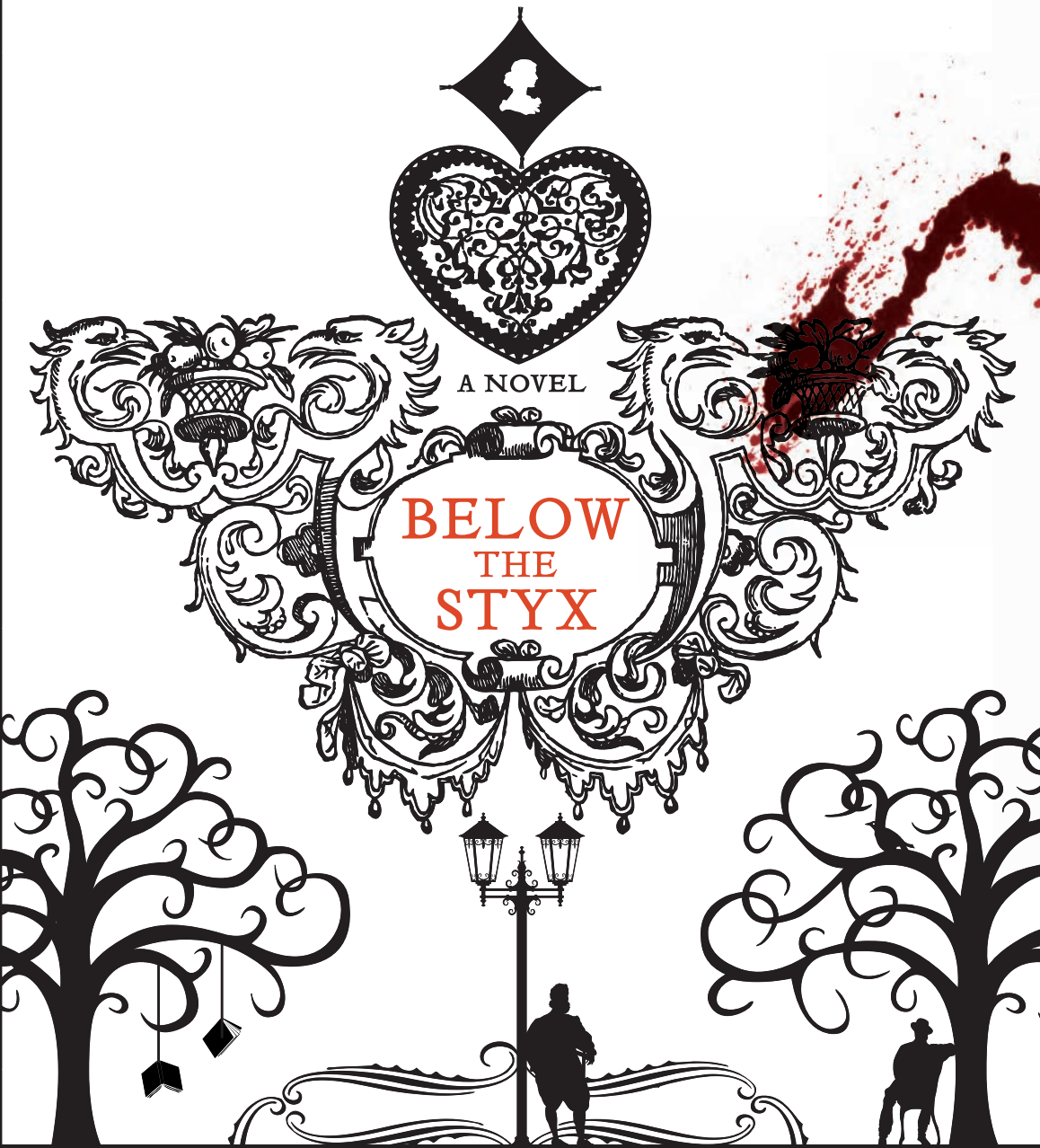
MICHAEL MEEHAN



A NOVEL

BELOW THE STYX

'an imagination of another order' THE AUSTRALIAN

MICHAEL MEEHAN grew up in north-west Victoria. His first novel, ***The Salt of Broken Tears***, won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the 2000 New South Wales Premier's Awards. He lives in Melbourne. This is his fourth novel.

Also by Michael Meehan

THE SALT OF BROKEN TEARS

STORMY WEATHER

DECEPTION

MICHAEL MEEHAN

A NOVEL

BELOW THE STYX

ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in 2010

Allen & Unwin
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Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
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Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available
From the National Library of Australia
www.librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 74175 780 4

Text and cover design by Sandy Cull, gogoGingko
Typeset in 12/18 pt Berkeley Oldstyle Book by Post Pre-Press, Brisbane
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Sheila

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1

'YOU ARE,' SHE SAID, 'A LOUSE.' IT WAS THE WORD THAT HURT. IT WAS the word, indeed, that set the infernal thing—the blunt object in question—into its fatal motion. Her opinion, I was long aware of. I had lived with it long enough. She knew that the word would hurt because I once told her it would. As the arguments grow old, we grasp about for refreshment, for new ways of twisting the knife. Without great effect. It's the old insults, the old jibes, lurking deep in their furrow, that really bite. The deep griefs of a long, sometimes intimate relationship. Intimacy! Therein lies the trap. You do admit, in fonder moments, the gaps, the lacks, the secret hurts. The mood then shifts, and all you've done is stockpile ammunition.

It was only after I came across her rummaging in my black plastic bags that she first used the word. Martin Frobisher, as louse.

The word ‘louse’, you see, has associations. It was an expression of my father. A louse was a person without principle. A human parasite. Always a louse, singular. Never the plural. Once you started talking about lice, it all got too close to the real thing. One ‘flaming louse’ after another, and a whole train of ‘lousy rips’, passed through my childhood; immoralists all of the darkest hue, but more usually parking inspectors, council employees, tax gatherers, hangmen and other forms of public service pestilence.

I struck her. Or at least the object struck her, with me, unfortunately, and as I have already explained in great detail to Clive Partington, attached to the other end of it. For this, I am in prison. This is the core of my story. The reason, in fact, for writing. The story of two sisters, my wife Coralie and Madeleine, the wife of Rollo. The story of my life.

The object was an epergne. What is an epergne? I hear you ask. If you had asked my father-in-law, Ernie, in happier days, he would have taken you aside, tears of gratitude welling in his eyes, and lectured you at fond and foolish length on the history of the epergne, its classical origins, its imperial antecedents, the growth of the native industry, the place of epergne design in the evolution of Australian decorative arts, the gradual use of native insignia, the sorry decline in the art of the epergne in the century of the common man. The epergne is, in short, a large, unwieldy object designed to suspend delicacies—usually fruit—above the table. Equipped with

a column (Doric, Ionian, Corinthian), it has a modest footprint, as I believe the computer people say, making table space available for other forms of clutter.

Old Ernie collects them. No more, I suspect.

I struck her. My hand reached for the nearest blunt object, and closed around the pylon. I did not raise the epergne above my head and bring it down mightily on hers. The long swing began at waist level, and became two-handed as I leaned into the weight of the thing. The motion of the epergne began to describe an arc that did indeed curve upwards, and which was less the motion of an arm—now two arms—than the movement of a whole body, turning with and perhaps even dragged along by, now that the momentum was taking over, the weight of the object in question.

My defence, Your Honour. Was it me who swung the epergne, or the epergne, once set in motion, that swung me? What if the intention to mangle and maim which had existed at the outset of the swing had waned long before the object achieved its target? Can *mens rea* still be said to exist? I insist that the jury should have the opportunity to test the weight of Exhibit A, preferably in a long swinging motion that runs from right to left, beginning roughly at waist level and running upwards to connect with the temple of a female of approximately average height.

~

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU, at least, have all the facts. For these, you have to go back. Stories are like that. You need the long trajectory, the full swing so to speak, if the whole truth is to be told. The accounts in the newspapers have all been far too short. They begin with the blow, and end in cautious speculation about trial dates. They deal in rumour and confusion, and generally play upon the most naïve of stereotypes. Accounts of the trial will also be short, full of gaps, topped and tailed to the point where the real truth will remain just about anyone's bet, with the journalists drawing on all the daemonic arts of suppression and embargo to set rich disinformations in train. The whole miserable saga will be a-dancing in the imaginations of daily readers through spicy denials and refusals to comment, with shadowy hints and deeper suspicions flowing like delicious treacle in and around the well-heeled participants, the expensive locations, the indulgent lifestyles, the fatal blow itself.

Ordinary is better! Ordinary is safer!

I'll find a beginning for you. A chance meeting at breakfast, in a small Left Bank hotel in the rue St-André-des-Arts. A Dan-Air package tour, with a bus trip down to Dover, a quick sardine-packed hop over to the airfield at Beauvais and a further bus trip the rest of the way down to Paris. My appearance at breakfast was opportune. There was an awkwardness with *la patronne* about whether or not the breakfast was included. I came quickly to the rescue, all *petits*

malentendus sorted out in no time, and all parties, even the cranky *patronne*, left smiling.

Shall I tell you how they looked? An extraordinary thing it was, to come clattering down the rickety staircase in this tiny budget hotel and to hear the metallic ring of the Australian accent, unmistakable even in its mangled private school variant, scraping around the salon and clawing its way up the stairwell. Here were two sunny, golden-haired young women, greeting the gusty Parisian autumn with bare shoulders and the last trace of Australian tans, poring over maps, dragging them through the *confiture* and sending the breakfast apparatus flying as they furled and refolded and pumped and flattened, the two of them laughing and haggling their way through the day's prospective sightseeing.

I had seen them on the bus the night before, as we made our way down from the airport at Beauvais, though they hadn't seen me. They were asleep, fallen against one another. Jetlag, perhaps, or the legacy of some shrieking Earl's Court send-off.

One of them was, of course, my future wife, Coralie, who was to topple, in the moments to follow. Hopelessly in love? I wouldn't quite risk that. Hopelessly into a tangle of curiosity and intense amusement, I would say, of a kind that didn't quite manage to sort itself out before we tied the knot.

The other was her older sister, Madeleine.

I will describe them to you. Each of them, distinctly. Coralie

and Madeleine. In the earliest stages of our relationship, I would not have tried to do so. I would have described them as 'the sisters'. The Australian sisters. A generic entity of taut and slender muscularity with blue eyes, blonde hair and slightly reddish face, flushed with excitement and enthusiasm for just about everything we saw as we walked the streets, the 'French bread', the 'French cheese', the 'French windows', the 'French poodles' and even, it seemed to me, the ubiquitous French dogshit that we wove our way around in our first negotiations with the city.

A generic entity they were, too, in the way they went about their touring—the frenetic exchange of banalities with anyone who would listen, the indiscriminate approval for anything that was vaguely old, for everything that was on record as ever having been admired by anyone else. The two of them swapped clothing, ideas, cameras, sunglasses, tanning oil, lipstick, maps and clichés, as they cheerfully and noisily tweedledummed and tweedledeed their way through all the prescribed tourist sites. Having 'done' Spain and Italy, they were now, God preserve it, 'doing' France.

Generic they were, until about three days after that momentous breakfast, that opportune descent, when they began to separate themselves into two quite distinct entities. Coralie started to distinguish herself by the sheer relentlessness with which she organised our days to ensure maximum 'coverage', with the drawing of lines across maps, the close consultation of timetables and opening hours,

the economies in both francs and foot leather that could be achieved through the proper arrangement of our visitings and viewings. Each girl's resources for awe and amazement, her capacity for admiration of all that was Fantastic and Wonderful, was carefully sequenced to ensure that the tempo of stimulation would be sustained throughout the day, and that every evening would go on to be just as Amazing and Fabulous as the day that it concluded.

Madeleine though, I gradually came to see, was actually quite interested in the historical detail. Through the froth and babble about all that was ever yet more Fabulous I did detect a real interest in exact details of the period and reign in which the side chapel was created, the precise phase in which the great work was painted, the actual order in which the *oeuvres* were published. We caught her more than once surreptitiously nosing through the more detailed sections of the Michelin guide, or tarrying to catch the tail end of what was being foisted on those who took the Guided Tour. Such dawdling, I also noticed, more than once put Coralie's careful sequencings at risk.

It all came to me in gentle stages. Those extravagant compliments and vacant superlatives actually contained coded messages, on the one side, about the near onset of boredom and of it now being time to move on. From the other, they hinted at a failure in appreciation, with each compliment and expostulation suggesting the need to tarry further.

The arm-in-arm progress through the galleries and *grandes maisons*, the Louvre, the Jeu de Paume, the Cernuschi and the Nissim de Camondo, just occasionally—I did begin to see it, even at the time—took on the character of hooling and shoving on the one hand, and dragging and slowing on the other; the interlinked arms actually said far more about divergence than kinship. And while nothing was lost of the shared accents, attitudes, clothing, makeup, cameras and clichés, there started to emerge not only two distinct personalities, but two personalities locked into deep and determined competition, with much of what had at first seemed engagingly generic arising less from deep kinship than from a knee-jerk determination, on the part of each, to hold, match and top the other.

It was, it always seemed to me, one of nature's more desperate forms of loving. I have lived with it now for almost twenty-five years. Coralie, and Madeleine.

~

I HAVE JUST THREE VISITORS. There is Petra, my research assistant. Petra is the daughter of a former colleague of Rollo. She is writing a doctoral thesis at the university—I am not sure which university—on the Victorian government's plans for resisting invasion by the Russians in the second half of the nineteenth century. The forts, the

gun emplacements, the embryonic navy, the local militias. Obscure? One would have to concede that the plans appear to have been successful. I recall no such invasion.

There is my esteemed brother-in-law, Rollo, who arrives, always, in Cloth of Mourning. Discreet, judicious Rollo, who is known for 'sticking by' people, at least up to the point where the law declares them to be a blighter.

And there is my lawyer, Clive Partington.

He's a former associate of Rollo. He recently quit the ranks of Rollo's firm, Sawney Bean & Co, because, Rollo once darkly confided to me, he wanted to Help Mankind. Clive's promising legal career was thus cut off in its prime. Clive was a victim of the deepest of legal professional hazards, as when pharmacists start taking their own drugs, or accountants start fiddling their books, or sweet-sellers start licking the merchandise. Clive had suffered a mid-life attack of Justice. He'd decided that the firm of Sawney, Bean & Co attracted the wrong kind of clients. Faceless racks of interchangeable corporate suits, always looking for ways to sail just that little bit closer to the wind. Clients wanting to be helped, indeed, but only in the sorry business of keel-hauling or scuttling each other. Or, in finding themselves becalmed and sinking, to be towed away from the consequences of their own excess.

In a few moments, Clive will arrive. His shirt will be white, almost luminous in the dim light. He will arrive looking crisp and

clean, the whiff of soap by now at war with the musty and acidic odour of a long day of intense and sedentary work.

As my lawyer, Clive may come to my cell. It is gratifyingly modern. I am incarcerated by electronics—the door, the lights, the temperature, the levels of oxygen. My cell is small and clean, and has nothing in it with which I can harm myself. Other than myself. I have a bed, and a shelf for books, and an ensuite—an in-suite, rather—with a basin and a shining steel toilet bowl, which is my only companion through the long nights of solitary meditation.

'Refresh my memory,' Clive will say. 'Refresh my memory.'

I will then supply poor fumbling Clive with all the memory he will ever need, all he needs in order to stand up and speak with conviction and authority for all that I am not. For my version of the whole story. I will sit and talk, and Clive will take his notes and wonder yet again how it could be that such a person had gotten himself into such a fix. How it was, as he would delicately and strategically put it, that she managed carelessly to stray within the range of a sweeping epergne. And why it was that I was not chasing bail.

Clive will survey me yet again with his practised trial director's eye, and size me up for the stand. He will examine yet again those fabled Frobisher 'boyish good looks', just starting to look like idiocy and retardation, the fine blond hair now starting to run thin and silvered, the teeth starting to jostle one another for position, the spots, the wrinkles, the patches of dry skin, the grey creeping upwards

from the temples, the nostrils and ears starting to sprout. None of it grave, none of it against nature and, certainly, none of it making me look less improbable, less inappropriate in the dock and witness box, nor less likely to be seen at all points to be telling the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth.

I had met Clive once before, in the dim and distant world that lay beyond the remand centre, at one of Rollo's parties. Clive was the very model of well-fed legal decency, but already showing signs of foundering between the Rock of social conscience and the Hard Place of mortgage, school fees, club memberships, beach houses. I recall feeling the most exquisite and protracted boredom—Decency's abiding companion—while subjected to long and windy tales of the young Sarah's horse's bottomless appetite and the state of the gutters at Balnarring, with the other party guests soon shuffling their way to the far end of the room and no sign of help in sight.

Clive, who has nobly agreed to 'act' for me, who has no doubt more than once sat through Rollo's uncertain account of this whole miserable story—a version which would contain remarkably little real information (never have I so deeply valued Rollo's steady and reassuring inability to see his own nose in front of his face), but just the mystifying details of its rather gory end, the ugly void and puzzlement to follow.

Rollo, you must understand, was and always will be the very epitome of decency, solidity and balance, and just about every other

quality—both Coralie and Madeleine were at one on this point, as on no other—that I have always so manifestly lacked. I could not, in the circumstances, use Rollo. Sawney, Bean & Co (known to the summer clerks as 'Beanies') had long given up their criminal practice anyway, and had passed on to a higher cleave of miscreant. But I do want someone like him. I confess it. I do want a real lawyer, or, at the very least, someone who *looks* like a real lawyer. I want the suit, the buttoned-up cuffs, the discreet tie with its escutcheoned hints of clubbability, the well-modulated voice, the gentlemanly attention, the lingering whiff of soap and assiduous early-morning scrubbing. I want the moderation, the balance, the patience. The insensitivity to human nuance. Even, at times, the genuine concern for Justice.

I want, in short, to be *represented*, and by someone who can be relied upon to dress.

~

THEIR MOTHER SPOTTED THE MICROBE as I came in the door. Dragged in, as 'twere, on her daughter's boot. I could see the spray-can finger twitching, but with no known disinfectant to hand, other than a chilling superciliousness. Which only served to temper her daughter's resolve, and to bring out all my powers of ironic contempt. She would have liked to eradicate me—I

do sometimes have this effect on people—in the same way that she eradicated all other intrusive house pests, all traipsers of life's muddier realities into the house.

The daughters marvelled at my resilience. No-one could have been more studiously, more consistently courteous than I, in face of all her ham-fisted disparagements. No-one could have been more patient, more conciliatory while taking the full brunt of her assaults. No-one could have scored so many tiny victories in return, invisible to all but their intended victim.

A fair time we had of it, their mother and I.

Their father was not much older, at the time, than I am now. He came into my vocabulary from that moment, though, as old Ernie. A decent fellow, by any account, the tragedy of whose life lay in its very success. Dear dogged, decent, irretrievably vulgar old Ernie, who had the simple misfortune to be good enough at what he did—rising from gardener to nurseryman to building and landscape supplier on a large scale—to bankroll his way into a world which, by and large, identified itself by denigration of his kind.

Ernie left life's major disinfections in the hands of his wife. By the time I'd sidled my way into the scene, he had retreated into his dogs, neatly kennelled far from the house. He had withdrawn into Rotary, where his particular brand of vulgarity was better appreciated, and into his unaccountable but passionate collecting of nineteenth-century colonial epergnes.

Gleaming silver epergnes, lovingly polished. Ernie's desperate grasp at the higher life. Ernie's shaft of light. Ernie's burning bush. Ernie's Sylvia.

Poor kindly grieving Ernie. For his daughter? For his bloodied *objet*? What does happen to the various exhibits, once they have told their story? What does happen to the torn underwear, the sneaker that matches the betraying footprint, the blunt and bloodied instrument, the odd buckled epergne? Where, oh where, is my own life's dark repository, my own *sanctum sanctorum*, my black plastic bags?

Utter superficiality, I've often noted, is one of the more fertile seedbeds for a complicated life. With Coralie and Madeleine, I could soon see, it was the attempt to take the rigours of domestic instruction—from home, kindergarten, and a range of private schools and colleges on the Nicer Side of Town—into the wider fields of living that led to the deepest complexities and conflicts in their lives. May I still risk some sort of collective comment about the sisters, now that age and experience have levered them apart? Now that the blonde hair has suffered various fadings and enhancements and the eyes in question look out through different shades of blue? It was the tension—between the disinfected vision of life that upbringing and education equipped them with, and the general human muckiness we are all pitched into, on all sides of town—that created some of their more spectacularly distinctive characteristics. Trying to live out the deep tenets of some eternal Fernwood Academy headmistress's

prize night speech. Trying to turn their mother's relentless domestic hygiene, the rigorous compliance models of potty training, bedmaking and wholesale disinfection, into some kind of Philosophy of Life.

All such comments will have far greater force and conviction, I can assure you, once I have spun my tale and let you a little further into its recesses, the secret lives of each.

~

WHAT WERE THE SISTERS REALLY like? It's not so easy, after such intimate and ongoing acquaintance, to wrap them up in a few quick lines. Even for you, Your Honour, for whom Human Nature is no doubt an open, if somewhat disreputable, book. Always, there is the temptation to read later conflict, later disillusionments, back into those first moments. Always, when things have not gone well, there is an easy refuge to be had in retrospect, the truncated wisdoms and epigrammatic malice of long hindsight.

It's much better, I think, simply to reveal these people as we go. As they did the things by which we got to know them. I want this story to have that kind of rhythm to it. Like a newly opened conversation with a stranger. Straying from topic to topic and every now and then pausing a while where there is a point of interest.

I have hinted, for example, of prettiness. It doesn't tell you much. Nor, to be fair, did either of them set much store by it. Both

were, in the estimation of all, admirable young women. Coralie's features were always cleaner, more sharply defined. Running mildly hawk-like as she swept into gracious middle age. It's one of those intriguing questions to which there is no real answer, whether the tone of thinking moulds the features, or the features mould the tone. In any event, Coralie did steadily begin, in God's good time, to look more and more like Coralie.

She had always been known as a straight talker. The blue eyes were, and remained, large and attractive, though the word 'piercing' might, in more recent years, edge its way in. Whenever they lighted on you, you knew without a word being spoken that some further explanation was required, some justification, so to speak.

'What on earth do you *mean*, Martin?'

After all the efforts I had put into disguising, deflecting, colouring, texturing and generally blurring whatever it is that I wanted to say. Coralie's was, distinctly and relentlessly, a plain English version of the world. A word stood for a thing. If the thing was not there, then the word had no place being there either.

Coralie was most at home in silk blouses and severely tailored suits. Increasingly. It was when she slipped into something more comfortable that tension levels began to rise. Wide-eyed, Coralie was, but wolfish. Outdoing all others in a carnivorous, omnivorous appropriation of just about everything upon which everyone else had ever been known to place value, pillaging the Tate, the Uffizi,

the Louvre, the Prado, the National Portrait, the Hermitage. Soaking up, imbibing, collecting, consuming, with all of 'Europe' as some kind of appreciable object that could be shipped back home.

The blue eyes would rove across the terrain, in deep awe—but more in awe, I do now deeply suspect, at the impression she would make in Armadale, Canterbury, Mont Albert on her return than at the rich aesthetic worth of what she saw.

Her older sister, Madeleine, was of softer mien. The blue eyes were, at first blush, less exacting. Even at the time of our first meeting, the corners were showing the sore toll of gaiety and laughter. Her gaze was more inward. Her features were always gentler than her sister's, the skin less defensively drawn against life's ambiguities. Both skin and features responded, in the time that followed, to the years of bland compromise and flaccid indecision, to the pampered boredom of life with Rollo, in a softening that wasn't just born of alcohol and ease and overeating. Madeleine's openness, her general accessibility, were marked in a face, a body that might be said to have gone a touch flabby, were it not that most of her was undetectable beneath the layered clothing, the swimming caftans and floating scarves to which she had become addicted.

The soft looks were misleading.

'Martin,' she would say, at increasingly frequent intervals as the years wore on, 'you are such an all-out fool.'

We met in Paris. Coralie, Madeleine and I. We were all out of our own water. We were all well out of our depth. Had we stayed in our native suburbs, no such meeting, no such exchange would have happened. Paris went on to heighten everything we did. It gave us something to let slip in conversation; how we met in Paris, in Paris of all places, and how I saved them with my command of French.

Let me tell you though, Your Honour, I was a good sight more adept at 'doing the French' than in really speaking French. My fabled 'gift for languages' is in fact a gift for *looking like* someone with a gift for languages. My simulations and my gestures were picked up by the dozen as each day went by, just by watching what the French did in the streets, and doing likewise.

All passed so pleasingly with these two sunny travelling companions though, with the *patronne*, to her eternal credit, doing nothing, even by a gesture, to dispel the marvellous impression I was clearly making on the two of them. Even, indeed, the infernal Madeleine, who seemed to see what was going on from those very first moments when I sat myself down at that breakfast table in the rue St-André-des-Arts, announcing that I recognised the accent, and offering my assistance.

Coralie had smiled and made all the room for me that I could ever need, while Madeleine moved her things out of harm's way and looked at me from a cautious distance that brought on, of course,

the worst itch of all: the itch to show, to perform, to ring the inner rattle out into open forms of living. I needed, in short, to impress. To impress, and desperately. I called to the *patronne*, in what I knew would sound to them like more than passable French. With a splendid gesture that I had just seen executed by a native Frenchman seated at another table.

The sisters cooed and billowed. The *patronne* saw what was happening, and smiled indulgently.

'Have you been here long?'

~

I HIT HER, THOUGH ONLY after provocation of the severest nature, with an epergne. This is not an excuse. Certainly, it is not a defence at law, unless the fact that the blow was struck with so awkward and expensive an object is itself some evidence of lack of aforethought. Unless the fact that the blow was struck with so precious an antique—part of the National Heritage, indeed—might somehow indicate to our twelve citizens good, true and probably heavily mortgaged to boot, that we are here talking about a *crime passionel*, unpremeditated, unplanned and, above all, entirely uncosted.

I offer you context. Perspective. So that you will see the thing in all its colours. I tell you this because, in a sense, it is the motion of the epergne that will guide us through, its little residual ring of dust on

the table probably a greater cause for pain, I do suspect, in the grimeless sites of Coralie's and my existence than the actual blow itself.

The swing, the blow, you see, is the only thing in all this narrative that actually amounts to a *story*, in the way that you would normally anticipate a story to run. It began at a certain point and ended at an even more certain point, linking cause and effect and action and consequence and intent and outcome. It distributed itself along a neat chronological trajectory, which, while entailing no more than a split second—perhaps a full second if we include that grasping about behind me for a suitable blunt object—could happily be told, from 'Once upon a time' through to what we might loosely call 'Happily ever after', once this *crime passionel* was abruptly concluded and the unfortunate hate-object in question most smotingly epergned into deepest oblivion.

I'm now persuaded, after long discussions with my lawyer, that the killing of one's fellow man or woman is indeed part of one's public rather than one's private life. It marks a point in one's life where others are entitled to show an interest. I did knock her down, though with an enthusiasm that had wilted well before the weapon reached its mark. She bled profusely. Head wounds, I've always been told, are like that. The copious amount of blood not necessarily a sign of any great hurt. That much I confess. That much I have never denied. Even after gentle suggestions by Clive Partington, always on for a good tussle with the facts, that even this might be softened in

various ingenious ways, if not altogether denied, I continue steadfastly to confess it.

The blood rose to my head. My thoughts ran to what was in that plastic bag. It was a combination of this unexpected nakedness, together with the word 'louse', that was more than I could bear. My fingers, casting about in distress, closed around the reassuringly solid fluted column of old Ernie's precious epergne.

I have confessed the sudden want, the urgent need to have her face gone from in front of mine. All in a second. It is the cushion, though, that is the mystery. The autopsy said that she had been suffocated. It was the bloody cushion, propped under her head when the ambulance arrived—by which time I had long since fled to the beach house—that had almost certainly been the instrument of death, and not the epergne after all.

Because the truth is, I did not smother her with a cushion. I struck the blow, though I insist it was with as little force as I could muster once the thing was in full flight. I rang for the ambulance. I recall it distinctly, the long wait as we ran through the interminable telephone rituals of customer relations, risk management, personnel development, the warning from that infernal woman with the laughing commercial lilt in her voice that my call would be monitored for quality assurance purposes, the specific number I was directed to press—'If you have just spattered someone's brains across the room with an epergne, press six.'

I recall the blood on the phone, disguising the numbers and making them slippery, the fumbling with key, phone and gears. All the while, I knew that I should have been up there with her, and not on my way down to Sorrento. That even if the wound was not particularly serious, I should have stayed to make sure that the flow of blood was properly staunched. To fetch such cups of tea as might be needed.

I could already see that this whole business, when it was over, would require some very tricky explanations.

Most of all, I found myself wondering where on earth the blow came from. I tracked back through childhood and youth and middle age, looking for some sign, any sign, of the roots of that violence which had emerged in the instant when my fingers closed about the shaft of the epergne, with the very idea of it already shifting into horrified denial and a flood of excuses, even as the heavy epergne sailed through the air, Your Honour, its own momentum at least three parts deciding the issue.

Law, yes. Ethics, yes. But the laws of physics, Your Honour?

~

CONCEDE THE EPERGNE, BUT DENY the cushion. This is my option. It has the benefit of being the truth. But where would that leave me? Is there not a special kind of freedom in the total contempt, the total abhorrence of others?

Of course, everyone is now coming forward with much darker accounts of all my Works and Pomps, of all that they had dimly perceived but never quite wished to mention, the daily play-acting, the shifting montage of faces, my whole chameleon mode of living. When I look over my own life, though, I see very little that is strange. Not until the incident with the epergne, at least. My scholarship to study abroad, my chance encounter with the sisters in Paris, our commercial good fortune, even the complications with Madeleine and the betrayed, admiring friendship with her husband Rollo, my long and searching conversations about epergnes with my wife's father; these are all brief spots of time in a life that has largely passed like simple breathing, easily explained along the familiar lines of passion, curiosity and contempt. There was nothing truly strange in any of it until the incident that has brought it to so sudden, abrupt and unpremeditated an Ending.

Yes. I knocked her down with the epergne, the sweep of her blonde hair disguising her face, and mercifully so, at the moment of impact. There was blood. I have never done anything like it before. I will do nothing like it again. I have always sought peace and tranquillity. The Middle Way. I have been known to shoo spiders, earwigs, even cockroaches out of sight, to preserve them from acts of violence.

I do vaguely recall fetching a cushion, and placing it beneath her head. I did not, however, smother her with it. It cannot be

proven, it seems to me, either that I did, or that I did not. The business of the cushion is, of course, exactly the chink of light in a very dark case that poor Clive Partington has so desperately been fossicking for. He genuinely wants to help me, poor soul. He knows Rollo. We have imbibed together, in corporate boxes at the MCG. He wants to be of assistance, to genuinely *earn* the swingeing fee that I'm certain he is going to charge. I am, Rollo recently confided to me, one of the very few accused murderers in the whole city with a healthy credit balance. It gives my crime a legal gravitas matched by few others. But the full story of the cushion, I have never told. If it were possible to fingerprint a cushion, yes, my prints would be there.

I suspect Clive knows it, or at least suspects it, because he nibbles at the edge of it every time we meet. I think he does believe me capable of the blow, knows that we are all of us, indeed, capable of that one blow, struck at that one particular time and in one particular set of circumstances. But not the cushion.

I have never told him the full story. Because is it not perhaps all my fault anyway—the cushion as much as the epergne? But for my clumsiness with the aforementioned instrument, Madeleine would still be hanging the vile daubs of yet another of her dismal young 'discoveries' down on High Street. Coralie would still be on time for her meetings. Rollo would still be passing his days happily stapling the pink form to the green form and the green form to the blue

form, in their correct and prescribed order, and Petra would be getting on with her thesis.

So you see, my guilt is comprehensive. It's really just a matter of deciding which set of facts to attach it to.

But here, of course, is the nub. Do I actually want to live in those dismal realms, the flat suburban sureties that lie Beyond Reasonable Doubt? How far do I want to draw the innocent into suspicion along with the guilty, to ferret out the 'real truth' and in the process drag all sorts of other truths shrieking along with it? The Whole Truth? What hope would there be for any one of us, solicitors, judges and juries included, if the whole truth were to be told—frightening idea—opening up a veritable quagmire of unreasonable doubts and rank improbabilities? Loosening convictions, undermining ideals, unhinging commitments? Making life that bit less manageable for us all?

What interest can the law possibly have in knowing about the long years of Madeleine's incessant niggling at me, and of Coralie's insistent chipping away at Rollo? Does it really need to know about the dank and dismal underliving of our twenty years of cheerless party-going and joyless prosperity, of sustained and ritualised mutual irritation?

I think of myself as, at last, part of Mankind. Being helped. I think of the jury, all twelve of them, minds run up to judgment pitch by the standard fare of advertising jingles, mid-afternoon

melodrama, American cinema ultraviolence and all the dubious wisdoms of the Glossy Magazine. But with all that, somehow making justice visible. Making justice intelligible. What time does the law have to take on the Whole Truth when engaged in such great matters? The Whole Truth, which would surely take just as long to tell as it did to happen, would so load the scale against every one of us, jurors included, that if I really told it all, they'd scarcely be able to come up with a decision about anything.

2

LIFE. MY VERSION OF IT. HAS IT BEEN A COMEDY? IS IT NOW A TRAGEDY? Even Petra accuses me of not taking my situation seriously enough. The problem is that my life, like most people's lives, is mostly not quite either. Not for long enough, that is, to be able to hang a label on it. I prefer comic. The really complicated thing about human existence, Dr Johnson wrote, is that usually it doesn't quite fall one way or the other. Generally, it's a haphazard, muddled mixture of both. Just as you are ramping your own little portion of gloom up to tragic pitch, someone breaks in with a good yarn. As you watch your whole life slipping down the gurgler, someone you happen to quite like rings up and invites you around to a good dinner.

Sitting here in prison, accused of murder—a murder I did not commit, let me tell you, though the memory of standing above a

battered body with a bloodied epergne in my hand does make the proof of it a little tricky—with the whole world whipped into a frenzy by the newspapers, who feed on the public's glee that someone in my position—someone who has had his moment in the social pages of *Vogue*—could stoop to such a crime.

Here, indeed, you might begin to think that my life has taken a tragic turn.

> I have been studying how I may compare
> This prison where I live unto the world;
> And for because the world is populous,
> And here is not a creature but myself,
> I cannot do it. Yet I'll hammer it out.

Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum. There is more. I think I've got it right. There is a copy of *Richard II* in the prison library, but some wretch has torn out the very page. I keep intending to have Petra check it for me, or even to bring in a copy, but the urge slips away each time I see her.

> Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot
> Unlikely wonders; how these vain weak nails
> May tear a passage through the flinty ribs
> Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls . . .

Let me tell you of my first contact with tragedy. Let me take you into my private, now controlling obsession. A young Englishman, Marcus Clarke. Author of *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Always just *His Natural Life*, in his own lifetime. It was my mother who first suggested that I should give the book 'a go'. I was thirteen. I sat and read it almost at one sitting. A big book, a harrowing book. My first cold-shock encounter with tragedy. Not now read as often as it was. A 'national monument', I've seen it described, to be placed alongside Shakespeare and *The Pilgrim's Progress* on the family bookshelves. There was a time when anyone in Australia deemed literate had read *For the Term of His Natural Life*. There is an old view of literature—the more serious kind of literature—that we read it to find the other, the darkness that we dread in 'real life'. The novel offered, it was said, a kind of national tragic catharsis. Something, indeed, in which to rub the national nose.

Which was, I now understand, exactly what the man intended.

For those who haven't gnawed their way through it, the novel—the only really substantial piece that the poor fellow ever wrote—runs the reader through a long and arduous tour of the antipodean gulag, tracing the misfortunes of one Richard Devine, aka Rufus Dawes. It runs for five hundred pages or so, and is always printed, I have noticed, in a tiny, incarcerative font. The bones of the story are simple enough. To many it will be familiar. For those for whom it is not—for those who have pushed such worthy national

literary monuments aside to flick through such scurrilous ephemera as this present text—I have no qualms of conscience in ruining it by telling them 'what happened'. Richard Devine is faced with a dilemma. Either he will confess to a murder that he did not commit, or see his mother's virtue impugned. What choice does a Gentleman have? He chooses the former—without such choice, indeed, there would have been no novel—and as a result is transported in chains to the antipodes, to the living hell of Sarah Island, Port Arthur and Norfolk Island, enduring all the relentless brutality that the convict system had to offer. The fragile light of humanity was kept alive through the long years only by the memory of Sylvia, the golden-haired child for whom he yet again sacrifices his freedom, aborting an attempt to escape in order to take her to safety.

There's an awful lot more to be said about *His Natural Life*. About John Rex, Dawes' insidious doppelgänger, about the marvellous Sarah Purfoy, vamp and manipulatrix, about Maurice Frere the bully, and the Reverend North, the dipsomaniacal Christ figure—for some early commentators, the 'Marcus Clarke-in-the-novel'—who sets Dawes on the final path to freedom and obliteration.

If there is any sort of moral to the story though, then surely it has to be that virtue and decency are outright disabling when it comes to the practical business of saving one's skin. Sylvia loses her memory and cannot testify about how Dawes has rescued her and her mother from the violence of the escapees. She later marries

Dawes' nemesis, the brutal martinet Maurice Frere. Yet later—late, late in a very long novel—in another of Dawes' escape attempts, on a boat out from Norfolk Island, he and Sylvia are brought together. The clouds lift from her memory. Now, Sylvia recognises at last 'Good Mr Dawes'. It is, however, too late. There is a great big storm. Shipwreck follows. Dawes and Sylvia are discovered on the last page, floating in one another's arms, on a still sea.

> The Prison Island appeared but as a long, low line on the distant horizon. The tempest was over. As the sun rose higher the air grew balmy, the ocean placid; and, golden in the rays of the new risen morning, the wreck and its burden drifted out to sea.

There had to be more. There just had to be more! What kind of book gets rid of its central characters by grabbing at a passing squall? What kind of story reaches its height and then makes a last-minute curtain grab at a storm and wreck and a sunrise? Something was missing. I was thirteen years old. I distinctly remember hunting for the lost pages—trying to puff and rustle that terrible last page apart, as though several more of them must have got stuck together. As though someone had made off with the real ending.

I felt betrayed, back then. I felt the shades of that same betrayal while reading it yet again just recently, while hunkering down in prison for the Term of my own Natural Life. Betrayed by Marcus

Clarke? Or by the writers of all the other books, who always and by whatever strained ingenuity had always managed to fish their hero and heroine from the foaming brine? Or was I coming to know, for the first time, by way of Clarke's rambling scenario of antipodean misery, that life itself was a bit of a nil–all draw? That this business of short-changing was an implied but invisible term of the contract we'd all been born into in the first place. That just about everything I'd read to that point had been written to disguise the fact.

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MORE OF CLARKE NOW COMES to me through Petra. It was the remand centre's copy of *His Natural Life* that brought the childhood confusion back. There are multiple copies in the centre's library. To remind us that things could be worse? For the rest—for my insatiable curiosity, in recent times, about the fellow and his writings—I rely on Petra Green. My research assistant, she calls herself. I hadn't intended anything quite so formal. Most of what I now know about Marcus Clarke comes to me from her research. I pay her well. I give her few detailed instructions.

Petra's first approach was cautious. There was an exchange of letters. There was a parental stipulation that there should be no epergnes within easy reach. There was, finally, a meeting, which went swimmingly. We did not discuss murder, or imprisonment.

She agreed, for an hourly rate that could only be called generous, to assist.

Petra drops in on Mondays, during visiting hours, with bundles of new Clarke material. Drops in—if I can call it that, with all those close inspections in the outer waiting room, the grim passage through the sliding gates, the long wait amid scowling wives and bawling children, for me to be brought down. I think she rather enjoys the adventure. The warders have begun to joke and flirt with her. There are jokes about files being hidden in her bags. I think she likes that, too.

Petra is tall. I did not say gangling. A little on the bony side, perhaps. She is young enough to be a friend of my daughter, if I had a daughter. She is tall and thin, with long dark hair and huge brown eyes. Her clothing seems rather bright, a bit too summery perhaps for the grim spaces of the visitors' room. Her jeans, her singlet, her bare arms and shoulders just a little too confronting for serious research. She is perhaps not altogether pretty. Her features may be somewhat too large and irregular, her gaze a little too intense. Her looks would not draw much attention, I suspect, from those of her own age. She is always cheery and bright-eyed, though, with an enthusiasm for detail and a quite savage scepticism that keeps me on my toes.

It's one of the perks of getting older. You can spot the things that last.

'Oh, come *on*, Martin!'

I love to see it. She laughs at my Big Picture approach, my soggy romantic leanings, my attempts to swallow up everything around me—dates, times, places, people—into 'indulgent autobiography'. As she calls it.

She, on the other hand, has the strongest sense of a Real World. Of the boundaries that separate one mind from another, and the minds of us all from the Real World of verifiable, quantifiable, referenceable fact. Petra's purpose as a 'professional historian', she insists, is to establish what is what, and what should be kept secure from the plagiaristic vortex, the maudlin meltdown musings of fogey amateurs like me.

'Where, when, why, with whom and to whom? That's real history. That's what we should be looking for.'

She has a mortal dread of what she calls 'rhetorical sludge'. She dismisses it at every opportunity. And with it, most of my favourite historians. Her big concern is that I will just soak Clarke up and smother him with my own baggage. She worries about the way I insist on poring over his fictions, when he wrote so much Real Stuff as well.

'You say you want to know about Marcus Clarke. All we seem to be coming up with is the Life and Opinions of Martin Frobisher. If you ask me.'

Human Repetends. It was very perceptive. It was pretty well exactly what I was setting out to find. Has any biographer worth his

salt—and passionately engaged—ever done any differently, I'd like to know? And with me, at least—as I explained at useless length to Petra—you'd at least get to see how the biographies stitch up behind. Both his and mine?

'Oh, Martin, do come *on*!'

Worlds of glittering hypothesis, the finest of fine fablings, crumble and disperse at her word.

But why Clarke? Petra has come to ask.

What can I say? It's like so much of what we do. Pushing on ahead, in the hope that our reasons for so doing will quietly emerge. Trusting that the ending will deftly circle back to rearrange the rawest beginnings into some sort of order.

Most weeks Petra brings me bags full of articles, photographs, photocopies of archived materials, microfilm copies of old newspapers. She brings me mounds of literary criticism, which is mostly all there is on Clarke. She knows, though, that I have no interest in writing criticism. There is more than enough of it around. There was a symbolic moment—there are few moments in the spare reaches of the remand centre that do not qualify—when the pile of stuff that has been written about Clarke toppled over and buried the lesser pile of what Clarke himself had written. And by the time I'd more or less got the piles back together again, that stuff that had been written about him was so mixed up with Clarke's own work you'd be hard put to work out what was what.

Petra is not particularly interested in Marcus Clarke, but she is increasingly intrigued by my interest in him. And the more time I spend with Petra, the more I find that I am interested in her interest in me. The real business—the crime, the flying epergne, the victim, the bloodied cushion—all this remains as vacant hub, the intriguing vortex around which all else spins. We do not discuss the blow. We do not talk about Madeleine, or Coralie. Her visits do not coincide with those of Rollo. There is something deeply pure, something truly prelapsarian, about the time I spend with Petra.

Petra has, I have noticed, perfect teeth. She hails from the city's dentally pious legal upper-middle classes, from a safe and solid family environment in Canterbury. She is now experimenting with the seedy side of Melbourne life, in the form of torn jeans and a flat in Abbotsford, shared with a boyfriend called Edward. She carries all the burden of Canterbury neatness, the strict culture of high walls and ordered gardens, of boundaries and barriers, of what might be brought inner and what must be kept outer. Edward is writing a doctoral thesis in philosophy. The jeans are cautiously and meticulously hand-torn.

She arrives, most weeks, with her bag stuffed with new material. Edward drives her from library to library. Rollo arranges for her to be paid. I need Petra. We work well together.

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CORALIE AND MADELEINE. IT WAS natural enough that I should have chosen Coralie at first—or that I should, indeed, have been chosen by Coralie. I suspect that some kind of confabulation had taken place on that very first day. That it was decided between them that if I was to be anyone's, I should be Coralie's.

It suited me too, of course. From the outset, Madeleine was cautious, sceptical, ironic, more interested in penetrating and subverting than in complimenting. Coralie, on the other hand, seemed to have such a firm grip on so many things, and such an appealing way of grasping at the rest. It was her desire—uncomplicated, vigorous, greedy—that drew me to her, that seemed to open into life so splendidly. Bit by bit, I slid in her direction, under the approving but probing eye of Madeleine.

Perverse indeed. They were both soon attached to me. More to me than to each other. I heard it, in the end, from both sides. Their mother thought the best way of putting iron in the soul of each was to preach the virtues of the other, thus sowing the seeds of resentment, a level of competition which was easy at first blush or jibe to mistake for intimacy and affection, but which soon revealed its hard serrated edge, its own rich meed of jostling and contempt.

By the time I came along, the close bond—the terrible, deathly struggle between the two of them—had dissipated to a degree, as they headed off into different camps. Coralie moved towards the professional and corporate, and Madeleine to the aesthetical and

alternative. Each so heartily despised the chosen path of the other, each was so bereft of any form of envy for the other's achievements, that it led to an *entente cordiale* of the kind that allowed us all to get together—including Rollo, of course—in a range of public places, theatres, restaurants, cocktail parties, corporate boxes. Strangers would comment indulgently on the 'closeness' of the sisters. How alike they looked (which they no longer did), how close they seemed (which they were not), how fortunate they were to have each other (for years they had only met in the company of others) and to have Rollo and me to support them in their various endeavours.

Ho. Ho. Ho.

The truth was—and perhaps this is always the case in such matters—it was the gaps, the chasms and crevasses, the sheer difficulties in the relationship, that scripted and directed these cheery enactments. Good simulations—witness the success of my appalling French—bring with them such energy, so much that seems to be lacking in the real. I suspect it's why people seem to like me, to want to be around me. I always seem to them to have my feet so solidly planted on whatever patch of ground it is that they happen to be standing on. They feel safe. They feel understood. I am their rock.

It takes work, though, let me tell you.

The sisters knew better. This is the price of intimacy, of long acquaintance. Both of them even seemed to value, I came to realise, what they saw as my 'superficiality'.

'It makes you reliable, Martin,' Coralie would call from the bathroom, as she rolled her stockings up her thighs, or mouthed her lipstick into a preciser symmetry.

'You're somehow always there. Doing what is needful. Whatever it is that people happen to want.'

Madeleine, always the more contemplative and lateral, was also intrigued by what she saw as my sideways shifting, my kaleidoscopic turns.

'And what do *you* think, Martin?'

Give us the fool, Martin. Do us the buffoon.

Madeleine liked to spatter me about like quicksilver, and watch with perverse amusement as I tried to pull myself together.

I have to admit it. I was fascinated by the tussle.

From the outset, I saw myself as teamed up with Coralie. But was this largely because I had already received a solid rejection from Madeleine on the very first night? Not a rejection that was ever set out in words, but it was there in her eyes. She does have a bit of French of her own. At the table, she leaned back in her chair. As though to decline, or at least to think. While Coralie leaned forward. As though to seize.

Our bodies do tell us things of which the mind wots not. Or at least not until much, much later.

Let me tell you of the logistics of seating on a certain park bench in a small garden alongside the Anvers metro, where we stopped for

a breather on our way back from Sacré Coeur. It was the very next day. Madeleine had gone off to find a lavatory, and Coralie and I were seated on the bench. Not hard up against each other, I should say. Madeleine came back after a time. The question was, would she sit between us—which would require a certain movement on Coralie's part to create the space—or would she opt for a place on the far end of the bench, which would also require a small movement on Coralie's part, in my direction? Madeleine chose the space at the end, and Coralie obligingly shoogled along towards me.

Our bodies touched. It was in that moment, in effect, that the marriage was conceived. Consummated, in a sense.

Besides, Rollo was already waiting in the wings.

We all know the famous aphorism of Groucho Marx, of not wanting to belong to any club that would have him as a member. Let me tell you something so horrible, so very teeth-grittingly intimate that I am embarrassed to admit it, even to my gleaming toilet: I have always had a sneaking contempt for anyone who has shown any sign of trying to love me. I have even questioned my own parents' wisdom and credibility on that very basis.

It is a characteristic of fragile personalities—and mine is indeed fragile—to despise those who love us and to pursue, pathetically, abjectly, those who do not. Despise is strong. So is pathetic. In fact, it usually takes much subtler, less direct forms. It inscribes itself in familiar and acceptable social rituals of ambition, professionalism,

even the Life of Art. The truth is, though, that it is generally the antagonist, not the friend, who is the first object of wonder and attraction. It was probably Coralie's rapacity and Madeleine's slicings, peelings and choppings, rather than any real affection, that kept our whole bunfight a-kicking. It fed from the outset in delicious ways from the deepest of resentments, and from the need to hang in there, to be armed and on site, so to speak, in order to score the next point. It was this, I really do suspect, rather than vows and protestations of eternal fealty, or legal contracts or accounts-in-both-names, that kept the whole rickety show on the road for quite so long. And all epergnes assigned to their proper places.

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I HAVE SPENT MORE TIME with Clarke, over the last few months, than with any other human being. Apart, perhaps, from Petra. Hours, I have spent, watching Petra watching Clarke. She is tracking down every jot and tittle that he wrote, everything that was ever written about him, everything that he may or may not have put together, alone or with others.

What was he really like? What sort of person was he? From where, indeed, did all the darkness come? How would you describe him to your friends, for example, if you were to invite him to the Beanies box? If you were to prop him up at a barbecue, or bring

him along to drinks somewhere and say, 'Meet my friend Marcus Clarke'?

No-one has ever had much luck with this one. He came, he wrote and he went, leaving oddly little personal trace. There are accounts by friends. Mostly pretty suspect. There is an admirable biography, now showing its age, and perhaps more in the Petra cast of Who did What to Whom, anyway, than in the sludgy Frobisher inward-probing mode. It notes from its first pages how elusive the fellow was, of how amid the vast production we only get 'mere glimpses' and 'share but few of his private thoughts'.

Petra has been a veritable bloodhound on his trail, and most of what she has found is speculation mounted on rumour, and rumour mounted on speculation. Mostly mere recyclings of Clarke's own clever versions of himself. He did a fine job, in all, of launching himself on the public while hiding pretty well totally from public view. Most of his writing is persona, fence, barrier, shield, mask, performance, deflection, enactment, subterfuge. It's as though the closer you draw to the man himself, the thicker the resistance. The closer you get to the truly personal, the wilder the fictions spin.

He was, in his own words, full of the fashionable 'affectation of cynicism'. Writing, for the most part, witty, allusive satire. Full of breathless surface skitter, with no-one much at home. The darker hues of *His Natural Life* were the Grand Exception rather than the rule. Most of his writing was more in the shadow of the

Left Bank—Clarke was far better at 'doing the French' even than I was—than the shadow of the gulag. Usually, he was more interested in exposing the follies and foibles and hypocrisies of Melbourne's 'wealthy lower orders' than in exploring the Heart of Darkness from whence they sprang.

Petra, I set to the task of chasing up his life. To finding out about the man. The facts.

His circumstances ill-fitted him for humour. His mother died when he was very young. His childhood was painful. Early editors and commentators wrote of his 'almost morbid reticence about his childhood and early life'. While still in his teenage years, he saw his father slip into insanity. The family finances were left in tatters. The precocious son, seventeen years old and near to penniless, was packed off to the Far Ends of the World.

The photographs, just one or two of them surviving, don't tell us much. We see a little man, fastidiously dressed. There is a highly theatrical shot of him with boots, hat and whip. A Young Man Full of the Future. Bristling with wit and aggression. We are told that he had a stammer, which of course the photographs don't show. We know that one arm was shorter than the other, following a childhood operation. The photographs are carefully disposed not to show that either. The flaws are neatly covered.

His stories tell of an unrestricted adolescence, with shadowy followings-up in Paris. Clarke seems to have spun his own story out

into a whole range of crafty fictions, like the stories 'La Beguine', 'Human Repetends', 'Holiday Peak' and 'A Sad Christmas Eve Retrospect'—with his biographers furiously trying, for more than a century now, to spin them back again into the Life of the Author.

Stories. Not facts, Petra reminds me. She will admit them, though, as 'throwing light' of an interesting but always dubious kind.

> So, a wild-eyed and eager schoolboy, I strayed into Bohemia, and acquired in that strange land an assurance and experience ill-suited to my age and temperament.

Fine things were expected to follow. 'My plan of life,' he wrote to his friend Cyril Hopkins, brother of the poet Gerard Manley and later, Clarke's own biographer, 'was an easy-going existence as an attaché to the embassy of Paris or Vienna, with a connection among the literary people.' Instead, he was sent to the antipodes.

> Perhaps I had hoped also to achieve fame as a novelist myself, and now by some hard fate all is changed and I am cast out like a leper into the wilderness.

The leper entered the antipodean wilderness with excellent connections, which he largely managed either to misuse or to sever himself from in a relatively short period. A career in banking fizzled.

A career as a grazier fizzled. A career as a property manager fizzled. A career as an editor and newspaper proprietor fizzled. A career as a librarian sputtered and probably would also have fizzled if Clarke himself had not fizzled first, dying in personal bankruptcy at the age of thirty-five, leaving a wife and six children behind, together with a pile of unfinished and unsaleable manuscripts.

In the meantime, he left the portrait of a city. There was nothing better before. There has been little better since. His productivity was enormous, and in just about every genre: poems, novels, plays, farces, musicals, stories, histories, essays, reviews, parodies, pasquinades and satires.

The centrifuge started spinning soon after his arrival. It was still wheeling at his death. Scholars and bibliographers are still turning up new work.

Out at the margins, the stuff is often fugitive, glitzy and superficial, with a tendency to fade off into clouds of world-weary retrospect and slick bogus nostalgia, wrapped up in a breezy prose to keep the reader moving, moving, moving. Better looked at from a distance, or at high speed, than at close quarters.

Moi? Je flane!

But did Melbourne—Clarke's 'Fawkner's Town'—really exist before he put pen to paper?

I understand that there were already buildings. I know that there were people in the streets. There are papers, records, even

photographs to show that the place was up and running well before his time. For my money, though, it was Clarke who clad the town in colour, texture, character. It was Clarke who drew aside the veil, who equipped the nation with the history that it was so keen to bankroll its way out of, the past of which it did not feel the need. It was Clarke who filled the streets with rich but telling fictions. The full gamut. There were his portraits of the city's Wealthy Lower Orders. There were his savage assaults on the grasping middle ranks, the brokers, the dealers, the lawyers from Parchment Buildings and the gross feeders from Nasturtium Villas. There were his descents down to a 'lower octave', his portraits of Melbourne's 'unvarnished' ranks, the Outer Darkness of Fugitives, Marginals, Outcasts and Old Lags. It was Clarke, above all, who took the place and stretched it, who made it a thing of Mind and not just Body, who supplied the battery of images, portraits, mirrors through which this spot below the Styx might come to know itself.

> There is young Meliboeus yonder, for instance. Meliboeus is five and twenty, red-headed, freckly, stupid and conceited. His father was a convict and his mother a cook, but Meliboeus has 50,000 sheep, and drives a drag. He is consequently among the upper half-dozen, and as he looks around to select a partner from among the mass of beauty on all sides, he knows very well that the dove-cote is fluttered by his eagle glance. He knows that he has only to throw his handkerchief, and any

> one of them will pick it up, from poor little Blanche Gabion (only daughter of the late Captain Gabion, who died of fever in Perth when Blanche was a baby), who lives with a stern female relative, and thinks of going out as a governess, up to the haughty Miss Belinda Battleaxe, whose proud papa was a publican, and who has a fortune nearly as big as her feet.

It's nothing if not lively, but it didn't all go well. Think of the Mac-Mammons, the Dudley Smooths, the Meliboeuses and Battleaxes, the Nine Ugly Misses Mucklepenny, the Young Tallowfats and Misses Shoddy, the Model Legislators and Democratic Snobs and Parochial Committee Men of Fawkner's Town. Is it at all strange that Clarke's principal targets were not especially *grateful* for the help? The knowledge was not needed. One of Clarke's own early essays offered a breezy warning.

> If we are sentimental by constitution, let us read poetry and be happy; if we are practical by constitution, let us cut axehandles and be happy; the worst of it is that the practical people will try and write poetry, and the poetical people are compelled by hard fate to cut axehandles. This is why we get bad axehandles and worse poetry; and unless we establish a company which will reform humanity and put down human nature, I am afraid we shall never be thoroughly comfortable.

The poor fellow was never, I fear, to be comfortable. Human nature—his own, as much as that of others—pressed just a bit too hard. Clarke would not have dreamed, in the first flush of publication, of how far he too would be pushed into the business of making axehandles. Bad axehandles, indeed, and even bad poetry.

He would not have dreamed—one hopes, at least—that the whole thing would end up quite so sadly.

'Do you think he'd have done better if he'd stayed in London? I mean, if he'd had clever friends, good criticism and tougher readers, would he have been stronger? Would he have written stuff with a bit more substance?'

Petra, I should tell you, has an imperfect notion of just about everything he wrote. She had just read an early piece that Clarke had written on art criticism in the colonies. Where one could, he more than hints, get away with Blue Bloody Murder. Clarke even had the gall to write—was it just banter?—about how he worked to depress himself down to levels suitable to his colonial readers' comprehension.

You could argue, though, that if he'd stayed in London, he might never have written anything. Indignation. Disappointment. Agrophobia. Frustration. Anger. These are the great seedbeds for invention, for that thrilling touch of gritty nastiness. Could it have been the *lack*, in fact, that set the centrifuge in motion? Clarke lamented to his friends in London that the colonies were a 'wilderness' and the

domain of 'vulgarity and mob rule'. But what if the place had been more civilised? Was it perhaps the wilderness that brought out the best in Clarke? I put it to Petra. Was it the gap that yawned between what he wanted and what he largely got—between the youthful jaunt in Paris, and a stroll through the Outer Darkness of Fawkner's Town—that set the imagination pumping? Was it actually the outrageous vulgarity of Fawkner's Town, still in the flush of Land Grab and Gold Rush prosperity, that set the Peripatetic Philosopher on his way?

~

HIS NATURAL LIFE. HIS GREATEST work. It's a vast novel, even in its truncated form. Truncated? Yes—because it turns out that my childhood instinct was right. My instinct to huff and to puff that final page into more pages was entirely sound. It really had been longer—the original serialised version, published in the *Australian Journal* between March 1870 and June 1872, was much longer than was ever intended in the original plan. It almost bankrupted the paper, exhausting writer and readers alike. Did Clarke at times default? Petra tells me she once came across a notice in the paper stating that in a particular month Mr Clarke had 'failed to fulfill his obligations to this newspaper'. The tone is indignant, and terse.

There are improbable stories about Clarke being locked in a room and not let out until he pushed the next completed chapter under the door. There are tales of Clarke—more than a little dubious, for those who have checked the chronology—sitting at his rostrum in the library, where he spent so many years, penning his novel when he should have been attending to library business. There has even been speculation that, once he plotted his way into the depths of *His Natural Life*, most of the inspiration for the work started to come less from his real subject than from his own imprisonment within the novel itself. Within the publisher's contract. Within the gargantuan plot that he had himself created.

What the long version shows—and even Petra seems inclined to agree with this—is Clarke pulling back, yet again, from the promptings of his own genius. Four hundred pages of retreating, in fact, and he was lucky to have friends and sponsors, like the prominent Victorian judge Charles Gavan Duffy, who could see what he was up to. For publication as a single volume, Clarke was told to get rid of the tangled redemptive plotting, the unlikely cheery ending. He simply chopped the thing in half, tidied up a few details, neatened up the ends and drowned his central characters. The novel was released to the public in its single-volume form in 1874.

The long version—veering dangerously out of control, I suggest, by the end—was built on a fall-and-redemption model.

Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained. The convict system was the fall. The 1856 Eureka Stockade incident—Australia's only substantial staging of armed resistance to Tyranny and Oppression—provided the upswing, the redemptive moment. The offspring of most of the early generation, the penitentiary generation, then appear in the second half, and generally in cleansed and redeemed form. Domestic happiness and material prosperity take the place of torture, cannibalism and murder. Clarke's plot then suddenly truncates, knits and finishes in breathless and bewilderingly complex ways, with all his characters, their children and their children's children suddenly crowding in on him and demanding to be fixed up with a suitable ending.

But I'm not sure, you see, how well shaped-up a good book needs to be. How impervious to criticism. As a publisher, I'm less interested in wisdom than in intriguing forms of weakness. I look for fractures, for rich uncertainty. I hunt for signs of excess. Cracks, leaks and confusion. I recall something that an English critic said about Jonathan Swift. That he was characterised by strength of feeling, and lack of insight into that feeling. Is that a criticism? I don't think that my English critic had read Marcus Clarke. Had he done so, he might have found further use for his thoughts on Swift. There is a lot that is clumsy, mawkish and confused in what Clarke wrote. Much of his work was published while still more or less 'in progress', sent down in handfuls, like Dr Johnson's

Rasselas, to the printer. There are ill-thought-through essays that read like hasty imitations of essays written elsewhere. There are satirical pieces in which the satire gets lost in bile and anger. There are stories that work up a decent fictional lather and then make a quick grab at the sentimental and the melodramatic in order to get some sort of column-length closedown, a cheque in the bank and a chop on the table.

His Natural Life is better—even the long version, even if it is content to land you in the scrum. It's got bits that don't actually work terribly well, mixed in with vast and unforgettable shapes that invade the mind and lodge there. It's one of those books where you're invited to share in the sheer labour of trying to pull the whole thing together. Books where the pages are drenched with the sweat of authorial effort in trying to curb the brute that has been unleashed, just enough to get it—some of it at least—onto the page. Big, overreaching, messy tomes with grand fragments that stick out at awkward angles, mixed in with the most craven submission to the ruling fictional creeds.

Clarke's *His Natural Life* is one of the best examples I can think of. The long version should, in my view, still be read. It's an intriguing instance of a writer working against himself. Of a Frankenstein, having unleashed his monster, trying to pare its nails and scrub it up for polite society. Of a writer, overwhelmed by the power of his own imagination, trying to squeeze his best ideas back into other people's moulds. It's a book where we can see Clarke the publisher's

hack sitting across from Clarke the literary genius, the two of them nodding to each other occasionally across the desk. Here and there they may seem to agree on some small point—a paragraph here, a page or two there—but largely they are inclined to take the whole thing in very different directions.

I put it next to *Crime and Punishment*, and just about everything that D.H. Lawrence ever wrote, as one of the great-messes-that-happen-to-work. The whole book could stand as an excellent example for all of us in how not to go about putting a novel together. And with luck, just a few of us might show ourselves capable of making the same mistakes.

Petra had not read the book at all before she met me. She had scarcely even heard of Marcus Clarke.

I ran a test. Against Petra's perfect teeth. Teeth which belong, I have always felt, to the longer, happy-ending version of the world. To the redemptive upswing. To the world of Canterbury, and not to the tragic zone. She ploughed her way through the longer *His Natural Life*. I asked her to read it in its month-by-month version, in the original newspaper. She picked up lots of interesting snippets—this was where she found his publishers' notice about his failure to submit his copy on time. But the lying, the historical distortion, just seemed to go on and on. The fact that all these terrible things did happen somewhere, to someone, didn't mean that you could pile them all onto the back of just one character.

There was a whole research project, Petra claimed, in just hunting down all the things he managed to get wrong.

She drummed her fingers on the table.

Oh, sludge, sludge, sludge!

3

MURDER AND MAYHEM SO REFRESH THE WORLD. I DO RECALL THE splendid glitter of the epergne as it caught for one nanosecond the light from our most prized chandelier. I see, as vividly now as when it happened, the strange angles, the play of reflections, the unusual configuration of the bodies in the room as the wretched thing picked up momentum.

I was also aware, as the epergne started to move, that I was not only enhancing the present with an unaccustomed passion, and not only adjusting our future. (Life, I do recall thinking as I saw in that awful moment my reflection in her startled eyes, will probably never be quite the same again, once this Blunt Object has made its way to the end of its stroke.) I understood that, in a certain way, I was reshaping the past. That awareness has now had time to shift

into something else, something more considered, something that has, in the months since the stroke began, turned itself into the shape of a more polished reflection. It was, at the time of course, more an instantaneous flash of realisation than anything that you could properly call a 'thought'. Whole sets of apparently random happenings, all sorts of actions and thoughts which had become interned by routine, their edges blunted by habit and repetition, suddenly took on a new and directed meaning. Instead of mere puddles, billabongs, meanderings, whirlpools and eddies, there was now a major current which really only started to flow—which really only began to take on any kind of momentum—in that foolish and desperate second when my fingers began to close around the slim and inviting shaft of the epergne.

Most of my work, since our return from London, has been in publishing. After a lifetime of advising, bullying and cajoling novelists and poets through their paces, I was blessed in that less-than-second with the realisation of what it truly meant to create a work of art. A work of narrative art, in this instance, but with all the distilled and instantaneous revelatory power of a splendid painting. In the slender duration of that ill-advised but altogether telling motion of old Ernie's precious epergne, the otherwise largely misused and routinely dispersed energy of the cosmos was suddenly brought to some kind of resolution, a focused *direction*, certainly, if not actually a meaning.

Everything that had happened between us over the preceding twenty-five years took on point and potency, every jibe and thrust and sally suddenly took its place in a chapter, and every chapter in a story that was here, now, at last, whistling, glittering, reaching backwards as it shot forwards towards a conclusion that graced everyone, everything that we had done, the whole sorry circuitous saga of we four Useless Fillers of Existence—me, Rollo, Coralie and Madeleine—with the seductive patination of vast purpose and intent.

We *were* heading somewhere. There was indeed—as none of us would ever have quite believed until this moment—a shape to it all, and an ending in store. And if Art does not give us that, then what does it do?

Is the blow with the epergne—a frightening thought this—the best that I can do?

~

'YOU'RE OUT OF TOUCH, MARTIN. That's your problem.'

I pay Petra for information, not counselling. It's true, though. I don't like touch. In time, Petra will discover that being in touch is also what she's being hired for. She and Edward, and Edward's Mazda, are to take the job in hand.

The walls of the remand centre now stand between me and the whole business of being in touch. My mobile phone has been

confiscated. I may not use the internet. I have no address book or diary. No-one wants to see me. No-one needs my opinion. No-one seeks my advice.

O happy fault!

For the moment, she arrives most weeks, her satchel laden with new treasures. There are more copies of poems, of plays, of novels and bits of novels, of letters and notebooks, articles, column upon column of newspaper 'twaddle' (as Clarke called it), essays, tracts, editions and translations.

The visitors' room is no place either for dalliance or for earnest scholarship. The walls are bare. Guards stand in place, shuffling from foot to foot. The tables are white and badly scratched. The lights are far too bright. My skin, I'm sure, is green.

Petra extracts the papers from her satchel and piles them on the table in front of me, in a large and unstable pile. They leave dust and sometimes black marks on her clothing. The dust and stains suit her torn jeans.

She sits and beams at me across the pile. Petra has a wonderful smile. Her eyes widen. Her face suddenly loses all inhibition. Her large teeth catch the light. She seems to derive an almost sensual pleasure from this burrowing, fossicking, flicking, copying and collecting.

I beam back. Increasingly, it is the beaming on the other side that pleases, not the pile. I find I look forward more and more

intensely to her visits. She comes more often than she needs to. I do wonder how much work she can still be doing on her Russian invasion.

I find ingenious ways of paying Petra far more than she has actually earned. Photocopying fees, petrol for the Mazda, the costs of photography, the odd trip. Rollo fixes up the bills. Rollo's only response is a slight pursing of the lips. Rollo says nothing.

'It's not all that easy, you know, when you won't really tell me what we're looking for. That's what Edward keeps asking. What are we actually chasing? I'm just not sure what you *want*.'

I'm just not sure what I want. My instructions are simple. Just keep collecting everything that he wrote.

Petra pauses from her burrowing to look around the visitors' room.

'You can't really be happy here, can you, Martin? I mean, *really*?'

There is little happiness on view. Some kid has just had his ears boxed, though whether by the visiting mother or the interned father I am not able to tell. His yelping comes back to us off the walls. Petra's lip curls. Her nose wrinkles. Hand-torn jeans are one thing. Real rips and crooked teeth and runny noses are another.

Am I happy here? What is pleasure? What is happiness? For me, it's more something that I've watched people 'do' than anything I've ever wanted for myself.

'What can I *really* do for you, Martin? This place is awful. It's really gross. Are you sure you're alright here? Just waiting? For whatever?'

I have been a Busy Man, Petra. Such busyness has its dangerous uses. I am more in touch here, without phone, diary or appointments, than I have ever been.

Most of what I can say to Petra, though, is simply too bleak and far too wintry for such youthful ears. Besides, we have an arrangement. The place, my life, the crime, the sweeping epergne is not an issue. The remand centre is my office. The guards are my executive assistants. Nor would it be so very easy to make myself heard over the racket that the wretched kid is making.

~

I DISLIKE ALCOHOL. I KEEP a glass of wine in front of me at dinner to distract attention from the fact. I know that I have passed, on occasion, for some kind of authority on matters of quality in wine. Many of my poor hosts have interpreted my abstemiousness as a form of contempt—and what do I find on my next visit? Yet more elevated and conspicuously expensive wines: Penfolds Grange, Château Margaux, Mouton Rothschild, with my wretched hosts taking a certain kind of satisfaction, I almost believe, from what they interpret as my disdain. Such deep fastidiousness, such studious rudeness, such rank ingratitude: these things do not come *cheaply*!

The reality is, though, that although I'm not a bad sniffer, with a good command of the language of sniffing, and usually enough bad French flung in to terrify my hosts into admiring silence, the truth is I can't stand the warm feelings, the bogus camaraderie that comes with a good sousing. I loathe that spurious and passing sense of wellbeing, of fellowship, that one gets from being tipsy.

Tipsiness, you see, means the onset of Sincerity. I have watched the city's greatest crooks and liars, the most successful scamsters, hypesters, hucksters and real-estate agents, taking on genuineness and sincerity by the beakerful. This scares me. I do not want to be sincere. Even more, I intensely dislike being exposed to it in others. Life remains livable, for most of us, through our incapacity to see into the hearts of others. When I drink, I lose distance. In such a state, even the worst of them starts to invite compassion.

Sincerity? Give us Art, lest we perish of the Real. Nietzsche. Good art begins in impersonation. In being able to simulate someone—a whole string of someones—that you are not. The very thing that Marcus Clarke was so good at. It's the energy of fictioning, of impersonating, simulating and imagining that reaches out and pulls the reader in. You may have read Henry James' story, 'the Real Thing', about how a cockney flower-seller and a little Italian 'bankrupt orange-monger' provided much better models for sketches of English aristocrats than real aristocrats ever could. About how the

energy of their 'doing' aristocrats gave those sketches such strength, such apparent authenticity.

I have spent my life, since my time in Oxford and Mawnsley College, in publishing, in trading in the lives, the dreams of others. Disguise and fancy dress, let me tell you, will infiltrate regions of the heart where poor bare forked truth will never penetrate.

The Whole Truth simply will not *entertain* you, Your Honour, the way a good yarn should!

~

IT WAS ROLLO'S SINCERITY, ODDLY enough, Rollo's frank accord of inner and outer, which was the source of so much of our pain. Coralie—far more than his own wife—spent much of her time getting her knife into poor Rollo.

Rollo, I should tell you, is a thoroughbred, bred purely for the law. Rollo is tall and thin, with fine features that seem formed for the very closest of clean shaving, with a long lick of fine dark hair that falls to one side of a tall and shining forehead. Rollo is as irretrievably measured, in his neatly tailored blue suits, as Madeleine is flaccid, loose and accessible in her flowing cassocks and caftans and scarves. Rollo's high brow gleams with exact intelligence. Rollo's thin lips tell of a close and limitless discretion.

'Ah me. There is a lot of human nature,' Clarke wrote somewhere,

'in men and women.' Coralie did not spend a lot of time speculating about such things. Her heavy commitments in the area of human resource management did not allow her the time. There was something, though, in poor Rollo's demeanour and approach to life that did particularly seem to annoy her, which meant that, soon after his marriage to Madeleine, she started chipping at him. A lowish set of cuts and jibes, I always thought, of a kind that steadily deepened into what might have been ongoing humiliation, except that Rollo himself always seemed so oblivious to them. Once Coralie got started, I anticipated an outbreak of Blue Bloody Murder. Instead, Rollo would just fiddle with his cuffs.

'I say, do you really think so, Coralie?'

It was maddening. Though whether it was Coralie's savage thrusts or Rollo's bland unblinking parries that caused the irritation, I could not to this day tell.

Rollo was on the scene long before our marriage. Rollo had long been waiting. He and his mother had, years before, come to tea. The sisters' mother approved the tie and cufflinks. The name of Bean was already a byword, up and down the leafy streets. No-one inquired after Ernie's opinion. Or perhaps even Madeleine's.

The date was set, vaguely, far in the future.

I have had much time to think about Coralie's assaults on Rollo. As the years went by, I think that her sallies were in part a response to my own elusiveness. Rollo was always so very present. So very

entirely 'there'. When Coralie fired a question at me, I had long developed an endearing way of offering three or four answers, each of which was designed to subvert and vary the one that had gone before. Each of which was designed to predict Coralie's response to the previous reply, and to disorient it just slightly. It was my way of trying to batter her off her templates, to enrich and vary our exchange.

With Rollo, on the other hand, the response was always clear. Unsullied by nuance. And entirely predictable. He made rich quarry. And Coralie would seek him out.

Madeleine's favourite sport, increasingly, lay in baiting me. She would turn, in the midst of some idle conversation, her eyes glittering with a prickly irony that she seemed to mistake for wit.

'And what do *you* think, Martin?'

Give me some ammunition, Martin. Just say something, Martin, anything will do, and I'll show you the fool. Madeleine developed an annoying habit of raising her right eyebrow as she asked a question. And then of raising it just one notch further as I replied. As if to say, 'Well, Martin, you and I both know what a load of old rope *that* is!'

The surface is indeed thin. I admit as much. Always one-dimensional. Usually faked. But I don't think either of the sisters has ever caught much glimpse of the deep viscosity of inner life that mulls just below that surface. I once heard a professional colleague being dismissed as a 'marshmallow man'. We hear speak of human

muffins and cream-puffs, and, more notoriously in the Australian context, soufflés. I see myself rather as a crème brûlée; the thin, brittle, shining surface, and the rich custard of deep contention murking below.

Madeleine, though, had a more homely metaphor to hand. She loved to say it, and preferably before a crowd.

'You're a bit like an onion, Martin. Layer after layer, and nothing at the centre when you finally get near.'

Her assaults on me were every bit as vicious as those of Coralie on Rollo. Indeed, I even allowed myself to wonder if Coralie's shafts at Rollo might not have been some kind of tit for tat. Balancing the ledgers. Keeping our end up. I even wondered if they might not be some obscure form of loving, with each jab at poor Rollo an indirect compliment to me?

Beneath all of it, I was convinced, lay the dead weight of the mother's approval. That invitation to tea. That conferral, over scones, with Madame Bean. That entry, into all our lives, of Rollo as the perfect embodiment of the mother's dreams, the perfect panacea to the mother's anguish. Rollo, who was always as clean and neat as he was courteous and predictable. As close, indeed, as a living, breathing human being can come to the Blessed State of Utter Disinfection.

The attacks on Rollo were, in short, attacks on the deceased mother. Not on the mother herself, the spray-can finger long at peace, long gone to her Eternal Rest. One loves one's mother. One

particularly loves one's mother when she is deceased. Madeleine and Coralie were both astutely schooled in deep love of the oppressor. But all the faceless anguish—all shades of the lifelong prison house—was somehow there, walking, talking, filing forms, arriving on time and topping up glasses, in the innocent, unfortunate Rollo. Who always did his best.

Coralie, with some dim and upside-down insight into her own limitations, goaded Rollo to reveal some further kind of life. She rode him, in the hope of coming between the man and his cufflinks. In the hope of exposing chinks in his unspeakable amiability, fissures where good sense and tolerance and decency simply would not fit the bill. To which Rollo seemed to have no response, but did not, as far as Madeleine and I could tell, take any particular offence, either.

Coralie seemed to want to find in Rollo cynicism, opportunism, ambiguity and delinquency of just about any kind. She always had a Bit of a Thing about lawyers and the law, she would say—in her heart of hearts I suspect she regretted not being herself a lawyer—and Rollo bore the brunt of it. But always, right up until the flight of the epergne, which I guess we might take as some kind of ending—a point at the very least from which we might take some kind of *perspective*—it was as though the focus of her attacks, petty and niggling as they were, was simply too broad for Rollo ever to locate a point on which to respond. If the barrage became too intense, he

would simply find something else to do; call for a waiter, or pour new drinks, or suggest we take a walk.

~

THE REAL MARCUS CLARKE. IT is proving quite a task. Make a grab for the fellow, and he's gone. Not just for me, coming along a century and a half after he expired. Not just for Petra, so hot upon his trail. It was the same for those who knew him at the time. When they were at school together, Gerard Manley Hopkins famously referred to Clarke as a 'harlequinesque' and 'thaumatropic' being. The remark gets quoted everywhere. Clarke was already slipping through the fingers, at such an early age.

Sometimes, it was just downright lying. Clarke wrote to Hopkins' brother Cyril not long after his arrival in Fawkner's Town that he was 'in bad spirits' and had 'nothing to say; you know my mercurial temperament and that in my mental barometer the quicksilver is either up to 70 Fahrenheit or down to Zero'.

This is frank enough. The sad thing is that a lot of what Clarke wrote to Hopkins wasn't. The portraits that he sent back to Hopkins appear to contain almost as much inventiveness as the pages of *The Peripatetic Philosopher*. It is unlikely that Clarke ever had cook, groom, nurse and housemaid at his beck and call, as he maintained. It is most unlikely that he ever topped off five hundred a year at the

library with a further five hundred for 'scribbling *Our Melbourne Correspondence* or some such twaddle in a local journal'.

His masks were legion. There is the Peripatetic Philosopher. There is Fantoccini. There is Atticus. There is Marcellus Clodius. There is Marston, from his *Noah's Ark Dialogues*. There are scores of anonymous and pseudonymous columns and reviews and commentaries, with Clarke hiding and disguising, slipping from voice to voice, depending on which particular 'mess of pottage' he was writing for, what kind of 'twaddle' was required for the next day's press. Hiding his extreme youth, in his early *Peripatetic Philosopher* papers, under the mask of cynicism. Hiding from his patrons and sponsors. Hiding from his wife. Hiding from his debtors. Hiding from his readers. Perhaps hiding from himself?

He was, in effect, infernally good at doing, masking, and doing yet again and in another guise. There's an early account from the sober poet Henry Kendall which might have served as a warning, to writer and to reader:

> There was stuff in the man—good stuff, too, only he himself did not appear to value it. Nothing seemed to satisfy him better than the borrowed and theatrical garb under which he contrived, too successfully sometimes, to hide his inherent gifts; in short, to affect the cynicism of a Coldstream, to carry that affection into ordinary conversation, to make it the staple of his literary work, to look, talk,

> and write like a 'blasé' libertine, constituted the chief delight of my juvenile friend—my budding philosopher.

There's the later story, too, of the bailiff who was sent to collect on Clarke's debts, near the very end of Clarke's short life. He was invited in and so wined, dined, charmed, sherried, ported and cigared that he came away determined to defend Clarke against all such comers as himself.

Clarke was a man who, I suspect, preferred to speak, and to be spoken about, than to be spoken to.

Many of his *bons mots* have been set down for posterity. Sprightly mythologies abound, such as the tale that a cigar stub shoved in the mouth of one of the zinc lions on the portal of the Fawkner's Town library meant that Clarke was 'in', and that old story—I've told it already—about Clarke being locked in a room until the next instalment of *His Natural Life* was ready.

'Why don't you believe it, Martin?'

It was my turn for scepticism.

'They're good yarns, Petra, but don't you think they're all just a bit close to the kinds of things people want to hear? A bit too close to the business of acting out the Gentleman Bohemian? A kind of wishful thinking on the part of eager friends? You've seen the fellow's amazing output. How much time was there, really, for all this fun and games?'

Everyone seems to have an interest in keeping the bravado running, in keeping the centrifuge spinning. The private man, though, kept very, very private.

Clarke, still very young, broke on the town with *The Peripatetic Philosopher*—a newspaper column, part-published in one volume in 1869. Petra has found a copy. It was, he crowed, 'a preposterous book, full of stale jokes, and borrowed metaphors, and stolen thoughts and hashed-up ideas of other people', and a 'miserable decoction of Thackeray, and Dickens, and Balzac, and George Sala, and Douglas Jerrold, and anybody else whose works are obtainable to be plagiarised'.

> I am not pestilently moral. I do not set up to be a steady burning light. I am rather a flickering will-o'-the-wisp, or a wandering corpse-candle, floating over moors and marshes. I slip, I slide, I gleam, I glance by all sorts of fields and fallows, and, while basking on the sunny side of Bourke-street, forget my rags and tatters. Being but that which a German friend of mine once called Shakespeare, to wit, 'a poor hobbler', I can't afford to be desperately righteous, and am obliged by sheer hunger to eat meat offered to idols.

It's the masks, the whole business of *seeming* that is the life of the party, and the nonsense comes on in floods.

> Since those days I have been many things—tavern waiter, *claquer* attached to the staff of the Odeon, 'agent' in the pay of M. Stanislaus Pronoitowski, minister of police under Nicholas, Emperor of all the Russias; stock-rider on a cattle station; cabin boy on board the Brahmapootra, East Indiaman; editor, reporter, leading article writer and compositor to the *Mallee-Scrub Gazette* (with which were incorporated the Dead-horse-gully Tribune and Old-man-plains District Advertiser). I have been everything by turns, and nothing long. I have swept the streets of Pekin, and dined upon puppy-pie and bird's-nest soup with my old friend Fo-hi (Mandarin of the glass button and Chief Inspector of the Bamboos to the Brother of the Moon and Uncle of the Seven Stars) . . .

Petra just finds it exasperating. I try to read it to her. She soon holds up a hand.

'It just goes on and on. There's no point. And those reviews he quotes. I'm not sure they ever existed, most of them. I think he made most of them up. I've looked everywhere, and you know I'm good at this sort of thing.'

I reassure her. Clarke did seem almost as good at creating his own critics as he was at inventing new authors, new versions of himself, new targets for them to attack.

Petra has been doing the round of critics. Some of them did take him to task. Generally much later. Some argued that for all the breezy

overtures, the cheery cynicism, the yards of witty skitter, Clarke was a bit of a cold fish. That, despite his professed love for 'unvarnished humanity', for 'human life with its coat off', he lacked compassion. A celebrated critic in the *Bulletin* claimed that his works 'had no humanity in them'. That they 'sparkle coldly, illumined by the head but hardly ever heated by the heart'; that they didn't 'sound the human depths'. Another, equally celebrated, wrote that 'though warm of heart in the daily affairs of life, his imagination was always cold; he was the professional, moved by nothing but his own sense of skill'. There were claims that Clarke's fabled descents down the social scale—his early articles on Fawkner's Town's immigrants' home, its opium dens and lodging houses—were for no more than literary voyeurism. That they had more to do with Clarke's love of Edgar Allan Poe and a lifelong attraction to 'the strange, mournful and grotesque'—even Petra drops hints in this direction—than with any genuine concern for the fortunes of shirtsleeved humanity. It was suggested that the kind of sensationalism that marred *His Natural Life* ran through too much of what he wrote. It was implied that Marcus Clarke, in the end, was actually more interested in what human misery could do for literature than what literature could do for misery.

My instinct is to defend the fellow.

'Just stick to the sources, Martin. This is supposed to be history, not advocacy.'

It's not supposed to be history. One day she'll understand.

4

INCARCERATION. FOR YEARS, I HAVE BEEN WRITING. OR TRYING TO write. Stuffing my black plastic bags with rejected drafts—all my drafts, in fact—and carting them down to the beach. I find myself now locked in a room with no light or dark or sound or air—there are no windows in the remand centre—other than what the administration has deemed necessary. Forwards has gone. Backwards is all. Though I have, it seems, very little past that I may call on—Clive and I have gone over the rules of evidence, the concepts of Relevance and Admissibility—and very little future, other than that to be decreed by the law.

> My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
> My soul the father, and these two beget

A generation of still-breeding thoughts;
And these same thoughts people this little world,
In humours like the people of this world,
For no thought is contented . . .

Shakespeare had it right. Still-breeding thoughts do come on apace. The confinement brings relief. And new forms of concentration. Thoughts that simply spun away now bounce back to link arms with one another. New narratives suggest themselves. Ever more intricate defences. Far richer in purpose and intent, where once mere chaos, mere disorder reigned.

I think I became aware, near the very height of the swing, that thinking back would from then on be more rewarding than thinking forward. That whatever the result of lifting and wielding and striking, it was unlikely to increase the general stock of human happiness, nor advance in any particular our Quality of Life.

They say that the older a man gets, the further he had to walk to school. The more the most innocent of domestic rituals becomes laden with retrospective menace. The more you penetrate life's deeper thickets, the more deliciously your parents are incriminated. It is indeed amazing how much comes together, how many loose ends tie up. How chance and random incident suddenly begin to take on *significance*, like scenes in a play, or chapters in a book—so much richer, more coherent than they were the first time round.

One must go back, Your Honour, much further back than legal stories usually allow. One must go far beyond the specific act—the mere flight of an epergne (a trivial occurrence, surely, given the time it took)—and delve into the prehistory of the *mens rea*. One must go far more deeply into whatever it was that the person attached to the business end of it thought that he was doing—he not being *himself*, surely, in any practical sense—and from thence, we can surely uncover all the pathos, all the moving sentiment that we need to addle your thoughts, to confuse your judgment, and to add a rich haze of Reasonable Doubt.

~

THERE WAS MY SPELL IN the Australian bush. This was all long before London. It was before my own time in the law. It was before the scholarship to Oxford, and Mawnsley College.

Was it all my father's fault? My father early detected signs of instability. He had determined that I would be a lawyer. I don't think he had much idea of what lawyers actually did. My father's fantasies were the fantasies of a local stock and station agent. He was, I suspect, a man of deep artistic leanings, who ascribed his own professional failure (as he saw it) to those leanings, and had set out to beat off all signs of poetic backsliding in me and my sisters.

He was, I always thought, a man richly divided against himself, unable to get access to the best of what he was—the artist with no skills, a philosopher without a library, the musician who couldn't hold a note—who had long turned against the distraction, the yearning, the urgent sense all artists have of an uncompleted world, to package it, the frustration and the anger, into plans for my future. My career.

I too showed a leaning towards the arts. The slippery slope. I was, it seemed, determined to be a 'lousy waster' after all. My mother seemed inclined to encourage me. Just once or twice, he and I tried to talk about it. It was usually when we were driving somewhere. It is so much easier to broach the great questions of life, to probe the more intimate and sewery channels of the psyche, when it's all disguised and deflected through the business of going somewhere, of getting somewhere, of driving and being driven, with all sorts of things outside the truck to look at, and lots of welcome interruptions to protect you and distract you as you edge towards the Bigger Issues.

Petrol to pump, gates to open, sheep out on the road.

I liked my father. I think it was the flaws, the weaknesses, the ongoing battle against his own better self that I most deeply admired. Quite early, he had hatched some misguided notion that a spell as a jackeroo would make a man of me. I think he read about this in an English magazine. And so I was sent off. To be a jackeroo?

No. Times had moved on. I was dispatched to Queensland to take on the modern variant. I became a prospector. It was the time of the great mineral boom. The days of Western Mining and Poseidon, of massive leaps in share prices, with everyone suddenly an expert on stocks and shares, and every expert proclaiming that the prices could only go higher. The nation quivered with greed. A few Jeremiahs were heard to talk about the upcoming crash. Tarred and feathered, they were, and run out of town on a rail.

A friend of a friend of an uncle found me the position, doing the legwork for geochemical surveys. It was, in a sense, the simplest of jobs. Head office obtained aerial photographs of the areas where they held their mineral leases. They drew precise grids across the photographs, and sent a team of us out in a Toyota LandCruiser with augers, compasses and satchels to take core samples, which we would document and send back to laboratories in Brisbane for testing.

We were chasing copper. Our task was to find Significant Traces. It was all complicated by the fact that the lines on the photographs actually crossed running creeks and deep rivers and tracked up the side of steep cliffs that were invisible from the air. The grids sent us deep into thick and impenetrable lantana scrub where you had to chop yourself a path with machetes, every inch of the way. We were sent up and down mountain slopes by what usually turned out to be the most precipitous routes. We took samples at regular

intervals up and down the face of sheer cliffs, from river beds and from huge plates of solid rock. Nor could we vary the route in any way without losing our compass bearing. Whole days were spent in working out ingenious ways of maintaining the line and charting the precise location of the samples according to the dictates of the head office grids. The sheer impossibility of the task was daunting. It was exhilarating, too. I trimmed, tanned and toughened, and went sinewy to the task.

There were three of us. One was a hopeless middle-aged alcoholic called Keith, a talented shipwreck of a man whose mates in the industry had cobbled together this last contract. Keith had all the work-shy craftiness of the committed inebriate. The other was an English public-school dropout, the Son of a Distinguished Family—as he would assure me with great frequency as the evening binges wore on—whom he sorely disobliged by dropping out of school, then dropping out of urban employment. He then headed for the Australian bush, where accent, forearm and belly had thickened in great measure, but where his success among the lumpy and attention-starved barmaids and pump attendants of southern Queensland still told of a power to charm.

I was there, as my father put it, to see a bit of the Real World. This particular neck of the real world, though, turned out to be a lot less real than he could have imagined.

The whole thing was a scam.

We discovered this, Keith and the Son of the DF and I, after a conscientious first month spent crawling up the steep slopes of mountains in the Esk Valley, to the west of Brisbane. We chopped our way through thick and lacerating lantana brambles, lugging our heavy satchels of soil samples with us and stopping now and then to auger further samples out of what seemed like purely vertical surfaces.

The results came back from the first set of samples we sent back to the labs. We had indeed discovered significant traces of copper. In fact, the grid had been designed to cross a set of nineteenth-century diggings. We had taken a whole set of samples from old mullock heaps, where there had to be lots of leftover copper simply lying around.

The good news went up to head office.

The result, though, was a telegram back, demanding that we pack up our gear that very night, and get out. Before we uncovered any evidence where the traces might run out.

Head office was actually one hour a week in the office of a canny Brisbane solicitor, who had got together with cronies from his own and from the medical profession, had incorporated Rytech Industries. The intent was to drum up a prospectus trumpeting 'significant traces', with the hope of selling out to a bigger operation just before the crunch. The Jeremiahs had, in this instance, shaved their beards, donned pinstripes, and were watching the clock tick

from behind their cash registers on the tenth floor of the City Mutual Building in King Street.

Once we realised that this was the game, the whole business of collecting soil samples became much easier. We now worked out of a town called Kilkivan, further north. Our approach to the head office grids became more creative. The sight of a distant pine on a ridge replaced the use of the compass. The unlikelihood of any mining ever taking place inspired us to find easier ways of tracking up and down the slopes. We took samples from more comfortable locations and labelled them in ways that kept the grid intact.

There was even one day—I confess this in some trepidation, even after so many years, when most of the pinstriped rogues are probably dead or gone gaga in their Brisbane rest homes—when all the samples, charted across a deep forest grid of cliffs and ravines and waterfalls, were actually taken from behind the dunny in the backyard of the Kilkivan pub.

Head office seemed more and more remote. The grids went very fuzzy. Keith showed less and less interest in the work. He'd located his *Belle Dame sans Merci* in a petrol pump attendant from just outside the next town, and spent his days loitering around the Toolgoolwah pub, waiting for her to shut down the pumps and join him over the bar. We soon learned how to stack the charts, to seed the grids, to keep head office happy with visions of a new El

Dorado, seductive glimpses of a Land of Milk and Honey and the purest of Copper Ore.

It didn't matter. The whole Australian 'mineral boom'—most of which seemed to have about as much substance as our own operation—collapsed within the next few months anyway. The shares plummeted, rather earlier than the Boys from Brissie were predicting. They were almost certainly left with their significant traces of copper on their hands, with all our glorious El Dorados yet untested, with their prospectus still in cardboard boxes at the printers, and the poor printer still unpaid.

In some ways, my father was right. I did learn much about human nature, and the real world. And I did learn much about a thing called Weird Melancholy, and the Australian bush.

~

I HAVE NEVER SEEN PETRA in real daylight. Nor, for that matter, has she seen me. The lights in the visitors' room are unnaturally bright. They are kept at what must be interrogation levels. We blink and squint and glow at each other. The lights gleam and sizzle and bounce off the formica tabletops. The room is full of plastic and steel, and all at harsh right angles.

I find myself thinking of meetings with Petra on a green sward somewhere, with a picnic basket and a gingham cloth. I

see her brushing flies away, pushing bull ants from her notes and photocopies, and smiling at me despite it all. I dream, from the aluminium and plasterboard depths of the remand centre, of remote and improbable trystings in the deep heart of the Australian bush.

The bush, the bush—the frauds that have been committed in its name! So often I have wondered why it is that close association with Nature and the Land—a deep attachment to the earth—generally results in such niggardly thoughts and contracted views? Why it is that the Wide Brown Land has been rich in breeding so thin a stream of Narrow Yellow Thoughts? Why it is that vast distant horizons and poky moral perspectives seem to run hand in hand?

Marcus Clarke gets us closer to it than just about anyone else. His own introduction to the bush was promising. He went out not as artist, mind, but as exploiter. Swinton and Ledcourt. Remote stations, in which Clarke's uncle had an interest. He was to be 'set up' out there, to learn the business of grazing, perhaps even to take up land of his own. To grasp a few thousand acres of Australian reality and give it that little extra shove. Nothing but abject failure followed, and Clarke soon found himself back on Camomile Street again.

There should have been strong material there. Some of it does come through in his early bush stores, in 'Pretty Dick' and 'Holiday Peak' and elsewhere. 'Pretty Dick' is a sentimental story on a classic theme: the lost child. I see it damned occasionally for its deep lode

of mawk by the odd lit critter who has probably never been anywhere near the bush. Or children for that matter. The portrait of the bush, though, is strong, direct and, in the end, despite the harsh tug at the heartstrings, not too mucked about by books.

You can't, unfortunately, say quite the same for the most famous passage he ever wrote about the Australian bush—perhaps the most famous passage ever written about the Australian bush—where he coined the famous phrase 'Weird Melancholy' as a way of running together gum trees, squawking birds, dry scrub and flaking bark.

> Australasia has been rightly named a Land of the Dawning. Wrapped up in the mists of early morning, her history looms vague and gigantic. The lonely horseman riding between the moonlight and the day, sees vast shadows creeping across the desolate and silent plains, hears strange noises in the primaeval forests, where flourishes a vegetation long dead in other lands, and feels, despite his fortune, that the trim utilitarian civilisation which bred him, shrinks into insignificance beside the contemptuous grandeur of forests and ranges coeval with an age where European scientists have cradled his own race . . . In Australia alone is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird—the strange scribblings of Nature learning how to write. Some see no beauty in our trees without shade, our flowers without perfume, our birds who cannot fly, and our beasts who have not yet learned to walk on all fours. But the dweller in the wilderness acknowledges the subtle

> charm of this fantastic land of monstrosities. He becomes familiar with the beauty of loneliness. Whispered to by the myriad tongues of the wilderness, he learns the language of the barren and the uncouth, and can read the hieroglyphs of haggard gum-trees blown into odd shapes, distorted with fierce hot winds, or cramped with cold nights, when the Southern Cross freezes in a cloudless sky of icy blue. The phantasmagoria of that wild dreamland called the Bush interprets itself, and he begins to understand why free Esau loved his inheritance of desert-sand better than all the bountiful richness of Egypt.

Clarke published this passage twice. The phrase Weird Melancholy got worked into the second version. The thing is, though, that Clarke is not actually talking directly about the bush at all. It was penned as a description of paintings by Louis Buvelot, *Waterpool, near Coleraine*, and Nicholas Chevalier, *The Buffalo Ranges*. It is less about the bush, I fear, than about paintings about the bush.

The material was too good, though, for just one outing. It then got reworked for the preface to the poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*, published in Melbourne in 1876. Where he was then talking less about the bush than about poetry about the bush. The Real World has, in effect, taken a double tumble. Only as an adjunct, only as a kind of excursion off to the side of the poem, the painting, does he get to talk about the thing itself. Memorable as it is, the passage has the tang of something written in a darkened room, with the blinds

drawn, with the pictures or the poems in front of him, and only the vague haunting memory of the bush to keep him company.

Others, closer to Clarke's own time, went on the attack. The sadness mote, they said, was in Clarke's own eye. The gum tree, they insisted, 'is the most beautiful tree in the world'. Further, there is 'nothing in the least grotesque or ghostly about a kangaroo'. And 'Australian forests are no more funereal than other forests. They are less so, for they are bathed in perpetual sunshine.'

I don't say Clarke's offering is bad. Far from it—it's one of the best strange scribblings we've got, as far as the bush is concerned. Petra likes it too. All I'm saying is that as soon as you pick up a pen and start trying to map the thing in words, the lying begins. The more intently you try to trench your way towards your subject, the more the words—other people's words, words from old books, words that bring on whole strings of other words—will topple in on you.

I try to explain this to Petra. What the excess tells is a tale of deprivation. It's a tale of being at the margins of another kind of language that he simply can't understand. 'Vast', 'strange', 'vague and gigantic', 'grand', 'mysterious', 'silent'. If you come up close, you can see that the words he's using are just opening up spaces, holes and absences. Not the sorts of things you can kick your way through or lean against for a breather or, indeed, pick up and hit people over the head with.

In each of these vacancies, there is more than a bit of helplessness. It's in that helplessness, though, that we see the best of Clarke. We see the chattering Clarke, the master of multiple disguisings, put aside for a moment. We see the sham cynic put down his pen and take a run around the edge of the truly unspeakable. In a sense, it offers us a brief moment when he more or less managed to shut up. It is probably the best thing that he ever wrote.

In the bush, Clarke learned about the darkness. It rolls in through the shadowy accounts we have of a dangerous episode—'this infernal Queensland business' as he later called it—when Clarke and five others trekked up to Queensland, a thousand miles away, in search of grazing land. They ran out of water. Horses died. Cattle were drowned in floods. One of Clarke's companions died, and was buried out in the bush. Clarke lost hundreds of pounds on the venture, and arrived back in Adelaide in rags. People told him he looked ten years older.

'I am sick,' he wrote to Hopkins, 'of the bush and colonies.'

How far did Clarke take himself into the Heart of Darkness in his trampings through the Australian bush? How close did he get to the Horror? Manning Clark—who gave the place its history—seems to have had few inhibitions on this score.

> The physical environment provided the perfect setting for all those abominations, cruelties and degradations which characterized the

> convict period in the history of this country. That past was still weighing on the brain of the living: human savagery, brutality and violence were the fitting accompaniment to the never-ending savageries of nature in Australia.

This, I can't quite see. Petra can't see it, either. The real truth is that the bush, in Clarke's writing, is neither one thing nor the other. It's neither malign nor redemptive, but thinking makes it so. Silence and solitude? What I wouldn't have given for a bit of silence and solitude in the Australian bush, instead of the daily grind of bragging and lamentation, of dirty yarns mixed in with maudlin late-night confessings, and all glossed up with what Clarke called 'tremendous taradiddles' told around the campfire. Most of the Weird Melancholy I saw in the Australian bush, I'd have to say, came out of a bottle. Most of the Strange and the Grotesque I saw propped up along the bar of the Toolgoolwah pub. If I can throw my own two bobs' worth in on top of Clarke's, I'd say that the Australian bush acts largely as a magnifier. Nothing more. The Melancholy is not a presence. It's an absence.

What is sad, for the new human observer, is the lack, the want of language. You can fill that any way you want. You can write it up as an Eden or an Auschwitz. A paradise. Or a gulag. We opted—in the early stages of the national past, at least—for the gulag. Clarke, in *His Natural Life*, is explicit on the point. Send the visionaries out

into the bush and they will hatch greater visions. Send the bastards out there and they'll come back bigger bastards. If you are a decent type, the bush will offer you all sorts of unlooked-for opportunities for heroism, stoicism, fortitude and resilience. If you are a bit of a prick, take to the bush and in no time you'll come up as a prick on stilts.

~

IT WAS ON THE FIRST day I set foot in Mawnsley. The far end of the spectrum. I had 'come up' on the train. The porters' lodge was closed. I was lugging a heavy suitcase, mostly full of books. I left it at the porters' door, and decided to try the grounds.

There was a cough behind me.

'Just what do you think you are doing?'

It was the first voice I encountered, beyond that of the taxi driver who ran me from the station to the college. Someone was calling to me. Angrily.

I had, it seems, stepped onto the Fellows' Lawn.

It was in my first few minutes of residence. It was the oldest college in the university. It was (as it turned out) the oldest of the oldest college's fellows. A Scot. A wheezy old Scot with a bottle nose and soup stains down his home-knit.

I pointed to a door that lay directly across the disputed terrain.

'I am hoping,' I said, lowering my bag onto the sacred turf, 'to get to that door.'

The anger subsided just a little as he recognised the colonial accent. He shook his head ruefully. It seemed—he explained it to me in monosyllabic simplicity, with helpful gestures—that only college members with a certain status had the right to set foot on that particular lawn. The straightest route between point A and point B was in this instance only available to fellows of the college. Or to visitors accompanied by a fellow.

The lawn. It had looked, to my untutored eyes, like an open stretch of grass. Like something that was designed—the very architecture of the place, the layout of the buildings, seemed to suggest—to be trodden on. Not so! It was cluttered, I suddenly realised, by several hundred years of history, thick and steamy. Tradition lay rich and perilous upon it, like a maze of stinking cowpats, just waiting for the colonial footfall. It was Nature, indeed, having been told exactly how to write.

I thought of asking the old chap if I could help him across the lawn. I thought for one frightening moment—was it prescient?—of resorting to violence, of taking him in a half-nelson and frogmarching him across. Accompanied by a fellow. I'm not sure he would have seen the joke.

It was a moment of revelation, though it took a good thirty years for the point to strike.

I think of the youthful Clarke. The shift from metropolitan champagne to colonial beer, from a world of clipped lawns and closely governed spaces to the great Australian wilderness. I have suggested that it was the fissure that opened between his own Great Expectation and the meagre returns of Fawkner's Town that set his mind in motion. My own fragmentation ran in the other direction. From colonial beer to metropolitan champagne. I too, let us remind ourselves—I plead it as no more than context, Your Honour—was shipped off to the antipodes. The other antipodes. I too was shipped off to the ends of the earth. To the Horror, the Horror of Mawnsley College cuisine. To the Outer Darkness of my lumpy mattress and unheated cell on Staircase D. To the Weird Melancholy that played about the Fellows' Lawn, with all its invisible messages of property, caste, status and exclusion. To a Wilderness with far subtler and more ingenious cruelties of its own.

One had to learn. One had to grow. One had to take on the codes, the invisible lessons, the new and bewildering panoply of categories and the hierarchies, ranks and accoutrements of the Upper World. Nature, which in the raw wilderness of my childhood laid down its stretches of grass principally for the passage of feet and the repose of tired bodies of whatever class or station, could no longer be trusted. Things were no longer what they seemed, and seeming seemed the only answer.

I tugged my forelock, respectfully, to the soup stains. I grasped

my suitcase and beat a grovelling retreat from the Contemptuous Grandeur of the Mawnsley Fellows' Lawn. I took the long way round.

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CORALIE WAS ALREADY WORKING IN London at the time of our first meeting in Paris. I came down from Oxford, stoked up on books and ale, much apt quotation and an impressive lode of fashionable superciliousness. Soon we were all working for publishers in Mayfair. The sisters had a flat off Finchley Road. I had, until our marriage, a bedsit in Crouch End.

I soon began to make a modest impression in the world of fiction publishing, where there was an awful lot of noise and vast clouds of smoke but usually not too much doing in terms of financial return.

Madeleine, now formally betrothed, if distantly, to Rollo, worked part time in the photo library of a small arthouse publisher, turning out extremely unprofitable introductions to minor Renaissance painters.

Coralie worked with a highly respectable educational publisher, seeing through sober tomes on home economics, social studies, tropical nutrition, and English as a second language, and steadily developing a specialisation in large and expensive medical manuals,

which, by the time we left London, were effectively bankrolling the whole company. Small beer in terms of imaginative and intellectual range, but with a big turnover, a high profit margin, and ready-and-waiting international markets in the scores of thousands.

Dear Coralie. How can I offer you, Your Honour, a 'rounded view' of a character so aggressively determined to be flat? How can I give you the inner life of someone so resolutely determined not to have one?

'What on earth do you *mean*, Martin?'

I have heard it so often.

Coralie, though, was growing. Faster than any of us. She soon switched from publishing to marketing. She quickly established a reputation as a straight talker. A straight-from-the-shoulder colonial. As one of her colleagues once assured me at Christmas drinks. Coralie was indeed direct, I could have told him, because there was absolutely nothing in her being that was crooked, bent, lateral, deflective, contemplative, textured, aesthetic, ironic, humorous or symbolic.

Life was, as I'm sure her mother told her from her lap, a simple set of As and Bs, and there were those who could see the clearest and straightest path between them—mostly people from the better suburbs—and those who could not. Coralie's poor mother, who, oh bitterest of ironies, was later taken out by a drunken teenager pursuing the approved path from A to B at breakneck speed in an

uninsured vehicle through Camberwell Junction. At the funeral, no-one was seen to grieve more solicitously than I.

We did well in London. It was only Madeleine who seemed to falter. Who talked of Going Home. Who increasingly took to blaming her unpromising work, the crush on the Underground and the Bloody English.

My own work flourished.

'Awstralian? You don't sound Awstralian.'

Not when I'm speaking to you, dear fellow.

I fitted in.

My task, quite soon, became that of sorting the sheep from the turkeys. Manuscripts came in, in barrow loads. Two or three pages usually gave me their measure. Was I looking for the Good Stuff? Not a bit of it. I was looking for the stuff that others wanted, whether it be good or bad. It went well. I had a talent, I was told, for paddling around inside the minds of others. Of knowing what would take. There was talk of quick promotion. I was given ever more generous luncheon vouchers. I was permitted to sit in on board meetings. I was taken to the Army and Navy, to the Carlton and the Athenaeum.

It was Coralie, though, who really set the pace. The disarming prettiness, the apparent and utterly misleading air of colonial naïvete, the flexible classlessness of a foreigner, got her 'access' in ways that were denied even to most of the natives. Professionally, Coralie's aggressive one-dimensionality soon proved an

advantageous weakness, a rich debility that won her plaudits among senior management all over London. If there was any subtlety in her manner, anything prismatic or nuanced in her thinking, it lay in an ability—which I suspect she had also learned from her mother—to carefully massage the egos of those above her, so that when she ploughed her way along that straight and narrow path, not too many of them got spattered or trodden on, or had to dodge out of the way.

The only bit of recklessness, the only instance of uncalculated and lateral thinking in her life—as she assured me with increasing frequency as time wore on, and even before we left London—was me.

Both sisters were wedded to the idea of an eventual return to Australia, though, in ways that I was not. I'd spent two thankless years as a lawyer in King Street before the scholarship to England and to Mawnsley College finally came through. I had bad memories. In many ways, I dreaded going back. I'd become used to Fellows' Lawns. My footfall had become measured, discreet, even craftily obsequious. I'd become used to soup stains and clubs and cliques and hidden hierarchies and endless queues and luncheon vouchers and the crush of subterranean bodies, and even the dank, dark and dismal weather.

'Weather?' queried an English sage, one particularly foul day, when I ventured to complain. 'There's no such thing as weather. Just different sorts of clothing.'

Just being 'overseas' and far away seemed good enough for me.

For Madeleine and Coralie, though, it always seemed that the cities of Europe—Paris, London, Vienna—were somehow not real places with real people in them. They were, rather, additions, finishings, dimensions of one's social acumen rather than spots on a map. It's true, I finally had to concede, that being in London, being in Paris or New York, was no vast addition, if one happened to be a Londoner, a Parisian, a New Yorker. I too took on the Fernwood model, in which one simply passed through these places, adding a polish which would only shine with appropriate brilliance on one's return, when set against the dull greys and earthy ochres of one's antipodean roots.

There was always, too, the matter of Rollo, still waiting.

And as a result, and before too much time had passed, we all picked up our tickets and brought ourselves back home.

5

COMPANIONSHIP. WE ALL SO NEED IT. SPEND MORE THAN A FEW weeks without speaking to anyone, without nibbling at the boundaries between your mind and the minds of others, and your own thinking soon starts to fray.

Is it not true that the thing we trumpet as Me is mostly just mere reaction, a tacky grab-bag of all the bits and pieces that are flung at us, a kind of teflon surface that lets us deflect the worst slings and arrows and to fling them back at those around us, friends and enemies alike, with reasonable good cheer? Take away the blows and the bouquets, and you soon start to falter. Instead of bouncing stuff back, you start to chase up new material from within. And I can tell you, from my new stock of remand centre wisdom, there's really not much there. Or only for a time. Pope tells us: the warm Third Day,

spent on our own, without the stimulation either of friend or foe, will soon work its ugly way.

Was it Thomas Hobbes who described the imagination as 'decaying sense'? External impressions, taken into the inner intestine of the brain, lodge there and putrefy. If intimacy is denied, I can tell you, it's not long before they start to ooze their way into the outer world, in philosophies, theories of mind, ecstatic visions, love, longing and the most exotic and enticing forms of hatred.

Most of us, I insist, are better off not being left too long alone.

There's a passage right at the very heart of *His Natural Life* where the Engaging Villain, John Rex, Rufus Dawes' doppelgänger, having escaped from Port Arthur, is trapped deep in a vault beyond the blowhole. It's a place that you can still visit on the wild Tasmanian coast. Provided you are not on remand. Where you can sit and think about John Rex, and experience what Clarke called the 'terror of Solitude'.

It's a moment of deeper reflection—a moment out of conversation, so to speak, slower and thicker and a bit out of kilter with the steep romp of the narrative—where the Darkness starts to catch up with the evil-doing Rex:

> Bloodless and bladdery things ran hither and thither noiselessly. Strange carapaces crawled from out of the rocks. All the horrible unseen life of the ocean seemed to be rising up and surrounding him.

> He retreated to the brink of the gulf, and the glare of the upheld brand fell upon the rounded hummock, whose coronal of silky weed out-floating in the water looked like the head of a drowned man. He rushed to the entrance of the gallery, and his shadow, thrown into the opening, seemed to take on the shape of an avenging phantom, with arms upraised to warn him back.

When attacked for the horrors of *His Natural Life*, Clarke might just have told his critics to rub their noses in the novel's deeper truths. That if the cap should happen to fit, then it should simply be worn. Instead, he opted for footnotes. For the safe house of fact, and for the moral parable. John Rex's slipping into deep pathology, his out-of-conversation encounter with the Dark Side, is reduced, in the paragraph to follow, to the simple operation of guilt: he 'deemed all the phantoms of his past crimes arising to gibber at him'.

It is the back-into-conversation that saves him, and maybe it's just a bit of prison pathology of my own, my toilet bowl yawning at me as I write, that tells me that Clarke was giving us a richer glimpse of what lies deep, and not just in John Rex. And of why it is that the talk talk talk, the steady patter of genteel conversation, the steady roll of visits, is so crucially important.

> 'John Rex!'
>
> The hair of the convict's flesh stood up, and he cowered to the earth.

'John Rex!'

It was a human voice! Whether of friend or enemy he did not pause to think. His terror overmastered all other considerations.

'Here! Here!' he cried, and sprang to the opening of the vault.

I am myself in danger. Martin Frobisher. Locked in a room, with no light or dark, heat or cold, no past or future, other than that which is artificially provided. For most of the day, there is no-one to disturb me. I am here with my thoughts. Like John Rex in the blowhole. Like Rufus Dawes, aka Richard Devine. Like poor sorry Richard II, again:

My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father, and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts . . .

I do believe that Shakespeare must have spent some time in prison. How much truth can just one man invent? Or, better, once one's life has been through the hands of literature, how much space for truth is left? And once you've read William Shakespeare on the business of being in prison, how much space is left for thoughts of your own?

'Martin Frobisher! Martin Frobisher!'

'Here! Here!'

I too, you see, am dangerously out-of-conversation here. My still-breeding thoughts will not rest contented. Were it not for my visitors, for Petra with her flow of photocopies, and poor grieving Rollo, and Clive, with his notebooks and his digital recorders, there would be no human voice. Just the warders and my fellow felons. Tramp, tramp, tramp.

~

IN TIME, WE ALL CAME home. Me and Coralie, and Madeleine to wed Rollo. Back to Fawkner's Town. I found a modest place in publishing. Trading heavily—more than liberally—on my slender London experience. Madeleine and Rollo settled in, and she opened her first gallery. Coralie moved from the private to the public sector, and began to rise and rise.

It was at the point in the late eighties when Australian corporate life in general seemed to be floating down the gurgler. Some sort of decision had been taken in the upper ranks of the public sector that this was exactly the way that public life too should go. Coralie was quickly snapped up as someone who not only had lots of corporate experience but, better, *overseas* corporate experience. In the Australian cringe culture of the time, this was the magic word.

By art of a few particularly harsh and unjust high-level sackings, a few blistering and wasteful 'restructurings' and the brutal and

much-publicised clearing out of truckloads of human detritus—all this as a kind of overture—Coralie was on her way to success. There were articles about her in the *Bulletin* and the *Business Review Weekly*, and profiles in several of the leading women's magazines.

Coralie quickly became a kind of private-sector guru to the Australian public sector. Years later, she was still dining out on those spectacular sackings and the 'corporate background'. Her main function, as far as I could see, had been to import into the public sector the kind of stress and misery then current in the private, in its declining late-eighties phase. Plummetings in real productivity, she persuaded her new employers, had to be balanced against gains in accountability. Peaceful and law-abiding (and perhaps even efficient) public servants must now be subjected to the same managerial harassment as their private-sector brethren. Wherever their particular tasks did not seem to induce high stress levels, these were successfully introduced through the establishment of labyrinthine sets of policies and procedures, strict deadlines and ever more detailed lists of accountabilities, all of which seemed designed to increase the tempo of work, while not—it has to be said—offering a lot of help to anyone actually wanting to get anything *done*.

Coralie became widely known as a leading management consultant whose principal task was to find new places for management where it never occurred to anyone that management was needed. Having successfully implanted her tiers and hierarchies in one

public-sector organisation, her job was thence to convince others that, without her, they would somehow be missing out.

The infection spread. Coralie's function was to set the poor lemmings in motion and goad them on their way with new sets of mission statements, strategic plans, operational plans, objectives and reviews, in ways that added a gratifying sense of speed, direction and momentum, and the means of measuring achievement on one single grid across a thousand utterly disparate fields of human activity.

Bureaucracy. The ecstatic domain! I too came to see, through the heady period that followed, the mystical capabilities of Effective Management. I came to admire the magnificent yearning to know and to measure all, the quest for transcendence, the pure Rage for Order that drives those who drive the rest of us.

For those of us down in the nether reaches, it all just feels like incarceration. Rules, processes, compliances and ceaseless, ceaseless paperwork. Most of it never to be read. But for those above, moving steadily towards the apex, and by means of the strictest asceticism—I do not exclude the Abnegation of Self, the Mortification of the Flesh, the late night Fastings and Watchings, the assiduous chanting of Sacred Texts—it is far, far more than this. For those whose bureaucratic glass is half full, it's more of a missionary role, scarcely less than a divine vocation, with the desk, the filing cabinet expanding in significance and aspiration, as they wind their way up

through the epistemological, the aesthetic and the theological, exploring and converting, invigorating and transforming, steadily bringing the whole world within the ambit of Light, Order and Control.

From the apex, all is clear. All is understood. And what thence transpires is a Peace Which Passeth Understanding, of a kind only to come when every breath, every Thought, Deed and Act, has been appropriately documented, regulated, evaluated and filed. Finality. Closure. Transcendence. There is nothing that lives beyond the ambit, the capabilities of the filing cabinet. There is no edge, there is no perimeter to the desk.

Nature, glimpsed just here and there through the last of the interstices yet to be plugged, looks tired, a bit tawdry and, above all, inefficient.

The only bit of light I get, here in the remand centre, is through frosted glass. I see it only through bars. It is cunningly made to look like daylight. It fades at just about the right time of day. My deep suspicion, though, is that the whole thing is in the hands of a trustie whose job it is to make it happen, to fiddle with the dimmer and manufacture the daily impression of day passing into night. It is the final triumph of bureaucracy. Of Coralie's Brave New World. With day and night now subject to regulation, sub-section, process. Let There Be Light, indeed, but only once the appropriate forms have been filled in, the committee has met, Occupational Health

and Safety have completed their checks and the whole process has been signed off and authorised at the appropriate level.

I think of how I lay abed at night, watching Coralie going over the next day's agendas. I would watch the light from the bedside lamp play about her lovely face. I would see the heavenly glint in her eye as she came across an item which needed to be starred, or an instance where the data in the top copy did not match that in the relevant appendix. I would listen, always, for the deep sigh of pleasure as she finished annotating the last item, put her papers down and let her head sink back into the pillow, her eyes closed, her lips creased with a softly indulgent smile, her golden hair wreathed in ethereal splendour around her.

At these moments, my wife had such an aura. I have to say it. At such times I dared not touch her. Such a presence.

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IN THE THICK OF IT all, Coralie and I made money. Some people spend their lives doing it. We got the whole thing over in just a few short, frenetic years, and all on the basis of a bright idea that we got hold of just a year or two ahead of the others. It was my suggestion, backed up by a bit of risk taking, some funds and good advice from old Ernie and my parents' modest estate, and Coralie's relentless need to manage everyone and everything around her.

We soon made enough money never to have to work again, should we so have chosen. We were in on the birth of the video industry. With our ingenuity, energy and wide range of contacts, we soon had two dozen suburban outlets. You may not remember VideoMart. It came, made a big splash with some clever innovations in marketing of a kind that are now so commonplace you'd not know they were ever innovations, led the way in distribution and pricing in ways that drew most of our competitors into recklessness and ruin, and then vanished into the bowels of a much larger operation.

At first, we tried to sell videos, with a few set aside for hire. We quickly realised that it was in rentals that the real market lay. For a time we rented out the players as well. Big, cumbersome machines requiring extensive repairs. Breaking the back, almost, of anyone who lugged them out to the car. The need to rent out players was soon overtaken, though, by the mass-produced price drop in VCRs, and in no time we were in the midst of an extraordinarily simple form of commerce, setting up simple display-and-counter operations run out of cheap premises in relatively unfashionable areas.

It was I—always the big-picture man—who realised that the extensive watching of videos was essentially a down-and-outers' occupation, and that the initial tendency to locate the outlets in the High End inner suburbs was misguided; it would be in the down-and-out areas that the business would do best.

The more barren the wasteland, the more videos we would let out. We plunged deep into the suburban Darkness, picking up scruffy premises that no-one else seemed to want, filling them with racks of low-grade magnetic tape in seductive categories—Adult, Romance, Comedy, Drama, Sci Fi—and staffed them with spotty teenagers, then retreated back up the river to Hawksburn, to Chatsworth Grove, to the Domain and then on to Toorak, to tot up the returns.

The clever part of the whole affair lay in our negotiations with the distributors. Most were still feeling their way in the new business. We used our early edge in the market and our steep growth profile to bludgeon them into putting the new releases our way, thus sending the more feeble of our competitors to the wall.

Prices dropped. Profits soared. Bigger players came into the market. I drew on my earlier experience as a copper prospector in Queensland, where the sexiest prospectus resulted in the most saleable end product. We got out. Not 'just in time', but well before the great wave of the new technology beached itself. We sold out—at a sum that reflected the directions in which all the arrows were pointing rather than anything we had actually managed to achieve—to the international Video E-Z chain, at a price that would keep us comfortably for the rest of our lives.

It was so easy. Neither of us even needed to give up our day job. Neither of us had needed to drop the high-end social aspect of

our lives, or compromise the professional kudos that we gained by returning from 'overseas'.

Making money together—it was when Coralie and I were most at one. It had required less intelligence, less work, less wisdom and insight than almost any other activity in our lives before or since.

~

MONEY. WHEN YOU'VE GOT IT, word somehow percolates. I did not want to live lavishly. I never wanted to be owned by a house. Coralie has bought lots of houses, of course, but never managed to persuade me to live in any one of them. Our present home is in leafy St Georges Road. It is designed to tell of success, acuity, longsightedness. I insist, though, on just renting. It has big rooms with big windows, but not so big that there is no wall space left to show off our investments. The kitchen and the many bathrooms are also big, far more suitable for glossy spreads, for features, magazines and photographers, than for hungry and dirty human beings.

Big, expensive cars, I loathe. There has to be some cheaper way of telling the world about your problems. I've always favoured the Italian, the French mode where you buy yourself a dodgem, treat the thing with utter contempt for a couple of years, roll it over a cliff and start on a new one.

Coralie pushed me, at length, as far as the Saab convertible. It was a troubled day in her life when I rolled home, just a few days fresh from the dealer's, with a buckled fender.

'It was some kid,' I crowed, 'in an old Torana.'

Coralie was busy with her hair. She had pins in her mouth.

'Well, at least you have his number.'

His number? It never occurred to me to take his number. I was more than happy to see the thing scraped out of its showroom condition and down into my own battered echelon of being. Up and down the streets of the kinds of suburbs Coralie chooses for us to live in, I daily witness lined and lumpy human beings crawling around in beautiful machines, looking the more lined and lumpy for it. I prefer not to be laughed at by my own automobile. The Saab and I—complex beings both, with vast pretensions to style, but now grossly defected—thence got along just fine.

Coralie and I went well, together in public. People invited us. We chirruped happily at the city's dinner tables. We did not complete one another's sentences. Rather, we developed the capacity, early in our marriage, to listen intently to one another's stories for the fiftieth time with no flicker of ennui. We mastered the art of making other people feel interesting. We looked good, even as the years wore on. We could be relied upon to dress. We were shipped in to one dinner table after another to assist in impressing international guests and local dignitaries. Masters of no particular subject,

we were passably well informed on most. We could be relied upon to keep a conversation rolling, seasoned with small compliments, all of which contributed to an air of bonhomie and wellbeing. For years, we sang for our supper in this way all over Fawkner's Town.

People seemed to derive much from us, while taking absolutely nothing. It suited us that way. What was it that held us together? I could describe it as a special form of amity, even of intimacy. We revelled, in all those public places, in a kind of freedom. It was a relief from the barriers and boundaries of our private lives. There was no-one I would rather enter the room with. Provided the room was full of Other People.

Insincere? Not a bit of it! We both valued, with the deepest sincerity and for many years, our well-tuned public face. We sought to hide nothing. It was a deep investment we had in it, a belief that here was something—order, exchange, civility, politesse—to which we could make a special contribution.

In our own world, we were not doing quite so well, with the silence coming upon us in slow stages as we ran back across the city, the reflections on the dinner that had passed, the other guests, the conversations gradually thinning as we drove. The concerns of the next day would start to intrude, the old distances start to grow again in the alarming privacy of the car, as the bright lights of whatever house it was—South Yarra, South Melbourne, North Carlton—faded from our thoughts.

I tried to talk about this to Coralie. Just once or twice I did try to jolt Coralie into thinking about what was actually going on. Just once or twice I tried to introduce the idea that the whole public thing—the parties, the receptions, the openings, the fundraisers—was like a bad piece of theatre; that our sense of mastery, the sheer ease of it all came from the fact that we were steadily shaping to the social role, rather than the role shaping to us.

I recall her eyes filling with alarm. Was her hand—may I suspect it now, in long and reflective retrospect?—casting about for an epergne? I let the whole matter slide. I consigned it to the beach house of my thinking.

There is an old saying—is it really an old saying, or am I making it up? I have used it so often—that any fool can ride a tiger; it's only when he tries to get off that the circus really starts.

~

LIFESTYLE. WE BOUGHT IN, HEAVILY. I think back, from the comfort of this dead end of my life, to the many dinners to which Coralie and I were invited. To the drinking of champagne out of the boot of Whatsisname's Roller at the Cup. To the sumptuous barbecues on the sweeping parterre belonging (or so it did seem at the time) to Whosit, overlooking the bay at Portsea. To the expensive boat, the seafood extravaganza, the gleaming wife which Thingummybob

took us down to Brighton to inspect. I do not recall her name, or, indeed, whether or not she was in fact his wife—and nor, when I think of it, did I manage to memorise his name either, or indeed any of their names, before the creditors waded in and swept up Roller, parterre, boat, wife, crusts, corks and all the leavings.

Clarke bought in heavily, too. You get his best and brightest when it comes to the business of food. I've had Petra track down all that she can find—the restaurant reviews, the recipes, the elaborate prescriptions for the gastric future of the country. It's here, for my money, that the intellectual ad-hoccery, the name-dropping, the masking and pretending is at its most intense. It's in his portraits of Melbourne's eating habits that his wit is sharpest, the twaddle at its most incisive, the digs at the 'Nobility of South Yarra', at the colony's 'sham aristocrats'—at Martin and Coralie Frobisher?—the cruellest and most telling of all.

Clarke wrote a number of regular newspaper columns on food, restaurants and the 'art of ingeniously guzzling'—a wild mix of literary flights, gastrofiction and, in general, learned nonsense.

> The majority of the author tribe have, indeed, ever abused their stomachs. Ben Jonson was once known as the Canary Bird, in consequence of his fondness for that liquor; Davenant, the next poet laureate, drank himself into a fever; Dryden was accustomed to fuddle his fine brains at a tavern in Rose street; Shadwell, Tate and Rowe, took

> their liquor freely. Indeed, the latter is described by a contemporary as being 'the best natured fellow in the world, drunk or sober!' Rusden, the next laureate, was, according to Gray, 'a person of great hopes in his youth, though at last he turned out a drunken parson'. Cibber not only drank, but gambled into the bargain, and Warton 'gobbled over his college wine like a turkey'. Southey they say—poor Bob Southey—was too respectable to become intoxicated, but his posterity has allowed his muse wanted something of inspiration. Charles Lamb confessed to a weakness for roast pig, and Lord Eldon bent the majesty of the law before liver and bacon. Young was passionately fond of a blade bone of mutton; and Boyce had so keen a sense of good living that when lying in bed at his lodgings 'not only starving but stark naked', a compassionate friend sent him half a guinea, 'he spent the gift in truffles and mushrooms', eating the same in bed underneath the blankets. There is something atrociously sublime about Boyce!

I read it to Petra. She just raises an eyebrow.

'What's the bet he just made it all up, Martin? I think he just came up with the stuff as he went along.'

There are better things. Even Petra admits as much. Clarke had a sharp eye for what was needed. He promoted a cafe society—'the tastes of the people and the warmth of the climate all tend towards the outdoor life'—and all this a good hundred years before the penny really dropped. His 'Melbourne Restaurants' series offered a

veritable *Guide Michelin* for Melbourne diners, with instructions on how to escape the 'dreary ceremony' of dinner at Scotts, the Port Phillip or the Menzies, and on how to find reasonable cuisine at the Academy of Music, or the Duke de la Victoria, or Buschmann's, with its 'hot ham, cold veal, horse-radish, caviar, herring salad, smoked fish, sauerkraut, bread in basketfuls' and 'butter in knife-loads'. In his 'Something to Eat' and 'Something to Read' columns in the *Herald*, and in the 'Melbourne Restaurants' column in the *Age,* we see war on the colonial 'aesthetical death in the pot', on the 'be-Brigeted' burnt chop and the boiled potato, as the soggy emblem of imperial gastronomic subservience, where the 'shivering bipeds of modern civilisation' insist on conducting their diet in 'direct disobedience to the dictates of common sense'.

> It is curious how the English-speaking people cleave to their flesh meat . . . the neglect of vegetables is criminal. Who does not know houses where men, women and children live on meat, meat, meat, with perhaps a potato or two; and so knowing, who wonders at the yellow eye-ball, the dirty skin, the slow perception of many well-grown Australian boys?

The inhabitants of Fawkner's Town, he wrote, should prefer the 'couscousoo' of Mrs Kaloolah over the roasted, baked and boiled sheep of Mrs Nokes of Collingwood, and above all the curry and

the 'Frijole (pronounce "free-holy" please)' as ways of preparing and presenting local food resources.

> But the basis of our regenerated Australian food system must be the curry. A curry of kid, mixed with some three eggs, the white of a coconut scraped to a powder, two chillis and half a dozen slices of pineapple, is, as Falstaff said of Dame Quickly—'a thing to thank God on'. The small river crayfish are excellent material; while he who has never eaten a young wombat treated with coriander seeds, turmeric, green mango, and dry ginger, has not used his opportunities. When I become rich enough to benefit my fellow creatures, I shall take a shop in Collins street—say somewhere near the Bank of Victoria—and building a bamboo verandah, will open a Curry House. Nothing but curry and pale ale will be dispensed, and my waiters shall be Chinamen—the best servants in the world—dressed in spotless white robes. Then I will open up the resources of the country, and teach the inhabitants of Melbourne the Art of Feeding.

Even Petra is prepared to give him a solid pat on the back for his support for the Acclimatisation Society, his promotion of their banquets of indigenous cuisine. Clarke writes of 'gorgeous evenings', on which nothing was eaten 'but was of native growth' and 'nothing was drunk but was of Australian birth', where the menu included iguana steak, roasted wallaby, boiled bandicoot and emu

'with the hair on', 'gum-tree grubs and flying fox *á la maître de l'hôtel*'.

Food. It gave Clarke the chance to show how he could roll out an intellectual cadenza on just about anything, the onion at one end of the scale, and the oyster at the other.

> The onion is a Bohemian, an Ishmaelite, the journalist of vegetables. You can flavour a ballroom of boobies with him if you are a skilful host, but be careful or his bite will not only betray him, but will leave an unpleasant memory for days to come! 'Tis alone however in a garret, at midnight when champagne bottles are empty and tobacco reigns supreme that the Jolly Onion opens his heart. But I will reserve his praises for an epic.

Oysters, on the other hand, must be eaten 'in a fine frenzy', and only when one is in a poetic frame of mind.

> I usually make my opera a whet to my oyster. The music, the lights, the sparkling eyes, the glancing ankles, the palpitation of a thousand budding bosoms, all these refine the mind, and elevate the soul to concert oyster pitch. Walter Scott, when a young man, ate oysters by the barrel. Adam Ferguson, the keeper of the regalia at Edinburgh, once ate thirty-two dozen . . . Voltaire, Helvetius and Diderot loved the dish. So did Reynal and Tom Paine, and Shelley and Porson. Thompson, the

> poet, died of a surfeit. George Sand gave suppers where scalloped oysters were a standing dish. Peter the Great never sat down to table without this fish dressed in four different ways. Oysters enabled Napoleon to win Austerlitz, or so at least says Cambeceres. Paracelsus recommended the fish 'to all such as love good dreams and pleasant slumbers'.

'I can just keep bringing it in,' Petra says, 'by the yard. If that's what you really want. There's stacks of it out there. Stuff by Clarke, stuff by people trying to sound like Clarke, and even stuff by Clarke trying, if you ask me, to sound like other people!'

The impression is of a tap turned on, with limitless resources of learned misinformation just waiting to flow out. I have asked Petra to run a check on some of these eating and drinking stories. She insists that her time can be better spent. Most of it was written to grace a column one day, and wrap fish and chips the next. To earn, indeed, the next day's fish and chips. It would be unfair, even Petra allows, to slow things down, to unwrap it all and take a closer look.

There's even a kind of gastro-sociology behind a lot of it. Again, best taken at high speed. Clarke here writes with tongue so far pressed into his cheek that there can't have been much room for anything else. We have his 'Theory of Gastric Juice' drawn from 'the gorgeous gastronome de Cussy, who may compare favourably with Brillat-Savarin', who 'declares cookery is a political science, and suggests that history should be written from a gastronomic point of view'.

> It is the fashion nowadays to own a theory and I shall tell you about mine. I am the apostle of a new creed, by which I intend to reform the world, and to make everybody happy. My theory is the glorious theory of Gastric Juice. Away with your forms of morality, your Brahminism, Buddhism, Spargoism, Dummyism, Duffyism and Platonism; give me a man with a perfect digestion and a normal stomach and I will show you a clever man, a kindly gentleman, and an exemplary Christian. Gastric juice is the secret of happiness. If a man's secretions are in proper order, he will have what nature intended him to have—*mens sana in corpore sano*. The history of the world is the history of livers.

Pages thick with splendid nonsense follow. About the onset of indigestion under the Caesars (the result of stale oysters and mulled claret) and its links to the fall of empire.

> Much of the acerbity of the conservative character will, we venture to think, be found to arise from physiological causes, and possibly a course of wholesome and simple food would bring the most violently ignorant to a clear sense of his place in the scheme of political things.

Nor does the consumption, even among the Nobility of South Yarra—I do not mention the Frobishers of St Georges Road—of 'the bleeding bullock flesh and barbarous masses of meat which were the original provender of the original pioneers' enhance political

intelligence. Conservative views in the colonies were for Clarke the 'inevitable consequence of eating French dishes cooked by a creature who, a few months back, was boiling potatoes in a pot on the edge of the Allen'.

The dinner table puts such weapons into the critic's hands. There's Clarke's coruscating sketch, 'Nasturtium Villas', from the *Weekly Times*. Joe Wapshot, host, is the colonial self-made man.

> The dinner at Nasturtium Villa was an infliction under which all have suffered. Soup (bad), fish (indifferent), sherry (very bad), mutton (good), vegetables, own growing (most excellent), entree of fowl and some other nastiness (both infernally bad), champagne (that is to say, moselle), cabinet pudding, tarts, custards (all good), cheese (colonial and so and so), dessert (good), wine (tolerable), and brandy (the most admirable that could be bought in the city).

Wapshot hospitality wobbles between social aspirations '(very bad)' and social origins '(most excellent)'. The origins offer good mutton, puddings and brandy. The aspirations offer imitation champagne, bad sherry and disastrous entrees. As the evening at Nasturtium Villa wears on, there is a general collapse in the direction of origins. Joe hauls his coat off in order to carve with greater ease. The guests begin to pick their teeth and feed with their knives, and 'Mrs Wapshot swilled porter out of a pewter pot until her cheeks shone'.

The remand centre, I should say, serves a truly splendid beef rissole, a triumphant rhubarb crumble.

Is this the best of Clarke? Is this the worst of Clarke? It's not just the Wapshots who let themselves down as the evening wears on. The wit slips. This is Clarke's problem. The anger gets on top. Poor Joe Wapshot is chopped apart for his 'foolish efforts to emulate his betters'. The friends are dismissed as 'positively, indecently stupid'. Mrs Wapshot, shining from her porter, is dismissed as 'simply an unobtrusive nuisance in her own house'. Clarke's vision of the 'attack of purse upon pedigree', his wider assaults on the MacMammons, the pretensions of Miss Tallowfat and Belinda Battleaxe, on Young Shoddy, on the Honourable Member for Shice and Swindle, the Legislator from Gluepot Gully and on all the grubby-nailed 'sham aristocrats' of Fawkner's Town, yet again goes hard, blunt and brutal.

There's the touch of envy. The tinge of anger. The excellent cooking at the 'Cafe Panard', he wrote, towards his end, was squandered on the untasting, on the 'fair heiresses of slop-goods and tallow', and on those whose 'putative fathers are merely carcase butchers or brokers of sheep's pelts'. While ridiculing his readership for its ignorance, Clarke more than took advantage of it. The comedy just gets sadder. Clarke had too little time, too little money, properly to extend himself. He found it easier to peddle nonsense, name-dropping, dubious allusion, off-the-cuff twaddle and even straight-out abuse, most of it with Deadline, rather than Wisdom or Insight or Learning, written all over it.

'Couldn't he have been a bit *kinder*?' asks Petra.

But if he'd been reasonable—if he had been *just*—would we be reading him now? Just think of the hundreds of chops, the vast lakes of porter consumed in colonial Fawkner's Town that simply came and went, that simply passed, Mute and Inglorious, through the system, without comment of any kind.

The moment tolerance, sympathy and kindness enter, good satire picks up its hat and leaves. If there is no *saeva indignatio* to hand, no high-minded savage indignation, then won't a bit of bile and envy do instead? Isn't it better to have some kind of memento—however wickedly tinged—than no portrait at all? Than to have the Wapshots, the Whatsisnames and Whosits with all their cheerful vulgarity, their porter and mutton and pudding, their boats and barbecues, lost down the sewers of history?

It's more than just a portrait that Clarke has given us. Coralie and I have spent our lives stumbling from one Wapshot debacle to the next—most of them in and around South Yarra. How many excellent tarts and custards have Coralie and I dined on? How much shocking champagne have we drunk? He's given us a whole *tradition* to lean on, goddammit, and we're still noshing our way through it, easing our bellies over our belts and calling, like Young Tallowfat and Miss Softgoods, for our 'solids'.

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OTHER PEOPLE LIVED THEIR LIVES. Coralie and I project managed ours. For Richer and for Richer, and for Better and for Better.

In fact, it got much worse. It was like the map of Paris. Not the city map, the standard sort of map you can buy at the newsstands, but Coralie's private map, the one she would draw up for the three of us at the breakfast table each morning. If Coralie had determined on the Nissim de Camondo, then nothing existed in the spaces that lay between us and the Nissim de Camondo.

Coralie had an extraordinary ability to turn vast tracts of experience into howling wastelands, in pursuit of the thing, the object, that lay at the end of it. Most of Paris vanished in a trice, with the setting out of each objective. Baron Haussmann, by comparison, did no more than tinker. Madeleine's and my suggestions that we might stop off somewhere along the way, our proposals that we might linger at some lesser place, were usually greeted with scorn.

'If you don't shake a leg,' Coralie would say, 'we'll never *get there.*'

Madeleine and I would exchange a glance. Madeleine would raise that eyebrow. It was amusing, at the time. Our wishes were never countermanded. Mostly, they were simply never heard.

I did make very big efforts, year after year. In other circumstances Madeleine and Rollo would so testify. For a decade or so, I tried to reassure myself with the limp idea that Coralie and I, being so very different, came together well as a kind of composite

personality. It was an idea that I tried to nurture as the years rolled on, and especially as most of the qualities that I treasure most—creativity, flexibility, the ironic touch—began, against the backdrop of Coralie's corporate commitments, to look like major flaws.

I tried to interpret our frictions and misunderstandings as signs of a grievous lack of self-understanding on my part. For quite a time, I did try to obey the promptings of Coralie as though they were fragments from the lost, the better side of my own psyche.

Perhaps, I thought, this is what a good marriage is all about? One mind, one psyche, engaged in an enriched ongoing dialogue with itself? I let Coralie's ambition become my ambition. I let Coralie's acquisitiveness define my version of the future, of Advancement in Life. I let Coralie's powerful myopia describe my own field of vision. Coralie's scorn at those who refused to toe the line, Coralie's impatience with those who approached her professional imperatives with inadequate respect—who were not, in effect, pious in corporate observance—I let act as a kind of surrogate conscience, to regulate my behaviour, my appearance, my own strategies for professional advancement.

None of which, of course, takes you very far into the inner sanctums, the more intimate dimension of our lives. Let me tell you that it was the sheer scale of Coralie's desire that I initially found most alluring. The desire to know. The desire to touch, to handle, to experience. It was there, above all, that her attractiveness was

lodged. The greed for experience, the hunger just to see, to roll all that was Fantastic and Fabulous—of which, for a brief time, I do believe I was a part—into a little ball and set it moving. As the poet once said. The real sadness in our lives—it is perhaps more my fault than the fault of any other—was that the desire to know steadily grew into the desire to have. The desire to touch and savour into the desire to manage and control.

If Coralie's principal allure lay in that hunger, that grasp at gratification in all its richer forms, then with that hunger allayed the allure soon fell away. So much of what we saw, and liked, we now simply bought. The realm of Awe and Wonder was snapped up, packaged and shipped down to St Georges Road, where it was catalogued, insured and adequately alarmed. Desire had simply nowhere left to go.

I have not mentioned children. Nor, it occurs to me, did I ever really mention children to Coralie. The issue was never raised. There was never a place for children or the prospect of children in any of the houses we lived in. The number of bedrooms. The layout. It's almost as though we chose houses deliberately to exclude the issue. The whole business seemed associated with disorder, with the interrupting of the eternal adolescence that material success and travel and professional advancement and a long string of useful parties seemed to offer.

Something was missing. I felt it strongly. Coralie did not. I soon adopted her language—her management patter—in the hope

that it would bring some kind of clarity, some better understanding, raising me from my slough of doubt and double entendre. My own words, I regret to say, Your Honour, do seem to mean so many confusing things, and often all at the same time. Key performance indicators, mentors, champions, performance reviews, market-facing strategies, risk management, quality assurance. From my depths of spiritual, philosophical and marital toil, it soon started to make about as much sense as anything else I knew, with the whole world, my own world, quickly lost in the rich symphony, the pure euphonic joy of Coralie's corporate songs.

The composite personality. It was first suggested to me, as I recall, by a psychiatrist whom I had consulted at Coralie's behest. At the time, we had discussed divorce. Coralie had done the sums. There was no place, it seemed, for a division of spoils along the new and glittering yellow-brick road that she had embarked on. A psychiatrist had to be found with a strong sense of the material exigencies of the real world, who could be relied upon to engineer an accommodation. Not just to tell us what was best for us, but one who would help us to continue to sail so close to the wind, if you like, steering us between the Scylla of Blue Bloody Murder and the Charybdis of an uninviting financial settlement.

I met with the psychiatrist. Because I was the one, I was assured, who had the problem. He had a bad cold, and sniffled throughout my appointments.

The sessions were soon abandoned, though, and very much at Coralie's own prompting. Any benefit that derived to Coralie from my taking on aspects of her personality were just as clearly negated by the idea that she should take on any of mine.

'I just don't like this *side* of you that's coming through, Martin,' she would say through her mouthful of pins as we prepared to go Over The Top and off to Nasturtium Villas one more time. Coralie, it turned out, was more attached than she realised to my familiar self. She was alarmed by my new air of decision, directedness, inflexibility. She was horrified, in effect, at my taking on so many unlovely characteristics of her own, in hideous caricature.

'I just can't stand this new tendency in you, Martin,' she would complain. 'I just don't like what you're *becoming*.'

There was a rather good passage I once wrote, in one of my many abandoned novels. It was about a group of children tormenting a lizard. The lizard had taken the end of a stick they were using to poke at it with in its mouth. One of the children had picked up the stick, with lizard attached, and was swinging it round and round.

'This is bad,' thought the lizard. 'But if I let go of the stick, it could get worse.'

I think I still have it, along with a thousand other crumpled profundities, in one of my black plastic bags.

I related most of this on to my psychiatrist, who took it on board with the same openness of spirit, the same generous and accommodating air with which he had entertained and recycled the exact opposite notions just a few weeks before.

He took extensive notes on the lizard.

6

I'VE LIVED TOO MUCH OUTSIDE THE SWING OF THINGS. WRITERS—even failed writers—do have this problem. We lie low. We watch. We take apart the work of others. We take apart the lives of others. As the epergne sailed closer to its target, though, I knew that this would no longer be the case. That however febrile, indistinct and ill-considered my intention was, the effect would not be so. I realised that from this point on—so much of the future came to mind, so many vistas opening—I was, in concrete and irretrievable ways, about to break into my own life.

I have lived so much on the margins. As a student, studying the works of others. As a lawyer, regulating the affairs of others. As a publisher, trading in the works of others. As a failed writer, painter, collector, abandoning the wreckage and lugging it down to Sorrento

in plastic bags. Standing, always, somehow, alongside myself. Measuring, watching, directing. Nibbling at the edge of other people's lives. Taking witty distant potshots at my own.

And now here I was, with the epergne in full motion, as the centre, both as fulcrum and as lever for something that could finally be described as a Real Event. A definite Act. An inescapable Commitment.

We each have our bent. The psychiatrist and I amused ourselves for a time—it did feel like a mere *amusette*, indeed, until I got the bill—with the geometry of our relationships. The movements of my mind, we decided, were lateral. An endless sideways shift, a refuge in association, in streams of irrelevant allusion, and the annoying aptitude I have for punning. There are circumstances where I might have taken his analysis as a compliment.

Coralie's motions I have already discussed. They are essentially vertical. Most of Coralie's judgments—of me, of the world around us—are structured in the perpendicular. Mere motion across is trivial, a distraction, a sign of things not thought through. It is motion upwards that counts. This is better than that. This will take you higher than that on the great bar graph of life.

It comes through in the clothing. Think of Clarke's boots, hat and whip. Coralie wore pure and natural fibres, designed to look like synthetics. Coralie's clothes were rarely patterned, always tailored, crisp and close-fitting, but with no signs of the body, no nips

and tucks of underwear, no straining of flesh and blood against the constraints of good design and corporate style, no bump, no crease, no trace of straps, zips, band-aids or pantyline.

Coralie at fifty was the neatest, crispest package in Fawkner's Town. Like something from an advertisement on television. Like something airbrushed, from a magazine.

Madeline was more difficult to plot. Madeleine came in layers. Madeleine came in streams, fashions, fragments, fads and phases. Madeleine lived in segments, fractions, slices. Madeleine lived the counter-culture, but under strictly controlled conditions. Madeleine lived a life of ease in a large manor in Hawthorn, but with rich Alternative Décor. Rollo was the pole around which she gambolled. Madeleine was discontinuous both in time and place. Perpendicular, lateral or circuitous, according to need. Madeleine could 'do' each of us according to her whim. According, I sometimes did think, to whatever spasm ran through the new age display shelves of her local bookstore.

Madeleine shifted with the wind. She wore clothing which seemed designed to catch whatever breeze might pass. This started early. Even in Paris, Madeleine's frocks and blouses were much looser, less confining. From this, on our return, she moved to more generous modes of disarray—baggily pre-Raphaelitic coats, caftans and cassocks, with frowsy hair to match. There was, I always felt, some tattering and fraying impulse from within, some disorderly and scattering motion that revealed itself in fringes, scarves,

tassels and streamers; high-end rags—once the knot was tied with Rollo—of a vaguely Hindo-gypsy provenance, gathered around an increasingly untidy body.

In the early nineties, Madeleine started to put on weight. The taut muscularity of the Paris days receded. You could see it even through the flakes and streaming layers. Madeleine started to look, this time and in the real, rather like the sort of person she had chosen to caricature throughout her slim and carefree youth. Madeleine as jaunting gypsy caravan, as pitching galleon in a wild typhoon, as laundry basket in a blustering wind. There was something of the true bag lady about Madeleine. Streaming, fraying, dispersing. But with dutiful Rollo always waiting for her at the periphery to tow her back to calmer waters.

'Rollo,' she would confide, 'keeps a Bit of an Eye on Things.'

The real implications of her way of living—the true toll of Madeleine's inner swaggie—never quite exposed itself. Few swaggies have had her resources to call on. Few swaggies have a Rollo, with a thriving bankruptcy practice behind him, to welcome them home and dust them down. Few have behind them someone quite so canny, mopping up the damage, selling off the abandoned premises, turning Madeleine's disasters into so profitable a line of business, and even, Madeleine once confessed, unloading the odd storeroom full of unwanted canvases onto trusting corporate clients.

Rollo's mind, on this model, is circuitous. I use the word in a special sense. Rollo is preoccupied with boundaries and perimeters. There are those who, casting an eye over the unexceptionable blue suits, the rimless spectacles, the neatly polished shoes, would say—yes. Limited. But those limits, let me tell you on dear Rollo's behalf, are the boundaries of community. They are not drawn by snobbery. They are drawn by considerations of stability, of sustainability. Rollo is preoccupied with order, with the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, with the restraints that the Public—the responsible dimension of the public—places upon the Private.

William Shakespeare shared the same concerns.

Rollo is like Coralie. He looks up, and down. He is also like me. He looks sideways. But whereas the rest of us are searching for new territories to conquer, whole new fields on which to play, Rollo watches for the limits, the constraints.

Rollo did not go to Oxbridge, despite his monogrammed cufflinks and escutcheoned tie. If Madeleine was nature's bag lady, though, then Rollo was surely nature's old collegian. Had Rollo gone to Oxbridge, he would not, as by gentlemanly instinct, have thought for one moment of walking on the college lawns. All over Fawkner's Town, even in democratic, egalitarian Fawkner's Town, there are countless lawns on which Rollo will not impose a desecrating footfall. Nor does Rollo speak loudly in public toilets.

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BEACH HOUSES OF THE MIND. I have told you about mine. Coralie, as far as I could tell, had no need for similar locations, for similar repositories. As the years passed, my fascination grew. There seemed, with her, to be no kind of detritus, not from body or from mind. Domestically, Coralie was impeccable. Immaculate, fastidious to the point of unearthliness in the way she conducted her daily *toilette*, with never so much as a soiled tissue, a discarded item of used underwear, an unflushed toilet or a soggy towel to remind us that there were also, somewhere, real leaking humans lurking in the apartments we traversed through the long years of our rise and rise and rise.

Where did Coralie stow her soiled underwear? Where did the tissues vanish to so quickly? (So very stealthily, it finally seemed to me, so very duplicitously.) At what point did Coralie's domestic hygiene begin to set the pattern for the rest, where each human instinct, every human capacity was swallowed up in order and cleanliness, all else lost in the eternal struggle between human being and microbe?

How far might some essential bathroom truths, in the very early stages of our relationship, have saved us, and everyone around us, from the Armageddon that has followed? What instigations to barbarism, to duplicity, murder, adultery and betrayal, derive from those earliest years of potty training—assiduous, detailed, regular and absolute? From the whole business of keeping a good house, but one where, finally, there was no-one at home?

These are mysteries I scarcely begin to fathom. What I do know was that a lifetime's training in aggressive one-dimensionality did seem to have succeeded, in alarming measure. Inner and outer had come to correspond to a degree not less than frightening. Cleanliness and godliness and yearning and devastation and narrowly postponed mayhem, adultery and murder had somehow all *plateaued out* together. The heights, the depths, the highest yearnings and the sordid reaches of the human soul had somehow been dispersed, outmatched, outshone by the glint on our champagne glasses, the shine on our domestic crockery and the darker gleam of our assiduously wiped boots. How could she live off so very little? How could she leave so little trace?

The fascination grew almost like a renovated form of loving. Believe me, if a deep desire for intimacy is a form of loving, then I love Coralie. If a longing to get inside, to live within another's skin, to roam around within the life, mind, body of another is on the way to loving, then I can lay strong claim.

Even the sex, for quite a time, was good. How intently I listened in those climactic moments—if I may be Strictly Inadmissible for just one sacred moment, Your Honour—how I forgot my own feelings, abandoned my own pleasure, and just listened to the things that Coralie told. As though her cry might offer a roadmap, the key to some secret location where I might hope to locate just a little of the leavings of real living, of all that had been dumped, discarded

and disinfected, all the traces of those places and those feelings that she had decreed were not to be?

It was her cry, her voice like some precious wound re-parting, some crevice opening to the soul, sounding out across the wastelands that lay to left and right of A to B; as though in that sharp impassioned absence of words there might be some kind of language still, for just the two of us, a language fresh, impassioned, unsullied by Project, Resource or Quality.

Right up until the moment of incarceration—even during that long early-morning drive in the police car from Sorrento—I had my desert-island fantasies of Coralie. Of being utterly alone in the world, with her, on a deserted beach. Mobiles off. Beneath the towering palms.

Of course, Coralie detested the beach. There was something about the cry of seagulls, the feeling of sand trickling between her toes, the crash of the waves that told too much of disorder, of the need for someone to take the thing In Hand.

I had fantasies of taking Coralie by the hand and leading her through the wastelands to the beach house. Of leading her in and displaying everything that was in it. Opening up my many beached collections. Tearing apart the black plastic bags, and showing her just some of what was inside. Dreaming that she might then take me by the hand in turn and lead me through the tea-trees to another house, in a street that would run parallel to mine, another house

boarded up and abandoned and largely unlived-in but filled with her own secret things, her own plastic bags, and all her abandoned hopes and the shreds of her own persistent and recklessly exquisite dreaming.

I once had a dream, a vivid dream, another sort of dream, about Coralie and me in the Antarctic. Or at any rate somewhere very, very cold. We were sliding across the frozen wastes. Dog sleds, I think it was. It was about Coralie slipping into a crevasse and crying out to be rescued. I recall looking down at Coralie slipping gradually into the abyss, blind terror in her eyes. Holding out her hand to me, standing safely above. I reached down to her but, instead of pulling her up, I let myself slip down beside her. I took her in my arms. And together we slipped, silently, down through the frozen air.

Can I draw just one tear from my reader? You will need an image. An image of me lying, depleted, *post coitum,* with Coralie already in the bathroom shutting down the close, betraying spaces. If only she waited for just one moment. Put her arm across me, and pressed her head against my shoulder. If only she let her hair drift across my face and let our sweat mingle, or laughed or wept against my cheek and murmured some word of affection or even anger or something preciously or outrageously obscene. Had this happened even once in the many years we were together, then the whole business, perhaps even that swift and steady motion of the epergne, might never have occurred and we might all, Madeleine,

Coralie, Rollo and I, be going about our daily tasks. The whole world would still quicken, warmed into life from this secret source, the deepest bedroom depths of St Georges Road.

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I'VE LOOKED TO CLARKE FOR wisdom. He didn't write much about sex. I've combed the letters that have survived, the novels, the plays, the poetry, all the various bits and pieces that Petra has been able to uncover. Mostly, it just rolls along the conventional Victorian lines, shadowy, elusive, with occasional daring hints at more.

This doesn't mean that he couldn't tell of sex when it was needed. His descriptions of Sarah Purfoy are as alluring as anything you'll find. Perhaps it is the prison walls that intensify the experience. In *His Natural Life*, we have the Good Woman (Sylvia) and the Bad Woman (Sarah) with the rogue and martinet Maurice Frere standing between them.

The portrayal of Sylvia is appropriately restrained. She grows into womanhood and sexuality in a state of deep amnesiac unconsciousness, knowing only, as Clarke discreetly words it, that it was when Frere, now her husband, liked her most that she 'liked him least'. Sarah, on the other hand—vamp and manipulatrix from the outset—is delivered to us as an 'impassioned, palpitating, abandoned woman'.

> The touch of his hands about her neck awoke her to the consciousness of her duty. She flung her supple arms about him, and kissed him close. The contact of his lips awoke all the slumbering fire within her, and, slipping from his knees, she tore with rapid fingers the ribbon that bound her hair, and laughing a low laugh, shook its rippling masses to her waist.
>
> 'Dearest', she cried, with her large black eyes dilating beneath their languid lashes, 'I love you! Do you hear me, Maurice? I love you!'

Palpitating? Rippling? Dilating? It's not just my prison walls that make this strong. Perhaps it's the context. It's on the convict ship, on the way out, in the serial version. Sarah has got the captain drunk, and now she is seducing, distracting Frere, to assist the mutiny about to break out below. What adds real power is the fact that it is such a mix. There is both her duty—to John Rex, her demon lover, down below with the others; her duty to distract and obstruct, to assist the mutiny—and the onset of what *seems* like real passion with the brutal Frere. That she should seduce him at all is, of course, outrageous. That she should so clearly enjoy doing it is unspeakable.

> She hung upon him with all her weight. Her long hair swept across his face, her warm breath was on his cheek, her torn dress exposed her smooth round shoulder.

Clarke here put himself at risk. Writing against the clock, writing to his deadline. Later, with time to think and sage advice from sober friends, more cautious souls, he toned it down. There is no rippling, no dilating, in the one-volume edition. It is the fading symbolic Sylvia, rather than raunchy Sarah, fleshly and palpitating, who sees the novel to its end.

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I HAD AN AFFAIR—YOU may not have guessed it—with my wife's sister. I think it was an affair. I was told that's what it was. Whatever it was, it certainly set in motion all the apparatus of an affair, all the furtive practices of long and sustained adultery.

It was in the tenth year of our marriage. It started with shared confidences. Always an error. Madeleine suggested that we meet for coffee. She seemed kinder, more sympathetic than usual. A small crack opened. We spent most of our time at the first, the second and the third sly taking of coffee talking about Coralie. As I probed, I struck ever richer veins of resentment. My own misgivings about Coralie were force-fed on small serves of gall and wormwood from the heart of Madeleine. It was exciting. There were so many things, so many little things, that I seemed not to have noticed. Not, of course, that these things were important. But so many of her virtues were, when properly viewed, conspicuous defects. Not, of course,

that any of these things *mattered* particularly, but was it not surprising how little I had seen?

My wife, who by the third encounter had became *poor Coralie*. Who steadily then shifted from front of stage to the dark shadow of the wings.

Meetings were never difficult. I could always duck out of the office, pleading a meeting, a lunch, an appointment. Madeleine could always put up her 'Back in 10 minutes' sign and quit for the afternoon. Madeleine had always had a key to our house, and me to hers. There were always gardens to water, tradesmen to let in and even, in good time, dogs to feed. She was likely to turn up at any time. And should Coralie happen to be there, well, they were supposed to be sisters, were they not? In fact, Madeleine only came when she could be reasonably sure that Coralie was far, far away.

Were there always these cracks in the relationship between the four of us? There were caverns, abysses, so many yawning crevasses. But they were crevasses, I always thought, that we had more or less grown used to in the first years of our sortings-out of one another, in the takings-up of roles and all the slippery adjustments and slick disguisings that added up to social ease.

There was, it had to be said, a certain liveliness to it all. Madeleine was not, on the face of things, as attractive as Coralie. The softer features were softening apace. The body seemed, in all its layers and streamings, to tolerate, to accommodate too much.

Madeleine was not successful in the way of Coralie. She lacked the special sense of direction that Coralie was notorious for. She was the kind of person for whom risk management was invented. She had a genius for finding her way into dead ends.

There was the new maze—a real, leafy maze, Your Honour, and not a metaphor—got up for the tourists at Sorrento. Coralie found her way through it in minutes, and I clung to the coat-tails of Coralie. We had, in the end, to call for the proprietor, his assistants and his children to go and find Madeleine. It was early in my marriage, but already at that time, with my keen eye for the symbolic, the emblematic, I saw far more than a thirsty and heat-stricken young woman who happened to get lost.

When Madeleine saw that she was not going to become an artist—I think she knew this already by the time we first met in Paris—she opted for the role of impresario, and put the full force of her social aptitude (which was considerable) and the full force of Rollo's income (which was increasing in steady multiples) to work. The artists she promoted were always of a kind; never quite interesting enough to crack it in terms of genuine artistic reputation, but not sufficiently anodyne and predictable to grace the corporate wall. I have a pretty fair idea that Rollo was still, after almost two decades, bailing her out either by paying the rent or, more usually, by buying and selling the various premises through which the ongoing Madeleine fiasco distributed itself up and down High Street.

I did wonder about Rollo's sluggish breed of calculating wisdom. It occurred to me once that if Madeleine did happen to be successful, it might be less easy for Rollo to make his own killing, so to speak, on the sale of the premises. Such thoughts rise to mind, and are of course swiftly banished. Rollo was Madeleine's rock. Below Madeleine's uncommon measure of professional ineptitude lay the common denominator of capital gains. The galleries simply came, and came, and came.

Intimacy? Was that the lure of Madeleine? Was it masochistic? It must seem so, from the outside. But if the pain is pleasurable, then surely it's not pain? I needed intimacy. I dreaded intimacy. I couldn't stand Madeleine. I needed the time with Madeleine. I just kept coming back and back.

Madeleine talked, you see, about finding the 'real me'. It was more than seductive. We were going to find out what made me tick. Madeleine has this fetching trust in clichés. The game intensified as the years passed, in a mix of dread and titillation. We peeled back, in steady stages, one mad tic after another. All she did, though, was to paint me in the brightest hues of which taunting caricature is capable. Every face I put up, every shield, became the next target, the next subject for dalliance and then for demolition. It brought new tics on in droves.

What we did not talk about, of course, was Rollo. What Rollo might feel, what we were doing to Rollo, what Rollo might do if

ever he found out. What was it like with Rollo? I assure you, I never did inquire. Nor, beyond one alarming, mumbled comment about Rollo's sperm count, did Madeleine ever tell. Odd, how strict were the decorums, how complex the parameters, the boundary fences we set up for one another. Yes, we did talk intimately about me. But rarely of Coralie. Never of Rollo.

You would be amazed how delicate the conversation was. How gently we edged along the margin of so many intimate things without ever really touching on any of them. How much and yet how little real conversation ever took place between us. Rollo was so little present to us that I did question what on earth she found in Rollo, to keep their conversation running. I wondered how close she got to Rollo's inner clockwork, or whether, indeed, there was such a thing to be found.

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CLOCKWORK. ONE BENEFIT, I HAD thought, of being locked away, and of being likely to be locked away for the Term of My Natural Life, would be that time—past, future and the whole beat of the pendulum—would dissolve into an easeful timeless present. I thought of my old country rellies, sitting day after day out on their front verandahs, just taking in the sun. The human mind, though, Dr Johnson tells us, runs not from pleasure to pleasure, but from

hope to hope. We cling to the pendulum. We live and breathe through goals, directions, even if it's no more than the watching of a spider making its way up a wall. My old rellies, when I think of it, kept a keen eye on the grass.

A spider—or a research assistant's visits?

I look forward more and more to Petra. She might not yet know it. She does arrive, though, with signs of a similar pleasure written right across her face. I greet her casually enough. We talk, of course, of business. Always of Marcus Clarke. She opens her capacious bag and spreads the notes and photocopies across the table. I flick through them, and distribute the most extravagant praise.

Petra responds by describing her pleasure, her enthusiasm for the task. She passes her own compliments back to the papers, to the project as a whole. The papers lie between us. We separate, stack and straighten. We stroke, smooth and caress.

Petra has taken to wearing russet-coloured clothing. She carries a large brown coat over her arm, and wears blouses and pullovers in a more sober hue. The mid-season colours seem to soften her brown eyes. The weather out there, I deduce, is changing.

The spider has been climbing more slowly than I had realised. And Petra has now come many times.

For once, though, she doesn't ask me what it is that we are really looking for. This worries me. She and Edward have just been up to Sydney, at my expense. They took the Mazda, with a more than

generous mileage allowance—the tally amounts to rather more than the whole value of Edward's ancient Mazda, I suspect—and the price of three nights in a motel, plus meals for both of them.

Why Sydney? Did Clarke not hail from Fawkner's Town? It's because of the letters. We don't have too many of Clarke's letters. Many that we do have are merely about business. The biggest cache of letters—private letters—is in the Mitchell Library.

Petra was sent to fossick. Edward was sent because he's the one who drives the Mazda.

Private letters? The truth is, you see, that Marcus Clarke fell in love with his wife's sister. Yes, here it is, at last. We creep closer to the core. Clarke, very early in his marriage, and when he was still very young, fell in love with his wife's sister, and she with him.

It was a murky, claustrophobic, torturous, star-cross'd affair. There followed a heated, surreptitious correspondence, running over more than two years from 1871 to early 1873, roughly the period in which *His Natural Life* was written and then revised. Eventually the sister, Rose Lewis, went to England with her husband, and the affair lapsed.

Some time later, Clarke began to make plans for a novel based on an adulterous affair. *Felix and Felicitas*. The plan was to describe an affair which would begin at the highest level of idealism, but steadily submit, via adultery, to the pressures of poverty and ennui. The novel was never completed, but Clarke did write a synopsis for

his publishers. He proposed that the novel would end in anticlimax. In a mediocrity of a kind to please no-one.

The received wisdom—not received by everyone—is that the novel was based in Clarke's own experience of his relationship with Rose Lewis. The letters between them, topped and tailed by Clarke to fit the new story, were to have been slotted into the novel. The project never proceeded, though, past the point where the letters were to have been inserted.

Did Clarke lose his nerve? Was he worried about legal liability? Or was it simply a sense of what was right—of doing what Rollo would call the Decent Thing? Writers are free to draw on their own experience. They will, they must, draw on the experience of others. But when it gets down to the publishing of personal letters, penned in the heat of an illicit affair, surely the whole thing changes hue? It was, in short, a bit too close to home. Even some of Clarke's most ardent supporters have judged this project misconceived. It shows an unfortunate tendency in the man, to which he was a victim elsewhere. He was accused, in his own day, of lacking any real imagination. All that he wrote had to be sheet-anchored in the real. And when you read the letters—Petra brought back copies—the big question arises of whether Clarke lived out the affair and then got the idea of working it up into literature, or whether the two of them somehow managed to ramp the whole thing up to the point where, from the outset, it had far more of the smoke of literature about it than the fire of real

passion, of actually getting their hands on each other. Or is it possible, indeed, that the letters are just another of Clarke's fictions? They do not, as it happens, exist in Rose's own hand. Yes, there are the letters—heated, passionate and vigorously wrought—but the fact is that they are all in Marcus Clarke's own handwriting, with another set copied by someone else. Not Rose Lewis. None of the letters is actually in Rose's hand. All appear to have been rewritten. Copied—or, indeed, heavily reworked? Or even heavily invented? Was the plot for the novel bent to fit the business of the affair, or was the whole affair, if ever it existed, rewritten to bring it up to novelistic scratch?

An affair with his wife's sister? How much did I need to tell Petra before she and Edward set out? How much would she assume? How soon will she begin to fill in the gaps? How much will she now know, on coming back? The newspaper accounts of my crime were full of holes. My own stories, my own versions of what happened, must have been more than provocatively flimsy, mere scaffoldings on which more substantial, rather more fleshly stories might be built.

'Why are you so very interested in this stuff, Martin?'

It's what she doesn't ask. And if she doesn't ask, it's probably because she already knows. Or at least suspects.

I thought of Edward and Petra on their way up the Hume Highway. Edward the philosopher. I have known philosophers. I pictured thick spectacles and bad skin and silly facial expressions

and awkward and affected hand gestures as he expounded his ideas. I thought of baggy pullovers and faded jeans and crooked teeth, and the slight whiff of body odour. I thought of mile after mile of irritating quibblings and half-baked theories and incessant goings-back-over and redefinings-of-one's-terms. What could Petra possibly see in him?

I imagined Edward putting two and two together, uninhibited by the profound and growing affection that Petra clearly has for me. Petra was raised in Canterbury. Edward, almost certainly of far more obscure and disorderly origins, would be subject to no such constraint.

Just once or twice, the idea flashed through my mind that behind those projected owlish spectacles, beneath that imputed baggy pullover, there might lurk a part-time model for deodorant advertisements. Rippling and flexing. Haunted by such possibilities, outrageous and obscene as they were, I thought of asking Petra to bring him to the visitors' room. I imagined that Edward, as a practising philosopher—Petra did once mention Foucault—might like to see what incarceration actually looks like from the inside.

If she did, though, it might mean the end of one of my more consoling veins of imagining. I preferred merely to think of the two of them making their way back through Yass, Albury and Benalla, with Petra sifting through the letters, and Edward reeking, squinting, quibbling and redefining at the wheel.

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WAS THE AFFAIR EVER A physical one? Did Rose and Marcus ever make love? Did they ever manage to touch each other? Most commentators think not. There is little in the letters to suggest they did, though the circumlocutions and evasions and genuflections and pirouettes do here and there take on a salacious tinge. There are no reports of the relationship from Clarke's own lifetime. A few crop up later, but largely from people with an interest in adding spice and value to the letters as literary properties. Clarke's wife Marian—whom Clarke confessed to having turned into 'a petulant woman' who 'said she wished she had never married me'—later made a bonfire of his papers, but kept the letters. Would she have done so if they had pointed to anything other than an entertaining yarn?

If the affair did happen, how did Clarke obtain his letters to Rose? Why did he rewrite them all? How close are the copies Petra has found to the originals? How far had they already been worked up for fiction? And how far were the originals ever 'real' in the first place? The prose in most of them is nothing if not intense. Herewith, the Peripatetic Philosopher in love:

> Forget me, hate me, laugh at me if thou wilt, I shall never cease to love thee—to love thee, with a love that would deny itself and force itself to hate thee did thy hopes of good demand it. Morality and social usage are gone in thy presence. You are my divinity, my God, my saviour. If your eyes say 'love me', surely no sin can follow, for I would then turn

> from the great white throne of God to worship thee. In thee is my life bound up. Whatever of worth that I have done.

Thee? Thine? Thou?

And she, in return:

> I do not think you will ever see this. It is better that you should not. It is better that you should think a cold woman thawed once, but soon congealed again ice being her natural being. Now you see why I gave way. Now you see why I allowed myself to drift and for you to drift with me. I knew exactly how far we should go. I knew that although the water covered the ropes that held us in our places, that the ropes were always there and that very soon our stolen holiday would end and with it our drifting. I knew we could not go far enough to reach those cruel rocks, that have wrecked so many silly boats . . . I have told you distinctly that I resolved to stick to my mooring, to go backwards and forwards in this little shallow bay and forget that there is a glorious ocean outside, in which in happier circumstances I might have sailed. I have elected to live among these miserable fishing boats, who see nothing in these wonderful waters but fish good to eat, and I will do it.

There is here, and coming at us from both ends, an awful lot of Literature to wade through. What really lies beneath?

Did Rose give him his letters back? Not as a contribution to Clarke's literary purposes, you would have thought. Rose had a husband—a Rollo of her own, businessman and organist at Christ Church South Yarra. Did Clarke—oh conceit!—keep copies from the first of the letters that he sent her, in case they should come in handy, by and by? Some do seem to be originals. Some of the letters from Clarke even seem equipped with tear stains. Does one keep the tear-stained article and send the pristine copy? Or are the tear stains in fact just slurps of tea?

Where are the rest of the originals? Presumably either Rose or Marcus destroyed them at some point. Let us assume that they did. I take the view there really was an affair, on the basis of the correspondence that Petra has tracked down. Petra herself is inclined to be moved by all those thees and thous. Much of the material comes from a monumentally clever and assiduous thesis by one admirable Wendy Abbott-Young, now sadly deceased, that Petra had shipped over from the Barr Smith Library in Adelaide. She has copied it for me. It's a huge piece of scholarly detective work in the old style, with careful transcriptions and projected chronological orderings of the materials, and much informed speculation on what actually happened. It takes a few brave punts, but without closing off the issues.

The letters—I here nail my own colours to the mast—are genuine. For the most part. Reworked, in some uncertain measure, and

even subject, in some instances, to a later editing hand. Even cautious Petra agrees. The words, almost despite themselves, do tell us something. Why do I think them genuine? It's because of their sheer banality. The letters are riddled with the worst clichés, the most ponderous and laboured metaphors, with ceaseless protestings and cavillings, should-we-shouldn't-we backwardsings and forwardsings about passion, and the evasion and sublimation of passion, and commitment and the impossibility of commitment, about fulfilment and the impossibility of fulfilment, and, in general, talk, talk, talk. The stuff is dull, repetitive, and really quite ordinary. It feels very, very real.

Both were writers. Rose Lewis went on, indeed, to write full-blown romance. Her novel *Fatal Shadows*, Petra assures me, is available in the State Library. I have not read it. Was she just working up a fictional lather too? Indeed, she did even suggest to Clarke, at one point where the verbal headspin ran too high, that he slacken off and perhaps just try to 'work it out in a book'.

Wendy Abbott-Young of the monumental thesis is kinder than I am. But to me, the letters are so much worse than the worst that Clarke ever put into his fictions, so much more dismal and monotonous than anything he ever put into print, that they do indeed have the dead hand of Real Life upon them. The straitjacket of Sincerity. The frightening limitations that real feeling imposes.

In the later 1870s, things began to come apart. There was more and more journalistic pottage. Clarke had a reasonable success—not financial, particularly—with *His Natural Life*. His other substantial novel, *Long Odds*, he dismissed as 'the greatest trash'. A few potboilers surfaced and disappeared. A few ambitious intellectual projects faltered and fled. The satires became less sharp, less lively, less entertaining. The world was waiting for another book. His powers were waning. He was often sick. Rose suggested, in the very heat of the affair, that the 'fumes of alcohol' were not helping, and there is no evidence to suggest that the problem diminished in the years to follow. He was short of ideas. But on his desk there sat a pile of papers. Letters. Written in a state of great intensity. During his most creative years. A slice of life, indeed, now feeling seductively like a slice of fiction. Could you blame him if he was tempted?

It was a kind of devil's pact. There has been a lot of speculation about why he never finished his novel. Six chapters were even printed off in the author's own lifetime. At which point, I suspect, the devil's pact caught up with him. That when he arrived at the point at which he really would have to throw the letters on the table—when he would have to expose himself and Rose Lewis to the public gaze—the whole project fell apart.

In the letters, and despite all the High Sentence, we do get to see just a bit of what the Peripatetic Philosopher looked like once he

stopped moving. We see a glimpse of what the *flâneur* really thought once he was off the street and back in the privacy of his own home. We do get a glimpse of the will-o'-the-wisp, the bohemian, finally pinned to the wall by a bit of real feeling. Hopelessly confused, I would have to say, between the world of the Real, and the stuff that flowed from the end of his pen.

I do prefer, it must be said, the lying, fig-leaved Clarke. The affected cynic. The man of many masks.

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I PARTICULARLY DISLIKE DOGS.

Madeleine and Rollo decided to go into dogs. They could not be deflected. I saw disaster from the start. Dogs meant feeding and walks, and feeding and walks meant being 'tied down'—my deepest dread in life—but they seemed undaunted by the idea, with Madeleine adamant, and Rollo meek and submissive.

I explained to them how these dogs would roam through the house and drive their stinks deep into the cushions and soft furnishings. I presented them with harrowing images of half-gnawed bones in their bedroom, of chewed and slimy sandshoes up and down the hall, of broken pots across the garden and, throughout the house, shed hair and reeking bowls.

Madeleine decided on a King Charles.

The canine. It's an antagonism that I was only dimly aware of early in my life. It gathered strength, though, during my time in England, where people's houses seemed to be infested with them. Where one had to contend with dog-hair and half-eaten bowls of the foulest murk in the most unlikely places, generally where one was about to stand or sit. Where complimenting and canoodling with the wretched mutt or mutts—the English love them in multiples, especially on sofas and under tables in the living room—is an essential rite of passage, a ritual of introduction, of far more importance than the way one greets their children, who are of little social significance in England. Invitees seek to outdo and outmanoeuvre one another at the outset of social occasions, and especially in the houses of the rich, in loud exclamations of enthusiasm for their beloved, accursed dogs.

So the dogs arrived. Not one but two King Charles spaniels. Ugly little orange and white brutes with wet noses and gaping goldfish eyes. Madeleine being Madeleine, they immediately shed the homely names they came with—Spot and Flossie—and became known as Tiepolo and Caravaggio. Which became, within a couple of weeks, and mercifully so, Tip and Cassie.

A month later, Rollo managed to reverse the Merc over poor Cassie—there is that in Rollo which doth trouble me—and that left only Tip to roam the house, demanding to be fed and walked; Tip, who would make towards any dangling hand and use nudgings and bumpings from his wet nose to extort pats, who seemed to know

exactly where it was that one wished to sit, where it was that he should nudge his bowls for maximal trippability, where it was that his various reeks would catch the best air flow.

Give me in preference—if dogs there must be—the Australian farm dog, imparting its stinks to the open air. Largely confined, in days of yore, to dog yards and the like. A man and his dog. *That there dog of mine*. The link, the bond runs deep. The Australian swaggie. The outcast. The dog as buffer zone. With the solace in those dark, moist eyes—particularly affecting, I've always found, around mealtimes—as a useful surrogate for real exchange, the real toil of trying to cross the spikes that lie between one human being and another. There was just something of this, I did suspect, with Rollo and Madeleine. Did Madeleine truly talk to Rollo? Or did they each just talk to the dog? It is so useful, on so many occasions, to find that there are three in the room.

And what did really happen to poor Cassie? There are doors here that, once opened, might not with ease be closed.

Oh, there were many narrow escapes. Rollo would come home unexpectedly. Coralie would turn up unannounced. But of course, there were always good reasons why I should be there, or why Madeleine should have dropped in and was making herself comfortable in the house, with me, and fixing herself a drink.

Receipts from hotels arrived. Bills from restaurants. You'd think these things would serve as warnings. Instead, they seemed to feed

the sorry affair. This is the true spice of dishonesty. The edgy thrill of 'almost being caught'. The strange desire to bring on exposure. The deepening sense, as Madeleine succinctly put it, that my life 'did not work', and only by such radical measures, such violent exposings, would it ever be changed.

And each time, the wretched dog would lift its tail listlessly, to signal Rollo's arrival in the house, its big watery eyes still reflecting whatever intimate scenes it had just witnessed, in bedroom, bathroom, living room, on sofas, chairs, patios and garden swings.

Did Tip know something about poor Cassie that I did not?

Regrets, regrets. Can you actually change the past? Just by thinking about it intensely enough? By concentrating, really concentrating, can you go back and somehow rearrange the thing? Sitting here in prison, gazing into my toilet bowl, I feel a fondness for the notion that we can. That you can somehow intervene, just shift the thing a little, so that we might be talking about a near miss—very difficult, given the physical evidence—or an accident—such dangerous things, epergnes—or no swing, no crunching blow at all. A simple one-step extending of memory's usual slippery control.

We do, the lawyers assure us, have such powers. Such magical control of past and future. I'm sure you know the old joke—not you, of course, Your Honour—about lawyers and lightbulbs. How many lawyers does it take to change a lightbulb? The lawyer closes

the door, pulls down the blinds and asks, 'Just how many would you *like* it to have been?'

The desire to be caught. Madeleine and me. Was it in the hope of escaping Coralie? I think not. If I confessed, more deeply confessing now, in writing, than I have ever confessed before, it was the younger of the sisters—the one, indeed, whom I just happened to have married—who actually appealed to me. I yearned, in truth, for Coralie. I longed to catch up with the caught-on-the-hop, the tabled-items, the questions-without-notice Coralie. The endlessly set-aside, the eternally postponed and moved-forward Coralie.

My affair with Madeleine. It was that business of the tiger yet again. The hazards of dismounting. The whole awkward business of trying to explain to the tiger, in terms that the tiger would understand, that it really has been lots of fun, but that this would now just about 'do'.

7

CORALIE AND I RECENTLY WENT TO A PERFORMANCE OF SHAKESPEARE'S *Measure for Measure* with Madeleine and Rollo.

A lawyer, I was, but only for a time—two dismal years of office work, two years under the lash of Bastard, Bastard & Bastard, stapling one form to another, opening up loopholes and closing down loopholes and learning all the inner tricks of genteel pinstriped bastardry. And at the end of it all I was pushed aside by one of the younger Bastards, who'd managed after years of bad behaviour to bribe his way into an LLB from a dubious private college to the north, and had oiled his way back to Fawkner's Town to elbow me aside and claim his birthright.

It was then that Mawnsley came to the rescue. The arms of the mother. The scholarship, and Oxford.

The law, in books, in plays, generally comes in for a hard serve. Shakespeare's 'First, let's kill all the lawyers' did set something in train. *Measure for Measure* is more interesting, though. I have quoted Clarke already. There is indeed a lot of human nature in men and women. Such being the case, you need to bring in good and decent laws to alleviate the fact.

The problem is that the moment you do so, the law itself starts to slide off into the realm of the monstrous, the non-human. As soon as you try to lift our leaky and delinquent species too far beyond the domains of appetite, you move into spheres where real human beings are mostly not fit to travel. You begin to create a system where inhumanity starts to leapfrog. Where local and individual backsliding starts to pale against crimes committed in the name of prevention and punishment. Where a whole new cast of monsters is bred up, with all the better aspects of being human—they do exist! They do exist!—inhumanely set aside.

Shakespeare saw it. Dickens saw it. Clarke saw it.

Shakespeare was, for Rollo, one of the accoutrements of his professional success, along with the members' enclosure at the Cup, the opera and the Savage Club. The play was performed by the visiting Royal Shakespeare Company. As such, we had to be there anyway. Ties on. I knew the play, as did Madeleine. Rollo and Coralie did not. The production was very good.

The story of *Measure for Measure* is very sound. Rollo approved.

The 'strict statutes and most biting laws' of Vienna had, of recent years, been 'let slip, Even like an o'ergrown lion in a cave, That goes not out to prey'. The Duke decided to leave his power in the hands of the severe, ascetic Angelo. During the Duke's absence, Angelo was to be 'morality and mercy in Vienna'. Angelo, it seems, was the ideal man to bring back the bite, to set the lion free. Angelo took the bit between his teeth.

The laws, including an ancient law promising pain of death for fornication, were now to be enforced in all their literal rigour. The fair Isabella's brother Claudio was soon convicted. Isabella came before Angelo to plead for her brother's life. Angelo, it emerges, did not know himself quite as well as he knew the biting laws of Vienna. Angelo conceived—like that!—an unruly passion for the pleading girl, and tried to stitch up a most disreputable deal, by which she might preserve her brother's life. It came unstuck, unstuck, unstuck.

There is, of course, much more.

There are, I believe, good monsters and bad monsters. I do believe that Rollo is ultimately monstrous—a strangely genial and responsible breed of monster—bred up, indeed, to have real trouble in seeing past the way the law has put the world together. Rollo was moulded, judiciously, from his infancy. Rollo grew up in the already lengthy shadow of Sawney Bean & Co. The Beans were the true muscle. The other founding partners had long since toddled off. Rollo's father, Quentin J, was the fourth of that name.

Rollo's upbringing and education followed the strict rules of procedure. Rollo's life was shaped by legal templates. Even the fairy stories of Rollo's early childhood, I do suspect, were sifted and largely exploded against the rules of evidence. Stories where the villains could be clearly identified and well beyond reasonable doubt. Stories where the evidence was not merely circumstantial in character or riddled with hearsay or, as in the case of the Big Bad Wolf, with inappropriate media attention and corrupted by the presentation of similar fact evidence.

Rollo believes in order. In constraint. Give him an unruly parish picnic, he would soon set the whole thing in order. Give him Auschwitz, he would have the trains turn up on time.

'One must,' he said to me once, 'always do the best for one's client.'

Rollo, by the way, was always 'one'. Almost never 'I'. And one had, of course, one's duties. One's responsibilities. Peremptory, they were, and absolute.

Over drinks after the play, Rollo, as usual, smiled tolerantly at all attempts by me or Coralie or Madeleine to suggest that there might be any deeper meaning or subtler probing in what had just taken place.

We were 'just trying to make too much of it', and he would look about him for the waiter, for the next round of drinks. That blighter Angelo got what he deserved. You could see it coming. This, in

essence, was what any half-decent play was all about. This was what Rollo's work was all about. It was gratifying for him to see the whole undertaking of Sawney Bean & Co reaffirmed in theatre, as well as in the Real World. The fair Isabella was rescued, her brother freed, Angelo banished and Isabella, in the end, snapped up by the crafty Duke. It was the kind of play which permitted one to get on with things. That did not leave an aftertaste. Unlike most modern plays.

The real point about *Measure for Measure* though—it became a conversation largely between Madeleine and me—was that you had to participate. If our world was a world of appetite and desire, then the law, to be effective, had to take these things on board. It had to move in flexible, even dubious ways between the ideal and the real. The law had perhaps to be a bit of a monster in its own right in order to deal with some of the more monstrous things we do, and that if it wasn't—if it pitched itself and all its operations at some impossible and inhuman level—then it would create worse monsters of its own. Like Angelo. The shaky bulwark of the Black Letter. The heartless literalist.

Rollo didn't really see why we felt the need to 'go on and on about it'. Why, indeed, were we even talking about the law? We'd seen what had happened, how it all got sorted out. We'd seen the curtain fall.

Rollo is indeed a monster. One of the better sort. With whom a genuine sincerity and sense of decency were muddled in with

professional ethics or looking-after-one's-mates, thence to be muddled in further with the sacred principle of blighters getting what was coming to them, and with the whole lot muddled together, finally, with that need, as Rollo so comfortingly put it, always to do the best for one's clients.

The centre could only hold through the most studied forms of sublime unconsciousness, of which Rollo was a true master. Not by telling lies, because Rollo would never do that. Rather by filtering, by only admitting as truth, as real, what passed through the screen of the rules of evidence. What stayed out of evidence stayed out of existence. His clients, proved innocent by the courts, were innocent. Their opponents, proved guilty, were blighters. If one's own clients, hitherto thought to be innocent, were judged guilty by the courts, then they had clearly lied. To one. And thus were blighters too. Whichever way you went about it, both justice and all sacred principles were affirmed. Like a cat, always landing on its feet.

Who, in the end, is Rollo? Most people arrive at some sense of who they are by thinking about what they want. With Rollo, it was more to do with what others wanted. It was a question of what was expected of him. Was this what actually fascinated me about Rollo—that kept me coming back and back, and with real affection, to this man who so studiously made himself as dull and predictable as it was possible for a human being to be? A man with a determination, moreover, and one I can assure you he maintained while

sitting across the desk from all the high-rolling bounders, shysters, schemesters and cads that passed through his office on a daily basis—just about every 'lousy rip' in the city, as my father would have said—to maintain the ideal of justice and to bring it into reality on a daily basis in his professional world.

Rollo is an object of wonder. Rollo offers a rare glimpse of Eden in our sorry fallen world. I loved, and do still love, my brother-in-law, Roland Inigo Bean.

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WHAT WOULD CLARKE HAVE MADE of Rollo? The law doesn't shape up so well in Clarke. Neither do lawyers.

Clarke was no philosopher. Petra puts it well.

'He had views on the law,' she says, 'but they came forward more as portraits than as theories.'

His Natural Life does have a kind of theme, though, or principle behind it. 'It is the law,' he wrote, 'that makes the criminal.' The law should avert tragedy. Instead, it brings it on. If the law did its job, it would stand between us and the tragic universe. It would ensure measure for measure. What really happens just runs the other way. Give the law bad and it will hand you back worse. Set a bit of misery in motion and the law will take over and ensure that it doesn't stop until it hits the boundaries of our worst imagining.

Murder. Suicide. Amnesia. Homosexual rape. Torture. Sadism of the worst kind.

'That,' Petra says, 'is what I think.'

Every time the law pops up its head in Clarke's work, it's linked to the darker side. We get Cyril Chatteris, one of the characters from his early novel *Long Odds*, who is an indolent parasite with 'no chambers and no briefs, and very few friends'. Even he, though, is one step up from the cold cruelty of his colleague, Jonas Huskinson:

> who lived, spider-like, in that web of houses that surrounds Lincoln's Inn. He was by profession a barrister, and had some reputation for the drawing of parliamentary bills. He was mysteriously connected with the Government—that is to say, with the moderate Conservative Ministry, and was a friend of Lord Nantwich when that nobleman was Under Secretary years and years ago. He was reputed wealthy, and lived in Cavendish Square in a big house that smelt of funerals. He was of the middle height, with a blunt, short nose, bare temples, thin, closely-shut mouth, and an eye like a pig—deep set, colourless, and cruel.

It's got Dickens behind it, of course. In Clarke, the smell is of funerals. In Dickens, as I recall, it was of dead sheep. Clichés get to be clichés because they are apt. Clarke gives us whole racks of cruel and musty lawyers. All living out the clichés as dutifully as they can. Clarke gives us the law itself, in the long version of *His Natural*

Life, as a vast, slow-turning wheel on which fragile bodies get broken. More Dickens, indeed. But it's when it all gets transported to the antipodes that Clarke starts to say something useful in his own right. It's when his image of the vast wheel, the slow turning and the breaking of bodies, starts to tell you something about the whole colonial enterprise, about Australia and prisons and systems, that he begins to break new ground.

Clarke knew lots about the law; his father was a barrister, and, everyone thought until his death, a successful one. Marcus Clarke came to Australia at the behest of his uncle, James Langdon Clarke, also a lawyer, and a county court judge in Ararat. As a journalist, he spent time, like Dickens before him, reporting from the police courts. Justice Redmond Barry was his principal patron. Clarke's first letters home were written, it is said, from Barry's verandah. It was probably Redmond Barry who set Clarke's career in motion at the library.

Barry gave Clarke good advice, here and there. Petra has managed to track down fragments of it. In return, Clarke avoided sending up a man who, in all his pomposity, must have made an inviting target. Justice Charles Gavan Duffy was also a patron to Clarke. He assisted in the pruning of *His Natural Life*. Legend has it that it was Gavan Duffy who actually sentenced Rufus Dawes to death by drowning, as a way of turning *His Natural Life* into a single volume. Life as a nil–all draw.

There were friends who were lawyers. Or who were, at least, fellow 'bohemians' with some sort of legal training. There was Shillinglaw, fellow member of the Yorick Club, writer and editor and former chief clerk of petty sessions at Williamstown, the one who famously dubbed the short version of *His Natural Life* as a 'Frankenstein instinct with a hideous life'.

There was his friend Richard Birnie, the true bohemian, geniality itself but of distinctly low moral fibre, who moved from colony to colony leaving a long trail of indiscretions behind him and with a reputation, recorded for posterity in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* of all places, for possessing an 'absolute want of principle and rectitude'. We find Birnie popping up as Tregarthen in Clarke's sketch *Austin Friars*: 'the most genial, witty and good-natured man that I ever knew; but he drank—drank like a fish—and despite all warnings, lectures and promises, *would* drink', who strolled Fawkner's Town's streets carrying an immense volume of law reports under his arm to give the impression of having 'an enormous practice—an enormous practice'.

Closer to the bone, Clarke had some personal run-ins with the law. He was bankrupted twice. In 1874 he had to sell off his personal library to satisfy his creditors. Debts had been building for years. His friends wrote of his immoderate and expensive tastes. There were debts from a number of literary ventures that had not been successful; he'd lost heavily on the *Colonial Monthly Magazine*,

where his novel *Long Odds* had first appeared, and which he'd taken over in 1868. In trying to extract his foot out of that particular mire, he plunged the other in even more deeply with a comic weekly, *Humbug*. It failed after a few months, and poor Clarke bore the brunt.

Clarke had a way of writing himself into legal difficulties, despite the advice of influential friends. In 1874 he involved the *Herald*, for whom he was writing at the time, in legal proceedings. He had suggested that the company of the Theatre Royal was about to 'mutilate' a certain pantomime. The manager of the theatre, one Harwood, sued the *Herald* for five hundred pounds in damages, but, on winning the case, gained only a farthing. The whole thing, Clarke's biographer tells us, was a 'comic-opera trial of a comic-opera cause, with plenty of laughter in court', and all except Redmond Barry—who disapproved—were much amused. The *Herald* was represented by the Irish lawyer Higinbotham. He and Clarke concocted a highly literary defence, with lots of quotation from Dr Johnson on the anonymous eighteenth-century writer 'Junius', and the author's right to conceal his identity.

There was Clarke's second insolvency. This time, it was a truly miserable business from start to ignominious end. No jokes are recorded. Clarke's fortunes had been on the decline for some time and illness, together with the expense of maintaining a wife and six children, added to his difficulties. Petra found the concluding documents for me. 'In the Matter of the Petition of Aaron Waxman of

no 181 Swanston Street in the City of Melbourne in the Colony of Victoria' praying that 'the estate of Marcus Clarke of Swanston Street in the said City of Melbourne Assistant Librarian of the Melbourne Public Library may be sequestrated for the benefit of his creditors'. It was served on Clarke by the said Waxman's solicitors. Clarke mounted his own unsuccessful defence. He died very soon after. In tragic circumstances.

It is the law that makes the criminal. I've spent a lot of time, in remand, trying to work out what *His Natural Life* was really all about. Trying to work out why the thing *clings* so, despite the long shifts in time and place. I've read all the material that Petra has brought me: biographies, introductions, scholarly before-and-afters, source hunts and scholarly reviews. I've read the collections, the anthologies, articles, prefaces and introductions, the afterwords, obituaries, panegyrics, theses, postulations and refutations, and even a fair bit of Clarke that almost no-one except me and Petra has ever bothered to read, tucked away in the State Library of Victoria, in the flaking pages of the *Age*, the *Argus*, the *Australasian*, the *Australian Journal* and *Weekly Times* from the 1870s and early 1880s.

The core of it all, I've now decided, lies in an ingenious but perhaps unconscious masterstroke. *His Natural Life* was written well after the shipping out of convicts was over. So why did he bother? One would need a damned good reason, as his good friend Shillinglaw wrote on the flyleaf of the first edition that's kept in the State

Library, to justify writing such a book of horrors. Others accused him of seeking to terrify 'boarding-house young ladies'. Clarke's stated defence—with footnotes—was that it had all really happened (he gives chapter and verse) and could happen again.

It really doesn't convince.

The richer defence, the one that manages to *stick*, so to speak, a century and a half after the writing, lies in the sensational things that the novel says about the darker reaches of the human heart. It lies in the things—unavoidable and unpleasant—it says about the ways in which we still incarcerate ourselves, and each other. Clarke shrinks the whole world down to the penitentiary—early Australia offered lots of hard fact, an excellent test case, for support—but only as a way of showing how the penitentiary model actually describes the whole world, the real world as it is and will ever be.

Rufus Dawes, for all the sensational horror, is Everyman; he is you and me. Clarke, I'm now convinced—whether or not he understood what he was writing about—was talking about society, about bureaucracy, about the intricate human ingenuity we bring to the processes of dehumanisation. Our own lives—if we don't watch it, and probably even if we do watch it—are full of similar transportations, similar bucklings down to alien systems, similar loss of the home ground.

This has to be one of the great strengths of the book. The shorter version, at least. *His Natural Life* is full of your tragic inexorability,

but let me tell you, it's got little to do with fate or destiny or anything Weird whatsoever. It's got absolutely nothing to do either with tragic flaws, or with what is written in the stars. If Coralie were here, I would tell her. *His Natural Life* is about what happens when risk management gets entirely out of hand. It's about bureaucratic rough-hewing. It's to do with the systems that we build to try to save ourselves, while managing to make ourselves irretrievably miserable in the process. It's about where the control of risk suspends all humane consideration. Where the systems we put in place to manage risk—do I speak about the law?—become the greatest risk of all.

I think of Coralie. The agendas. The templates. The processes. I did once, years ago as I recall, try to persuade her to read the shorter version, but she has always had so little time.

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WHO DID WHAT TO WHOM? Chasing the legal facts on Clarke takes Petra deep into the archive, the sort of work she most enjoys. I have not discussed *Measure for Measure* with her. Her views are not unlike those of Rollo. She prefers to talk about Redmond Barry and court records, or about whom Jonas Huskinson might have been 'based on', or on whether or not Clarke's days in court found their way into the reports. She's still chasing up further references to Waxman. She

has walked the length and breadth of the town—what she means is Little Collins Street, between Queen and William, the area that was once nicknamed Chancery Lane—chasing documents.

I'd like to have walked with her. I think she'd have liked it too. She does, though, still go on and on about this Edward, how helpful Edward has been, how Edward too has been caught up in the project—she has more or less stopped, for the moment, asking what the 'project' actually is—and how very useful the Mazda has been in chasing up Marcus Clarke.

Chancery Lane. It is still, she tells me, infested with robes and briefs and bands and jabots.

Petra has earned a certain kudos among her friends, I understand, for answering on a weekly basis to these sounds that issue from the abyss. Putting together photographs of the ugly red-brick apartment buildings, the laundromats and motor repair shops that mark the places, in Brighton and in St Kilda, in Robe Street and Inkerman Street, where Clarke used to live; collecting copies of building plans and maps and old photographs to show what the city was like in Clarke's time.

One incident does trouble me. Petra has traced it, week by week. In the early *Peripatetic Philosopher* series, crime often surfaces, with lots of articles—some serious, some provocative and cruel—on the fate of a murderer named Ritson. His original crime is not mentioned, but in prison, he strangled an unfortunate Wesleyan minister who tried to bring him spiritual consolation.

There was some doubt about Ritson's sanity. Clarke offered a long and sympathetic discussion, through a series of papers, on crime, sanity and the evil effects of solitary confinement. He polished off the subject, though, with a cruel and flippant dismissal of the whole business, and of Ritson himself: 'If Ritson was sane, he ought to be hung; if insane, it doesn't matter. He is in any case a dangerous animal and ought to be deprived of the power of doing mischief.'

This was followed by a short satire on judicial bungling, in a caricature of a senile judge summing up for the jury, and in the *Philosopher* column to follow, Ritson's case is cited as a prime example of the operation, in real life, of Poe's 'Imp of the Perverse'.

'Don't you think he's getting literature and life a bit confused here, Martin?' Petra's eyes were even wider than usual.

I was having darker thoughts. Was this the real Marcus Clarke?

'Don't you think it's a bit dangerous, reading this sort of stuff? Especially for someone like you.'

Someone like me? What does she know?

Why Clarke? Did I imagine I would get some sort of *hearing* there, of a kind not to be found elsewhere? With Martin Frobisher as one more Rufus Dawes—one more decent chap, of gentlemanly instincts, soon to be broken on the wheel? Would he have been sympathetic? Would he have been kind to one more Martin MacMammon, himself formerly of Parchment Buildings, exactly the

kind of poetaster, lawyer, parasite and hack to grace Clarke's Wicked World?

Someone like me? I couldn't agree with Petra. I couldn't disagree. In that moment, though, I did find myself slipping away from Clarke, peering through my prison bars and becoming poor wretched Ritson. Clarke's coverage of the whole Ritson affair, I'd have to say, didn't do much to lift his stocks as a serious social thinker. Nor was it, indeed, a particularly effective comic turn. The man was wonderfully flawed. But sometimes, cruelly.

If Frobisher is sane, he ought to be hung. He is in any case a dangerous animal.

I have since avoided discussing the Ritson case at length with Petra. I'm not sure that she knows enough of human weakness. I'm not sure she'd understand.

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THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT, WITH the law, Clarke stepped into the darkness. Petra agrees with me on this, at least. His satire on lawyers, 'Parchment Buildings'—it was in 'the Wicked World' series in the 1874 *Weekly Times*, the same series that featured Joe Wapshot and Nasturtium Villas—has great difficulty in staying civil enough to be entertaining, and funny enough to be called satire. Mere diatribe is never far away. The place is 'grim, gaunt and unpleasant'. The lawyers

themselves are greedy, grotesque and 'remorseless'. The law firms—indeed, we even find an early and disparaging mention of Messrs Feplevin, M'starvation, Sawney, Bean & Co, an early version of Rollo's present establishment—emerge in a most unfavourable light as 'ignorant, narrow-minded and avaricious'. I do not tell Rollo.

The whole piece is riddled, too, with vicious anti-Semitic jibes, thinly disguised as wit.

'Would it be fair to say,' Petra asks, 'that Clarke stopped being all that funny when he turned to the law?'

It was when the wit ran thin, though, that the best stuff appeared. There's an early piece that came out in the *Argus*, to conclude his 'sketches of Melbourne Low Life' series, on the city's 'lower Bohemia', the opium dens, the Chinese quarter, the cheap lodging houses. 'In Outer Darkness'—where Clarke sets out to probe a 'deeper gulf of misery'—is just about the bleakest sketch Clarke ever wrote, the darkest thing we find outside the pages of *His Natural Life*. It's the grimmest nightmare view of Melbourne ever penned in Clarke's Dantesque downward journey through all the 'several depths of human misery' towards the Yarra's muddy shores.

Here we find the home of the most wretched of the city's outcasts, 'ragged, dirty, wet, infamous and obscene'. Even their fair city, Clarke told his respectable readers, has its desert islands, on which new Crusoes, 'the "trappers" of the city-wilderness', still battled with a 'dumb' and 'savage power' as brutal as any Defoe's hero faced.

Clarke gives us a wilderness of law and civil progress, of police, locked doors and rain-swept pavements. It's a place where modern Crusoes are forced to build their shelters of 'pipeage and barrels and boxes and odds and ends of manufactured ware', or, even further down, to sleep in ragged piles, 'huddled upon the soaked earth', as other tattered, fluttering birds of night creep painfully about within the eerie glow of solitary fires and the city's distant gaslights. He offers us a world of thieves, old lags and drunkards, of men and women who, in sorry re-enactment of Defoe's 'superb romance of reality', must tear their subsistence from the modern urban jungle, 'from between the paws of the law'. True to the nature of that other jungle, too, Clarke writes, just every now and then the law wakes up, and one or two of them are killed.

The sketch doesn't stop there, with the law as savage beast. It appears in another and even more insidious guise to wrap up the tour. Stepping over a prostrate drunken form, the writer and his companions find themselves before the 'entrance to a sort of little alcove, formed of stones piled up like a Galway wall or a free selector's chimney on the plains'. It's the home of Melbourne's hangman. He's forced to live a nomad's life, it seems, to avoid the wrath of criminal bohemia. At the call, 'There is a hanging on, Jack', the head of an old man with white flowing hair pops up through a hole in the stones, like that of some wild animal from its lair.

> It struck me as a curious comment upon capital punishment that the executor of justice should be forced to live like a dog by reason of his office. The man who pulls the bolt does no more than the judge who sentences, or the jury who decide upon guilt or innocence. Yet the spectacle of the old man with laughing mouth, eager eyes, and white locks streaming, half buried in that dismal pit, in such a bleak wild night, made me shudder. I was in the midst of the Crusoe's desert island of modern civilisation, and I had suddenly come across that Footprint,—instinct with a terrible significance,—which alone was wanting to make the parallel complete.

There really were times—especially in his earlier years—when Clarke rose to mythic heights. 'In Outer Darkness', in my view, sails out beyond Dickens, beyond Defoe, beyond the pale of all forms of 'plagiarised inanity', and into new and memorable territories. It caps off the fine job Clarke did on the legal system, pretty well from top to bottom, from the wigs, the postures, the 'avaricious politeness' at the top end, down through the lower levels to these images of the law as prowler in the urban wilderness, with its final Footprint in the hangman, now blaspheming for being 'gammoned' and cheated of five pounds. You won't find better anywhere. And the Footprint steps on neatly and powerfully into *His Natural Life*.

Even Petra seems impressed. She's never seen a portrait of Melbourne like it. She has some notion that she and Edward should go

exploring, and bring me back some photographs. We go over and over the piece, to see if we can find a precise location. The first hint we are given—'down upon the wharf'—is hardly instructive. There is mention of a river. Princes Bridge is in 'the left-hand distance' and the 'public houses along Flinders street' are visible, 'aglow with light'. With a bit of shuffling of the furniture, a bit of imagination, you could just about make it out.

'It has to be what's now Southbank. Across from Southbank, at least. Calamari. Quail's breast and tamarillos. Lobster thermidor. You're not going to find too many derelicts down there, Martin. Not too many hangmen. Not too much Outer Darkness.'

I think of Petra and Edward, at Southbank, looking out across the river. I agree to bankroll a dinner for them on the terrace. Provided That they can find a restaurant which will admit Edward and his stinking pullover. And Provided That they take a copy of Clarke's piece with them. And Provided Always That they look across to the other side, and allow themselves to think for just a moment, between their *escabèche de sardines* and their *magret de canard aux myrtilles*, about Clarke's Crusoe's Desert Island of Modern Civilisation, and about those Melbourne Ishmaelites, 'ragged, dirty, wet, infamous and obscene'.

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IN CORALIE'S WORLD, EPERGNES REALLY did connect with their object. In mine and Madeleine's, we seemed lost, eternally, infernally, in the depths of one of Zeno's paradoxes. Liking the lure, the chase, but with that last bit of distance yet to cross much less interesting to us than the business of reviewing the distance we had already travelled.

Angelo lusted after Isabella. He was caught out. The blighter got his just deserts. Mind you, there is some awkwardness in *Measure for Measure*. The play doesn't quite snap shut in the way Rollo and friends might like. The Duke himself is a worry. He delivers the goods, alright, but only through the most artful trickery. The fellow also managed along the way to snap up Isabella, who as I recall was supposed to be on her way to the nunnery. Her effect on him was not so different from her effect on Angelo. The Duke was so sharply strategic in his thinking; who can imagine that something like this wasn't part of the plan? The frigid, coming-apart-at-the-seams Lord Angelo may tell us one dark story about the law. But the crafty, disguised and shifting Duke, who seems to be some kind of hero, tells us quite another.

I think, for the purpose of arriving at a happy ending, Isabella decided to be cheerful enough about the general outcome, though I'd have to say, I don't recall her opinion being asked.

Now—you may think it's fine cheek on my part, to sit around discussing the play with Rollo and Madeleine, agreeing with Rollo about blighters getting what was coming to them, and all the while

getting off with Madeleine behind Rollo's back. But here's the strange thing. And it's time, I think, to tell you the truth. Madeleine and I did not make love. Not even once. I touched Madeleine more intimately in the presence of Rollo and Coralie, there were more kisses and embraces, more arms around waists and hearty huggings in public places, than we ever attempted in private.

You may indeed have wondered why you were not delivered more *bodily* matter when I first told of the Affair. Titillation, yes, but palpitating? Rippling? Dilating?

The truth is that my most intimate physical contact with Madeleine ever was the removal of some dog hairs from the breast of her overcoat one evening in the foyer just before we went in to the opera.

But surely this is fraudulent, you say. Have we readers not been led along with lurid indications of a sensual affair, with delicious hints of the surreptitious and illicit, of secret assignations and drawn blinds and *déshabillé*, of hotel receipts and restaurant bills and the unexpected comings-home of wives and husbands? Have I not written of house keys, of furtive visits and carefully constructed alibis? Have I not just poured bucketloads of contumely on Marcus Clarke and his sister-in-law Rose Lewis for their deflections and vacillations, the sheer frenzy of words, words, words, with which they wrote their way through the thing and out the other side?

The truth is, Madeleine and I were just never able to break through the endless talk. We probably never wanted to, even in

the early euphoric and breathless phase of the relationship. We were both seduced more by the idea of the illicit and the surreptitious than by the possibility of actually getting our hands on each other.

By the time the talk was over—there were some months of negotiations of a kind that I guess you could describe as intimate—the desire seemed to have gone, and in its place was just the talk; about desire, about what was about to take place, then about what was not taking place, then about why it had not taken place, and finally—the long and stable phase of talk, that had now persisted for many years—about how it was probably a good thing that it had never taken place.

The endless talk had brought us steadily to the point where real physical contact—the kind of forgetfulness that would be needed, the new vulnerabilities that such a shift in *modus tactendi* would expose—just no longer seemed possible or necessary.

I am circumspect. Madeleine is sceptical and ironic. *You are, Martin, such an all-out fool.* The eyebrow, the raised eyebrow! It doesn't help. These are not the base elements of a heightened eroticism. Put circumspection, scepticism and irony together, and what you have got, I can tell you, is an awful lot of talk.

Madeleine was, she announced at the outset of our negotiations, going to uncover the 'real me'. The inner onion. While Madeleine's own frumpy layers of clothing, gathered up at great expense from

the boutiques along Hawksburn and Toorak roads and worn in such wild combinations, began to take on new significance. I found myself thinking about the layered person underneath, the flirtations with Buddhism, Bahai, pre–Vatican II Catholicism, Taoism, the Charismatic Movement and Tantric Yoga. Were we going to look for the real 'her', as well? She was slippery on that one.

So odd, how quickly the basic roles in these matters declare themselves. How speedily we select our rut, our groove, our personal furrow. It was decreed, quite early, and as with her younger sister, that I was the one with the problem. On this, at least, they did agree. If I introduced the subject of Madeleine and her 'difficulties' (she did allude to these, just once or twice) it was quickly deemed an attempt to deflect us from the real nub of our conversation. I was the one in need of help.

So what did she get out of it? When we talked about sex, all she ever said was that she was happy with Rollo. Nothing more. For a moment, I was drawn by speculation in that regard, but soon drew away from them. There are spectacles from which the mind shrinks. The terrible, unthinkable prospect of Rollo without his cufflinks.

The whole business of sex, indeed, seemed to be of little interest to either of us. It was all so wildly trumped up and overpromoted, distorted, debased and commercialised, so fast-tracked, pasteurised and turbo-charged, that we soon agreed that the whole thing had really been done enough. Or, at least, that it was being done by

others and everywhere with such forced and manic and impersonal ardour that it could be left to look after itself. Once you got into sex, you took on so much from so many other people, so many frightening myths and so many hostile agendas, most of which are ultimately aimed at making us feel rotten, and even worse as we got older, that the whole business simply lacked that spice of privacy, the teasing spark of intimacy, that each of us so desperately desired.

Nor, however, did it ever quite go away. It remained the subject of talk. It remained a remote goal, a kind of grail towards which we took a hundred different wandering and happily fruitless paths. The idea was that when we'd sorted out all the other things, we might be ready. We would need to approach it as innocents, in the new Eden that we would certainly create, once the impediments of just about everything that we were (and increasingly, I realised, were pretty much determined to remain) had been cleared away, and all through the purgatorial fires of talk, talk, talk. Ever more intimate talk (intimate about my life, at least), and in ever darker, more furtive and more cloistered places.

But never the beach house.

I could not risk that. Madeleine vaguely knew of it and once or twice broached with Coralie the prospect of spending a few days down there with Rollo. Coralie did have some idea of the state of the place, even though she had not been down there for years. Fortunately, to Coralie the rich detritus of a mind distressed and in

urgent fragmentation, that deep mulch of interior negotiation with which I had filled the house and lined the corridors, amounted to no more than 'piles of Martin's stuff in old boxes' which no-one had 'got around to clearing out'. And so the sanctum remained inviolate. For the moment.

Did Coralie know? Did Coralie suspect? If she did know, then what she knew, or imagined she knew, was almost certainly wrong. It was an odd situation I had got myself into. Could I really call it an affair? I have already prevailed too far on the indulgence of my reader in calling it such. Can I justifiably ramp it all up to the pitch of adultery, given that the incident with the dog hairs in the opera foyer was about as far as things went in that direction?

Would Coralie really think of it as an affair, if she happened to get her grip on the real knowledge, and not just the blanket fantasy of envy, rage and vengefulness the bare word itself evokes? Could she justifiably complain if I were found to have been paddling in the inner life of someone else—given that the dog hairs marked the inner erotic perimeter of the whole business? Might she simply have been amused?

Coralie has no great sense of humour. She knows from the expression on the faces of those about her that a joke has been told, that there is certainly a joke in the room somewhere, but she can rarely spot quite where. Time and time again, I have known her to laugh uproariously along with the others, but then interrogate me

closely and indignantly on the way home. I have, *post facto, post raucous rictus*, explained the nub of many jokes to Coralie, in plain English and with vast patience and many helpful hand-signals. She generally remained quite unconvinced that they were funny.

8

THE BEACH HOUSE. IT'S TIME, I THINK, TO TAKE YOU THERE.

The beach house was our first concession to Coralie's desire to own. It was, at my insistence, a house which we could visit, but where we didn't have to live. I have told you that I hoard. I have plans to paint. Everything I have painted so far suggests that these plans should change. Yet still I paint, and will not let the wreckage go. I have plans to write—large plans. I write, almost daily, copious notes and plans and drafts and synopses, an ongoing diary on the art of going absolutely nowhere; massive plans which incorporate in myriad ways the best that has been thought and said, vast projects which grow gleaming in the mind, that mount and aspire and transcend and synthesise and generally end in a small pile of illegible scribble and crumpled sheets of A4. My writings,

which have filled so many black plastic garden tidy-up bags, also indicate that my time might be better spent elsewhere, or that I should just stick to admiring the works of others.

For all the scribbling and crumpling, though, those bags contain my deepest thoughts, fragments from the dark side that have managed to clamber their way up into consciousness for however brief and muddled a time, mixed in with glimpses of ecstatic release, mountain-top revelations and heavenly epiphanies, the intensity of which never quite seemed to survive into the act of writing.

Together, they mingle and rot in the plastic bags, which sit alongside my rejected canvases and the host of expensive toys through which I must at some time have imagined I would launch new selves upon the world—my ways of trying to shed some of the wretched money that came our way over the years, piling up in such ugly mounds between my lost love Coralie and me.

There are motorbikes, pianos electric and traditional, two fine reproduction spinets and a small Bechstein Grand in walnut, drum kits, easels, computer hardware, dinghies, ever more sophisticated barbecues with matching outdoor settings, punctured lilos, hammocks and suspended arbour seats, and even a car, a superb 1948 Citroën never quite in full working order that I had picked up for a pittance from an erstwhile friend as he sailed down the financial gurgler not long after our return to Fawkner's Town. There are my numerous ill-starred and aborted collections—my boxes of thirties

jazz on warping 78s, my mouldering eighteenth-century leather-bound collections of natural history, early antipodean geological, zoological and botanical engravings by Lesueur and Péron and other peripatetic imperial Frenchmen, all just stacked up in dusty frames against the walls, together with my collection of nineteenth-century British caricaturists, and the numerous toby jugs and spittoons that I collected when I was a student in England. There are my silver butter knives and French *chocolatières*—a whole shelf of deeply tarnished *chocolatières*—mixed in with unopened boxes containing bread makers, deep fryers, grillers, juicers and electric hotpots. The whole melange is stuffed into the rooms, sleep-outs and sheds of the beach house in the vague and intermittent hope, I came to admit to myself, that some enterprising burglar would come through during the quiet mid-winter slump and clean out the lot, including and perhaps especially the black plastic bags full of my jottings and leavings, which I took care to locate conveniently close to the front door.

There was the business, too, of keeping Coralie away as the house began to overflow with the wreckage of these discarded versions of my life. I need not have worried. Having forgotten the fact during the brief weeks in which we went through the primary excitements of acquisition (the teeth-edge haggling, the procuring of funds, the sending of bank managers into a tangle, the tripping up of lying estate agents, the signing of documents), after a couple of desultory weekends trying out the new garden furniture and tuning

up the barbecue, Coralie drifted back to her old realisation that she actually detested the beach. That she loathed, and indeed had always loathed, the sand and the dogs and the insects, the mingled stench of sweat and perfumed oil that pervaded the whole town, the sight of so much teeming, overfed humanity, aggressively unbuttoning its detested spotted secrets to the sun.

She detested the *memento mori* dimensions of Australian beach culture, the tanner's marks of crinkling and sagging in her friends, the unrestrained shrieks of concentrated holiday gaiety and the ubiquitous reek of grilling meat that drifted through the tea-trees and up and down the gravel streets. Within months, the beach house had become my private sanctum, my personal repository for the detritus of all the forms of living that I seemed compelled to experiment with and discard. But not quite discard.

I have discovered, with great pleasure, that Marcus Clarke enjoyed holiday-making almost as much as Coralie and I.

> Holiday-making, as a general rule, is the hardest work attempted by mankind, and the most weary, stale, flat and unprofitable business into the bargain. Yet people go on the same way year after year. The same wicker baskets are packed; the same stone bottles filled with brandied sherry and lukewarm liquor of intoxicating quality; the same buggies with the same battered, woebegone, and sad-visaged horses are hired; the same stiff-collared shirts are donned by the colonist *père*,

> the same raiments of cunning handicraft (or sewing-machine work) by the colonist *mère*; the same dusty roads are traversed; the same preposterous amusements watched; the same feeling of utter heart-sickness experienced; the same babies slapped and cuffed (no, not the same babies but others like unto them, of equal rotundity of arm and leg, an equal irritation of gum and power of squalling). In fact, the same round of pleasure (Heaven save the mark!) is gone through, and all the same amount of material and mental dirt eaten in consequence.

Ours was not a house for holidays. Ours was not a house of pleasure. Our silence was unsullied by the power of squalling. The sheer volume of junk I had collected, on the other hand, had become quite a problem. I knew that some of the clutter had some kind of value, even an appreciated value, but I also knew—I think that Coralie may have sensed this as well—that any serious rummaging, any attempt to dispose of the rubbish in the beach house, might lead to a more general psychic renovation, leading in turn to the destabilisation of our whole *modus vivendi*, a shaky, eggshell business at the very best of times.

Just once or twice, she hazarded the idea that we should let the house out for the summer. Such suggestions I always found richly motivating. I would quickly demonstrate some new capacity to earn, would launch some new financial plan or project which would soothe away any residual financial concerns.

I would offer her, in coarse-grained detail, unsettling visions of the kinds of bodies we could expect to rent the house, the unseemly domestic habits, the staining of sheets, the farting into cushions, the expectorating in the garden, the shit slides in the toilet bowl. I offered her the ghastly spectre of the kinds of friends who would be likely to turn up as visitors (and, worse, the children of those friends) to the types of people who would be wanting to lease the house through such a period. In such a place, close to the beach. And each time, the plan faded gently from her mind, and my sanctum remained untidied and uninvaded, unsullied by the slap of soggy towels and the tramp of sandy feet.

The place was soon derelict. Like Clarke's Crusoe, I was stocking up against an uncertain future, salvaging what I might some day need from the ongoing shipwreck of my life. Gold, when I had no use for gold. Foot warmers, when my feet were never cold. Grillers, when I loathe the reek of burning meat. Every now and then I would drive down on my own, usually at night and in the winter months, and sit amid the deep mouldering shambles of it all.

In the early days, I took great pleasure in the unopened boxes, the electric gadgets still in their polystyrene foam blocks and plastic wrappers, the untouched instruction books and guarantees, the warranty periods long passed and the various models of fryers and grillers and toasters and choppers and juicers long superseded by newer, sexier models in ever more contorted forms, retro, contempo,

progro, which I continued to buy and deposit in piles alongside their ageing counterparts. The joys of acquisition. The pleasures of keeping up. Of living in tune with the mandates of the glossy magazines. Of having a Lifestyle. The reassuring sense of contributing to a growing economy without having to live one's daily life amid such vile and useless clutter.

And after a decade or so, the pleasures began to deepen. My own past, my discarded jottings, my random acts of acquisition, now began to throw surprises at me. As the raw acts of accumulation faded, here was mystery, exoticism and surprise, the leavings of my own past suddenly a fresh and interesting territory for exploration. My America. My new-found land. The plethora had begun to send its own messages back. I would sit in the half-darkness, in an empty winter street bereft of shrieks and oil and stinking meat, just turning over the fragments. Sitting amid the detritus of my own life, like a damp seed thrust into the warm dark earth, to be seasoned by my own forgotten dreams. Plugging in ancient and unused appliances to test their heat, their light, their motion. Opening boxes and filling in outdated warranty forms. Leafing through pristine instruction books in multiple languages. Fossicking in my plastic bags, and uncrumpling old bits of writing and discarded shreds of paper.

Were some of them Coralie's soiled tissues, thrust there when I was out of sight?

Others contained no more than a phone number or two, or a message to myself on some routine domestic matter. Some were cross-referenced to other bits of rubbish around the house, notes about purchases or payments for parts of the collection. Most were scraps of preludes to unwritten novels. Plotlines for vast Tolstoyan epics that never quite came together. Quick drafts for prose-poems of such profound and impenetrable obscurity as to out-Rimbaud Rimbaud. Pencilled outlines to shimmering masterworks in new genres yet untried, that faltered, fractured and faded long before they hit the crumpled page.

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TERRA NULLIUS. THE TERM IS much debated. Some will tell you that it's the legal principle which enabled the dispossession of the Aboriginal population. Others will tell you that this is nonsense. There was no legal principle. The law at its best just trawled mumblingly behind, in the wake of musket, axe blade and plough. The idea of *terra nullius*, which indeed existed somewhere deep in the nether reaches of Roman law, was first put forward in this country just a generation ago, to name in retrospect a whole cluster of beliefs, prejudices and attitudes, which led, in the end, to the same misery, the same shame, the same sorry dispossession.

Terra nullius—his own version, perhaps—was something

Clarke knew about, though he never called it that. It was something Manning Clark seemed to know all about too, when he wrote about Clarke, and called the country the Kingdom of Nothingness. Clarke and Clark were charting, though, some deeper dispossession. Unlike *terra nullius*, the Kingdom of Nothingness doesn't denote absence of possession; it means an excess of it. The entrenchment of Matter, where Mind should be. Of Possession, where there should be Contemplation. The shipping in of Goods, to clog the empty spaces.

Manning Clark is one of the few historians to have found Clarke interesting—beyond the range of 'Clarke specialists', that is. In the pages of his *History of Australia* Clark gives him his due as poet and as prophet, proclaiming his Kingdom of Nothingness to anyone who cared to listen. Proclaiming it even to those who didn't quite realise what it was they were listening to, because so much of it was wrapped up in what looked like comedy. (With most of his readers, one suspects, not quite realising that they were being rolled forward into the target zone.)

There's that tag of Swift's. Satire is a mirror in which we see everyone's faces except our own. Did Joe Wapshot enjoy being 'written up'? Did he buy multiple copies of the *Weekly Times* and show them to his friends? Did the Honourable Member for Shice and Swindle scatter copies around his electorate? Did Young Meliboeus take back copies of Clarke's *Humbug*, or the *Australasian*, to read to his fifty thousand sheep?

Nothing succeeds like excess. Manning Clark waxes long and strong on the power of hatred, on how Marcus Clarke's 'wounds of childhood had made him hate man and all his works'. He gives us a Clarke who was 'an innocent child and a devil, an angel who had a vision of God's throne, an insect in whom was planted sensual lust and a capacity in taking pleasure in cruelty to other human beings', a man without money and without friends, with 'only the luxury of hate, contending and colliding with his never-ending search for love and understanding', a man whose soul was a 'battleground between good and evil', and who found, in Melbourne, a place that answered to 'all the uproar in his own soul'.

Clarke was actually a lot funnier, in most of what he wrote, than Manning Clark allows.

Manning Clark was a seer, in search of his own antecedents. He was determined to find one—with some contracting of the facts here, some stretching of them there—in Marcus Clarke. There's a lot more coherence and sense of purpose in his version of Clarke's life than poor Clarke himself ever found. With all this, Manning has much truth to offer. He spots and highlights the prophetic dimension. He sees that despite all the imputed 'hatred', despite the literary distraction, his 'fascination with the morbid and the macabre', Clarke had a clear sense of the nation's historical origins and the way the past weighed upon the present.

Manning could see, through Clarke's eyes, how the hiding, the

drawing of 'veils', took on such intensity in this new Kingdom of Nothingness. He could see how Clarke, in his own writing and in his own dissolution, 'foreshadowed the shape of things to come, the power of the conservative, petty-bourgeois view of the world to render impotent all those who, like Clarke, dreamed a great dream, only to see it fade away before the stern facts of Australia's past'.

And so on. I love it. Real Clarke scholars do not. Manning Clark trips just a bit too lightly, a bit too selectively over his sources to come up with a version of Marcus Clarke that he can suck into his own narrative rhythms. Accuse Clarke to his face of being a visionary or a seer, or someone in tune with the 'uproar in his own soul', and he'd probably have taken over the idea and worked it up into a character. Probably a comic character.

I have tried in vain to talk of Manning Clark to Petra.

'You are talking, Martin, about the Grand Master. The *real* Master of Sludge.'

Apparently he grossly underestimated the significance of the threat of Russian invasion to boot.

Clark has been the target for many a bitter philippic in the visitors' room. In vain did I argue that without the likes of him writing lively and readable history for amateurs like me, most of that history would simply vanish. That the human drama, the steep narrative romp, picked up on our love of fiction, of a good yarn, and made use of that to poke the Good Stuff through. Such difficulty I had, in

coaxing her to fetch just those few pages on Clarke from *The History of Australia*.

I must say, though, and with vast goodwill, I've never quite been able to locate Marcus Clarke's 'great dream', as imputed to him by Manning. Manning was taken in, just a little too easily, by one of Marcus Clarke's own more successful versions of himself—the bohemian, the fashionable cynic, the fractured visionary. Like so many of Clarke's own contemporaries, he was just a little too ready to buy into the myths and keep them running. You'd have to fossick pretty hard to uncover the distilled daemonism, the visionary dimension that Manning Clark commends. And what you'd come up with in the end—what Manning Clark does come up with, I fear—is just another one of Clarke's clever personae. Just another one of the masks. The visionary. Not the sham criminal. Not the entertainer. Not the fashionable cynic. Not the fading Left Bank voluptuary. Not the colonial Jeremiah. Not the denizen of the gas pipe on Cole's Wharf. Not the bankrupted father of six, writing *de profundis* from a weatherboard cottage in St Kilderkin.

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'THE AUTHOR HAUNTED BY HIS Own Creations'. It's the name later editors gave to one of Clarke's best, wittiest and most probing stories. He called it 'Hunted Down'. At first blush, the story is very simple.

The harried author is confronted by one after another of his fictional characters, each of whom is discontented with the roles that he has given them. They don't like their physical appearance. They feel that he has overlooked all the more admirable aspects of their characters and their aspirations. Altogether, the author has been grossly unfair. They gang up on him—the Villain, Jabez Jamrack, Black Will the Smuggler, Sir Aubrey de Briancourt, the Typical Digger (sick and tired of never being able to change his eternal red shirt), the fair Madeleine, Mordecai the Jew, Lady Millicent the Poisoner, angry at having been forced to take on in just ten short chapters 'all the hideous knowledge of the Borgias', and Coralie de Belleisle, the planter's daughter, indignant at having lingered in consumption for forty pages folio. All bemoan the fates they had been allotted, and have come back to seek revenge on their creator.

> It was terrible to hear my own impassioned language thus turned against me.
>
> 'Ladies and gentleman,' cried I in despair, 'consider the exigencies of fiction.'

It is to no avail. They attack him with all the vigour and malice with which he has invested them. The author is in trouble. He is about to be pitched into the abyss. And then, in a satirical tweaking of the best popular fictional style, there is a sudden commotion at the

door. The boy from the printers has come for the proofs. The mood is broken, and in ten quick lines, the author has managed to get the ringleader of the pack, the Villain, safely locked up in irons at Norfolk Island.

Good jokes should be taken seriously. I have spent many hours reflecting on this story. I've probably spent far more time reading it and thinking about it than Clarke spent writing it. Clarke himself probably dismissed it as a quick part of that 'mess of pottage' for which he sold his birthright as writer and artist. It has a neat off-the-cuff air to it, the kind of thing he may well have put out in an hour or so, in first draft, in between more serious writing.

Clarke's title, though, is clever. It is ambiguous, and points to the deep drift of the story. On the face of it, it's all about the characters coming back to seek revenge on their author. In substance, though, it's really about the author—the real author, Marcus Clarke himself this time and not the 'author' character within the story—revenging himself on his characters. On the taste of his readers. On the kind of dismal romance stereotypes that he felt forced to resort to, as he once wrote, in order to write himself 'down to correspondence point', with the sort of stuff that young Tallowfat and Miss Shoddy could be relied upon to read, stories of a kind that even Young Meliboeus would consume in large quantities, were he not so busy looking after that vast mob of sheep.

The only character in the whole story that Clarke really felt

haunted by, though, was almost certainly the author himself, the overburdened hack with his printers' deadlines and his ready stock of fictional clichés and his endlessly refurbished and recycled characters, with each version hurried towards improbable and outrageous closure by the 'boy from the printers'.

The whole story offers a neat little instance of anger recycled, of frustration put to excellent literary use. Who knows what deep vein of self-reflection that clever story masks? The real demons in Clarke's life were not intrusions from the Dark Side. They were the intrusions from the Extremely Light. From the pages of popular fiction, from the gallery of stereotypes he felt forced to draw upon to satisfy the demands of his undemanding readers.

Did Clarke perhaps think of himself as one of his own principal characters? Or as a set, perhaps, of his own characters? And did he find his lot, his role, as contemptible as they did? The 'exigencies of fiction'? The exigencies of living, damn it all, and especially for poor Clarke, whose Great Expectations so little matched the hand that life kept dealing him that running the whole business in and out of fiction must have presented itself as the best compromise. What might have looked to others as high comedy or gross pretension was in fact and quite simply some sort of leaky survival raft.

So much of Clarke's early journalism ramps the whole place up to match his lost Left Bank dreamtime, with Clarke running himself forward as *flâneur*, as sophisticate, as an aged and world-weary

beau. You'd say it was comic, even quaintly picturesque, if it weren't for the deep toll of such fictions on his own Real Life.

> Where are the snows of autumn? I went into the Closerie des Cleles t'other day, and asked for a light. Monsieur Terre was there as of old. 'Is the town as it used to be, my Terre?' He shook his Jovian head, and heaved a sigh. 'Business is well enough,' said he; 'but we have no nice little suppers now!' What a world of Bohemian meanings was in that pregnant sentence! No, we have no nice little suppers now. Hopkins is buried and Tompkins is married, and Lalage—the sweetly speaking, sweetly smiling Lalage!—is enriching the soil of the brand-new cemetery in Honolulu. It is proper that it should be so. The whirligig of Time has a right to bring in his revenges, and one must not expect to be for ever young and prodigal, and careless of the morrow.

It looks comic enough. It's only in the fuller trajectory that the darker tinge creeps in. The whirligig of time did him no favours. Clarke's fading Arcadia just faded further. Such things actually come on more harshly in thin light-hearted guise than when in full tragic array.

I'm no physiologist, but I've seen plenty of evidence that a lump in the throat is the quickest way to stop up the flow of oxygen to the brain. We love tragedy because of the way it works us up to unfamiliar heights, as we become Macbeth, Lear, Manfred, Othello, peering

beyond the real holes in our lives that yawn and deepen all around us. We want the reassurance of sad endings to the lives of others, sad stories of the death of other people's kings. Where, once the dying is over, the dead can rise, dust themselves down and grin into the lights. Where the curtain closes and the audience crawls back to the suburbs, the wife at the wheel and the husband, well pickled from a couple of stiff ones at interval, dozing at her side. Home, to put the cat out and pull back the covers and thank God for the fact that nothing of what they've seen will intervene on the slow and steady decline, the deep tragic denouement, that is going on all around them.

Comedy is stronger. There is less danger, with comedy, of deep emotion edging between us and the raw truths of life. Tragedy just can't match the infernal niggling of comedy, its knowledge of the familiar, mixed and grubby, its frightening inner and neighbourly understanding of banality, subservience, routine. Quite simply, there is no way off the hook.

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I AM, I HAVE TOLD you, a big-picture man. In this remand centre, this shadow realm that runs beneath the Styx, I feel the need for a philosophical approach. Unlike in the old world.

I think again of my feckless foray across the sacred lawns of Mawnsley. What use is philosophy to anyone in such a place? The

rules are set. To shape an adequate philosophy, a philosophy in the active sense, surely something has to be 'at issue'? Surely philosophy can only really thrive at the crossroads, when there is still some kind of puzzle as to which path one should take? In dear musty old Mawnsley, it seemed to me, Tradition (and The College Rules, Tradition's pudgy sister) had muscled poor Philosophy away from the crossroads and back into the college library. Which was, as it happened, where I was heading at the time.

It was the library that lay on the far side of that land-mined, man-mined terrain, the Fellows' Lawn. It was the library that had lured me to bravado, fecklessness and folly of the same ilk, I doubt it not, as that which sent our youthful Anzacs up and Over The Top and into oblivion with such pathetic and athletic unseeing ardour generations before; taking up the good antipodean shortest route from A to B which just happened to lie across no-man's land and a hail of machine-gun fire. The only question left to philosophy—true philosophy, that is, of the choice-making kind—was the second-order question of whether or not to heed the phlegmy voice of tradition, in the form of a tweed jacket and soup-spotted pullover, or to take an air ticket home.

I opted for tradition. The result was sudden enrichment. What had looked like blank spaces, I could now clearly see, were enriched with networks, invisible traceries, rich filaments of regulation and prohibition.

Over The Top, and off to the Mawnsley College library. I suspect I was not the only casualty of that lawn.

I feel the need for guidance. Nourishment for the life of the spirit. Not, I should say, that my parents were particularly religious, beyond a vague Anglican sense of decency and decorum that seemed to have as much to do with not speaking loudly in art galleries or public toilets as to anything that happened in churches. It seemed more linked to the tempering of excess—any form of excess, such as kiddie noise in enclosed public places—than with metaphysical yearning or deep longings for transcendence. We were shown, in our rare forays into church, the bleeding, tortured image of a naked man nailed to a cross and were expected to draw from this spectacular and outrageous obscenity a doctrine of restraint, of moderation and even a kind of class solidarity—the solidarity of the orderly, the discreet, the restrained, the unobtrusive—against all that was vulgar, flamboyant, excessive. Like being crucified? It was good training. Children should be introduced to life's richer contradictions at a very early age.

Living with contradiction. Instead of seeking resolution, I just switched back and forth. There has been indecision and confusion, but perhaps on a national scale. Let me now tell you about the Crusoe Complex and the Swaggie Syndrome. The base elements, may I suggest, for a distinctively Australian philosophy of life—and the seeds, perhaps, Your Honour, of my own strongest defence.

I offer these as options for those who live on our peculiar terrain. Two distinct ways of coping with the immensity, the vacuity of the place. It's an experience which is not, I do concede, distinctively Australian in any sense, though the philosophy I offer, and the dilemma from which it arises, is in many ways more visible, more *impending*, in the Australian physical environment than it is in most others. It is not easy to confront the deeper vacuities on the Avenue Foch, the Corso, Chandni Chowk or along Fifth Avenue. Tall buildings do so *channel* one's thoughts. Here, in the Australian bush—and I take authority from Marcus Clarke again, who saw so many things so very clearly—the gaps are all around you. Spaces for even the very best of our thinkings to get swallowed up and lost.

First, the Crusoe Complex. I have said how Clarke so admired *Robinson Crusoe*, and drew on it to unpack Fawkner's Town. At the core of the Crusoe Complex is the bastion. The collection. Material Possessions. Our instinct, from the moment of the first Great Land Grab, was to gather in numbers along the edge of the coast, using our goods as a kind of barricade against the wilderness. Piling them up in huge banks to hide behind. Armed against the menace of loose thoughts, against all incursions of philosophy with its infernal craving for crossroads, junctions, side tracks, dirt tracks and roundabouts, of a kind that would complicate those happy passages from Point A to Point B, and up and down the coast. Armed and ready we were, to beat it off with an ever mounting barricade of

consumer durables, our whitegoods flashing—blindingly—in the relentless Australian sun.

The clutter, the accumulation. It explains the habits of Coralie and me, of our moving from place to place and, like a pair of magpies, picking up anything that glittered and shipping it back home. There we smeared it around the walls of wherever it was we happened to be living, in Hampstead or in Armadale or at 4/16 St Georges Road, where our suitcases and the greater part of our shiny trove happen to be deposited at this present moment. Storing up our possessions, however useless they might be, however little pleasure they might give, but, as Robinson Crusoe said of his rescued gold, perhaps worth hanging on to anyway.

O drug!

The trove in Toorak has at least this justification: that it can all be seen to have cost vast sums of money. Coralie and I keep absolutely nothing there, and on display, that we are not assured most other people want. Achingly. Even old Ernie's wretched epergne. But there is no such justification for the clutter in the beach house. In the beach house, precious things are mixed in with the worst forms of detritus. The house and its contents speak only of incoherence and confusion and chronic indecision. It takes in everything. It keeps all options open. It keeps nothing out. It tells no useful stories. Only of the Vanity of Human Wishes. It is chock-a-block with old enemies. Stale reflections, aborted projects, and the deepest forms of obsolescence.

Mea maxima culpa.

The other option is the Swaggie Syndrome. Crossing the barricades and setting out into the wilderness, taking nothing but what one can carry on one's back.

It's in my blood. Perhaps it was as a result of the trips with my father the stock and station agent, on those long hot country roads in the Holden Special, to remote farms and stations. Those endless gravel roads and telephone lines and boxy little farmhouses with their scones and tea and tattered barefoot children, scuttling like wild rabbits as we came in, or peering out at us from between parental legs.

The nomadism. The wanderlust. It has clung to me, subversive and unsettling, like some foul smell. I dream of Humping my Bluey. I long to go On the Wallaby. I imagine myself as a modern-day Saint Benoît Labre, moving in holy indigence from town to town. Like Clarke, I see myself as 'a poor philosopher, whose shoes are down at heel and worn out in the soles; whose elbows are visible through his ragged jerkin; who munches his black bread with thankfulness, and in his inmost heart has an utter contempt for everybody, including himself.'

The Swaggie Syndrome might seem irreconcilable with other things I have wanted: the esteem of peers, the noise, the shining lights. One has to accrue a bit of moss, normally, to be able to enjoy such things. The nomadic life, though, the life of the Peripatetic

Philosopher, can take many forms. It can be cunningly disguised within the fringe benefit tax apparatus of modern professional life—the conferences, the weekends away, the leased cars, the rented executive apartments, the airports, the clubs, the restaurants. Anything, anything, but home.

It can be disguised, too, in a relationship where Coralie's desperate 'busyness' on her endless useless committees provided an excuse, a pretext, a mask for both of us. Where the vast hole at the centre could so easily be disguised by the endlessly postponed notion that one day in the mid but not too distant future, she would Declare the Meeting Closed.

It is the inner shape things take that matters and not these external signs. It is the inner dimension of these motions that is so significant. The Crusoes, the Swaggies of the mind! For there to be true philosophy, there have to be options. In deference to that same philosophy, one must also make some kind of choice. One cannot just wallow, as I have for too long wallowed, in the mire of endless possibility, with limitless maybes, what-ifs, perhapses and *on-the-one-hands* locked in contention with an even more formidable host of *on-the-others*.

Coralie and I should have talked about these things. We really should have made a decision. Madeleine and Rollo had found a kind of solution, a compromise, with Madeleine as a kind of high-end vagrant, wandering from premises to premises up and down High Street, but with Rollo's capital appreciation to sustain the bastion.

As true Crusoes, Coralie and I should have built a full and conclusive 'lifestyle' for ourselves, either in Toorak or down at Sorrento. A life full of gold. Replete with fully insured and alarmed objects of desire.

If I had been content merely to pile up valuable possessions, to build our Kingdom of Nothingness on St Georges Road, I would not have made myself so vulnerable. Insurance would have covered all the darker eventualities of life. (It is insurance, not philosophy, that stands between us and the void. If you read your policy closely you will find that Armageddon is specifically covered (in plain English) in Part III, Section D, par 3:5, though the Apocalypse is, I fear, specifically listed as an exclusion. The black plastic bags, having no value, would not have been covered.) Instead of sitting here, accused of unspeakable actions, I would still be out there with Coralie, restocking.

As a true Swaggie, on the other hand, I should have abandoned both establishments, and taken fully to the road. I would also have been less vulnerable. There would have been no collections. No millstone relationships. No wives and in-laws. No black plastic bags. Instead of sitting here accused of unthinkable deeds, I would be On the Road—yes, albeit on Fifth Avenue, probably, or The Bund or Unter Den Linden—spinning the bottle to discover my next destination, and ringing on ahead for reservations and an Avis hire car.

It was my fault, Your Honour. I kept the fragments. The jottings.

I stored them away. It was indecision, the bob-each-way, that was my tragic flaw.

Scarcely a full defence, Your Honour, I do admit. A reason, perhaps, my old housemaster would have said, but hardly an excuse. But perhaps you and these twelve persons good and true can now see that this was, as Porfiry Petrovich suggested to Raskolnikov after a not dissimilar clobbering, an 'intellectual crime' based in a deep and subversive, almost passionless impersonality. A crime to be configured not in terms of individual passion, individual default, but in terms of philosophies, social movements, external circumstances, complexes and syndromes.

Was there not something representative in my failure to choose? Was there not something epochal, momentous, even philosophically intriguing in my crime?

This was indeed the act of a desperate man, Your Honour, but that man is not Martin Frobisher. That man—or woman, I should say—is you. It is these twelve honest and upright citizens who sit before you. It is these lawyers, even, stripped of their wigs and jabots and Armani suits and Ralph Lauren shirts and lopped back to bare forked Australian humanity. Back to their Cottontails and Y-fronts. The blow arose, I respectfully submit, from the very deepest of confusions, and at the national level. Surely the accused, in this instance, is no more than a scapegoat, a representative, the crime itself motivated, at root, by unresolved cultural tensions, by

conflicting aspirations, by fatal fractures in the Zeitgeist, the very spirit of the times. The act was regrettable, it is true, but was it not an act of a kind that may increasingly be necessary to each one of us? Violent indeed, but necessarily so, given our context of violence, Your Honour, the inner mayhem of those systems, those deepening transportations which breed upon us with each day.

Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders.

I have tried it, from a number of angles, on my toilet bowl.

9

THE MOMENT OF IMPACT. IT'S TIME, I THINK, THAT I EXPLAINED TO you what actually happened. The salient facts, as I have told them to Clive. I know there are things that are not yet quite clear. She was fossicking in one of my black plastic bags. It was one I had not yet shipped off to join the others in Sorrento. It was one in which there was more recent material, more frank admissions and bleeding testimonies, than in any of the others.

I have shown a tendency towards honesty in my later years. It makes me feel that perhaps the prison house is at last starting to close in around me, that the more unruly and ill-favoured of my creative powers are at long last, and mercifully, starting to fade. The bag contained lots of fresh A4, intricately balled and crumpled, in which I had much to say about the sisters, about my marital

problems with Coralie, about the ups and downs in my affair with Madeleine—I still don't quite know if I may permit myself to call it that—and even about Rollo.

It was all fragments, vignettes, dribblings, crumpled into what I'd expected to be oblivion at the end of each abandoned paragraph. But with enough to incriminate. Enough, indeed, to rue, with violence, having my black plastic fig leaf so crudely stripped away.

Which brings us back, at last, to the business of the louse. To the raw accusation, with all its deep familial resonance. It was on a Wednesday evening, early, when normally no-one would be at home. It was a time when we were usually all still at work; Coralie in her office, Madeleine in the midst of one of her aesthetic shemozzles down on High Street, me tucked up behind a pile of manuscripts and Rollo, high up in Parchment Buildings, busily stapling the pink form to the green.

She was sitting at the living room table, the bag on her lap, but got up as I came in. The blonde hair was brightly refreshed. Toorak Village, that very morning, I would think. The blue eyes were sparkling with what turned out to be anger, but which I at first mistook as pleasure and surprise to see me. The lips were already shaping for the patriarchal curse.

'Provocation, Your Honour. I caught her peering into my black plastic bags. She called me a louse.'

I know that it is grossly inadequate as a defence. Physical abuse, if sufficiently grave and sustained, might have got me some distance. There are situations, I recall from my own youthful passage through Criminal Law 101, where even sustained verbal abuse might offer some kind of defence. I recall from the law reports—from the headnote, I suspect it was—some husband who, having been referred to as a 'little black bastard' over a lengthy period by his erring wife, managed to bring judge and jury almost to the point of approval of the domestic mayhem that ensued. In my case, there was no repetition. One assault on my black plastic repositories. One sharp jibe. Albeit so well chosen. Together with the oddest, perhaps even the most hurtful suggestion, which trickles painfully into memory as I write.

'I've been going through some of your stuff, Martin. There's just about enough stupid material here for a novel.'

She said it laughingly. But even if this were just a stupid novel, would either the incident with the bags or the insults to follow amount to sufficient 'motivation' to carry the story forward? If I am to hold your attention for the last part of this telling, do I need to come up with something a little more probable, a little more persuasive?

If this were just some sort of novel, I can see the plot would need to improve. Though one thing I've come to realise in my own paddlings about in literature, and my odd strayings into real life, is that the kind of reality that leads you to pound someone over the

head with an epergne is not always at one with 'psychological realism'. The kind of reality that rears up out of nowhere and grabs at the nearest blunt object is as likely to be 'improbable' to the unfortunate who finds himself doing it as it's going to be to his readers.

I have thought about this much, since that time. The whole bullpit situation had been getting worse. Coralie's attacks on me and on Rollo were escalating. She had begun, I think, to have suspicions about me and Madeleine. Rollo's tendency to look sadly at both me and Madeleine and to fiddle agitatedly with his cufflinks was growing. Madeleine's forays into my own inner springs and gizmos were becoming more insistent, more invasive. And overall, there was the impossible burden on us all of Rollo's unshakeable and ponderous decency. No one, absolutely no one, not me, Coralie, Madeleine, Rollo or even poor old Ernie, was getting what he or she wanted. Perhaps especially poor Ernie, who seemed to believe that we all loved his hideous epergne almost as much as he did. Was Ernie the most deeply betrayed of us all? It all added up, though, to what we thought of as our lifestyle. We were all committed to it. We thought it would go on and on.

Somehow, I think I had always hoped that one or the other of the sisters would indeed go for a rummage. Somehow—I have to confess it—I had always dreamed of being 'caught'. There was something in there. Something had gone into those bags over the years that needed to be brought out and aired and passed around.

Was this why I had kept all the material, indeed, in the hope that someone, one day, would read their way into the thick of it and tell me what it all meant? Or perhaps even that one day I would be locked up for something for long enough to go over it all and put it in some sort of order, if you see what I mean?

For what other reason had I kept the black plastic bag in question up in the apartment in St Georges Road? There had been plenty of opportunities to take it down to Sorrento. And why the stockpile in Sorrento, indeed? For what reason had I kept all this stuff, dating back for so many years, if not in the hope that someone—one of the sisters, indeed, more probably than Rollo, or perhaps even the cleaning lady—would somehow come across it and tell me what it all meant? In the hope, perhaps, that some kind soul would sift through it all, then take me aside and stroke the back of my hand, and say, so gently, and over and over and over, soft words of consolation.

'There, there.'

I do object to being called a louse.

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I WILL SPARE YOU, FOR a moment yet, the blow itself. The *actus reus*. To whit, a most almighty clobbering. Unchallengeable, if spouting blood and a buckled epergne can be cited as evidence. Grisly indeed, and more for the technician, the pathologist, than for the writer, the

diarist, the humble penitent. I refer you to sections of the coroner's report, particularly paragraphs 12 to 18, which would set you up with a far more detailed, exact and finally objective description of the blow and its consequences than ever I could, and all cautiously couched in the passive voice and double negatives and sly subjunctives and multiple past perfects.

The attention to detail is impressive. There are many things in it that I still do not understand. I've told you little about the epergne itself. An ugly brute of a thing. The essential shape in itself was large and laboured enough with its Corinthian column and ample base, but once embellished with native fauna and flora, in solid silver, the whole thing took on a perilous dimension. We had to display it in a prominent place in St Georges Road in case of surprise visits from old Ernie. He loved the jumbled intricacy of the figures; the emus, the koalas, cunningly concealed by the silver foliage, the sinuous figure of a creeping Aborigine about to impale a grazing kangaroo. It was partly too, Coralie had decreed, because of its escalating material value. Apparently Ernie is not the only person in the world who has been induced to admire these horrors.

But yes, there was anger behind it, and not just the weight of the thing, that drove the wretched epergne forward. Anger that I was scarcely aware of. I have no particular strength. Coralie and I have subscribed, over the years, to a series of fashionable gymnasiums. I have always been big, taller than most of those around me. What

strength I have, though, is very short-lived. My height does offer me a fair measure of leverage. I suggested it as one possibility to Clive; that it was my height, not my rage, not malicious aforethought in any sense, that struck the blow.

The business of striking was, before and after the blow, unthinkable. I have never, in my life, struck anyone. It was perhaps because it was so utterly unthinkable that I did it. Had I been able genuinely to premeditate in any measure, I'm sure I would have taken careful steps to make sure it wouldn't happen. Again, I have put this to Clive, who pursed his lips discreetly and took careful notes. The striking of the blow as itself clear evidence of the absence of any form of premeditation? He said he would have to think it over. That it was not, in his experience, a common defence.

But there it was. The epergne, singing through the air. With me watching it move about me and all the while wondering what, exactly, I thought I was doing. I do not recall a moment of choosing. What I do most vividly recall is that interminable moment, that split second which then strayed out of time altogether, in which the epergne continued in its own motion, with me slipping into a sense of being agent rather than principal to the terrible events that were in train. I remember feeling even at the time that I was witness rather than perpetrator, a mere actor carrying out the dictates of a script that had been written out, mulled over, edited and prescribed for me long, long before I ever appeared on the scene.

In truth, the idea did just cross my mind, once or twice in the preceding years, though in trying to tell you about it now, I fear it will be shaped by later thinkings, so bent and varied in the writing process that it will hardly connect to what I thought at the time. Under the severe provocation of Madeleine's deepening contempt and Coralie's escalating system-structuring idiocy, under risk of exposure to Rollo and, above all, to dear old Ernie—I do dread the tragic, broken reproaches of poor old Ernie, and not just because of his damaged emus—I may indeed have contemplated rash and careless actions of the kind now set out in thick constabular prose, with lots of chesty euphemisms: 'the deceased individua-w', the 'lacerations', and the 'blunt object in question'.

'The deceased individua-w': I do not know how to write a soft *l* but I tell you, my interrogator's *l*'s were soft. It is not uncommon, I have observed, among police men and women.

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DID I EVER REALLY CONTEMPLATE it? Was the crime in any sense premeditated? Did I ever really go any further, in any previous thought on the issue, than casting the whole scenario up into a reverie of absurd ethical choice? If I had ever thought about it at all—which I had, it now occurs to me—then does this make the act premeditated, no matter how abstractly, how hypothetically I had considered it?

I did hazard once, to Rollo, the notion that we all nurse such dark tendencies. I think I even cited Blake: 'sooner murder the infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.' I recall Rollo straightening his tie and reaching for his drink with an embarrassed guffaw. Much of Rollo's income, I suspect, derives from people's failure to nurse unacted desires. Rollo's thoughts ran, as always, to the precise legal consequences of murdering infants in their cradles. I let the subject drop.

Rollo did not, as far as I could ever detect, have a subconscious, in any form whatsoever. Rollo suffered few promptings from the dark side. Rollo kept no black plastic bags. The inner life was at one with the outer, the extremities of his emotional range clearly registered in whether he was buttoned up or buttoned down, the tie in place or not.

At any rate, I do recall, now, some passing moments of reflection in this vein. I must be very careful. It is so easy to supply such thoughts after the event. It is so easy to rearrange the topography, slipping this little extra piece of reflection in there, where it makes for a neater trajectory. Allowing a passing fancy just a little more clarity, a little more duration than it ever assumed in real life. Building this odd little hump up, up, up, so that it is visible from all parts of the story, and running the odd trench across the landscape so that you can creep through some sections without even being seen. I know every trick.

Should I kill my wife, because I feel guilty in relation to her? Or should I kill my wife's sister, because she is the source of the guilt?

Madness indeed, when spelled out in this way. Never—I assure you—never did it quite take this raw shape in my own thoughts, even in the dark abyss of insomniac obsession. Never did I enter the names of those closest to me into this outrageous proposition. Never did I entertain the idea that such obscene and incoherent thought would translate into action.

Three times, though, in three utterly different versions, such a proposition did edge its way in my direction. Three times, that I recall, I entertained these promptings of the Evil One.

The first was one night when I was in bed. I was restless. I was not sleeping with Coralie. It was a hot night—we both detest air-conditioning, and prefer whatever relief an open window can offer—and I had moved to the spare bed. I tossed and turned far into the night. My mind slipped steadily into one of those odd deep ruts that minds get into at such moments, with the same thoughts going over and over. I was not awake enough to think clearly on the issue, and not quite able to drift off and away from it altogether and into deeper sleep. It was then, on that stifling January night about a year ago, that the whole unspeakable proposition slipped into my mind. What if I decided to take one or the other of these paths? Which sister, in the end, might I strike?

The second was a more detached moment of musing, brought

on by a distant glimpse of my first-year philosophy tutor, now ageing badly, in an airport lounge, just last year. I recalled the pissywhiff corduroys of yore, the wispy beard and owlish spectacles, the teasing sets of hypotheticals that we ran through each week in Ethics. It was the late sixties. We were in pursuit of Relevance. Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume and Kant were suddenly replaced by Marcuse, Timothy Leary, first sightings of Barthes and R.D. Laing. Lecturers went off on sabbatical to California, leaving in tweeds and home-knit pullovers and coming back in beards, jeans, beads and pendants. There was much talk, then, of William Blake, and those unacted desires.

I recall putting my newspaper aside and running my insane hypotheticals past a hypothetical reconstruction of my long-gone tutorial. I recall arguing both sides of the question, with equal passion and conviction. Smilingly, warmed by the inner spectacle of my own wit and erudition. And then being called to board my flight.

The third time I was on the road, between my offices in South Melbourne and Prahran. I was listening to one of the late Beethoven sonatas—a movement which I play again and again because of the way it breeds sweet saddening thoughts, then intersperses these with ecstatic motions of joy, and then goes *allegretto*, the transition almost like a form of violence. The traffic was slow. I think I was tired. The whole affair with Madeleine, gone sad and worn without ever in a sense having actually happened, and now more than just a bit nasty, suddenly seemed an apt but furtive emblem of everything

that was not happening in my life. The idea of escape, down either of those reckless paths, suddenly surfaced as the true message of the music. It rose to mind as one of those precious, epiphanic, out-of-self and out-of-time moments that modern traffic conditions so often bestow. In that moment, bloody murder *a l'allegro* seemed for one ecstatic moment to look to wholeness, towards whole new forms of freedom.

I thought of Paul of Tarsus on his donkey, blinded by his revelation while gridlocked on the feeder that ran up to the Damascus bypass.

Such reflections offer neither release nor condemnation. Did they recur, however momentarily, while the epergne was on its way? Does the mere fact that I once toyed with such things mean that the crime was in any sense 'premeditated'? Can the Intent still be there, even if the Intended has shifted? If the target has slipped sideways, and morphed into someone else? Can premeditation, legally speaking, be relocated from one person to another? Do two half-intents, directed at entirely different people, add up to one whole, or still only one half-intent, in the end?

My deepest dread is that I might have acted on a long and deeply considered volition. I worry that my own life, to a detached observer, might itself appear as steady and inevitable as the passage of an epergne. That the moment of striking, what seemed to me to be the most uncharacteristic act of my whole life—a quick search of virtually

everything I had ever done, from the usual run of early childhood cruelties through to the odd angry breakout in adulthood and middle age, showed nothing to compare—might start to look like the necessary logic of a whole life of such slippery and elusive thinking.

Was this one gruesome image of me, beating a defenceless woman over the head with an epergne, the closest I was ever likely to get to the real truth about myself? Had this William Blake fellow ever actually beaten anyone over the head with an epergne? And if not, in what way was he qualified to advise?

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CLARKE'S 'HUMAN REPETENDS' IS ONE of his odder ventures, but it's one that's full of teasing material. It's a story that has always attracted scholars and antiquaries because of the tasty biographical details it seems to contain. It tells of a youth luxuriously misspent in Europe, a father suddenly dead and impoverishment to follow, an exile to the antipodes and the steady 'newchum' descent through the colonial social scale, from smart clubs and South Yarra tea parties down to coach driving, billiards and bitter indigence.

The story, like so much of what Clarke wrote, flickers in and out of his own life. Beyond the highly coloured hints it offers about the young Clarke's life in the Upper World, it offers us a splendid glimpse of life in Fawkner's Town:

> To walk down Collins Street was like pulling up the Styx. On either side I saw men who had vanished from the Upper World sooner than I. Tomkins was there to explain the queer story of the concealed ace. Jenkins talked to me for an hour concerning the Derby which ruined him. Hopkins had another wife in addition to the one he left at Florence, while Wilkins assured me on his honour that he had married the lady with whom he had eloped, and introduced me to her during a dinner party at a trading magnate's. The game was made in the same old fashion, only the stakes were not so high. The porcelain was of the same pattern, only a little cracked.

Below the Styx. The river of the dead. *Human Repetends.* It's not the best of Clarke's stories, but it's one that's now chipping away at the edge of my own thinking. In it, Clarke probes the possibility of human repetition, the idea that 'men's souls return to the earth and enact again the crimes which stained them'. It's the idea that we might be ruled by processes of reincarnation and repetition. Clarke leans heavily on Edgar Allan Poe for story and for style.

> A word in your ear. If you would read poor Poe aright you must read by tallow-candlelight, and if you will just take as much laudanum as will fill a saltspoon, and then, wait until midnight, and put a looking glass in front of you, you will perhaps be able to comprehend how it was that the author of 'Ligeia' and the 'Raven'

> died drunk in a hospital at the age of thirty-eight. But I am getting prolix and stupid.

The central character in his story, one Hugh Pontifex, comes into possession of a fifteenth-century copperplate engraving, a haunting portrait of a young woman holding a spray of rue. And then, in 1863, four hundred years after the portrait was worked, he sees her in the flesh, under a black bonnet, in Bourke Street. Below the Styx.

An ancient memoir is discovered. The engraving, dating from 1469, is of one Jehanne La Galliarde, now mysteriously resurrected in one Jenny Gay of Melbourne. Both are murdered. Jehanne la Galliarde, whose 'romantic amours electrified the Paris of Louis XI' was thrown into the Seine by her husband, Sieur de la Forêt—a 'man of ill-life'. Jenny Gay's body is dragged from the Yarra within days of her sighting in the street by Pontifex; thrust there, it is widely thought, by her shady associate, the 'cashiered gambler' Bernard Forrester.

In the fifteenth-century version, the death of Jehanne la Galliarde is avenged by one Hugue Grandprêtre, who pursues and kills Forêt in Padua. And where does this now leave Hugh Pontifex, wandering the streets of Melbourne in dread of encountering Forrester and being impelled to re-enact, by most mysterious impulsion and according to the principle 'human repetends', the final event of 1469?

If this was a coincidence, it was terribly complete.

George Santayana, critic and sage, tells us that those who have not learned the lessons of history are compelled to repeat them. At times, Clarke seems to be in agreement with him. In writing *His Natural Life* he was accused of sensationalism; he responded that the novel was written to ensure that such things did not happen again. No-one has even been convinced by this. *His Natural Life*, like so many good novels, was written to make money. Clarke's overcomplicated little yarn, at any rate, argues a very different sort of case. It suggests that a knowledge of history just tells us what we are compelled to repeat. This is what worries me. I have less faith than Santayana in the idea that if we have the knowledge, we will somehow put it to good use. Experience suggests that we will simply draw on it for even more hearty clobberings.

Petra agrees.

'If you are talking about people clobbering each other,' she insists, 'then Niccolo Machiavelli wrote the standard manual. And he was, as I recall, a pretty sharp historian.'

'Human Repetends' is classic Clarke in that the writer of the last paragraph seems to have lost touch with the writer of the first, with deep coherence losing out to word count, column length, copy deadline. The story is broken-backed. The tone, the style, is shipped in from abroad. The philosophy is pap. This should be no surprise

to anyone who knows anything about the daily grind that literary 'inspiration' largely dribbles down to. It won't surprise anyone who knows the way the thoughts fall into shape, the effect of one good day and the effect of a few bad ones to follow, the ways in which the chance advice of a few friends might turn a baggy disaster of overwhelming silliness into a more or less readable fiction. The very dogshit that a writer steps into on a certain day might be just as likely to determine the whole course of a novel, the themes, the aesthetic patterning, the philosophic import, as the profoundest reading, the most abstruse and obscure contents of the author's auctioned library. One thing, Your Honour, that I've managed to learn from a lifetime of horse-trading in the fiction of others—one morsel of truth that is lodged deep within my rack of black plastic repositories—is that it's not the bright ideas, the cunning allusions, the architectural intricacies that make for teasing fictions. It's the mix, the melange, the muddle, the very deepest of confusions. Wisdom, an African proverb tells us, comes out of the ant heap. It's the negotiation between the ideas and the dogshit that really sets the thing a-running, as much as the Balzacs, the Renans, the Kants and Humes and Bossuets.

Freedom. My own life told the tale. My parents were shuffled off in what my sisters and I were told by our solicitous relatives was 'the prime of their lives'. I was, I am told, griefstricken. I was grieving, though, not their deaths, as it must have seemed to all around,

but the sleepy and unadventurous lives they had lived. Their only point of high dramatic release was the encounter with the semi-trailer on the Calder Highway which brought about their ending, with their shining Holden Special distributed in gleaming fragments up and down the road. If this had been prime living, I think I knew even at the time, then the whole human proposition was infinitely more menacing, the dice far more outrageously loaded against the free, the uncommon, the ecstatic, than I had believed was possible. I was thus seen to grieve more sorely than the others. The solicitous relatives offered their solace, for a time, before they began to detect this perverse metaphysical tinge. They quickly edged away from the infection and back into their reassuring material pursuits. Because Life, they shrieked in unison as they reversed down our driveway and back onto the solid bitumen, Must Go On.

The psychiatrist appointed by the courts—and by sheer coincidence, worthy indeed of the worst excesses of a Marcus Clarke novel, the same sniffling psychiatrist with whom I had spoken so many years ago (*psychiatrictus repetends*)—suggested that my present circumstances were largely owing to my not heeding the advice he had given me back then.

'Refresh my memory,' mouthed the psychiatrist. 'Refresh my memory.'

The very fact of talking to him again made me feel further that the dice were loaded, that the whole game of life was an ugly

set-up. That in the end it must be repetition that will rule. Was it possible that any sense of freedom I ever knew and shared with Coralie, Madeleine and Rollo arose merely from—and if Clarke is to be believed, from a precious ignorance of—another life lived somewhere else and perhaps centuries ago? Did it stem only from not knowing about the flight of another epergne or similar blunt object tucked away in the mists that cloud times past? With always the danger that some cunning historian or poet might dig it out and roll it forward? That some poet or seer might let us know what it is that we are condemned to repeat, the weight and momentum of the epergne thence carrying the full burden and momentum of history with it, with all the more reason to suggest that the said blunt instrument—I do argue the point again, Your Honour, and even more insistently—was now swinging me?

~

'YOU DIDN'T DO IT, DID you, Martin?'

We have fumbled through the papers for a time. It is one of her routine visits, with not much new to show. Petra suddenly closes her folder with a thump.

'Come clean, Martin.'

I raise an eyebrow. The old trick.

'I just know you didn't do it.'

Petra now comes partly, I flatter myself, because she likes to see me. She has never talked about my crime. This was just one of a whole herd of elephants that we'd carefully steered around. She is sensitive to atmosphere. Petra is as intrigued as I am with this whole business of incarceration. She is as captivated as I am by the sheer intensity of thinking that windowless rooms bring on. She piously observes the remand centre decorums. The torn jeans, the oriental tendency in linen and beads and tassels, have gradually given way to deep and thoughtful winter mourning. The jeans have been replaced by black leggings and a large and baggy woollen smock. Even, on one occasion, a beret. There is something in it of a return to the mid-sixties. Something just too wide open.

'What on earth makes you say that?'

'Maybe you did hit her. That's bad enough. But you didn't smother her, did you?'

'I thought we'd agreed not to talk about this.'

'We didn't agree to anything. We just haven't talked about it, that's all. I want the truth. I just know you didn't do it.'

We've spent so much time together, Petra and I. So much time chasing revelations in the papers that simply were not there. I see a new tendency in her to reroute attention from Clarke's clockwork to mine.

'You can't possibly want to spend the rest of your life in this frightful place?'

Are there actually tears in her eyes? Or does it remind me of a movie where someone's eyes moistened at just such a moment? 'I want the truth.' What is it about those misty eyes and straight inquiries that brings on the dangerous longing to tell all?

Oh, come *on*, Petra.

I don't say it. I try to come up with something terribly clever, just to muddy and confuse.

'You probably have your own good reasons for not telling me, Martin. Family reasons. I've seen that Rollo coming in and out. The one in the suit and tie. Edward thinks you're protecting someone.'

Infernal Edward.

'I'm protecting myself, Petra. I like it here. I like your visits.'

I don't want to tell her any lies. At what point, though, does not telling the full story start to amount to a lie?

'You should tell the truth.'

'If I told the truth, I'd lose the only three visitors I have. Rollo, my lawyer and you. It's the lack of it that keeps all of you coming back.'

'I come back for the money, Martin. Why else do you think I would be here?'

Her eyes really are glistening. There's a bit of straight talking for you, she seems to be saying. There's a go at truth. See how it feels. Now it's your turn.

There is a long pause. Petra pulls out a soggy tissue, and starts sorting out the tangle. We are edging in awkward directions.

'I prefer versions, Petra. Versions of people. Versions of events. Versions of the truth. Ones that more or less work. The real ones often don't.'

Petra blows her nose. Conclusively. She starts to pack up her things. She keeps looking at me, though. At length, she reaches over and puts her hand on mine. It is the only time we have touched since the day we first shook hands. It occurs to me, in this truly awe-full moment, that here was a whole version of the world, a whole better way of living that I had somehow managed totally to sidestep, to jest and mock out of the way.

What is she really looking for? Is she chasing another Frobisher, a Frobisher-of-her-age, a pre-mucked-up Frobisher, a might-have-been, could-have-happened version of her own? Is she comparing me and Edward? What hopes would my jumbled thinking have, against a real philosopher?

It is the straight look, the sudden frankness of her touch of hand on hand. My fingers curl around her hand, for just a moment. Tiresome, betraying fingers.

'You're not actually going, are you, Petra? I mean, *really* going?'

She smiles, and sniffs, and withdraws her hand.

'It's alright. Don't worry. I'll be back. There's more. Really, there's lots more where this came from.'

~

ROLLO, IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING, continues to visit me. He is the only visitor that I have who is not paid to attend. My professional connections have all faded away, like dew upon the morning grass. Fearful that the taint might blemish their affairs, my colleagues on numerous boards and charities have already voted me off. All of them, I suspect, have the queasy feeling that perhaps 'they didn't really know me, after all'. That, given that the person they did know was not really me but some kind of artful fabrication designed to conceal murderous intent, then in a sense I never really existed, and the books should be adjusted to note the fact.

The whole truth. How much would it really tell?

Would it tell of the real pain of Rollo, in coming to see me? Rollo, in mourning, but indetectably so, wearing the same mourning suits and grieving ties he always did; Rollo, who spent so much of his time passing on the dictates that the dead leave to the living, now suddenly confronted with closer-to-home forms of death-in-life, with no soothing documents or box files of instructions left behind.

I cling to Rollo. In the desperate hope, mingled with trepidation, that Rollo will stay Rollo, no matter what slings and arrows are flung up by the next sad phase of the Real. If Rollo crumbles, if Rollo proves to be made of straw, then the whole world crumbles with him. Most frightening of all, I now see that just about all my notions of bringing myself up to scratch are located in Rollo; that

for me, 'scratch'—infernal expression—pretty well begins and ends in Rollo. How could I live in a world that rearranged itself to inform me that the high road to scratch runs not up but down?

My fears, my apprehensions do lead me to seek in Rollo some glimmer of friction, tension, doubt. Did Rollo, in adjusting the cushion to support her head, find the opportunity just too irresistible? Rollo has not come under the suspicion of the law, so Rollo is not under suspicion. Rollo, dear betrayed and disappointed Rollo, is my rock and my foundation. Visit after visit, all I see in Rollo is dogged affection and steady conviction and pathetic loyalty and, increasingly, a deep and uncomprehending sadness.

The lawyers will write their own story—a simple tale of guilt and jealousy. The Sunday magazines will take it a step further—one of the special punishments for upper-middle-class crime is this morbid public fascination; *these people have everything I want, and still they insist on massacring each other.* The real truth—does it ever really matter whether or not the real truth is told? Does it matter that a real murderer—who is probably the murderer of a close family member to boot—is going to go scot-free? Other murders are not likely to follow.

I will not write satire. I have no fashionable cynicism left. I just want to be Rollo, for all that his wife did stray into illicit conversation with another. I just wish that for a moment I could be Rollo, for all his buttoned cuffs and musty manners. Once or twice since that

awful night, I have been tempted to go back and replot the whole sequence of events, the whole story of Rollo, Madeleine, Coralie and me, so that the dice might come up Rollo's way. It shows you just how storytelling can get so out of hand, how it is the unthinkable that really draws it on. By the mere fact that I am discussing Rollo in this, which I intend almost to bring us to an ending, I take the risk that you will be swayed, Your Honour, into thinking that I am *meaning more than I say, and saying more than I mean*. If I were then to discuss, at this juncture, the possibility that it was in fact her sister who raised the cushion, your sense of the 'balance of probabilities' would then shift in her direction. Which leaves me feeling that the only truly Meet and Fitting way to conclude is by talking about myself. About Marcus Clarke. About myself.

10

THE GREAT JOY OF BEING LOCKED UP (ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU REALISE that the sentence, even a lenient sentence, is likely to last for the rest of your active life) is that it lifts you out of the useless tramp, tramp, tramp of 'going places'. It relieves you of all need or hope of ever *getting there*, as Coralie would say.

In prison, you get a firm sense of an Ending. You know you are finally in the Last Chapter. Your life being over, you can at last get down to the business of sorting things out, so to speak, and finding out what happened. Deep in this dark coffin of concentrated thought, using your thoughts to circle back is the only means of going forward; to go over what you've already done and pick it up again and try to make more sense of it than you did the first time round.

Good fictions—so much more satisfying than actually living—always work this way. Your decent page-flicker sets up lots of confusion, lots of anguish in the early pages—Venables is found dead in the club library, the club's librarian is seen living high in a club in Majorca, the club's receptionist has also vanished, with a police inquiry to follow—and it's only when we get to the end, when we see the librarian's hands on the receptionist and the receptionist stuffing the revolver in her handbag, that we are able to roll back through the whole business to see that what looked like confusion, disorder and chance was all linked, ordered and significant. At which point we put the light out and make a grab for the blanket and drift into peaceful slumber in the cheerful knowledge that the world does, in the end, make sense.

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world . . .

In fact, prison feels rather more like a novel than any world I've ever lived in. The cell is like the life of writing. It's like a gravitational field, drawing in everything you know. Thoughts run out from it. Thoughts track back to it. New connections, between the major events, the major characters in your life, richly meet and meld.

Suddenly, I feel closer to everyone around me than ever before.

My father, my mother. I forgive them everything. Relationships are revisited. Poor Madeleine and dear Coralie. Poor Coralie and dear Madeleine. And Rollo. Petra. And, of course, Marcus Clarke.

I am more tender, more forgiving, than ever I was in the outside world. I can see, at last, where it all *fits*.

> Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot
> Unlikely wonders; how these weak vain nails
> May tear a passage through the flinty ribs
> Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls . . .

Poor Richard II again. Part of the same soliloquy. The only soliloquy I know off by heart, as it happens—ghosts and shadows of the old Victorian Leaving Certificate—though I'm not sure that I have given you these passages in the right order and there is certainly more. The stolen page, the stolen page! I search the faces of my companions in the cafeteria and the yard as we sit over our daily quota of oakum, picking, picking, picking. Which one of them has it? Which one of these battered, disappointed souls is also begetting new generations of still-breeding thoughts, as we grunt and burp and fart at each other across the exercise yard?

> Da dum, da dum, da dum.

Do I really want to leave this place? New worlds are taking shape. The officers are gently respectful in the way they move me from place to place. Ready, I was, for all forms of humiliation. Instead, I find the old machine beginning to tick, the face, the bearing adjusting to suit, the voice moving one shade closer to the remand centre accent while retaining its cashed-up ring, the manner modest, appreciative, yet with a subtle hint that such treatment is only appropriate.

It's an old trick I picked up in Oxford, from watching the college porters and the young gentlemen of the college. The warders are no different. It's no longer 'Thompson', or 'Merkin', or 'Hawley', of course, because this is sunny shirtsleeved Australia and not the soggy depths of Oxfordshire. In this case, it's 'Jack—you may indeed take my books'. 'Yes, Ted—and how's that old back, again?—you may indeed smooth the covers and clear away the wrappers on the bed'—and even, just occasionally, the word 'mate' slipped in, as 'twere inadvertently, as though for just that moment I was forgetting myself and letting the 'real', the truly egalitarian Frobisher out; with the warders thinking finally, if I had done my work aright, that Martin Frobisher was beneath it all and despite All That Had Gone On not such a bad sort of a bloke. A surprisingly nice guy. With a real common touch.

If I were truly common, it would not be known as such.

The epergne. The savage blow. Let not my own story get entirely lost in that of others. There are indeed a few matters—a few salient

facts, as Clive would say—that I have not disclosed. There are a few things I have yet to clarify.

For example, I have spared you, until now, the terrible moment of impact. The twisting, the almost straining of my wrist as it caught her by an awkward corner. The sickening crunch of skin and bone submitting to the impact. The little puzzled sigh.

I think I expected her to be knocked for a six, with flailing limbs and toppled furniture. But instead she simply crumpled, stage by stage, almost as though it was the ankles that gave way first, then the knees, the hips, her eyes seeming for a moment to stay level with mine—'So we are not going to talk after all'—and then sinking in slow and almost elegant stages, like a fainting heroine in an old movie, as the lower parts of her body succumbed to the effect of the blow to the upper. Fainting, as Coralie Belleisle the Planter's Daughter or, indeed, the Fair Madeleine or even Lady Millicent the Poisoner might have been expected to faint.

There is nothing quite like this in Clarke. Not this last stage in the affair. Not the crunch, the fall, the blood running out into the silk Persian. My frenzied hunt through the *Stories*, the *Memorial Volume*, the *Portable Marcus Clarke*, the various lives of Marcus Clarke, the mounds of photocopies that Petra has delivered has furnished nothing.

The affair, yes, it was there. The sisters. Marian and Rose. They existed. The furtive meetings even.

But the blow with the epergne, no.

In this, months after, I still feel oddly naked. Strangely exposed. With no precedents, no analogies, no reassuring archetypes to call upon. Abandoned, I would have to confess. Wondering if there might be something, somewhere, in Clarke that I might have missed. Something that Petra might one day turn up, interleaved between the pages of some other story, or buried deep in some lost archive. I thought enviously of Jabez Jamrack and Coralie the Planter's Daughter and the Fair Madeleine, the Australian digger with his eternal red shirt and even Lady Millicent, of all people, able to turn on their author and take him to task. With the joy of having someone finally to blame. With the reassurance of having been somehow authorised. However badly. With the feeling that there might be someone up there, somewhere, with the power or the kindness to deliver me from this dreadful yarn that has gone so badly awry. Or, at least, to try to explain.

~

THEY FOUND ME IN THE beach house. I needed the time, the peace to 'collect myself', as the expression goes, and had naturally made for the site of all my other incomplete collections. I rang Rollo. I rang her sister. I rang for police and an ambulance. Then I fled, leaving the door open for the first one to arrive. It was a wet night

and the roads were hazardous. I recall no more than the rain beating towards me in shining silver streaks, the slap slap slap of the wipers, the white line glowing amid the waters on the road and the glorious 'Dido's Lament', which I played over and over and over:

When I am laid in earth
May my wrongs create
No trouble in thy breast;
Remember me . . .

I thought of how poor Henry Purcell had only lasted a year or two longer than Marcus Clarke, while pointless beings like me live on, year after year, mouthing our improbable excuses and waving our bloodied epergnes.

I recall the time it took to get down to the beach house. Interminable it seemed, and me desperate to get there, to get down to the silence and the isolation and the plastic bags. As though I now had something to write about. As though I now, at last, had something to say.

Remember me . . .

When I arrived, I sat alone and in darkness, in the front room. I did not turn on a light. Even the front room, the living room, had been

invaded by the detritus, the sprawling collections, along with the bedrooms, the corridors, the kitchen, the little conservatory with its tangle of boxes and long-dead ferns and creepers.

But ah! forget my fate.

It was the conservatory itself, it did occur to me somewhere through the long wastes of the night, that killed them. If I had simply upended the pots into the garden at the time when Coralie lost interest, half of them would almost certainly have flourished.

I spent much time, through the night, reflecting on the fact. Until, at last, the police arrived. I became aware of them through a flashing light among the tea-trees outside the house and the brief burp and screech of a megaphone that someone had thought to use and then decided not to. Some form of radio broke across the chill of the early morning, a blurred, staticky sound.

A series of trucks then pulled up. Men in dark blue uniforms spilled out. They were in full body armour and heavily armed. They rushed the house and broke down the front door, each crouching and offering protective cover to the next as they stormed down the corridor, shooting the locks off doors and shredding the plastic bags that lay in their path with concentrated bursts of automatic fire. They broke down the living room door, shrieking coded instructions to one another, knocked me down and handcuffed me and dragged

me from the house, screaming and frothing, straining against the manacles, shrieking my innocence to the absent neighbours, to the tea-trees and the gravel streets. Just like in the movies.

They did not. It was nothing like the movies. Two polite, almost apologetic young constables knocked gently at the front door. I answered and reassured them, in the calm resignation of my manner, that they would not need to move to the second stage—it would, I suspect, have involved handcuffs—or the third, which might indeed have brought in the body armour, the broken doors and the shredding of the bags.

There was little to be said, and I was rather tired anyway. I would have offered tea, but there was no milk. There was blood on my shirt, on the cuffs of my coat.

How they had disentangled our affairs to the point where they discovered we had the place at Sorrento—how they had divined that I would be there—I had no idea. I'd not discussed the place and what went on there with anyone, not for many years. Not with Coralie, except to counter with statistics about escalating property values the odd listless suggestion on her part that we should get rid of that wretched White Elephant. Not with Madeleine, who would quickly have spotted that there was so much more than just old piles of junk involved. Not with Rollo, who as a matter of social responsibility and personal hygiene would have prescribed multiple wheelie bins and sustained weeding. Had Rollo turned up, we

would have seen industrial skips in a trice, with some reeking collage of blurred tattoos in a navy singlet and battered elastic-siders shipping away more psychological detritus, opening up more family secrets and suppressed motivations in a few short grunting hours than the psychiatrists with all their MMBSs and FRANZAPs could have managed, at the cost of vast personal embarrassment and many, many thousands of dollars.

The police, at the beach house. I own that the place had become rather dilapidated in recent years. The rubbish through the house had begun to take on a certain odour. The reek of mortality? Can even plastic wrappers go off after a certain time? Does biodegradability involve the smell of rotting? Or was it perhaps just the ideas inside them that had become putrid? Reflections that had long since seen their use-by date. Confessions that were intimate, personal, organic to the point of putrefaction. I saw the nostrils of one of the young constables curl at the sight of the plastic bags lined up along the corridor. Thinking, no doubt, that they were full of old garbage. Rotting. I rather hoped he would take this merciful untruth away with him, and pass it on to others.

They told me no details, but I soon guessed that she must be dead and, further, that there had been a cushion in the matter. Which I admit did surprise me. I made no comment. Such things are best recollected in tranquillity. It was from a passing comment, made not to me but passed as an aside from one of the

young constables to another, as though they were starting to prepare some sort of report.

A cushion, you say? A knowing glance passed between them.

It was on the way back up to the city, the car quiet, air-conditioned, the occasional message coming through on the radio. A traffic obstruction on the Westgate. A hailstorm in the north. A grisly murder in the cushioned depths of St Georges Road, Toorak. The young policemen had been up all night. Their voices were hushed, throaty, their minds now moving on the wreckage that all this must have made of the next day. I was restful and subdued. I had the feeling, which niggled at me all the way back, that I had probably forgotten to lock the Saab. The keys jiggled annoyingly in my pocket. The prospect of the unlocked Saab sitting there on the front lawn while I passed my Natural Life in prison conjured up a dozen scenarios, each of them more unsettling, more disturbing than the last.

It was very early morning. I love to be up at dawn, to see the first light. The time when there are only the very earliest morning travellers on the road. Mostly freshly shaved and showered. Those who rise at this hour have a special intentness about them, an eager readiness for life. I wondered how often the two young men through the grille in front of me might have done this. Husky young fellows. Sportsmen. A little run to fat. It's the beer, I could have told them. Too much high GI carbohydrate. I wondered how many other

miscreants had sat in this same seat, separated from them by this same grille. With blood on their cuffs. I wondered what directions these calm and ostensibly gentle characters might have taken had I resisted. Had I shown signs of reaching for yet another epergne. Shot down with smoking epergne in hand. Assault with a deadly weapon. Resisting arrest.

Moving back into the inner city, towards the remand centre in Spencer Street, I saw that people were starting to emerge for work. We had been silent in our passage through the outer suburbs, but now I listened to their talk as the movement in the city brought them back to the blighted day ahead. I could hear them talking about the business of ferrying kids to school and other domestic rosterings of the kind.

Was it always like this? The whole police apparatus, the whole prison system, the whole business of transportation, mostly just honest labour and daily routine and middling efficiency, with all the floggers and pinchers and rackers, all the ghoulish guards and rapacious commandants of literature also needing to drop their kids off at school and to put a chop on the table and get a decent night's sleep once in a while, with only the dysfunctional likes of Clarke and me feeling the need to ramp the whole thing up to apocalyptic heights?

Far fewer passengers died on the convict transports, I am told on the very best authority, than on the average migrant ship. Marcus Clarke, the historians tell us, is largely to blame for the confusion.

The demons, they claim, are largely from Poe, from Dickens, from Hugo, and, as Clarke would have it, 'anyone anybody else whose works are obtainable to be plagiarised . . .'. The historians have been hard at it, ever since *His Natural Life* hit the presses, to rescue the facts about the well-oiled benevolence of the English transportation system. Despite Clarke's defence, despite his assiduous footnotes stating time, place and method of misery. Some historians even claim that the system was finally dropped not through a thickening of the milk of human kindness, but because it was being used by too many of the crafty to subsidise a not-too-uncomfortable form of migration.

Indeed, I felt a kind of love for these young constables as we drove back through the growing light, talking of wives who would be grumpy on being woken yet again by their early-morning return, of kids' expenses and new trampolines, of the footy scores and upcoming holidays down at the Prom.

Their worlds were rich, ample, fecund. Their lives were full of sunlight and barbecues. They slipped nothing into their own black plastic bags but wrappers and empty bottles and well-gnawed bones.

~

SO THE QUESTION REALLY BECOMES—the question I found myself asking, and now with some sense of urgency, with the memory of the blunt object whistling through the air and the prospect of twelve

citizens good and true standing in judgment on the issue who can hardly be expected, let's be realistic about it, to *approve*—how far we are actually responsible for these various pickles in which we find ourselves. How far can we actually hope to break new ground—to send the whole world running to the left or to the right, in entirely new and unprogrammed ways—with each choice that we make? How far are we simply doomed to relive, adversely, conversely, perversely, the sadder mistakes of others?

It is curious that so physical an act should evoke such abstract musings. Our central problem, Dr Johnson once wrote, lies in the fact that the mind can conceive so much more than the body can deliver; that it moves so much faster than the corporeal vessel can follow. The best, the grandest, most ennobling schemes and projects that we are capable of conceiving turn to ashes, to frustration, envy and resentment, almost before we can raise a finger to set them in motion.

I did think of dear old Dr J while the epergne was still whistling through the air. Indeed, were it not that my mind was so fatally distracted by such metaphysical musings, might I not have had the presence of mind to interrupt and deflect the cruel flight of the epergne? A motion of mind opening up a defensive chasm, at that crucial moment, between action and intention? Between *actus reus* and *mens rea*? Could we perhaps work up something out of Dr Johnson? Perhaps we could in some way implicate Dr Johnson as an accessory before, and even during, the Act?

How far do we actually choose? I speak not here of richer destinies; I'm thinking more of some distant secret seed, sown by some long-forgotten ancestor, passed down to us through the generations by a process of action and reaction. So easily we accommodate the idea that the very worst of ourselves is the fault of the parent, the action strictly programmed by the parent's default. If we go one step further back, surely we'll find that act and default of the parent are mere response to act and default of the grandparent, and so on, right back to the ur-act, the ur-default which set the whole thing a-jangling down through history, until we find ourselves at last, attached to one end of a singing epergne, beating relentlessly, Zeno-come, Zeno-go, towards its waiting target.

There's nothing new in this. The custodians of the Bible had a solid purchase on it. He, She, They called it Original Sin. The original Act may well hail from a time beyond which the Memory of Man Runneth Not to the Contrary, but which, through a long train of forebears, down through the passage of the centuries, happily zigzags its way from generation to generation, and finally lands you deep in the ancestral poo. Leading towards the incident. Did I have some kind of plan. Did I arrive with any intent to strike. It was as though almost everything that had happened between us, since that first meeting in the hotel in Paris so many years before, had been some kind of weird set-up—the witches screeching with malicious glee in the background as I strutted my stuff in execrable

but infernally plausible French for those two gloriously golden-haired Australian emptyheads, so perilously open to whatever the city might throw at them—and that ever since I had been moving through my life as though blindfolded and fumbling about in the darkened and unfamiliar reaches of someone else's house, being steadily directed, though, as to which doors I should take; as though every act, every feeling, every insight was in fact put in place long before I set foot on the scene. As if I would have chosen, if I were truly a free man, old Ernie's prized silver epergne, cumbersome as it was and difficult to swing with its hideous apparatus of leaves and emus and other bush creatures, the weight in all the wrong places. It was only later, when I was on my way to the coast, that I noticed I had actually cut myself, that one of the abysmal 'native themes'—an emu or perhaps a wombat, cunningly worked in silver—had taken the skin off one of my fingers.

The surprise on her face was largely masked by the cascade of her falling hair. How much of this I actually saw, in the sense of registering the sense impression, reflecting upon the sense impression and comparing it with others of the kind—how far I engaged in anything like *cognition* at the time—I cannot now truthfully say. What I do recall is a fleeting expression of astonishment which must have matched, by this phase of the glittering arc, a similar look on mine. The measure of her surprise at what was by now irretrievably in train suggested, 'Well, if you feel that strongly about

it, perhaps we really should go back to square one and go over the matter with a bit more honesty', with my answering expression saying something like, 'Yes, I think this probably means that I'm not coping awfully well just at the moment', and agreeing that yes, we really should talk further. Realising too late, the two of us, though at a point beyond human intervention with the laws of physics, that this whole business between us should above all be read as a Cry for Help.

That last, haunting nanosecond of deep mutuality has been a consolation to me since.

I recall ringing Rollo, still labouring over his files at the office, saying no more than that he must come, and straight away. That there had been a terrible accident. There was the call to her sister's mobile. I left a message. That she must come, as quickly as possible. I rang for the police, for the ambulance. I then fled to the beach house, unable to face any of them.

I pictured her in hospital, a large bandage around her head, and the assault charges to follow should she decide to press charges, though I reassured myself that for a whole range of family reasons it was likely that she would not. I could imagine her pleading that she had slipped and fallen and hit her head on an epergne, which just happened to be lying on the floor at the point where she fell, reserving the right to inflict cruel, unusual and eternally unremitting punishment entirely to herself, and to the Extended Family.

Or would she have no choice in the matter? Would the charges follow as a matter of course? At any rate, I saw that many months, perhaps even years of very close and intense discussion would follow from that incident. That it would indeed be some time before we managed to sort it all out. That our lives would probably never be quite the same again. So much, I did concede.

~

'YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TELL me, are you, Martin?'

'I've told you lots of things.'

'But you're not going to tell me why we're hunting Marcus Clarke.'

Why has she begun to *turn* on me? It is in the middle of a routine visit, edging up to the trial. Time has passed. Petra arrives now in what looks like transition-season clothing. The baggy smock and leggings have given way to a cotton blouse, jeans again, and suede waistcoat.

I told you I pay her well.

I look at her armfuls of notes, of photographs, of photocopies, spread out across the table. Other visitors to the remand centre just bring cigarettes, underwear and Mars bars. She looks so fresh, so young and springing. It must be on its way back to summer out there. I should, I tell myself, ensure that the unseen trustie switches the remand centre season control over to a more appropriate setting.

'Clarke, Clarke, Clarke,' she says. 'There's more. If that's what you really want.'

This time, she actually gives the file a slight contemptuous shove.

I can see that she wants to talk. I think of a previous visit. *You didn't do it, did you, Martin?* I look intently at the photocopies, the folders, the notes, the steady job to hand.

'What about you, Martin? Really. Enough of all this. What about your life?'

My life? We hover. Those searching eyes. That dangerous longing.

'Look around you, Petra. What on earth would I do with a life in this place, if I had one?'

She shakes her head ruefully, and with an 'ah well, let's just get on with it then' air, reaches for a file. A hint of something terminal, something a bit sorry and reflective, is definitely starting to creep in. Petra, the one soft contour in my whole edgy existence. She is still working up to something. I can see it in her eyes. I try again to head it off. Breezily.

'Well, we've certainly come a long way together on this one, haven't we, Petra?'

'We've come absolutely nowhere. If you think about all that we've found out about Marcus Clarke—the *real* Marcus Clarke—all we've got are more and more masks. What was wrong with the guy?'

What was indeed wrong with him? Was it that someone managed to make off with his bags—canvas bags, perhaps, in this instance—and only left us with the things we were meant to see? Did his wife Marian do a Lady Burton after his death? There is talk of a bonfire of his papers. Or was he perhaps hoping, all the while, that someone like me would one day manage to filter his way in, through the masks, the fictions, the ironies, subtleties, subterfuges and allusions, to find out what was really going on?

Petra fixes me with one of her steely looks.

'Do you think he was capable of real affection, Martin? Of really letting himself go? Do you think Marcus Clarke ever really cared about anyone? Or do you think that there was perhaps just an awful lot of talk, talk, talk to keep the world and just about everyone in it at a distance?'

I told you she is clever.

'Do you think he was capable of love, Martin? This Marcus Clarke? Or is the waffle in all those silly letters the best that he could do? Do you think that he was protecting some real version of himself from exposure? Or do you think that he spent his whole life hiding from the fact that there was really nothing there—that the centre was hollow—and that all the froth and bubble, all the play-acting, all the pages and pages of clever stuff was just to make sure that no-one could beat through, to see what wasn't there?'

Petra has such an intent way of looking. Of peering, eyes wide, into one's own. I almost thought, in our first meetings, that it was a form of naïvete. I do wish she would leave hypothesis to others. She stuffs her books into her bag, leaving me the photocopies.

'Do you think there was ever actually anyone at home? Or just empty rooms, more tricks, more allusions, more inventions, more quotations? Was he shouting quite so loudly, and so often, because he knew that his whole life was just another Miserable Decoction, like he said about his books? What do you think about that, Mr Martin Frobisher?'

In the end, it is my gaze that falters. Petra gets up to go. One of the guards approaches, as if to help.

'I know you didn't do it, Martin, whatever the courts say. And I really will be back.'

She gives an odd little wave from the door. And a smile.

'We'll talk more—about Marcus Clarke, of course.'

~

YES. ABOUT MARCUS CLARKE. IT is a sobering thought. Clarke was in many ways a failure, across a broader field than most. As banker, as farmer and grazier, as explorer, as dramatist, as newspaper proprietor, as editor, as estate manager, as husband, as family provider, as librarian, as friend and even, in many instances, as writer. The

material saddened as the years drew on. The wit darkened. The stories refused to come. Old material was pillaged, old literary forays, even old bits of living.

I, on the other hand, have been what is popularly known as a success. As entrepreneur, as editor and publisher, as public benefactor and community leader in a range of up-market and high-profile activities, as raconteur and, indeed, as connoisseur. My income permits me to taste more beer and more champagne than I could possibly desire.

One hundred and thirty years after his passing, though, we in our remote corner of the world are still talking about Clarke, writing about Clarke, editing Clarke, scouring the nether reaches of our archives and public libraries for the faintest further light, whereas my own small flicker of fame is already on its way to being snuffed out. One of our most venerable and heavily funded arts institutions has, I am now told, already done a global search and erasure, ensuring that I not only no longer exist but that, as far as their records are concerned, I never did, regardless of the outcome of the trial. They have taken on a professional historian, or so Petra teases—someone thoroughly skilled at getting rid of history—to ensure that not even one of their own number, not she and Edward the philosopher, with all their assiduous fossickings and trackings and burrowings, could ever hope to drag me back to besmirch the institutional letterhead.

Why Clarke? Should I tell Petra of a disease? Should I speak of a deep infection? The whole truth?

It was on a blurry, rain-swept street in Oxford, and many years ago. It was after too many Green Tartan bitters at the Shoulder of Mutton in Richmond Street. I made the mistake of talking directly, and sincerely. Someone was drunk enough to listen. A total stranger. A kindred spirit, though, who grew more kindred by the pint. We drank into the wee small hours.

I was like him, he confided, as we helped each other stagger home. As we sang our way down Hollybush Row. He was like me. A genius without a genre. A true *artiste manqué*.

We clung unsteadily to a railing, me and my new friend whatsisname, peeing onto someone's basement window. The Green Tartan wisdom caught the glitter of the starlight as it ran its final course.

We are, he said, the perfect Wandering Jews, packed off in exile from ourselves, but with no homeland to be found. We roam the world, our heads ablaze with love and fear and anger and an obscure and painful longing. We're exiles in a place that does not match our dreams, but lack the thing that's needed to give them some kind of outline and to set them on their way.

The artist has the work. The product. At the cost of whatever pain. Something that they can hang on a wall, or see acted out on stage or screen, or even just hoard up on a shelf somewhere, to see them through life's winter moments. It's a reserve, a bank, an archive from which they can borrow back the fragments, to retrieve the bits of living that haven't just flown off to the ether once they let go of their tail.

The rest of us have none of this. We're cursed with the sorry beginnings, the first part—the shifts, the masks and yearnings—but we have no part of the second, no way of pulling the bits together so they can live beyond ourselves. We dream through paintings with no mark or colour, through poems that find no words to speak, through music that rises to vast crescendos, but that sounds in no-one's ear. And all from some infernal longing, some dogged and incessant rage to play fantastic tricks before high heaven—he was quoting badly, that I knew—as to make the angels weep.

We buttoned up. I still recall his face. A saggy, baggy sort of face, sad-eyed and oddly capacious for someone of his age. I see the rain, which looked like tears. We're doomed, he said, to live out our days in useless noise or deep in silence. All in a fug of what-is-not and clouds of glorious might-have-been, the muddle and the mix of it just beating around inside our heads and ringing sadly in our ears, like the whole world's dirty laundry in some eternal juddering front-loader.

Why is it that the springs of genius in the one should be the fount of weakness and mere derangement in another?

Clarke. It's the way the fellow was able to name the fragments, to set them up with coat, hat and stick, and pack them off to seek their fortune. It was the way, as Rose Lewis once advised, he was able to 'work it out in a book'. It was how the leaks and splinters actually *went* somewhere. That's what intrigues me. How he could clothe the

slivers, set them up in Tremendous Taradiddles, and thrust them out into the world.

It was his invention, and invention, and invention. It's what I want, and want, and want.

I sit, in the dangerous inner darkness of the remand centre, and stew about such things. What hope would I have of telling Petra this? What hope to speak of disappointment? Of this worst, this deepest, most cruel incarceration of them all? At a certain point in the telling, I'm sure she would just begin to shuffle her papers. Petra has this way of pulling back her hair and fixing it firmly behind her ear. As if to say—though with increasing kindness—'Yes, Martin, but now, let's just get back to serious work.'

~

I HAVE A FRIEND WHO is a devout Anglican. This fascinates me. Demons—the Evil One—I have no trouble with. The evidence is everywhere. But I did ask him once, 'Do you believe—*really* believe—in angels?'

Angels did seem to pose a problem. He thought for a time.

'Well,' he said at length, 'it's a *nice idea*!'

It was a revelation. It marked one of those thresholds we only very rarely traverse, not just in what we think but in the whole framework through which we put those thoughts together.

I am getting older. I no longer care whether something is 'true' or 'real'. I look for the Nice Idea. I did have a certain dalliance with natural law theory when I was young. Sixties drivel, most of it, prompted largely by the prospect of having my head blown off in Vietnam or, worse, being called upon to remove the heads of others. It's the comforting notion that nature itself provided a sound basis for law in the truths that reason could uncover, and that all actions, public or private, which 'contravened nature' were inherently illegal. Right stoked up, we were, in philosophic terms, for a noble struggle, choosing in the face of the conscription ballot to ignore the clear and distinct message of forty-odd thousand years of unrelieved and unrelenting slaughter, that the killing of others and especially those less fortunate than ourselves was somehow 'against truth' and 'against nature'.

Alas, I was balloted out. 'No sadder fate can befall a man,' Clarke once wrote, 'than to resolve to sell his life in some great cause, only to discover that no one particularly wants it.'

The philosophic ardour abated. I've seen more of nature since that time, and its messages have been, I fear, a good sight more disorderly and menacing. Human beings, I now ruefully conclude, are simply one of nature's more efficient ways of fertilising itself. Should we choose to hasten the process through murder, mayhem and an endlessly ingenious array of Armageddons—I do not exclude the role of flying epergnes—then it seems to me that nature is unlikely to object.

So, when the chaplain does poke his head in the door, I spend my time trying to convince him that the question of whether or not it is all 'true' is much less important than that of simply making it all 'work'. I tell him he must keep in mind the broader picture, the whole context of what he needs, before he slips down to the far lesser question of what it is that he *believes*. I would love to convince him that his concern for justice in my local case—he does suspect something, I know it—is touching, but is really a very small, a very private matter.

Am I really guilty of the crime in question? Not quite. Am I guilty enough? Certainly. Guilty enough to become the major player, the star turn, the leading actor in the great Spectacle of Justice, the triumph of the Nice Idea. I should not have hit her. I merit punishment. The measure of the punishment, the reasons ascribed for the punishment, the official narrative of breach and retribution—these are details for the court to sort through. It is enough that justice be seen to be done. Even if not, in the end, to me.

Was it Durkheim who said that the object of punishment is to act upon the innocent, not the guilty? Think of poor Ollie Cromwell, dug up, hanged and most bunglingly beheaded many years after his death. Not of much use in his particular case, one would have thought, but wonderfully instructive to the living. I do recall laughing, too, at Sir Leicester Dedlock's debilitated cousin's claim that it was 'better to hang wrong f'ler than no f'ler' in the later pages of

Bleak House. Not thinking for one moment that one day I might be called upon to be the *wrong f'ler*, to immolate myself in the higher interests of social order. A scapegoat. A Christ figure. Job, on his dunghill, scratching with his shard. Transmuting, by higher moral alchemy, even the foulest mouthings of the tabloid press into deep moral tracts and sound templates for social order. Crime and Punishment! Crime and Punishment! Ordinary is safer!

My moment with the jury is still to come; the jury, who may well end by asking—if I do not keep my wits about me—how this fellow can have gotten himself into such a pickle. All twelve of them. Already I can feel it pumping, that awful rattling beginning even as I start to think of it, the desperate urge to overtake each one of them, to creep into their skins, to set their thoughts in motion before they know their thoughts themselves. To show myself an affable, accommodating sort of chap. Eager to assist the prosecution in uncovering the real truth in what must be for them, and for Her Honour in particular, a very confusing situation. More than a little embarrassed at the inconvenience that this whole awkward business has caused, and especially to the twelve persons good and true.

Courteous. Self-effacing. Predictable at all points. An Everyman to Everyone. In the end, a bit of a fool. Yet somehow, poignant. As though having simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. As though having come in on the tail-end of someone else's argument. So that they'll come to think: I know this person. This is a

man without mystery. *There, but for the grace of God, go I.* Asking themselves, with the evidence all in, is it really beyond reasonable doubt that I would not, in his circumstances, have done exactly the same thing? That if I condemn this man, I actually condemn myself?

The really big problem, though, is that Petra might just happen to be there. That Petra might see me in this guise, drifting away and parting company from myself, and becoming just about anything it is that those twelve persons might wish to see.

I will have none of this. I will roll with the law. Clive Partington will fumble and expostulate and be seen to earn his fee. With the truncated facts I've given him, the meagre 'refreshment' I have bestowed, he will surely lose the case. The prosecution, pursuing its Nice Idea, will win. I offer myself to Justice, and to Measure still for Measure.

Better, indeed, to hang wrong f'ler. Will it perhaps be the one useful thing I have done?

I might feel a tad sorry for myself, but only if I manage to avoid thinking of poor Clarke in the last phase of his life. If I've a tear to shed for anyone in this whole hollow-hearted saga, then let it be for Clarke. Passed over for the job that he'd always wanted, that of librarian at the State Library. His principal promoter in life, Justice Redmond Barry, Ned Kelly's nemesis, dead and gone and everyone, enemies and erstwhile friends alike, tripping over themselves to brand him at last as the sententious old git that he always was,

and with the pigeons already queuing up for a pass over the statue. Clarke, yet again insolvent and in court once more, conducting his own defence. There are reports from the time of the trial by Henry Bourne Higgins, later Justice Higgins, of the first High Court of Australia. Of 'the poor little litterateur', in the hands of a 'fat, dark, oily moneylender'. Of his attempts to defend himself, coached up by his legal friends. Of his high stammering voice, pleading his case. Of the judgment made absolute. Of his death, shortly after, at the age of thirty-five, and the wife and six children left to fend for themselves. The law, yet again, translating life into dead matter. Death into life. Life into death.

'The modern tragedy,' Clarke wrote earlier, about his own *Felix and Felicitas*, 'is Anticlimax.' He died in misery. He'd had much to do with the money-lenders. There are reports of the money-lenders in question trying to steer Clarke away from his own destruction. It's a moving story, and did not prevent either Clarke or his friends from using the opportunity to get their knives into them, their children and their children's children.

I have not told much of Clarke's anti-Semitism, his low assaults on the 'daughters of Judah' on the field at Flemington, and the tasteless philippic he wrote, under the guise of obituary, on Disraeli. I have not told you of his caustic comments on the Kelly gang, and the need for more 'Napoleonic' measures on the part of the Victorian police, or his cruel and dismissive comments about the Aborigines.

I have not told of the toll of what Rose called 'the fumes of alcohol'. He should have listened to his friends. He should have heeded the ponderous and pot-bellied but no doubt well-meant advice of Justice Redmond Barry. His contemporaries said it. He lacked wisdom. He lacked compassion. Like so many of his betters in the literary industry, then and since, he was good at offering moving accounts of Grand Tragedy, while spreading Little Tragedies, real misery, around him at every turn. He distilled much of the worst as well as the best of his time. He was like you and me. Perhaps a touch more reckless than you. He failed, again and again, and even in his writing. It 'failed to draw'. He said it himself.

That's why I like Clarke. Trumpet him as a 'great writer'—he is widely blurbed as the 'greatest Australian writer of the colonial period'—and you sink him, in my view. You start thinking again of statues and pigeon shit and plaques and corporation dinners, not wonderful, awkward, fumbling books that you can somehow clamber into and dog-ear your way around in, mixing in with the weaker characters and hatching your own two bobs' worth on where the story *ought* to be travelling.

The future is uncertain. If you are looking for something like an ending, while I go on gathering my thoughts—for the next fifteen years, no doubt, with possible remissions for good behaviour—look rather to poor Clarke. Clarke, with his stammer and his withered arm and his champagne tastes and shrinking beer income, the six

kids shrieking about the household and the whole of Nasturtium Villas, the indignant and sorely battered MacMammons and Dudley Smooths and the Honourable Member for Shice and Swindle, the Belinda Battleaxes and Young Meliboeuses, the Model Legislators and Cuttlefish and Corporation diners, all the denizens of Parchment Buildings and Galen Square and all the combined professional roguery of Feplevin, M'starvation, Sawney Bean & Co steadily stacking up against him and all the fading febrility of his jibes and pasquinades and lampoons and satires.

Think of them all, beating up and down Camomile Street to this very day, sinning up to and far beyond Clarke's song, the Wapshots and Messrs Blowhard & Co and all the axe-handle makers of Fawkner's Town still steadily winning, and the Clarkes, the poets, just as steadily losing, waning, dying; the Tallowfats and Shoddys and their descendants still tramping forth in their legions, taking their brainless and indifferent revenge on the man who trawled the Styx and dredged out such unwelcome sights, who drew aside the veil and authored on them all the Kingdom of Nothingness.

It's the words that betray us. Lawyers' words, poets' words. Perhaps the very worst means, in the end, that we have for trying to tell the truth. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? I do swear, but the 'nothing but the truth'? I will say far more than that, Your Honour, far more than I intend. Words—you just don't know who's been using them, what

meanings, over the centuries, have been shovelled in. How many of them are left there, lurking, gnawing at the edges of the Whole Truth? Believe me, it's the Nice Idea that enables us to go on living. The Whole Truth, should I happen to find it and recount it, even to you, Your Honour, may not. Clarke did seem to see it so.

> Ay, and ginger shall be hot in the mouth, too. All around us the sad drama of life is playing. We cannot sit quietly in the boxes and look on; we must go down on the stage with the rest. Do you think that if all the secrets were known you would go out to tea tonight, Mrs Cantwell? You would be terrified at your shadow. The ignorance is all.

The flight of the epergne. If the unsteady magic of writing can extend one fraction of a second into so many hours, weeks and months of careful reflection, surely it can work the other way, contracting fifteen years (with possible remissions) and all the uncertain living that went on before into one distilled but decisive fraction of a second. Into one moment of intense, magnificent revelation.

I end in hope. In passivity and acceptance of my fate. I end with what Clarke, with all the unsullied wisdom of twenty-one, called the 'calm cynicism which becomes a philosopher who has set the Decalogue to dance music, and improvised variations on every offence in the statute book'. Clarke, who as youthful burning boy had sailed out in the *Peripatetic Philosopher* and elsewhere to set the

Decalogue a-dancing, but who soon found it was the Decalogue that chased away the music, the Decalogue that got him in the end. I can tell you, there is no sadder bit of paper floating around the archive of this country's literature than that Supreme Court paper issued by Aaron Waxman and served by Lewis Solomon, Solicitor, requesting the sequestration of poor Clarke's non-existent assets. Days before he died, at thirty-five, surrounded by his six children. In his tiny cottage on Inkerman Street. At what must have been just about the lowest ebb of his life. Bankrupted, and almost certain to be sacked. Long past the best of his creative work. Gesturing for his pen, and letting it move wordlessly across the page. Peering into the darkness. Wondering how the writing had brought him to such a state. But by then able to tell us nothing.

I've lived longer. I tell you—here, it does begin to become a little strange—I do feel some sort of responsibility to live, or at least to tell, the rest of Clarke's life for him. Is this not another reason—perhaps the best of reasons—to stay one step back from pleading innocence? To ensure that I have the peace, the calm and concentration through the years to follow just to keep on with the job. To take up more or less where Clarke left off, and do some of the longer thinking that he never quite got around to. To sift through the mess of pottage, the journalistic twaddle that the poor fellow betrayed himself into, and to try to bring a few more of the choicer morsels to light. To try, perhaps, to 'work it out in a book'.

I still have lots of little jobs for Petra, who need never know that most of the real work has been done. What she does know, I am now convinced, is that I did not wield the cushion. A technicality, perhaps, but an important one. And if she knows that, why should I care about the thoughts of others?

For as long as Petra will work for me, as long as the authorities will permit it, I can keep coming up with little jobs for her, sending her and Edward off in Edward's Mazda around the town, chasing up bits of paper, tracking down fugitive pieces, hounding the staff at the State Library, bringing back bits of paper, photocopies, notes, maps and photographs to me at the remand centre, or wherever I will end up in the years to follow.

Edward is, I suspect, the real loser in all this. Petra is always so pleased to see me. She and I, at least, know what we are talking about. He is losing elevation. That young fellow had best hit someone over the head with an epergne, I do suggest, and quite quickly, should he wish to maintain his place.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Marcus Clarke, *genius manqué*, and, despite the odd swipe by Martin Frobisher, to the work of his many eulogists, critics, obituarists, commentators, anthologers, editors, bibliographers and biographers, especially Cyril Hopkins, Hamilton Mackinnon, Brian Elliott, Joan Poole, Graham Tulloch, Laurie Hergenhan, Manning Clark, Ian F. McLaren, Andrew McCann, Ken Stewart and Michael Wilding. Just about everything I know about 'Felix and Felicitas' and Clarke's correspondence with Rose Lewis I have learned from the late Wendy Abbott-Young's admirable thesis in the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide.

There are some large colonial epergnes on display in the Art Gallery of South Australia. For those who live in Melbourne, there is a fine example of an epergne, complete with native insignia, propped up on the counter in Gerald's Bar in Rathdowne Street. It is firmly attached to the bar, and is not available for wielding by customers.

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