism of my surroundings.

I had turned to stone, unable to move my eyes. With my gaze tilted back at the canopies, the moon was obscured by the beast's broad head. Its snout traced over my ear, my throat, my jaw, my mouth, and its tusks jabbed without piercing, a result of clumsiness, rather than an intent to maim. Its wet breaths came fast through its curled lips, and when it placed one exploratory trotter on my chest, the pressure was almost unbearable. If it had chosen to press down with all of its weight, it would have crushed my sternum into my heart and lungs, pulverising them.

Its eyes bored into mine.

Blame someone else for your evil

& you have become someone else's evil.

The boar spoke with Daniel's voice. Hoarse with disuse, it came out as a guttural bellow, but I understood it perfectly. Through just a mild shift of its stance, the weight on my chest increased. I was without breath, and could not take in any air. My lungs were flattened by its sole hoof. A final gasp froze upon my heart.

I died.

& when I died, it was very hard to not stay there.

People compare death to what they know of life. Will it be painful? Will it be frightening? Will it be cold, and sad, and dark, and lonely?

I can attest it is anything but. When you come back from having died, you can only then grasp just how painful it feels to be in a body, even in its most relaxed state. When you have been momentarily without weight, without form, the heaviness you return to is infinite in comparison.

You are not frightened, because your brain does not allow you to be so, once it knows you are beyond saving. Instead, its last resources are used to make you comfortable in your final moments, and you are perhaps for the first and only time since being in the womb, beyond the capacity to feel stress, or terror, or apprehension. Death is not cold, it is a blanketing warmth; those who freeze to death spend their final moments stripping naked because this warmth has overwhelmed them. Death is not sad, for it is too enlightening and joyous a reveal. It is a surprise ending which leaves you in rapture as you turn the final page, rest the book on your lap, and gaze out the window with a pleasant and satisfied glow about you. It is such a surprise, that you are elated, and feel compelled to laugh in good-natured relief, greeting death by way of reintroduction, knowing an apology is not necessary, for it has long understood your perspective. Death is not dark, nor is it light, for both have ceased to be. It is absence, much the same as pain ebbs to nothing once a painkiller sets in. And finally, death is not lonely: it is not anything close to being alone. It welcomes you back into its company after such a long time apart. It misses you dearly, because it is needed, truly needed since our emergence for our minds to function half a century down the line, death is needed, and when it is called upon, you need only anticipate relief.

I could not imagine why any person would fight for their life. For a brief-yet-infinite span of time, I felt that not a single thing could compel or convince me to break away from the too-early call, to slip out of those beckoning arms, the arms I just wanted to fall into and be encircled by, the only fireplace to have ever warmed my lifelong chill. I would not have fought for Daniel. I would not have fought for Diane, if she were alive, nor would I have fought for my father, or my aunt, or my brother-in-law. It is not that they meant nothing to me, by far, it was the contrary. It

was rather that I just did not want to fight at all. I wanted to lay at rest & rest forever, for it all to grow still & silent. I let myself fade away. I gave myself permission.

The agony which ripped through me tore my mouth apart. I gasped, heaved, gasped again, coughed and sputtered and writhed. The boar had removed its pressure and stepped away. It watched my bug-like contortion upon the rotten floor, how I grew caked in mud while my spine spasmed, nearly twisting in half to force air into my lungs. I rolled onto my stomach, reached forward into the dirt, and curled my fingers into clumps of silt. They came away as I tried to crawl. I was fighting the very same fight I had only just condemned. The boar grunted and huffed, circling me, but made no show of aggression.

I regained enough strength to push myself off the ground, if only to my hands and knees, to hack phlegm into the impassive soil. Tears and snot poured from my face, as did sweat, from every gland in my body. I felt a dreadful ache from the surface of my skin which intensified all the way into my bones. I craved the boar would gore me, so that my brain would send me into shock and numb me until I died, this time inevitable, bloodless and helpless and isolated.

I collapsed again, and withered into the foetal position. I felt a great jostle, followed by warmth spreading along my side, seeping from my hip to my shoulder, and assumed my request had been answered. My eyes slid closed as I allowed the blood to wash from me, to warm and comfort me once again. Another jostle. A deep, heavy groan — a sigh.

I opened an eye, and was met directly with that of the beast. Beady and half-lidded, it was undoubtedly watching me. With its entire body pressed against mine, legs splayed along the ground in contentment, it licked its lips, slid its eyes closed, and fell asleep.

It shook my body with its snores.

As the night matured, the temperature plummeted. Had it not been for the warm, itchy hump nestled against my limbs, I would have become seriously ill. Petrified, I lay motionless and alert. With every inhale, the boar's enormous body expanded, momentarily crushing my arms and ankles beneath its ribcage. Even if I worked up the nerve to run, I couldn't — my feet and hands were trapped entirely beneath the boar's stomach. I had quickly lost feeling in them, though static shot up my limbs with every movement.

I did not sleep, but squeezed my eyes shut regardless, and watched a tasteless firework display on the backs of my eyelids. I did not have anywhere to run, because I did not recall where I used to place myself. I could not leave, and became less resistant to this fact with time. Dawn broke sluggishly, ambiguously, as an overcast sky transitioned from black to grey. Still, the boar used me as its pillow, and I used it as my blanket. Once it was light enough to see my hand in front of my face, my symptoms had started to wane. The fireworks had dimmed to flickers, and my thoughts found a loose cohesion. I even felt myself begin to drift.

A cacophony of hooves shot from the treeline and wheeled across the clearing. The event was too instant for me to perceive anything beyond a white flash, but the panicked bleating could not be mistaken. The boar stiffened over me, rolling back just enough to yet-again force the air out of my lungs, before it staggered to its feet and snorted at the shrubs. It took off at a canter in the lamb's direction. I sat up and watched as the disturbance in the undergrowth grew further from me, until the encounter was out of range. I listened closely, but as the tempo of hoofbeats faded away, I could garner no further information.

At this point, I took stock. I had lost my weapon, my flask, my ammunition, and my clothes were torn and ruined. I was numb throughout my limbs, though the sensation was returning, with

excruciating currents flashing through me at every twitch of muscle. I was bloodied, soiled, and deeply depressed: spiritually wounded and emotionally disturbed, I was defined by pain.

I heard the inevitable squealing. My lamb was being dissected somewhere beyond sight, brutalised and disembowelled. Its death was a torturously slow process. Its agonised wails diminished into weak whimpers over a period of twenty minutes. In that time, I had searched the clearing, and followed for a short while the path which I believed I'd come from, in hopes I may find my rifle. I was too weak to search for very long, and ended up walking in a loop, returning to the clearing where the boar and I had nested. At this point, I could still hear the lamb, albeit barely clinging to life, though getting louder all the same. Drawing nearer. It wasn't long before the undergrowth began to twitch and rustle in the distance, and the boar came crashing through the bushes before me, with the lamb's throat clutched between its jaws. The lamb was still alive, though only so far as primal functioning. I don't think it would have been conscious, or perhaps only hoped not, as its intestines dragged a trail about two metres from its abdomen. Its mouth gaped slowly open and closed, with its eyes narrowed to slits. Its fur was matted with mud and destroyed organs. It was silent now, though I could hear the faint rasping of its final few breaths.

The boar dropped the lamb before me, then sat down, and began to tear into it. I stood opposite the boar, transfixed as it paid me no mind. Its jaws bore down on a hind leg with a brutal, crushing force, tearing it straight off the lamb's body with the nasty, hollow cracking of a dog chewing on a bully stick.

I watched it mutilate my baby, and felt nothing. Unarmed and vulnerable, I sat cross-legged, and accepted the devourment.

# NINE

Douglas did become confused at several points, but never to the extent of panic. His hands had been flexing and relaxing over the arms of his chair, gripping and then smoothing over the texture of the leather. He remarked frequently on the beauty of things, such as the warped ceiling rafters, the cobwebs and grime on the window beside him, and the dusty accumulation of boxes and furniture in the opposing corner. He was having considerable trouble looking me in the eyes, even looking at my face at all, much in the same way I struggled. I used this as an opportunity to study him.

Gaunt, pale-eyed, and Roman-nosed, with scraggy ginger hair that curled around his ears, my uncle had always struck me as the perpetually sunburnt stereotype of a farmer which my father could never fit. Prior to the illness Douglas had been of wider build, with enormous forearms from carrying materials up and down slopes. My own father's frame was barely half as filled out as Douglas' was, even after the illness had eaten away his muscle. Dad harboured very little physical strength, being from such an academic background, and laboured in very few ways around the farm. Had it not been for his propensity to layer himself in plaid, there would be no visual clue that he was rural. Being such a small country, we had few variations in regional or occupational dialect, so there was no way of knowing by his voice, either. He listened to so much of the radio, in fact, that Dad had picked up some features of the transatlantic accent, giving the impression he may have been raised upper class. Douglas, on the other hand, had a voice which many mistook as Australian, helped in part by his pronounced masculinity (though hindered by his amiability).

“You’ve done something to this tea, haven’t you, Clara? It’s alright. I knew you might. Y’see, Hugh’d let me know about your recent escapade — ‘s’why I came up here. I knew well enough through Diane that she’d really had her hands full with you, but try as I might to intervene, she just couldn’t let herself stand down. Thing is, your parents… were never the sort to understand… the sort of things *we* understand.” He looked at me for a long moment, his eyes dark and dilated. “I’ve tried these sorts of things before. LSD, I’ve taken a good amount of LSD. You — you’re more the foraging type, aren’t you? I saw you out there, saw you head down behind the aeroplane shed… your father warned me to keep an eye on you, and I put it together like that.”

He clicked his fingers — or, he tried to. He peered at his thumb and forefinger for a while, then relented.

“You’ve done me a favour. Alleviated my pain. Well, not exactly. It’s worsened it, but in the sense that it’s not unwelcome… The gesture is, perhaps, the alleviation.” His head lolled back on the armchair for a moment. He stretched his neck left and right. “I would *love* some music. I really need some music.”

I turned on the radio, but could only find static. Douglas didn’t seem to notice, and swayed along to the noise, discerning a rhythm within it. For some time he experienced his merriment in silence, and I observed closely. With his eyes slid closed, his head bobbing and weaving to some indiscernible melody, he did not heed my watchful gaze.

“Clara, there is not anything to fear about who you are.”

I had been sketching for the past hour, and was startled by his voice.

“Does me saying that put any doubt into you? I’d hope not. I had a sister, your mother. She was a great deal like you. Yet, by the same token, not really. Y’see, there were two versions of your mother — the one you knew, and the one I knew a whole lot better. That’s not me talking

down to ya, not at all. Parents do this. All of ‘em. Hide who they are from their kids. How else’ll you get them to listen? It’s an act of love, not the contrary. But I think she hid herself from Hugh, as well.

“Our mother, Ruth Sawyer — she married Donald Raines. Old Don, as you knew him. You didn’t know Ruth, though, and for good reason. Have you ever heard this story? From me, that is. Your mother would have taken that to… *did* take that to the grave. Well, it was something to do with this boy, Roger Brickersley. I’ve no clue what ever happened to him — his father was the local butcher… then he got enlisted. Roger could still be alive, and if it weren’t for him, Diane probably wouldn’t have been. Nor you, come to think. Though had Old Don not been flat-footed, none of us would’ve been. Well, Roger had parents a bit like mine, and a bit like yours, all stuffy, behind the times. Roger was into the Devil’s music — at the time, this was bebop — and sent Diane home one night with a bagful of Gillespie, Monk, and Miles Davis. Our parents were more of the symphony and worship-music sort. I could hear Diane’s lashings from two stories up — that was Old Ruth’s doing. Cut her right open with a belt. That’s not supposed to be able to happen, but it’s how hard the whippings were. Hurt her so bad the skin gaped, and bled for days.

“Well, some days later, these strangers turn up at our door. Ruth goes up to Diane’s room — *get dressed!* — and down my sister comes, in some horrible grey dress she’d never wear by choice. She was being sent off to correct her disobedient behaviour, is what I was told. When she was being led outside, she bites the arm of one of the strangers, he lets her go, and she takes off down the street! They search for hours and hours — no sign of her. I wondered if my sister was gone for good. That afternoon, Roger’s mother handed Diane back over. It wasn’t before Roger had done a number on her, however. He’d let her hide in his room, and at some point, she’d

asked him to cut off all her hair. When everyone turned up to collect her, Roger claimed Diane was not Diane, but a boy named James.

“Do you know what a lobotomy is? Well, that’s what they’d had planned for your mother. Old Don, though, bless him — Old Don put his foot down and stood up to Old Ruth. He says to her, he says, that girl needs a hole in the head like she needs a hole in the head! Old Ruth was so beside herself over what Diane’s done to her hair, it’s as though her anger had no choice but to simmer into misery. She took Diane home and pitied her for months. Perhaps the haircut was punishment enough, though Diane never seemed fussed; from then on, she learned how to keep a secret: you simply don’t get caught.” Douglas stared at me. “Would your father feel the same?”

I did not know what he meant, for I was so fixated on a nearby pair of scissors. On recognising my fixation, however, I knew exactly what he meant. It was something I’d asked of myself over the many years I’d been estranged from him.

I'd always been boyish. I, myself, am just as perplexed on this fact today as I was fifty-odd years ago. What's inside a man or a woman to make it so they know themselves? You could say all they’d have to do is look down — but this is muddied already by simple biological factors, that those who were born intersex may possess an unclear representation of what we typically associate with a male or female sex. You could call them the exception, certainly, but they do not cease to exist merely because you perceive them to be a rare and special case; an outlier.

There is something within any born male who self-identifies as male that is shared almost wholly with myself, a born female who has never known any other way to identify than as a female — they experience such highly identical forms of torment in regard to their performance of maleness, that it only later came to me that my obsession with masculinity was thoroughly congruent with any other male experience; I was, and am, the same. To me, that does make me

male. I do not have any concern nor feelings regarding female presentation, beyond detest and revulsion.

At that time, there were no answers — the question had hardly been asked. I was known and understood as boyish, that which was effeminate being avoided where possible. Dad aided me with sanitary products, but held back on offering to buy me skirts or dresses or blouses. I had no idea the extent of his, or anyone's, recognition that I did not belong among women.

“What do *you* want to do?” My uncle regarded me with watery, pride-filled eyes.

I knew then it was a matter of shedding a layer of myself, much as an insect moults its outer shell. The scissors — heavy and rust-speckled, giving a sheet-like appearance, were touched by my uncle. He did not pick them up. When his hand pressed on their cold surface, a flash of intense fear and hesitation crossed him. I don't think it had anything to do with me. Rather, he did not trust himself to safely hand them to me.

I recalled points in the past, where I had shared an identical state, that I was afraid to light a match. It felt gravely serious, and the fear of distraction was all-consuming. Wielding a weapon of any sort, you can think only of harm, and fear that harm, fear to inflict it, whether it's on others or on yourself.

I took the scissors from him, firmly resolved to my intentions. His eyes tracked up as he followed the scissors’ path, and he seemed perhaps a little awestruck as I took the first chop without delay. A long brown chunk of hair drifted to the floor. I chopped out another chunk, then another, then another. I wanted it all gone, and soon left my uncle in the living room to find a mirror, and examined as my uneven hair was sheared away, shorter and shorter until I was as close to the scalp as I could manage.

I was perhaps born anew, but more likely, I was emerging from a lifelong hibernation. My pelt was strewn all down the hallway, a trail of decisions which led evidently from my uncle to the mirror.

My scalp bled with nicks and cuts, and it seemed no two hairs were the same length. An emulation of such desperate feelings, I felt myself impassive and unconcerned with my appearance. I put the scissors down and returned to my uncle. It appeared that at some point within those four minutes I'd been absent, he had begun to experience ego death, and clutched his knees tightly with a dissociated, fugue-esque gaze. He did not appear frightened, rather contemplative and deeply unsettled. I let him be, and emerged outdoors into freezing air. There was something the night was not telling me. Something was disturbed.

It had been hours since I'd last seen Dad. Well past midnight, I decided to grab a torch and look for him around the treeline. I had begun, increasingly, to question the last memory I held of him — when I had found him gathering his gear at the dining table, what was before him? Was it but his rifle and ammunition, or had there been a mug? Had it been full and steaming? Or had it been drained? Had he placed the mug in the sink before he left? I hadn't seen him do so — and it was not so easy to take stock of every dish that came and went. I had emptied the kettle not long after I brewed it, having only given the dose to Douglas. Had I somehow missed Dad pouring himself a cup?

I embarked on the search for, admittedly, more selfish reasons than outright concern. Though the fear of harm befalling my father was a major factor, I also discovered an elitist streak within myself; I believed my father did not have the correct temperament to experience that which I had inadvertently gifted him.

The light drew creatures within the branches. The beam flashed across the tall grass which tangled the base of the fence posts, and sent oversized shadows deep into the woods. Each motion of the light against the foreground rotated these shadows around their axis. From some canopy in the darkness I heard a flutter of disgruntled chirping, daytime birds disturbed by my light, so I aimed my torch at my shoes and wondered if I ought to remain where I stood until dawn. Ultimately, I decided to remain at the house with Douglas, then search for my father if he hadn't returned by morning. I would not have been much use searching for Dad, for I could not call out or make any noise, nor did I have a weapon. It proved to be the right call when I returned indoors and discovered Douglas missing from his armchair. He had left gouge-marks in the fabric with his fingernails, which ran all the way into the upholstery, apparently caused by some sort of repetitive raking motion. A large patch of watery vomit lay at the base of the chair, with trails of spittle leading towards the hall. I found him in Dad's bed, shuddering beneath the blankets, his broken leg stiff by his side. I don't know how he'd managed to hobble all that way, but it must have pained him greatly judging by his pallid, glistening brow.

He turned his head, aghast. "What's your name?"

I waited at the bedside. He swallowed with a dry throat and repeated the question. I looked up. Mountains of books threatened to tip sideways and crush him. Half an inch of dust was caked onto the blades of the ceiling fan. The stippled ceiling was dirtied with years of fly faeces. Yet there he lay, curled in my father's bed sheets as though it were the last safe place on Earth, his greasy hair stuck up against the pillow, one vulnerable blue eye peering at me from the covers.

My initial thought was that he did not recognise me, so I gestured to my hair. He responded only with a goading hum, fingers gripped around the sheet he'd drawn up over his nose. I looked away from him and inspected the library of cracked spines and flimsy pages. I scanned name

after gilded name on the covers of these books, and found one sitting loosely atop a pile of boxes. I picked it up, a dusty pale blue, and wiped my sleeve over the cover.

As it is to be

Cora Linn Daniels

The golden text shone dully back at me.

"Daniel," Douglas murmured.

*Contemplation. Death. Peace. Pure light. Infinite content. Faces. Laughter. Rising upwards. Becoming changed. No change of individuality. Opening of spiritual consciousness. The walls of Heaven. Location of Heaven. Near and far at once. Instantaneous communication. Illustration.*

*"Tell me," said I, "if you are allowed to do so, what death is like."*

*"It is a natural process," said the Voice, "like birth, and like birth is an unconscious one. Being unconscious, it is painless and utterly devoid of fear, and being natural, goes on its own accord without help or hindrance of the person. Well, then, when I died I was in no pain and had no fear. For some time during my illness I had been rebellious; I did not wish to die. I was in the prime of manhood and I could not seem to bring myself to admit the righteousness of it. But as time went on and I approached my death, I became more and more resigned, until I was at peace and even happy. My other sensations were those of infinite content, rest, and peace. I seemed to be fully satisfied; I wanted nothing.*

*"Fragrance is the atmosphere, music is the very air of heaven. Flowers and fruits, beauty unspeakable, scenes beyond description glean with ever-changeful glory from the farthest heights. Yet height and depth, east and west, north and south, what are they to us? I only use the words you can understand. Our compass points but in one direction, go where we will. To the centre, the centre of this glowing stretch of endlessness, we turn, forever turn.*

*"Home is in every place at once, for love makes the home, and Love Supreme dwells ever in the very light we breathe. What do we do? Fly through the worlds with speed that leaves their lazy flight behind, to carry tidings of the great joy abroad. Stoop to the lowliest blossom of a new-fledged planet, to fill its cup with dew.*

*"And those we love and loved? 'T is sublimated into poetry and eloquence; 't is taught it never knew how sweet was love. Song and silence, grace and triumph — satisfaction — satisfaction of every wish, every desire, long since so hopeless, comes stealing in and growing on the consciousness until not so much as the sleepiest little prayer offered as a child remains to be answered in full.*

*"Nor are we capable of holding back, for every instinct of our being teaches us this is the only perfect immortality. We seek with joyous delight the one dear counterpart in whom can be no mistake, from whom we derive completion. Ah, exquisite contradiction and agreement within ourselves at once! She or he, he or she, what matters it — or if the male and female mingled into one, form a new creature with a new name, as John on Patmos saw! What harmony of human conception were worthy to celebrate it? Love was never yet written in words or told in story. Only the shadow of his bright presence ever illumined the earth-bound air.*

*"It is the unreasoning and unmoral intelligence which animates animals, birds, insects, fish, vermin, and all life below the human, — the idea-fact of the lower order of intelligence which*

*cannot rise to human consciousness or thought. The spirit of a living being of any order is superior to the being itself. Although an elemental is only the life-principle of a brute creation, yet it partakes enough of its eternal inheritance of glory to know, to think, to utter itself. Human beings are apt to endow animals with more human attributes of thought, feeling, sensitiveness, delicacy even, than they possess. But such feelings toward animals are ennobling in the extreme. They refine and uplift. Thus there is a reactive influence.*

*"You hurry on earth, because away down deep in your hearts you are afraid you shall die before you get things done. That may not be the conscious motive, but it is the unconscious motive. You hurry to get rich so as to enjoy it before you die. You hurry to marry because you say, 'Why waste time in living apart?' You hurry to bed to preserve health enough to go through the task of tomorrow. You hurry up for fear you cannot perform it in less time. All the enjoyments depending upon the labour of someone compel time engagements. With you, weather, conventionalities, hours, properties, customs, and unlimited trivialities of no real meaning or moment hamper all free intercourse. Here, the serenity and ease of inner grace and power; the knowledge of endless harmony, prevents that eager strain and anxiety which so detract from the joys of earth.*

*"Day is sight, clear as crystal and piercing to infinite depths, or following to its inmost intricate curve the ear of an insect too small to be seen beneath the material microscope. Day is the exercise of ranges of emotion and sense indescribable to you, but ever increasing in value and delicacy, while never losing strength and variety. Make up one day on earth with only one of these added powers, and you would declare life too poor a thing to resume without it."*

I sensed Douglas waning some hours later. I closed the book and placed it on my lap, to observe instead his half-lidded eyes, tracking lazy figure-eights across the ceiling. I felt a lack of pain within him, only because it had been swallowed up by something worse; though his expression was relaxed and betrayed nothing of his emotional state, I knew some unthinkable epiphanies had been shouldered upon him. At that point, just before dawn broke, he was ravenous and mostly alert. I left the room to prepare him something to eat, and he hobbled out not long after, guiding himself along with one palm flat on the wall, hopping on his good leg. He took a seat at the dining table and let out a long breath, sinking lower into his chair until his eyeline was level with the tabletop. He clasped his hands over his lap, crossed his outstretched legs at the ankles, and slid his eyes slowly closed, blinking them open intermittently.

I made him toast and a coffee. He was hesitant to drink the coffee at first, though when he watched me pour myself a cup from the same brew, he timidly raised his own. Yet, I did not perceive any resentment towards me. Disappointment, certainly, but no anger, no blame. He swallowed a mouthful and placed the mug back on the table, sliding it aside.

“Daniel,” he said, and bore his eyes into mine. Within us, a sort of hypnosis took hold. I could not look away. “When my sister — your mother — was pregnant with you, she picked a girl’s name and a boy’s name. Clara, of course… and Daniel. You see, our parents — your grandparents — were hoping so resolutely for a male child that when she was born, the only name they’d remotely considered, Daniel, was changed to Diane. Why they didn’t choose Danielle, the answer was never clear, and when I came along, I was Douglas, not Daniel. Perhaps Diane and Daniel would sound far too similar. Or perhaps your spirit hopped between us, not quite ready to manifest, not even in *you* — not until now.

“Whatever it means, or doesn’t mean, what matters is that someday you’ll float back down to touch the earth again. It may well have been today. Or it may never happen in this lifetime. That’s okay. What I do see is your horns pushing through. Now, go find your father. I’m exhausted.” Douglas stared into his coffee for a while. When he looked back up, and saw me still standing there, he shuffled to sit upright. “Where’s your father, Daniel?”

We stared at one-another, both feeling dumb.

“I hadn’t even thought to — where is he? Daniel, where’s Hugh?” Douglas stared at the empty box of ammunition on the table. Then, he looked back up at me. “Oh, no.”

# TEN

Of course I'd have laid down my life for Daniel. Any parent would die for their children, and most of them would kill, too. Had it not been for the throbbing of my molars, I could have lurched right forward and tore a chunk out of that boar's face with my teeth. If my hands had not been so stiffened and locked by the cold, I could have gripped the beast by the tusks and dug my fingers into its eye-sockets. Were it not for my gaunt, frail sickliness, I could have barrelled straight into its flank and tackled it to the ground.

Were it not for my assimilation, I could have stunted my compassion.

I was so starved. So starved that the thing took some beastly version of pity on me, and nudged some viscera in my direction. Between the cracking and gnawing I could discern some sort of faint mewling, but I knew not where it originated. The lamb was beyond dead, it was wholly unrecognisable, with its once small body now strewn across the clearing as a deconstruction of its natural form.

A throb of anxiety spread throughout my chest and abdomen before I could process why. All at once a debaucherous thought took form in my mind, and I could not seem to stop my palm from squishing down on the raw innards to drag them towards me. This disgraceful, wicked action was not shameful enough to stave the voracity. The organs slithered down my throat, cold and vile. I stained myself red, and soon lay back, groaning in pain and revulsion. I had glutted myself on the creature, and though the pain was immense, I still felt unsatiated — somehow, I was desperate for more.

I had gained enough strength to stand, at which point the boar turned and galloped away. Now light enough that I could peer through the trees, I followed the line of disturbed undergrowth until it was long out of sight. In the bloodsoaked clearing, I was finally alone: soiled and exhausted and directionless. I dragged my feet slowly through the dirt, and started in a random direction, for there was no logic to choose from in finding my way back. I did begin to notice my own pattern of disturbed growth, where I had crashed through in an outright sprint, snapping branches and flattening ferns in my excitement. I followed this trail for some time, limping weakly over the uneven surface I'd flown over the night before. I took many breaks to rest, heart in my throat as I struggled to breathe, before I finally came upon my abandoned weapon and knew I was not far from where I needed to be. I equipped the rifle and continued my staggering path.

To absorb this all, to assume my own defect, had set the caverns in the matter so barren, so sparse, that there ought not to be much at all aside the sinewed cobwebs of grim indifference. From this, I did not develop anything new, rather strengthened some mechanism in my brain which would send me into month-long obsessions over how bizarre chewing and swallowing food is, how my hands were like that of a mannequin, how my thoughts must have had some power of manifestation, they must, *they must.*

I felt myself able to project in front of, or behind, my own geometry. I walked about a half-metre behind my body, and watched myself from behind, shoulders slumped and head bowed. In complete lack of fortitude I glided across the moors of adversity half-feigned and half-patronised. With great reason I concerned myself about the sanctity of life, before I recalled that I was, and am, dead-ape-walking. Dead tired of assigning any connotation to any state of the

self, as well as of bending below the qualms of others, my stagger grew to a stalk, my feeble clutch grew to a vice.

Fear simply doesn't happen until it has a reason to. That's why children are born without it — it's why cars hit them so much. The first instance of authentic terror is so utterly grievous to a child, that many fear to bring children into this world for the mere thought of causing that fear anew. I have worn myself thin running that same line of thought into the ground: am I evil, am I not in control of myself, am I a good man, am I a good parent, am I a parent that encourages curiosity and communicates openly and honestly about mistakes, am I a parent that treats my child as an equal and is nurturing without being overbearing, do I emulate that sort of Darwinian parenting hardwired into human instinct until cycles of abuse distorted it beyond comprehension… what if I've turned into… what if my values are illusions? What if I'm no more than a seething wolf, falsified by its own idea of reasonable thought, at any flashpoint blinded by its impulse, unable to help the sunken teeth for it is no more than a product of where it came from?

Am I evil? Am I evil? It relied on more than just the sum of my actions, for at times I would research the evil acts with a repulsed pit in my stomach just to prove whether or not I would be capable of committing the act. As these obsessions resurfaced every few months I became less and less disturbed by them, which was clearly grim resignation, a weariness, yet I took it as gospel that my lack of resistance meant compliance, it was evidence, proof I was right about myself all along! At times I grew so convinced of being evil that there was absolutely no way of telling, in that period of time, whether or not I had crossed some kind of threshold. Yet a great deal of other times I heaved until I was sick at the thought of having upset anyone, believing I ought not to live at all if I were not strictly polite. There are times when some disturbed

awareness of God seeps beneath my fingernails and I end my night in harrowed petrification of hell until I convince myself I've been the Devil all along.

That night, and for that night alone, I became the Devil.

Was I truly afraid, or just saddened at the thought? Was I afraid to be sad? I wish I could have chosen things for Daniel and convinced him it was his choice. How to maintain the delicate balance between controlling and enabling, I will never know, and perhaps it is not for any of us to know. Yet we are tormented still by a wretched question: how is it so easy to fail in convincing someone else to save themselves?

What's the price of life? I'd have to rip my entire conscious mind apart to even bear to seek an answer. What, if anything, could I change about myself to change those around me? Would I be looked back upon with scorn at my oblivion, as Daniel looks upon his mother, who believed change was much too late? She fixed others to avoid fixing herself. I think I got that from her, I think I wanted to understand why she'd even do it, what sort of appeal she saw in it.

I learned nothing.

Emerging into a thinner section of forest, I began to see distant glimpses of my cottage, nestled in the alpine pastures. It appeared and disappeared behind waves of trees for some minutes, then burst rapidly into view as I stepped out of the woods and hovered at the threshold. Where my flock would usually cluster to gaze down at any human who approached, was replaced by a similar bloodbath to that of the clearing, but upscaled ten times. Bloodied wool was smeared across their gathering point. The imagery rivalled the aftermath of a stoat in a chicken coop. It appeared not one lamb had gone unmutilated. The flock had been wiped out overnight, and the battlefield left behind was nothing short of an atrocity.

Yet, at the same time as my revulsion, I could not help but spare hungered glances at the monstrous scene. I had developed some kind of a taste for it, so it appeared — perhaps due to the high nutritional value of both meat and organs, which my body had for so long lacked, with the dwindling income leading to harsher and harsher grocery restrictions. I must have lacked such a great deal of vitamins and minerals that eating the poor animal could very well have brought me off the brink of death. Still, in my conscious mind I knew that the greater tragedy was in the desecration of my flock, who provided the last remains of my food and income. I did not know what state I would return to find my family in, and somehow I prayed both for and against returning to an empty home.

This was not a state I would ever want to be seen in. I considered at the very least washing in the river before I showed my face, but I was so fearful for their state that I chose to advance as I was. The last ten minutes were by far the most brutal, with raw, bleeding wounds on the backs of both ankles chafing painfully against my shoes with each step. The climb up the gravel driveway was agonising, and when I finally reached my front door, I kicked my shoes off without a second thought. Pushing my way inside, I left a trail of blood drops on the floorboards behind me.

“Clara? Douglas?” I called. “Hey, where are you? You alright?”

There was a creak from down the hall. Douglas’ voice carried from my bedroom.

“Hugh?” Douglas replied.

When I appeared in the doorway, Douglas fell silent. I shuffled into the room and placed the rifle securely away. He watched my every move, his gaze fixed as I ripped off my ruined shirt and exposed what seemed to be hundreds of cuts and wounds from my escapade.

“Jesus,” he managed. “You've been in the wars.”

“War’s about right,” I responded with a heavy sigh. “Where's my daughter?”

Douglas took a while to respond. “Looking for you, I think.”

“She's out there?”

“Was, but probably in the loft now.”

I fixed my gaze on him and finally processed his appearance. “You don't look well at all.”

“I've been up walking… not on the broken leg, of course, more like hopping than walking…”

“You know you shouldn't be doing that.”

“I lived, didn't I?” He smiled. “So… did you kill it?”

I shook my head. “It killed everything, Douglas. Everything.”

Douglas shifted sideways in my bed. There was little space to begin with, but he made room, and gestured for me to sit. After a moment of hesitation, I sat beside him, and he watched me with an owlish stare. Then, he shuffled to sit upright, gripping my upper arm for support in doing so, and began to slowly clean the blood from my back with the damp cloth he'd had across his forehead. He was painstakingly gentle, yet always kept one solid palm pressed against me for stability, and ran the flannel across my shoulders and over the back of my neck. When it came time to clean my front, he did not have me turn around, rather he pulled me to rest my back on his chest, and pressed his chin into the corner of my neck. He gazed down at his hands which reached around me in a quasi-embrace. His cleaning drifted lower until it reached my navel, at which point he set the sponge down and left his arms wrapped loosely around my waist. He buried his face fully in my shoulder, then, and heaved a deep sigh. I lolled my head backwards, somewhat, resting my neck on his collarbone.

It was a long time before Douglas spoke again. “Your daughter is your son, Hugh.”

“I know,” I replied, because I didn't know.

I never saw a hoard, only the things which made it up. What Douglas and Daniel and Diane thought of as an eyesore, I thought of as inheritance. Where they saw a nuisance, I could only see utility. The piles of books were collections of limited run, many of which were made my own, not vandalised but personalised, not dog-eared but renovated. I could see the encyclopaedia Britannica, an expensive set of 20 leather-bound volumes, protected from dust and household elements via their obscurity beneath layers of duvets and flannel blankets. There were dictionaries and Dickens, manuals and manuscripts, theatre and theses.

Sculptures, papers, containers, plastics, board games, lawn darts, loafers, model trains, mildewed jackets, paper plates, broken dining chairs, boxes and bags and upturned storage shelves. I saw my things — disorganised, but all accounted for. If I had to relocate these things to make room for others, so be it. I could do that.

We lay in a crevice of objects. Like a path carved through ice, there was a surefire channel between my bed and the doorway which held only the odd paper to line it. I felt content when I was able to roll over to face my possessions all around, able to take attendance without ever once perceiving an absence. All those which lay below the utmost layer were of far higher protection: forgotten, sure, but not going anywhere, either. I could guarantee their security for they were buried and untouchable.

“Hugh,” spoke Douglas. “I want to help you kill it.”

“I know,” I replied.

“I'm being serious.”

“You can't even walk, how'd you expect to take it down?”

Douglas was quiet a moment. “Seriously — we’ll go into town today. I'll buy the Carbine off my mate. He knows how to take a pig this size down, and how to coax it out of hiding. He’ll tell you what to do.”

“Well, we certainly need the better rifle. I'll take you in at noon. Let me check on Clara, first.” I didn't move.

“Are you going to do that now?”

“Yes,” I replied, and reluctantly pulled myself away from him. When I stood up, I saw him staring at me with a delicate expression.

“If you had as strange a night as I did, please don't be too harsh. He was trying to help us.”

“He?”

“She's a boy. Clara is Daniel now.”

“Daniel,” I considered. “Why Daniel?”

“That would have been Diane's name, if she were the boy our parents wanted.”

“How can my daughter be a boy? How could she have told you this?”

“I was shown, mate,” he replied. “He's cut all his hair off. That's who he is — maybe he’s got a male soul.”

“That's codswallop,” I retorted. “There's surely not a way for a girl to be a boy, if her body is that of a girl’s.”

“Would you feel okay with it if your body was that of a woman's?”

“Well, I'd imagine so, because I would be a woman,” I replied.

“What if you woke up a Sheila tomorrow — still yourself, but everyone was telling you that you were a woman. What then?”

“I'd just have to accept it.”

“But would you be happy about it?”

I pondered this. “I can't imagine so. But what is it you're telling me — she cut off her hair, so you think she's a boy now?”

“It's more than that,” Douglas said, with a slow head-shake. “What’s in a man? You’re a biologist, you should know. There’s more to it than bits alone.”

“Entomologist,” I clarified.

“What’s the difference between a male and a female honeybee?”

“There are many… all worker bees are female. They pollinate crops and produce honey. Other than the queen, they’re all born sterile, and are also the only bees with stingers. Drone bees are all male, and only serve one function, which is to mate with the queen. They are massively outnumbered by the female bees, at a ratio of around one-hundred to one. Drones die once they have mated with the queen, and if the queen does not mate with a drone, the drone is forced out of the hive during the winter. When the queen lays eggs, she is able to control the sex of each one by choosing which to fertilise. Fertilised eggs become female, unfertilised eggs become male.”

“Would you say their sex makes their behaviour, or their behaviour makes their sex?” Douglas asked. He was clear-eyed, as though he’d caught me in some fashion that I was not privy to.

“Their sex determines everything about their life.”

“And if they were not born in a hive, but in isolation?”

“That would be a solitary bee,” I expressed. “They are very different. The females are all fertile, for one, and will rarely — if ever — produce beeswax or honey. They’re important pollinators regardless, but it all goes into feeding their brood. Male solitary bees are similar to drones, in the sense their only purpose is to mate. They emerge from their nests earlier than the

females, and spend their nights sleeping in flowers and searching for female bees to reproduce with."

"Y'could say then that they have some behaviours wired into them, but others are due to the community they are born into. It's part biology, part psychology."

"Maybe so, but a female bee would never take the role of a male bee, or vice-versa."

"What happens if the bee is a hermaphrodite?"

"I'm not sure. I've never come across a case like that," I replied.

"Imagine if a bee were born with the mind of a female, but the body of a male. What would it try to do?"

"I'd imagine it would very quickly find that gathering pollen is near-impossible. Males don't gather pollen for a few reasons, mainly because their proboscis is too short. They also lack stingers, so they wouldn't be effective defenders — though in saying that, male bees often act defensively in hopes of intimidating a potential threat, even though they know they cannot cause it harm. They emulate the behaviour of the females. Whether that's hardwired or learned from observation, I couldn't say concretely."

Douglas savoured this thought for a moment. "I can't help but figure, Diane was always wearing the pants with you. Don't get offended — she was like that when we were growing up. Remember how she'd take the lead, do the heavy lifting, tell you what's what? Yeah, well, did that ever emasculate you?"

"Potentially… but I preferred it to the thought of taking charge."

"So you're still a man, and she's still a woman."

"Yes, because that's how we were born," I replied.

"If you were born a woman, would it feel more correct?"

“It’s… irrelevant. I’m just who I am.”

Douglas sat back, then, in a deeper state of consideration than I’d ever seen him. He appeared to be circling a point, but was struggling to land on exactly what he meant to express. Though I could not comprehend his argument, nor where it had even come from, I recognised that expression so thoroughly — for I had held it so often — that I began to ask myself how I could know so concretely of my maleness.

It seemed simple, so unthinkingly simple, that it was hard not to find the questioning outrageous. The men and women I knew were never, to me, a set of genitals before anything else. There were certainly people I’d met whose sex eluded me to the point it became awkward to refer to them, as I was so terrified to ask. Yet I was not discomforted by the lack of knowledge about their private areas (I could not have cared less about their private areas), but about how they presented themselves, only because I wanted to get the ‘he’ or ‘she’ right the first time. To make a mistake of this scale! It was much like the voice of a heavy smoker coming distorted through the telephone, and only after that first horrid ‘sir’ do you discern your error. Not once did you question or consider their genitals, maybe only because it is assumed innate, but it never seems a concern of someone’s body, rather than how they present said body. In that regard, there is far less to pin down. What if the effeminate men I had met over the years had been born women? Would that change my knowing of them as men, for that is how they introduced themselves? Or the deep-voiced smokers over the phones, who expressed that they were women — I had no way of knowing this for certain, but of course I would take their word, rather than question them.

“You think Clara would simply… prefer to be a male?” I finally asked.

“I do,” he replied. “And who are we to say it’s not possible?”

“You’ve surprised me, Douglas. You see no issue with this?”

“I see bigger problems to deal with.” At this, he moved his broken leg with his hands, to swing it over the side of the bed. He grabbed my shoulder for stability, and pulled himself up to stand. His broken leg hovered just above the floor, and over half of his body weight was now borne upon me. I aided him down the hallway, into the kitchen. Daniel met us there, his uneven hair chopped down to the scalp.

“Clara,” I said, and came to kneel at Daniel’s side. “What have you done this for?”

“Hugh,” Douglas warned.

Daniel was engrossed in his drawing, and did not respond to my question. I looked at what he was drawing, and a rapid illness overcame me as I was met again with the massacre. How had I forgotten to keep Daniel from seeing this, how had I not shielded him away? To not have been eaten alive by guilt was, in that moment, a miserable triumph.

“You should never have seen this. You should never — you should not have to live… *afraid.”*

Daniel stared at the carnage outside. Though I tried to shield him with my torso, it was a weak attempt at best, and it could not undo the exposure to such horrors. It was not the imagery, to be clear. Daniel had spent some time on a farm, and had seen a great deal of the gruesome things that come with it. No, it wasn’t the death and gore that I feared would destroy him. It was the scale of it, and what that scale meant: there were no sheep left to kill.

We had a bigger problem, now.

# ELEVEN

Under no circumstances was I to be left alone. Just shy of lunchtime, the three of us piled into the Farina, where Dad took us down the hill at speed, flinging gravel left and right into the surrounding pasture. When we emerged onto the main drag, and the farmland shrunk away behind us, I felt a discernible difference in atmosphere.

I knew only that we were going to get the gun. The Gun; the master-weapon to take down the formidable animal. The .303 Jungle Carbine, that could kill a charging boar with just one shot. A weapon of war. I knew this because I had overheard it, just as I had overheard their fistfight, their apologies, and the single popped shot the day Dad put the mangled newborn down.

I had not seen the backroads in some time. It was an idyllic setting, a temperate, cloudless day. Bordered on both sides by old fencing and native trees, I received intermittent glimpses at the endless farmlands beyond.

I had lived the majority of my life within an inner city brick building, overshadowed by an overpass. I had been roused so relentlessly by unyielding noise that my brain had rewired itself to ignore the thundering and screeching of metal. I had become so attuned to noise that noise could no longer penetrate me. The subsequent return to silence, brightness, and emancipation of the landscape, could not have felt less natural, less congruent with what a human life paraded as.

If you release a domesticated animal into the wild, it will likely die. Though what's in its nature could certainly be biological, what's natural to the creature is anything but its nature. If it could only live in domestication and only die in nature, there is only one correct option as to what the creature should do. If it has lived all its days thus far in comfort and security, to send it

to a life opposing all it knows is not an act of liberation, but of condemnation; you would not be acting in its best interests, you would be abandoning it.

There is not one thing more natural than whatever it is we do right now. We are living true to, and upholding, our nature, by the mere act of pushing that nature to the very brink of what it can accomplish. By innovating we are being human, by building we are being human, by making more problems with each solution we are living perpetually authentic to our most distant ancestors. We became who we are because nature rewarded so highly that which we put into it. Of course it would reward us when it relied on us so greatly; we are so deeply symbiotic. We don't merely feed on nature, we propagate nature. We don't forage, we cultivate. We don't scavenge, we farm. We don't get tired. We don't stop thinking. We don't engage in life passively.

We work.

We work out the most optimal way of doing things. We rely on memory and myth, community and instinct, failure and demonstration. We seek the greatest triumphs with the smallest expenditure possible — of materials, of energy, of prosperity. We so easily create excesses of our needs, and we're never quite sure what to do with all that we have made. When we create a wall, we do not create one wall, but two, or three, or more walls, because the wall exists on both sides of itself, as well as on its top and bottom, and each side serves its own purpose. When we are told we are defined in any rigid way at all we just can't help ourselves but to push back against it, because to cage us, to box us in, is the true violation of nature. It is so thoroughly instilled within us that the only way to get ahead and stay ahead is to challenge everything that's been done by us before.

We came shuddering to a halt in the middle of the country. Initially I wasn't sure why, but when I sat up and peered through the windshield, I saw a shepherd standing before us, leaning

forwards with both hands atop his cane. He was in the dead centre of the road, with a flock of over fifty sheep trickling across in front of and behind him. A Belgian Sheepdog nipped at their heels and kept the flock moving. It appeared far more wolf than dog, enormous and long-haired, with a jet black coat and upright, pointed ears.

Dad sat back and watched him. They never took their eyes off one-another. When the flock had moved entirely into the other paddock, the shepherd took his weight off the cane and stood up. He moved languidly towards the car, until he was beside Dad's window. Dad wound the window down.

The shepherd leaned into the car, his forearms over the top of the windowsill. "Where'r you all headed?"

"Into town," Dad replied.

"You be careful getting in. Just wanted to let you know, the weather's starting to turn a few kms ahead of here, and last time it pissed down some people got caught in-between slips."

"I've been saying for years this road is ridiculous," said Dad. "Thank you very much for letting us know."

"You don't know each other?" Douglas interjected.

"Should I?" the shepherd replied, quizzical.

"Well, you're both shepherds, I figured you'd be familiar."

"I'm afraid not. Have you been in the area long?"

"Decades," Dad said. "Most of my life."

"Bizarre! I've been here over ten years and haven't heard a peep from you. Hopefully I'll be seeing more of you around. I'll let you hop to it."

The shepherd tapped the roof of our car and returned to his clustered flock, the dog trotting circles around the sheep to keep them tightly pressed together. Dad watched him join the group, then slowly accelerated away.

The weather held up for the rest of the drive. It had become decidedly grey, but no rain assailed us. When Dad's car crawled up besides the storefront, Douglas was the first one out of the vehicle. He disappeared inside immediately, and fifteen seconds later returned with a stranger, who introduced himself as Ken, in tow. Dad stepped out of the car and closed the door. I heard muffled conversation and friendly laughter, before Dad opened my door and gestured for me to follow. Ken led us into his store, and disappeared for a moment before popping back up behind the counter. Dad was gazing around in silence, hands clasped behind his back. Knives, pistols, rifles, shotguns, hunting bows, ammunition, and outdoor clothes were set up on display around the room.

"You look a little awestruck, there," Ken laughed. Dad took a moment to realise he was being spoken to.

"There's a great deal of weapons I've never seen before. Were these developed—"

"For Vietnam? Yeah," he responded. "They've become more accessible in the past year or so. Can't get you a flamethrower or a machine gun, still, but I'm working on it."

"They'd let you sell that?"

"Worth a shot, isn't it? I've been in this business a long time, and there's a lot of stuff in the room with us now that I thought I'd never be able to supply. The developments are happening fast — wasn't long ago, some forty-odd years, a weapon like this was remarkable." He gestured to a large gun that looked like any of the other guns. "Now, we're worrying about getting a nuke dropped on our heads."

“Hugh here wants to take down a pig,” Douglas interjected.

“Well, I don't think you'd need a nuke to get the job done. I take it you mean one of those wild boar?”

“That's correct,” Dad replied. “Biggest one I've ever seen. The rifle I've got barely made a dent when I shot at it.”

“Yep, get a lot of farmers in your boat. It's that thick pelt — hard to even sink a knife into, it's that impenetrable. No doubt it's to protect themselves from each other’s tusks.”

“Those things are razor sharp,” Douglas added.

Ken looked at my father quizzically for a moment, then squinted his eyes with a wry smile and snapped his fingers. “Let me see what I can do for you.”

He hopped the counter, then, and slid between us to approach a wall of mounted rifles.

“I'd already talked him into the Carbine,” said Douglas.

“Ah, have you now? You've probably made it quite easy for me, then. Still, let's weigh you up a bit more, Hugh. Now, I know you're not much of a hunter, but let's say you wanted to get into this for sport. What's your angle? Are you a long-distance sort of shooter, or do you like things a bit more face-to-face?”

“Well, I've got some trouble with my eyes,” Dad began. “You see, I'm quite farsighted. Last time I tried to aim the gun I had to take my glasses off because I couldn't see what was right in front of me.”

“Let's start there, then. You're a tall man, thin…” Ken turned sideways to compare his body to my father's. “You also seem nice and calm, collected, definitely not a thrill-seeker. But — and this is a very important but — if I send you away with a weapon that's only good from across the

other side of the valley, and you get bailed up between a mother and her offspring, a sniper rifle isn't going to get you out of there. I'd ask if you'd consider carrying a few weapons, but—"

"I couldn't quite afford that," Dad said.

"That's why I want you to take a look at these…" Ken drew my father's eye to a wall full of high-power, short-range hunting rifles. "Decent for distance, and powerful enough at close range to get you out of a difficult situation. We really need to double down on versatility, here."

"And safety," Douglas added.

"This'll do the job?" Dad asked, stepping closer to the wall.

"It'll make easy work of it. Hunting conditions differ vastly from one pighunt to the next, be it differences in the pig's temperament, powers of endurance, even how it responds to being shot. The last thing we want is to fall short when it comes to the power of the weapon. A great deal of farmers, or inexperienced hunters, end up maiming a pig and lack the ability to track it down and finish the job. It's not only inefficient and wasteful to leave a pig for dead, but it is also disrespectful to the animal.

"I take it you fired the first chance you got. Without the relevant experience, it's hard to know when the right moment to shoot is. In that sense, setting you up with a powerful weapon is even more crucial. I won't even entertain any of those on that wall — the .17 Remington, .223 Remington, .222 Remington, all those varmint hunting cartridges, they're not high enough calibre for taking down game like pigs and deer. Using a lighter grain slug means that the killing power is in the velocity of the bullet, which isn't good over a long range, and is especially problematic when you're shooting through scrub. They may be accurate, but the limitations are immense. It's common to have a bullet deflect right off the hide of the pig."

"That's exactly what happened to me," Hugh returned.

“What cartridge was it?”

“.222 Remington, exactly as you’d said. Took a shot at its shoulder, and it hardly flinched.”

“They’re bloody staunch things. I know a hunter who emptied an entire .22 magazine into a boar’s *skull* and still had it come charging at him. What we’re looking for is a weapon that can kill in one well-timed shot, from distances of nine to one-hundred and forty metres. It also shouldn’t have too long a barrel, as it’ll just get in your way when you’re deep in the bush, nor should it be too heavy, as you may have to swing it quickly into action. What I’m describing are bush carbines, and while Douglas made a great suggestion with the .303, I’d love to introduce you to some other members of my collection as well.”

Ken guided Dad’s eye up and down a wall of bush carbines. He expressed that some of the weapons, while still very suitable for the job, were not so advisable for Dad to purchase as the ammunition could be hard to obtain.

“This one here is the .44 Winchester. It’s very popular among pighunters, firing 200-grain slugs at a velocity of 490 metres per second, with a muzzle energy of around 1,000 foot pounds. It delivers enough energy to sink right into a pig, without bursting out the other side to injure a hunting dog. It’s most effective at a distance of ninety metres. It’s an old, reliable model, but not as powerful as some of the others in my collection.

“If you’re looking for a lever-action rifle with more power, this is the .44 Remington Magnum. Firing a 240-grain jacketed bullet, with a muzzle power of 1,630 foot pounds, it’s a great option for hunting in heavy scrub. It’s lightweight, about six pounds, but hits hard.

“This one is the 30/30 Winchester, also extremely popular as a bush rifle, especially in the States. It loads a 170-grain bullet, with a muzzle velocity of 676 metres per second, and the

muzzle energy is 1,861 foot pounds. It's great at a slightly longer range of 140 metres, has a moderate recoil, and the ammunition is readily available at any sports shop.

"Here, this one… this is the 7X57 Mauser. It's one of the best all-rounders for New Zealand hunting. It fires a heavy 175-grain slug, blasting through scrub without trouble, and can drop a charging boar in its tracks. The slugs travel at around 762 metres per second, with a muzzle energy of over 2,400 foot pounds. It's effective at ranges of 300 yards, including shooting uphill. The seven mill is truly in a class of its own — it's my number one choice of weapon.

"There's also the 7.92 or 8mm Mauser carbine, which was issued to the German paratroops in World War II. The ammunition is readily available, reasonably priced, as are the rifles themselves. They can take a lot of wear-and-tear while still being powerful, shooting a 196-grain slug with a muzzle energy of 2,482 foot pounds, with a velocity of 720 metres per second.

"Now, here's the one you've had your eye on — the .303 Jungle Carbine. This is my second choice of rifle behind the seven mill, so long as you're using the correct ammunition. It needs to be used with the mark VI, especially with dogs, not the mark VII which will blast straight through a pig into any unfortunate dog behind it, and possibly cripple the pig rather than kill it outright. The mark VI is a 215-grain slug. The muzzle velocity is around 610 metres per second, with the muzzle energy being 2,028 foot pounds. The slugs are designed to stop. It's what I would highly recommend for a beginner such as yourself, particularly for its affordability. I have it going for $27. The only issue is with the availability of the cartridges. It's been difficult to get a hold of the 215-grain slugs as they're no longer being manufactured by the Colonial Ammunition Company in Auckland. You'd have to get them imported if you wanted a regular supply; I have some on hand at the moment, but I personally don't stock them too often due to the additional expense of shipping. They work just fine with more accessible cartridges such as

the 180-grain C.A.C or Norma soft nose, so long as you possess reloading tools to reload your own cases.

“A few others here, I’ll introduce them to you, so far as telling you what they’d set you back. This is the 303 Winchester Model 99E, retailing at $175. The Model 88 is $210. Unless you’d like me to go into their specifications, I assume they’re quite far out of your range.”

“You’d be correct.”

“I think, then, we’d best focus on the weapons I’ve shown you. I have a hunch the right choice for you would be the .303 or the seven mill, based on the balance between their power and affordability. Tell me more about your property, however, and the behaviour of this pig you’re trying to take out. That may sway things, perhaps considerably. Have a seat, I’ll get us set up with some tea — how’d you like yours?”

Ken disappeared into the back. We sat on comfortable armchairs beside the counter, in a corner of the shop where a pool table had been set up. An unfinished game, perhaps a practice round, was in play on the tabletop. He returned after a few minutes with a thermos in one hand and four mugs hanging off his other hand’s fingers. He drew an old coffee table towards us and sat, set up the mugs, poured the tea, and retrieved a sugar packet and set of teaspoons from his shirt pocket.

“When I first got into pig-hunting, some forty-years ago, I made a lot of mistakes. I knew almost nothing about bushcraft, and the rifle I’d purchased on the cheap didn’t have nearly enough stopping power. However, you could have the most efficient pig-killer money could buy, and still wind up dead if you lose your way. Now, I know you’re just sticking to your farm, but I want to set you up with as much knowledge as an old-timer like myself could bestow. It’s real easy to get yourself turned around, and nobody is above it. What we are above, is being

unprepared for that reality. Make sure you take a compass, a map if possible, and always tell someone where you're going and when you expect to return. Once you've told someone that plan, stick to it, never change it. If you can bring someone with you, that's a hundred times better than going alone, too. The moment you return safely, let the person you've told know. The last thing we want to do is waste the time and services of searchers. Always bring supplies with you for the worst-case scenario: matches in a waterproof container or a lighter, a first-aid kit, a light-source such as a Coleman white spirits lamp or a Tilley lantern, a candle for starting a fire in damp weather, a swannie or parka, a supply of tea and sugar, and enough food to stave you overnight — or enough ammunition to hunt your own. Opossums are your best bet. Keep yourself near a source of running water, and if there are eels in that water, don't turn your nose up at eating them if need be. That's my spiel; I couldn't, in good faith, send you away on your hunt without emphasising the importance of safety.

"Now, since you don't have a dog, and it's a bit short-notice to be thinking about getting one, I'll give you some tips for stalking and tracking the pig. You'll spend much of the hunt laying low, moving silently, blending in with your surroundings, and observing with vigilance. Pigs have keen eyesight and great hearing. They are also sensitive to vibrations underfoot, so the way you walk once you're nearby will make all the difference. This is a specific sort of walk that allows you to move in complete silence, and even stop in any position, including with one foot hovered above the ground. I'll demonstrate this to you in a moment. Namely, though, the trick is to not make any noise — no loud conversations, no sharp click of the safety catch, no jingling of loose bullets. Scent is another factor: always stalk with the wind blowing in your face. Now, you can do one of two things when it comes to stalking: follow a pig, advancing silently, or sit and wait until the pig comes into view.

“When you’ve lined up your shot and feel ready to pull the trigger: wait. Observe how you’ve set yourself up. Is the barrel holding steady, or is it moving due to your own exhaustion or excitement? Don’t fire if it’s jumping about. You want to kill it, never wound it — a wounded boar is worse than a scorned woman. If you do find yourself at a point where you need to leave cover and enter a clearing, do not press ahead until you have spent several minutes closely observing the open area. Just as you are stalking a pig, the pig may well be stalking you, waiting for you to come out into the open. If you do observe a pig in a clearing, it’s most likely rooting for food. In this case, you want to take a step forward each time its snout lowers to the ground, and go completely still each time its head comes back up. If you can get the sun behind you, even better.

“When tracking the pig, look at the ground. Tracks are an obvious indication, as is turned-over ground where they’ve been rooting for tucker. Plenty of information can be discerned from tracks alone, from the emotional state of the pig, to its sex. You can tell whether it shot away in fright, or if it had been wandering calmly, searching for food. The hoof-marks of a sow are tapered at the tip and much smaller than a boar, whereas a boar’s hoofprints will be much heavier, larger, and rounded, making deeper impressions in the soil due to his weight. Note that in bad weather, hoofprints that are fresh could be diluted and blurred enough to look very old indeed. Be very careful if, after rain, you find faded hoofprints and assume they’re from several days prior. They could be from thirty minutes ago or less.”

“I’m deeply impressed with your knowledge,” Dad mentioned over the rim of his mug. “And greatly appreciative of your imparting it. I’d ask you to join me, but I assume you’re tied down here.”

“I’ll be honest, the offer is enticing. I’m more of a retired hunter, and I think my days of spontaneous hunting trips are over. If you’re frightened that you won’t handle yourself well out there, don’t be — you’ve faced this beast before, and that actually gives you a greater preparation than most any words out of my mouth. I’m being quite sincere. Every animal is different, and until you get to know the animal, you’re essentially flying blind. We’ll get you set up with an appropriate weapon, and any gear needed, and the right advice to boot. I have no doubts you’ll take down the once-formidable beast, so long as you use your common sense and stay quiet. I take it Douglas will be joining you for the hunt?”

“I’m afraid not,” Douglas stated. “I’m still healing from a broken leg.”

“That’s a shame, then. The only other preparation I can really offer, Hugh, is to advise that you take the intelligence of these animals very seriously. I don’t hunt because I dislike these animals — it’s actually quite the opposite. Pigs are clever, shrewd, and even cheeky. They operate on habit, and can often be found in the same places at around the same time per day. One such pig used to creep out of the bush at around 6 o’clock every single night, sniffing the air until he was certain of his safety, before he'd approach a large, dead matai tree, stand up on his hind legs, put his front legs on the trunk for balance, and continue sniffing the air. I coined him Grizzly, as he appeared indistinguishable from a big grizzly bear. Every night he’d do this, and once satisfied, he would approach a pair of nearby quince trees and begin to bash against them, until the ripe fruit dropped to the ground for him to eat. Though I chose to never take a shot at him, he outsmarted several hunting groups, at one point diving into a river and swimming for several kilometres to mask his scent from a pack of hunting dogs. Pigs are also prone to bluffing, in order to force dogs, or even men, to fall off cliffs. Next to their tusks, their brain is their deadliest weapon.

“Only about one in fifty pigs take to lambkilling. You’ve lucked out for many years, as lots of farmers do, but what ends up happening is a hungry pig comes upon a lamb that has died, or the afterbirth of a ewe that has just lambed. Once he gets a taste, he becomes a killer, and the only thing that can stop him is a bullet. When they run out of dead lambs, they begin to kill those that are living — some can take four or five lambs in a single night. Once the lambs are big enough, and quick enough, to elude the boar, the boar has to be content with dead or sick sheep until the next set of lambs are born.”

“But — my entire flock was slaughtered,” Dad said, aghast. “Every last one was taken out overnight. I haven’t found a single living sheep, only the aftermath of the cull.”

“It may well be that the flock has fled after one or two sheep were targeted,” Ken replied evenly. “A boar simply wouldn’t take a whole flock out in one night. I would wager your sheep have run away after being so terrorised, with such little relief. Take out the boar, and they may well find their way back to you.”

Entirely lost in thought, I took a moment to register Ken’s attention shifting to me. “Are you much interested in hunting, son? Haven’t heard much from you just yet.”

“Oh—” Douglas started.

“Daniel is mute,” Dad interrupted.

“He’s never talked?” Ken asked, looking at me in curiosity.

“Never. It’s just how he was born. He does a lot of drawing and painting.”

“An artist? Why, I can appreciate that. I’m a writer, namely of guides surrounding pig hunting, but I like to write poems too. What sort of artwork does he make?”

“Charcoal drawings, mainly,” Dad said. “They’re very realistic. He draws from life.”

“I’d love to see them sometime, Daniel. I draw from life too, albeit in the written form.”

Ken, Douglas, and my father deliberated over weapons for a while longer. Ultimately, it was the .303 Jungle Carbine that won, if only by a hair, for Ken had several magazines of the mark VI bullets, certainly more than enough to stave Dad over. He also equipped Dad with a leather sling, free of charge, and threw in some bushcraft accessories for good measure. Ken kept in conversation with us for some time longer, and was still chatting away as Dad was piling the items into the car's boot. Once the final farewells had been bid, Ken waved at us from the doorframe of his shop until he was only a dot in the rearview mirror. Dad drove home with one hand on the wheel, the other occupied by a chain of cigarettes. Douglas wrapped an arm over the back of his seat, and slowly turned to look at me.

"You alright, Daniel?"

My eyes slowly drifted away from my lap. They darted around for a moment, but ultimately locked with his. He didn't say another word — there was no need to. He just smiled.

# TWELVE

The rain had picked up on the drive back, flooding the backroads to an indistinguishable muddy bog, lashing broad puddles over the poorly-drained pastures scrolling past the windows. As we proceeded home, I grew increasingly uncertain of our direction, and soon enough I felt the car hobbling along as its tires became increasingly suctioned to the mud. It was flat ground, so I continued forwards, but when we came to the winding section of road which would take us deeper into the bush, Douglas and I grew apprehensive.

"I think it's best to push ahead," I said, tapping intermittently on the accelerator to lift the car out of the uphill mud pockets. "Even if the rain stops now, there's no drying this out anytime soon. I'd rather get stuck as close to home as possible."

"I hear that," Douglas replied. "Just hope we don't get stuck at all. Try to keep out of the sunken bits — looks like a bit of erosion is happening."

As he said, there were parts of the track that had crumbled away into sheer drop-offs below. Some of the forests around could be very steep, with roads carved into precarious tight ridges. None of the surrounding drops were alarmingly high, but it would certainly not be fun for the car to slide down the edge of any of them. I manoeuvred over the steepest part of the incline, and for a while needed only to wind the car over flat ground. The rain had only worsened, thundering down with the wipers barely making up for it, even at full speed. Daniel had curled up in the back and fallen asleep, and I hoped for his sake that he would stay asleep until we were safe at home.

Douglas tapped my arm. "Hey — slow down, something's on the road up ahead."

“Oh, Jesus bloody…” I came to a crawl at the sight of a felled tree. It was some sort of birch variety, pale with only loosely-attached bark, and had pulled away entirely from its place in the bank. Its roots stuck wildly into the open air.

“Right,” Douglas sighed. “Park up over there, we’ll push this thing down the hill.”

“How will you be able to, with your leg?”

“Look, mate, I’ll manage. Don’t worry about me.”

I pulled as far away from the cliff as possible and parked the car. I left it running, as it had grown dark quite rapidly. Douglas climbed out first, and I watched the back of his shirt glow as he hobbled beneath the headlights. Awkwardly, with his weight pressed entirely on his good leg, he squatted down near the roots of the tree and inspected the ground below it. He wrapped his arms below the trunk and heaved upward. He was able to lift it partially off the ground, but he lowered it quickly, and half-turned to wave me over. He yelled something, but I could barely hear anything over the rain. I slid out of the car and splashed towards him, mud caking the hems of my pants and splattering up to my knees. Douglas’ hair was already plastered to his brow, and when he turned to face me, it was with rain beading rapidly from the tip of his nose and sliding in and out of his eyes.

“Alright, I can budge this! I think it’s best you hop over to the other side and we just try to slide it sideways! Be really careful about the roots! If this thing starts moving quick, you could get clobbered by them and swept away yourself! Moment it starts to give, jump back! Sound good?”

“Yep!” I replied, and hopped to the other side of the trunk. I slid my arms beneath it, spaced in between Douglas’ arms, and with a nod we both lifted up and to the side. The weight was considerable, but the slippery mud on the ridge made the task possible. The tree gradually shifted

closer to the edge, though it was bottom-heavy — the roots would need to be shifted close enough for the centre of gravity to pull it the rest of the way. At about halfway cleared, the tree was visibly teetering.

“I say get behind the roots and push now!” I called. Douglas nodded, and we stepped around to the back of the tree. “Don’t slip! Hey, grab onto the car, just in case!”

Douglas was confused by what I meant, until he saw me whip open the passenger door and wrap my fist around the inner handle. This gave me an anchor point in case the trunk fell suddenly and my forward momentum would have me tumbling after. Douglas copied me, and we began to push the tree away. There was a cracking sound, followed by the crashing of leaves as the tree finally pitched downwards, bouncing and then sliding rapidly downhill, knocking out saplings as it went. It slid entirely into darkness, and we were met with only silence and the sound of the downpour. Douglas looked at me, our muddy hands both clutching the door handle, and breathed a sigh of relief. He was close enough for the breath to warm my freezing cheek. I helped him back into his seat, sopping and filthy, then shut his door and carefully stepped back to the driver’s side, both hands on the car at all times.

Heading further into darkness, my muddy hands did not fully dry on the wheel due to my perspiration. We had come to a decline in the road, which worried me somewhat more than the next upcoming incline, as it was a very steep and unforgivable slope. I slowed right down and braked heavily as I crept the car over now-exposed roots, as the rain had washed away the surface layers of flattened dirt. A sudden lurch frightened us greatly, as the car momentarily lost traction. I managed to skirt the danger with a quick adjustment of the wheel, which I can only attribute to split-second instinct rather than anything cognizant. We made it down safely, and were soon met with an overflowing river in place of a usual trickling stream.

“Just drive through,” Douglas said.

“Hold on,” I replied, slowing to a crawl.

“It won’t be deep,” he continued.

“I know.” I heard the scepticism in my voice. He said nothing. Slowing to a stop, I parked the car again and got back out. The murky, brown water was streaming past at a high speed, and was about three metres across. I picked up a stick and pushed it in the river, noting I only felt it sink into the mud when it was two-thirds of the way into the water. I then waded partially into the river, but already felt a strong force against my ankles and decided not to stand in the centre in fear of being swept away. I was unhappy with this, but we had no option but to cross. The rain was still pelting down, and it would only get deeper with time.

I returned to the car and switched it into first gear, then crawled slowly into the water. Straight away I was uncomfortable with the sideways push I could feel, but I continued at a snail’s pace through the deepest point, slipping the clutch and revving aggressively as I went. The rear end of the car, then, lost traction with the ground, and began to drift sideways. Despite a moment of panic, I did not accelerate, but slipped the clutch and crawled forward again. This lurch was just enough for the rear wheels to meet the ground, and I was able to crawl the rest of the way out onto land. Douglas burst out laughing, and gripped my knee tightly in a delirious, petrified relief. I chuckled as well, changed gears, and continued cautiously along. The rain thinned out into a light pattering, however the wind picked up, thrashing the canopies above. The car had performed exceptionally well up until this point — I wasn’t too surprised when it failed right before the final incline. The wheels lost traction entirely, and began to spin uselessly in the mud. I stopped revving the engine once I realised it was only sinking us lower.

“Bugger,” Douglas moaned.

“I know,” I replied, despondent. “We’re not too far — if the rain tapers off a bit more, we can walk the rest of the way and rescue the car tomorrow. Though, I don’t want you walking at all.”

“We could try getting it unstuck now. Or stay put overnight,” Douglas countered.

I didn’t want to just sit there. I also didn’t want to leave the car and try ambling home in the darkness, especially with Douglas’ leg. Our best bet was to attempt to push it out of the mud, but what if this happened again on the incline? The water could have damaged something in the car.

“Pushing it won’t do much if we’re just going to slide in the mud ourselves,” I said.

“Try wiggling the tires. Might get traction that way.”

I did so, moving the wheels back and forth. I then attempted to accelerate again, to no success. “We might have to place something in front of the wheels.” I got out of the car before he could respond. The rain had almost entirely stopped, now speckling my skin with sharp, intermittent droplets. I gazed around the illuminated section of forest, hoping to find anything appropriate in the immediate vicinity. Douglas soon followed suit, searching in the nearby scrub.

“How about ferns?” He called.

“That might do the trick.” We both picked an armful of ferns and spread them in front of the car’s tires, forming a mat which would hopefully offer some grip. I slipped the clutch again in hopes of creating some forward momentum, enough to rock the car onto the grip we’d made. While we did, at one point, manage to creep up onto the ferns, it seemed the car would only sink further back before I was able to accelerate out of the mud. After a fourth attempt, the vehicle stalled, and try as I might I could not get it started again. I suspected, with the cranking sound it was making while trying to turn over, that floodwater had damaged some aspect of the car.

“Car’s buggered,” I stated. “We’ll have to walk, but not in the dark.” I turned in my seat to face Daniel. He was awake, though just barely. “You alright? We’ll have to stay here until it

lightens up a bit, then walk home. Hopefully the mud has dried out somewhat by morning, too. It's best if we try to sleep through it."

Daniel slid his eyes closed without delay. Douglas looked at me, I turned to look at him.

"Just my bloody luck," I murmured, then turned off the car to be met with a wall of darkness.

"This was my fault," he responded. "I can't help but feel responsible."

I shook my head slowly. "That's not how responsibility works to me. You couldn't have foreseen this. We were warned, too, by the shepherd, and I still went ahead."

"I had forgotten about that," Douglas exclaimed.

"Try to sleep," I replied.

I felt him place a hand on my knee. I could not see a single thing — it was equally dark with my eyes open as it was when they were dark. I wasn't sure if he was looking at me or not.

"Hugh," he stated, softly.

I remained silent. He continued.

"You've made a lot of changes, since I spoke to you about it. I want you to know that I'm really proud of everything you've done. You're taking your life back, not just standing around waiting for a bus. The version I knew when Diane was alive would never have taken the initiative. You've started fighting for yourself. For Daniel, and for your home, too."

I pondered this for a moment. "I can't tell whether I'm doing what's right."

There came no reply from Douglas, only the sound of light breathing. I soon fell asleep.

A thud shook the car. I sat up in a stiff, frozen position, wondering whether I had dreamed it. For around twenty seconds, there was nothing but silence and darkness. I then heard the

crunching of leaves, some distance away. It was slow and intermittent, but had the tempo of footsteps — delicate footsteps, made with stealth in mind.

I could not see whether it had woken Douglas or Daniel; neither of them made a sound. There was no way of knowing whether their silence was intentional. I reached a cautious hand towards Douglas, and met a wall of warm fabric. I squeezed, and felt his hand reach towards me, to touch me in response. Douglas leaned slowly towards me, with the only inclination of his proximity being the radiation of his body heat, to whisper near-silently in my ear.

"I felt it too," he said. A wave of frisson shot down the back of my neck.

"Something's out there," I responded in an equally low volume. "Can hear it walking."

"Hit the lights. Ken said something about that — it can disorientate them."

"What if it's not in front of the car?"

"Listen," Douglas countered. His lips unintentionally brushed my neck. We fell into silence again, and waited for the sound of footsteps. None came. The only thing I could hear was his uneven breaths in my ear.

"Maybe it's gone," I suggested. We waited even longer. Douglas did not move away, one of his hands firmly gripping my shoulder, his chest pressed against my upper arm. A rush of heat began to spread across my body. "I think it's gone," I clarified.

Douglas did not move away. Instead, he shifted closer, and I felt him very gently press his lips against my jaw. Uncertain how to respond, I remained still. His other hand fumbled delicately against me until it found my face, and cupped it gently, as he kissed along my jaw, cautiously, slowly, travelling up towards my cheek, then to the corner of my mouth. Then, he pulled back slightly, and paused, and waited. He did not turn my head, he did not initiate any

further. He just waited. I reached for his face with my own hand, and nestled his jaw in my palm. I located his mouth with a light swipe of my thumb, and lightly pressed my lips against his.

The sensation was overwhelmingly dry — soft, yet chapped. It did not last long, ending with a scrape of our stubble and an awkward bump of our chins. I had rarely, if ever, experienced anything quite as strange as that. I half-expected Douglas to apologise, but he didn't. I could only feel him, his face still so close the heat of his cheeks was warming mine.

"Diane knew," Douglas whispered.

I recoiled somewhat, though there was little room to do so. "She never told me that."

"She considered it an open secret. Only when she saw how miserable you'd both become, did she decide to end things."

"But I loved her."

"I know. She loved you too. But you didn't love each other the way you needed to be loved."

"We settled," I said.

"I think you did what you felt you had to do," Douglas countered.

Looking back on everything, it made perfect sense. Diane had never wanted to be tied down, but she felt an obligation to conform in that sense. I thought of our first date, how she'd always led me along rather than walk with me side-by-side, keeping me as an accessory because that was the only sort of partnership she could tolerate… perhaps not just tolerate, but outright *understand*. If she could have made the choice consciously, without any external input or expectation, she would not have chosen me — she would not have chosen anyone. Everything felt like an interference, our displays of affection were just that, displays, and our mutual incapacity for any romantic passion for one-another created a certain symbiotic perfection.

"Are you a homosexual?" I asked him.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Did Diane know?”

“Yes. She didn’t like it, but she respected it because I never came out.”

“Came out?”

“Told anyone,” he clarified. “It’s the idea that gays and lesbians should tell their friends and family, and live publicly as a homosexual. That it’s the only way for homosexuality to no longer be something to be ashamed of.”

“But it’s against the law.”

“*Sodomy* is against the law,” he returned. Another flush travelled through me.

“We shouldn’t talk about this now.”

He moved away, and we drifted back to sleep.

I woke to a dim, blue morning. Dawn had not quite broken, but it was light enough to see the outline of the bonnet of the car, the neighbouring trees, the path ahead, and Douglas asleep beside me. I turned around to see Daniel still asleep in the back seat. It was bitterly cold, far colder than it had been earlier in the night, and a light frost clung to the bottom of the windows. Shuffling in my seat, I removed my jacket, and reached into the back seat to drape it over Daniel.

I stepped out of the car to inspect the ground — it was moist still, but had hardened considerably due to the frost. If we could get the car started again, it shouldn’t be too much trouble to get over the final hill and head home. As I rounded the car, my attention was drawn directly to an enormous dent in the side of my door. It had not been there when we left. Whatever had hit the car had been enormous, certainly powerful enough that the thud had not been in my imagination. I popped the bonnet to check the dipstick. It looked fine, so I screwed it back in and hunched over the engine for a while. I decided that it would either start or it wouldn’t. I slid back

in the car and tried the engine. Though there was an initial knocking sound, the car did manage to start, albeit unhappily.

Douglas woke to the sound of the engine, and looked at me in wonder. I turned on the headlights, which doused the path ahead.

"We're good?"

"I think so," I said, and attempted to crawl forward. The tires caught traction on the ferns straight away, and we were out of the mud seconds later. Douglas cried out in excitement, and I slowly increased the speed. The car shuddered as we moved along, and though I was terrified to attempt the incline, I approached it as calmly as I could. Douglas was clutching the ceiling handle with a white-knuckled grip as I took us cautiously up the final climb. It was janky, and at times the bumps from uneven terrain were severe enough to panic me, but we made it all the way up without any drama. Douglas hollered again, slapping my shoulder repeatedly in joy. I took us out of the bush towards the final stretch of farmland, with my head thrown back in relief. Douglas lit me a cigarette, I cranked the window. It was the greatest cigarette I had ever smoked.

"What a bloody mission that was," Douglas moaned as we pulled up the driveway. I parked the car, leaned back, and stared at him for a moment. He recognised my exhaustion, and matched it with his own heavy gaze. Daniel wasted no time in exiting the car, and we soon followed suit. I checked him over before he could walk past me, ensuring he had warmed up and looked well. He brushed me off, handing me my jacket, and I watched after him as he disappeared into the house.

Douglas had already limped to the boot of the car. I joined him as he gazed down at the rifle.

"It's a beautiful weapon," he said.

It eluded me, then, what the next steps were. I knew only to pick up the gun, sling it over my shoulder, gather the rest of the supplies, and help Douglas into the house. Daniel, to my surprise,

was waiting for us at the dining table. He made unwavering eye-contact with us, and did not shy away from the rifle being placed across the surface of the table, nor from the jingling of ammunition.

"Knowing the pig, it'll be back tonight," I said.

"There's no sheep left."

"There's still some remains. Perhaps it will be hungry enough to return."

For the next several hours, Douglas and I deliberated over strategy. It took a great deal of time to come to any form of consensus, and as we split hairs over logistics, he helped me collect all the supplies recommended by Ken into a leather backpack. As noon approached at a snail's pace, we communed for an early lunch of baked beans and spaghetti on toast. As I washed the plates, and fixed my eyes on the carnage through the window, I observed that a small group of insects were hovering around the pile. Though initially thinking them to be flies, on closer inspection, I could recognise the characteristic flight patterns of bees. I drew the curtain shut.

As I finished putting away the dishes, I turned to note that Daniel was no longer sitting at the table. I found him instead in the living room, scribbling rapidly. When I approached and caught a glimpse of the drawing, I could not make out what I was seeing. Daniel angled it away from me, so I did not push the matter.

"I'll be going now," I began. "I don't plan on going too deep into the bush. You should expect me back by midnight at the latest. You be very careful, and don't go outside at all until I'm home. If you must leave, wear something bright, okay?"

He gave no inclination of having listened. I kissed him on the top of his head.

Douglas was sitting on the front doorstep, letting the air breeze through the open doorway. He shuffled over when I approached to pass him.

“Alright, I’ve let Daniel know,” I informed. “Remember, if I don’t come back, don’t go looking for me — call the police. I’ll fire gunshots every 30 minutes if I’m lost, like Ken told me to do.”

“Good luck out there, mate,” he replied evenly, then offered me a broad smile. “Bring home the bacon, yeah?”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” I responded, with a laugh. Then, I stared down at him, in a moment of sobriety. “Please keep Daniel indoors. Don’t even let him watch through the window.”

Douglas only nodded. I dipped my head in response, then turned my back, and headed first towards the massacre. The scent was more assaulting than yesterday, one which I associated heavily with butchery. It was a distinct, inner organ smell, sort of a rubbery, unplaceable yet distinctly biological odour. The remains were yet to decay, but they were old enough to have attracted all manner of insects — my bees included. I watched them for a while, navigating over the mangled hunks of half-eaten flesh, burrowing and feasting on the array of mutilation. I opted to keep moving, in hopes I would find a vantage point some way up the incline.

Thankfully, the grass had dried enough to not be slippery. It would certainly do no good if I had a similar accident to Douglas on returning up this way. I opted not to approach my hives, and to instead continue climbing, anticipating that a small crag with some scrub to obscure me would be an optimal vantage point. I soon enough found my spot, and placed down my supplies to take stock of the view. I could see the cottage down on my left, and the driveway which snaked onto the difficult backroads. The treeline was set out straight ahead, curving to the right, before thinning into the mānuka grove. On my right, a few minutes’ walk away, was my apiary down below. Then, dead centre and far below, was the hangar, whose corrugated roofing had certainly seen better days. I had not noticed the clear holes in its roof when I had visited the past few

times, nor any particular leakage. Immediately I grew uneasy, tempted to abandon my post to inspect the interior of the hangar, to ensure none of my items had become water damaged. Still, I maintained my focus.

To say I waited would be an understatement. I lay there for so long I could have grown into the landscape. Minutes felt like hours as the sun crawled along the sky, slowly roasting me between heavy grey clouds.

A black dot emerged at the treeline. It hung cautiously at the threshold between forest and pasture, haunting the copse, unmoving. It stood there for quite some time. I watched it keenly, at points wondering whether it was perhaps a shrub… but shrubs did not sprout tusks.

I arranged myself with minute movements, as the pig was out of optimal range. I knew that I would have to get comfortable, but remain on high alert, tracking every behaviour, every motion and gesture, with unwavering vigilance. It was a good ten minutes before the pig began to advance into the pasture, and even then it moved slowly, sniffing relentlessly at the air much the way Ken had described.

It made its way towards the sheep's corpses, much as had been expected. It kept its nose on the ground most of the time, though it froze on a few occasions to scan the area with its head raised. When it came to the site of the slaughter, it stopped a few metres short, staring unwaveringly. I was able to see its ears and tail flicking, and several times it tossed its head as though avoiding something. It backed up and began to skirt the border, trotting restlessly in an arc to the other side of the bodies. With its back now to me, I watched it stamp its hooves repeatedly into the ground, doing so with aggravated diligence. As I was lining myself up for a shot, the boar slammed down its hooves again, then took off sprinting — not back towards the forest, but uphill in my direction. In spite of my terror, I realised quickly it had not actually seen

me, and was veering off slightly away from my direction. It was sprinting far too fast for me to get a decent shot at it, and I remembered what Ken said, about knowing when to not use the gun. This was one of those times where it would be very unwise to fire.

As the boar charged further, its hoofbeats only just becoming audible, it struck me that it was not running towards something, but *from* it. A cluster of small black dots flitted around it, which I knew for certain were my bees. They were defending their source of food by biting — not stinging — the boar relentlessly. Ken had said that the young pigs and sows will squeal when in danger, but that the old male boar, even when the teeth of dogs have sunk into their legs, snouts, or testicles, would still not make a peep. He was quite right about that, for the boar showed no inclination of its pain, other than its flat-out sprinting.

It was to my shock that the boar stopped in its tracks, not too far from me, staring off to my right. I followed its gaze to the apiary. The boar was now taking several steps backwards, then hesitating, then stamping its hooves in place. I readied my weapon, lining it up with the side of its head. It couldn't have been more than forty metres from me, at this point.

Before I could pull the trigger, it charged again, this time with deliberation. It ploughed its way through the overgrown grasses, carving a path directly towards my apiary. I fired my weapon, but it was too late — I failed to shoot the boar, or to distract it. It ploughed its tusks straight into my bee boxes, knocking the towers down. An enormous black swarm emerged. I did not spare a moment.

I ran.

An ominous hum grew in intensity as I sprinted down the mountain, jumping over rocks and stumbling over awkward terrain. With the weapon clutched to my chest, I used my downward momentum to guide me, at times taking flight for over five metres until coming to an awkward

landing. I felt no pain at that point due to the adrenaline, but I may well have broken something. Another noise joined the terrible humming, a rapidly approaching gallop. I looked to my right and saw that the boar had come into view, matching my pace as we both fled from the oncoming swarm. Its front hooves shot out so fast I could barely distinguish them from a black blur, and its enormous shoulders rippled with the exertion. It held absolutely no interest in me, and I needn't wonder why.

The first bites caught up to me, then. I was not far from the base of the mountain, so though these caused me to stumble, I managed to get to flatter ground without tripping up. I shot across the pasture, but the cloud of bees was growing rapidly by the second. A wall of them barred me from going any further towards the cottage. The boar and I crossed paths at this point, where it shot out in front of me to chance the wall of bees, heading directly towards my home. I, on the other hand, headed towards the hangar, in hopes the swarm would target the boar alone.

I sprinted around the side of the hanger and slid below the rotten doors. I scrambled to stand, hoisted myself up onto the wing of the plane, threw my gear inside, and shut the door behind me. Moments later, several bees tapped against the window. I was struggling to pull air into my lungs, each breath like glass along my trachea. It was hard to restrain myself from throwing up. My breaths came ragged, uneven, like the grunting of a boar, yet my heart was beating like that of a rabbit's, rapid and panicked and prey-like. I craned my neck as far back as I could, in hopes it would open my airways to ease the agony somewhat, but every intake was as fiery as the last. Being in the stuffy, closed-off cabin didn't help matters. The distinct scent of mildew filled every desperate breath, making each gasp occur with hesitation.

It didn't take long, either, for an ache in my legs to overwhelm me. My quadriceps, shins, calves, knees, and ankles, all began to scream in exhaustion, doused in moist, sticky sweat which

glued me to my seat. I would have to go back out there. The beast had headed towards my home — it may have charged straight inside seeking shelter. It could have already gored my family, for all I knew. If I had only taken the shot earlier, when I had the chance, if I had acted when the timing was perfect instead of holding back…

I didn't know what my chances would be if I went back out there, whether I would be mauled to death by a wild pig, or eaten alive by a defensive swarm. The bees had left me alone once I'd found myself in the plane, for I could no longer threaten them from within my shield. That was just it, however: I could choose to remain here for the rest of my life, because it would guarantee my safety. But that would be a very short life. That would be a short, lonely, cowardly, shameful, repentant life.

I gazed down at the cockpit controls. I was faced with a great deal of dials. I had seen Dad control it, I had been flown in it, I had been taught how to operate it. To drive it into the open, so that I could travel safely to the cottage, was something I could do. If it had been simply sitting here, with no maintenance since my father died, it would obviously be ridiculous to expect that it could run.

But it hadn't been sitting here.

The hangar was piled with boxes — the very same boxes that had occupied the rooms of my house. The hallway had been cluttered, and under Douglas' direction, I'd removed them from the cottage. But I had not disposed of them. Instead, I had stored them where they belonged: with the very plane that they were bought to repair.

For many years, since Dad's death, I had told Diane and Daniel and myself that I would continue his work on restoring the plane. And for most of those years, I had been much too afraid to touch it. Fearing the parts would be ruined by the state of the hangar, I had stored them

indoors, where I knew they would remain clean and dry. It became easier, over time, to find reasons they ought to stay there. I became busier, Diane and I split up, money became tighter. There was always some greater cause to draw me away. Some mundane, yet more immediate and significant, call for my attention. Something I felt I would have to handle first, to prove I could handle the plane. These things did not stop coming for well over twenty years.

I did not know whether the plane could fly, but I did know that it could be started, and that it could be moved. I had tested this whenever I had the time to attend the hangar, where Douglas was unable to move and Daniel was captivated with his drawings. I knew that the plane, if in good condition, would sell for a decent amount of money. I was not as passionate about my father's projects as I was with keeping food on the table, but the latter concern was perhaps more of a drive than a passion project could have ever been. It was one of the final assets I had left, outside of that which I needed to keep us all alive.

I brought the plane to life. It came away happily, a stark difference to the upset engine of my Farina. There were no more bees tapping against the windshield, but I couldn't risk climbing out to open the hangar doors in case I faced the boar. For all the times I'd come and gone from the hangar, I had eventually left the rusted locks and chains on the ground outside. There was no point in the security anymore, when you could simply crawl beneath the rot. They were so flimsy I had no doubts I could drive the plane straight through them.

& that is exactly what I did.

# THIRTEEN

For the better part of the afternoon, Douglas and I sat in the lounge playing cards. It was his clear attempt to distract me, and I allowed it. The first instance of anything having happened was a singular crack of the rifle some hours later. Douglas looked at me with a winning smile.

An insect tapped against the window. Then another. Douglas placed down his hand after the fifth or sixth tap to investigate. I watched him approach the nearest window, one hand on his hip, to peel back the mildewed curtain.

“That's a lot of bees,” he commented, calmly. “Come look at this.”

I joined him. The window was crawling with them, at least thirty navigating in spirals along the glass. A great deal more of them were whizzing past outside, forming a field of sorts.

“They must be swarming,” Douglas continued. “They do this when the hives are overcrowded. The queen leads them on a search for a new hive. Funny, maybe they're trying to move in with us!”

Something bashed against the front door. The entire house shook; a pillar of dust from the ceiling poured between us. Douglas stared at me, then at the kitchen, and breathed lightly.

“I don't think that was Hugh.”

The second bash was accompanied by a sort of splintering sound. Douglas scooped me up and took us upstairs. He slammed my bedroom door shut behind me, and pushed my bookshelf against the door. I helped him strengthen the barricade by dragging an end table to rest beside the shelves. Then, Douglas took me by the arm and coaxed me to crawl under the bed. Being too

large to fit, he instead armed himself by ripping off the curtain rod above my window. He tore off the lacy fabric that clung to it, readying it in front of himself like a sort of joust.

An age passed, us both rooted in place, his shallow breathing defining the moment. I could still hear the tapping of bees against the window, but nothing more from downstairs. Whether or not the intruder had succeeded remained to be seen.

There was a frenetic, deafening clatter of trotters on the linoleum downstairs. It sounded like stamping, much the same tempo as someone whacking a fly with a newspaper. Douglas crept silently towards the door, in an emulation of the hunter's walk Ken had shown my father. He was far enough from the bed that we could make eye-contact. He gestured to me that I should drag the nearby cardboard boxes in front of myself, to obscure me from the creature. I did so, as quietly as I could manage, though I left a tiny gap to see through. Alongside the thumping from downstairs, a faint hum grew in both volume and aggression. It soon became a cacophony: more like a swarm of bush flies than a hive of warding bees. Several found their way beneath the door. Douglas took a few steps back, which only made them angrier. One began to dart in front of his face, Douglas swatted at it with the curtain rod, then grabbed an armful of clothes to stuff along the base of the door. He stamped a few crawling bees to death.

Judging by the buzzing, a wall of bees lined the other side of the door. We could even feel it — the temperature in the room rose at an alarming rate. The windows were not so covered as they once were, as the bees were rerouting through the main entrance. The buzzing had morphed into a terrible gnawing. Deafening and disorientating, we would not have made it out if it weren't for the roar outside.

At the sound of a deep, rising whistle, Douglas stumbled to the window. He placed his hands on the glass, slack-jawed. I shuffled out from beneath the bed. Bees were trickling into the room

again, squeezing through every passage they'd managed to burrow. I waved them away from my eyes and joined Douglas at the window. The plane stared straight ahead, about a hundred metres away. The propeller was near-invisible at the speed it whirred, and even from that distance, the engines were beginning to overtake the humming. Douglas stared at him in dismay.

Without a word, without even looking at me, Douglas shoved me backwards, readied the curtain rod, and rammed it directly towards the glass. It deflected with a bounce. He battered it again. On his fourth attempt, he released an enraged cry, and drove all his strength into the blow. The window burst into razor-sharp chunks. He used the end of the rod to push the remaining glass out of the frame.

He helped me out of the window, onto the veranda. I navigated the flimsy surface in a half-crouched shuffle, easing my way over the shingles towards a spout I could shimmy down. Douglas followed straight away, and cried out in pain, having caught his thigh against a ridge of glass poking inconspicuously from the base. As I turned to slide down the pipe, I saw that the denim from his inner thigh, all the way down to his ankle, was already saturated with vibrant blood. By the time he was following me down the spout, he was woozy, and lost his grip just as I'd moved out of the way. He fell, curled around the base of the pipe, and clutched feebly at the air in front of him. I dropped to my knees and squeezed both palms around his thigh. Blood squirted between my fingers, though I could feel the pressure of each pulse rapidly tapering off. I found the laceration through the tear in his jeans, and pressed two of my fingers deep into the wound. I felt around for the source of the bleed and attempted to plug the artery. His hand limply brushed against mine, and he looked me in the eyes, breathing faintly. His head trembled towards the ground, his pale throat too weak to support its weight. His mouth opened and closed for a few more seconds, until his eyes glazed over and ceased to see.

I grabbed him by the back of his shirt and tried to drag him behind me. He became heavier with every step, his body reacting in an increasingly lifeless fashion. Regardless, I pulled, and created gaping tears in his shirt. I felt I was dragging an anchor, one which could aid me no longer as it flopped limply along the ground, soaking the golden grass red in its wake. Halfway to the plane, Dad opened the door, leaned out of the cockpit with one foot on the wing, and pointed his rifle at us. I stopped.

I stared at my father.

The barrel of his gun drew awkward circles in the air. I could tell even from that distance how gravely his hands trembled, how little chance he had to hit a moving target. I dropped to my knees beside Douglas, and lay over him. Dad screamed at me, pleaded with me, but all the roaring drowned him out, the violent propeller, the firing engines, the swarm. I buried my head in my uncle's lifeless chest, and shielded my ears with my hands.

I heard a gunshot.

I sensed warmth, the scuttling of legs across my flesh, and a damp, stinking odour before me. Slowly, I raised my head. I saw a wet, leathery, bristled snout. It huffed a laboured breath in my eyes, and with the exhalation, a single jet-black bee crawled out of one of the nostrils. It buzzed against the raw, chewed-up flesh, its wings vibrating feverishly akin to a cicada. I watched it travel down towards the heaving lips, navigate its spindly legs across the salivating gumline, under and around the exit point of the tusk, back up along the cheek, and when I rose my eyes to meet the creature’s, I did not see a pair of eyes at all, but two hollow sockets, festering with hundreds of shiny black thoraxes, burrowing and excavating and dumping material aside, like ants digging out a nest. Between the entrance points, a stream of blood was running. It began to slide off the tip of the snout, to generate a pattering waterfall between its mangled trotters. Small

fragments of its cranium came away, as well, for the rifle had burst its skull wide open, with a grey smoke rising like a low cloud above it. The boar fell — the front legs folded first, causing it to kneel towards me as if in prayer. The flank toppled second, and the remaining momentum drew the boar to the side, where it lay deceased, and grew blacker with bees by the second.

I watched, in rapture, as they began the process of installing a new home.

Dad came to stand beside me, and drew his gaze slowly from Douglas, to the boar, then back again. He knelt on one knee before the bodies, and hovered over the bees clustered within the boar's eyes. He stared for a very long time, until he found what he was looking for. With a seamless motion, he reached within the group of bees, and pulled his hand away with the queen bee clutched gently between his thumb and forefinger. When she was picked up, numerous bees immediately followed. She writhed within my Dad's grip, and he stared at her for so long, with such an unreadable expression, that I became convinced he would crush her.

Instead, he placed her on Douglas. We watched as the queen investigated him. She crawled down his shirt, heading towards the laceration. When she came upon the wound, she spent a great deal of time focused on the blood, crawling within it, even drinking it. Once she disappeared into Douglas' thigh, Dad stood up, took me by the hand, and guided me to the plane. He lifted me onto the wing. I crawled inside the cockpit, and he joined me, squeezing in just enough to shut the door behind him.

The plane advanced forwards.

On the grassy knolls, it shuddered and hitched; it seemed impossible we'd gain enough speed to fly. It rattled across the pasture, approaching the cottage, then turned in a large arc to face the opposite direction. From there, was a flat, yet uneven, stretch of pasture which carried towards the mānuka gorge. We advanced, and as the speed increased the interior only rattled louder — I

expected at any moment for the bolts in the cabin to screw themselves loose, and for the plane to fall to pieces. We moved faster, and gained only minimal lift, with less than half of the flat area left. But Dad only bore down harder, committed further, and as the remaining runway halved and halved again, I anticipated my imminent death with an overwhelming sense of calm. It was the same acceptance I had sought all my life, that same tranquillity and peace and gratitude.

The plane dropped off the edge.

There followed an infinite moment of fury. As the wheels left the bank, and we began to plummet, I watched our death approach with seething indignance. We were not going to join Douglas. We were not on our way to be with him for an eternity. Rather, had we died then, we would have been forever without him. Dad was sobbing, and did not appear blind to it — he wanted to die at that moment, though it was not a wish for peace, but rather the intent to run away. I made to take control. Dad caught my outstretched hand, but instead of holding it still, he pressed it on the controls beneath his palm.

Dad pitched the plane upwards. The wheels grazed the treetops as we bounced from the brink of catastrophe, barreling instead towards the golden sky. We whistled above the clouds in mere seconds, and the world below us disappeared behind the veil — & we went to Heaven.

Dad gradually relaxed his grip on the controls, and after a minute of silence, with his head pointed decidedly forward, an outline of gold tracing his profile, he flicked his eyes sideways to meet with mine.

& I could not look away.

# EPILOGUE

Fifty years on, I was stopped on the street by a white-haired eccentric. He asked something decidedly strange — I never could recall what — then searched my eyes for my reaction.

When I did not answer, an unmistakable joy pushed his wrinkled cheeks into a grin.

“There's no mistaking it! I remember you!”

& though I could not show it, I too remembered him.

The years pass all too quickly. It seems only yesterday that I shot my first wild boar at Matahiwi on the Wanganui River. That was in 1925, and as I write these few lines I feel that I have come close to the end of my hunting days. I have no regrets, for I have had more than my share of pighunting thrills, and can count myself fortunate in not having suffered personal injury. This is due in no small measure to hunting with good dogs, a suitable rifle, reliable companions, and using plain common sense.

I appeal to all hunters not to kill for killing's sake. Take what game is necessary, but endeavour to leave some for tomorrow's youth, and my last most important request — *positively identify your target* before you squeeze the trigger.

Pighunting? Yes, I know it all. Memory is so strong. I can close my eyes and see mile after mile of steep bush-clad hills, small clearings ringed with mānuka scrub, hear the savage barking of my dogs, the grunting and squealing of pigs, the loud report of a rifle, and the excited voices of my companions as they gather round the kill. I can smell the bush-laden scent of the rata, the honeysuckle and the mānuka.

In my mind's eye the carcase is being dressed, the ever-present bush flies are buzzing round, attracted by the scent of warm blood. I stagger wearily to the nearby creek and know the priceless value of a few drops of clear, cold water as it cools and soothes my cracked, parched lips.

I fuss for a few moments over an injured dog, call the others, pick up the carcase and my rifle, and head off home into the dying sunset — to a well deserved rest.

— Ken Cuthbertson, *Pighunting in New Zealand,* 1974

A man spends too much time alone.

— John Mulgan, *Man Alone,* 1939