

61. The Mother of Carrots

Bernard came home from work. He found his wife, searched her face, gently kissed her dark face. No light. 'How's Carrots been?'

'His soul is bound up in his soul.'

Luisa's 'Bible talk' used to amuse Bernard, the archaic words and phrases of the Gideons. Over time, her English had 'naturalised', capturing something of local cadence, if not its informality. The Gideons still spoke through Luisa when she was moved by strong feeling. It was instinct, not intent.

Since Jaffas' disappearance, Luisa was never far from those depths. Bible talk was the sound and the proof of her disintegration, of the family's. Would he too fall apart? Luisa's *bibliolalia* – would that be the correct term? – drove him crazy. It drove them apart.

The old nightmares became Luisa's daytime thoughts. Sometimes it was Mengele torturing Jaffas. Now a paedophile had him, now he was dying of neglect somewhere, untended, unloved. She saw Jaffas captive, disoriented, not knowing himself, disintegrating. She saw him pining for Carrots: *his brother and his flesh*.

Fresh horrors came to her from the news: visions of twin sisters at 'The Family Shooting Center' ... 'They practiced for an hour until confident of their accuracy. They took aim, and on the agreed signal, they fired at each other. One perished. The other was less fortunate.'

The name, the '*Family Shooting Center*'!

Real life supplied endless vehicles for her guilt and her fear. She needed no power of imagination; the daily news sufficed: today, a parent drove his children into a dam. The children drowned, the father survived; another day, a second father drove his two children to the top of a high bridge. He stopped the car and threw one child to her death. *He took one of two*. He left the second to survive, to suffer.

Closest of her terror parallels, a pair of identical twin brothers

in Belgium, deaf since birth, was informed that presently they would both lose their sight. Rather than lose this unmediated communication, the twins chose to die.

The bad dreams that came at night now were all biblical, text-heavy, lament-laden. Whole passages of dialogue disturbed her sleep. She'd awaken, sweating, with the words burning her tongue. *But he sent not the brother with his brethren, for he said, 'Lest there happen unto him harm.'*

Luisa wasn't sleeping and Bernard, Bible-bashed, retreated to Carrots' bed. He lay there, pressing his face against the boy's unconscious back, feeling the small body warm, alive, present. His tears dampened Carrots' pyjamas. The child slept on. Bernard released pent-up love for his boys, and grief and rage for his torn wife.

Luisa woke again suddenly and sat upright, quivering with unformed fear. *What will happen?* It came to her then: *No point in fearing anything worse; the worst is actual. No, no, not quite the worst – worse still might follow, something – someone might harm Carrots.*

After such an awakening, Luisa tried to remain awake, but sleep crept up on her and she'd rest for a time, innocent and unfearing. Then, hammering at her mind: *Have ye a father or a brother? O, Jaffas, dear Jaffas, bereft and alone! Surely he is torn apart, and I have not seen him until now.*

Sometimes the Bible words brought Luisa a bitter comfort. They had borne her into English and now they bore her grief. Their power was equal to her pain. Old friends, sad allies from her single days, the stories were her companions now in loss. Luisa lived in them, retreated to them. She had no place here, among the present: *The child is not, and I, whither shall I go?*

She did not deserve the sweetness of sleep. Hers it was to be mindful of Jaffas. *If I forget thee, let my tongue cleave to my mouth.* If she stopped thinking of Jaffas, would he exist? If she forgot him,

would he remember? Luisa, unworthy of living connection, turned inward to the stories and retreated. Bernard and Carrots inhabited far reaches of her mind.

62. Tracking

The sun rose. A long shadow and a shorter one moved steadily along the perimeter of the backyard. The moving shadows left behind them a trail of trample, black against the silvery glisten of the dew.

The shadows followed a thin boy and a thin dog that walked silently, automatically, around and around the yard. They had been walking for an hour. Every time he passed the driveway, the boy stopped and looked up and out to the street. Boy and dog, both still, eyes and ears to the road. The moment passed. The boy's head fell and the two resumed their circuit.

Inside the house, a man prepared coffee for his wife. Soon he would wake her, they'd drink coffee and go out to search.

Bernard looked out at his back garden and watched the steady shadows in their circuits. He waited for the boy to reach the driveway, he saw him pause and lift, saw him slump and resume.

He shook his head. His own body sagged and he turned away. But at every circuit he watched anew. He had to watch. He needed to keep faith with the son keeping faith with his brother.

The sun lit the pale dog and the thin boy. Suddenly ablaze, the two looked down at the grass at their feet and walked on.

63. Luisa, Avenger

Eventually, man and wife talked. Bernard said, 'I'm lonely. I miss Jaffas.' He lowered his voice, absently moving his hand up and down Sahara's spine. 'I miss *Carrots*.'

He looked at last at Luisa. His voice cracked, a rustling in his dry throat. 'And I miss you, Luisa.'

Luisa looked up at Bernard; she saw him. She drew a long breath and leaned forwards. The daughter of a smile, another long breath, a look, as of resolution. 'I explain to you now. The day I meet you, I decide: this man I can trust. I showed you a mark on my leg, but until now I never explain.' Luisa pointed to the mark behind her knee. 'There was a man ... when I had only twelve years. He raped me. He had a knife. He cut my leg when I ran away.'

Bernard's gaze had moved to Luisa's leg. At the word 'rape', his head jerked upward. He stared at Luisa, his mouth open.

Luisa continued: 'Please do not be angry for my silence. And do not feel sorry for me, Bernard. I do not need sorry, and I cannot bear it now. I can forget any hurt anyone does to me. I learned that, after that man, beneath the bridge in San Telmo ... Not straight away; it took five years of therapy. I was seventeen before I decide that that man and his acts do not define me. They do not really relate to me. I was the occasion, the location.'

'I am Luisa, a person. Not connected with that creature. There is nothing for me in remembering. He is nothing to me, he is less than nothing. But so long as I held him in my thought, I was that man's prisoner. He was free, unmolested, he never served time.'

'It took five years for me to know I was serving time. Then I was free. I will always be free of anyone who ever hurts me. I will forget hurt. I learned how to forget.' Luisa smiled. She looked again at her husband. Her features softened, she rested her hand on his.

'That decision to forget, that was before. Before a man stole my child, before I discover my limits.' She lowered her voice, breathing

the words. 'I see Carrots every day, suffering, withering. Carrots is a shroud, not now a child.' Luisa wrenched her eyes from the spectacle before her. 'I think of Jaffas – who can know his pain? I see him dead. I see him dying of loneliness. I have visions – he is a child broken. He searches faces for the one face that is his reflection. When these images start, I see Jaffas in every extreme, every misery. Now I see him dying of starvation, he is bones and skin. His hair is somehow coarse and grey; now I see my child injured, bloodied and torn, his bones broken; now he is maimed, his body crooked from broken bones unset.

'And then I see the kidnapper raping my son; I see the man's face, I recognise him. That face, it comes back to me from the darkness of the shadows under the bridge in San Telmo ... You know when you play music from opera, always I leave the room. I explain now.'

Bernard, confused, waited. Luisa continued, 'I explain: before the rape, I am walking in San Telmo, my legs walk towards the bridge but my eyes look across the road, looking at the opera house, at the beautiful, terrible picture of the next opera. It is Theodorakis' *Medea*. The picture is of Medea. She holds her two small sons, she is about to murder her boys. I see the beauty. I feel the horror. I do not see the man who sees me. I walk under the bridge into the shadow and he ... I cannot go to opera, I cannot hear it.'

Luisa stopped, her head in her hands. Bernard watched her fingers claw at her head, the nails press hard into her scalp.

'I see visions of the suffering of our boys. They flash and fly away. Other visions – all bad – follow, they do not end. My mind spins; madness calls me, it calls me back, it tempts me. No! I will not go mad; Carrots needs me. I learn to anchor myself in hatred! I steady myself by hating the man who took Jaffas. When I picture myself revenging, I can unpicture Jaffas: *If one person steal another, and the stolen person be found in his hand, he shall surely die.*'

Bernard recognised Luisa's slide back into Bible talk, the resort and habit of her deepest feeling. He looked across the room

empty of one son. He saw the remaining son, Carrots, the boy's face unpresent. He saw Luisa's face, a face not empty but working its rage, a face full of feeling, olive skin darkening, cheeks tensing and collapsing.

He remembered for a moment the beauty of Luisa's face in tranquil moments. How those cheeks when smooth seemed to rise gently into rounded hills, her mouth slightly open, hinting a smile, her eyes glowing – he saw this beauty, this beauty lost.

Bernard did not recognise his wife, this woman, this face not rounded but long, the eyes narrowed, the mouth cruel. The woman moving her lips, framing words.

'Surely he shall die. Surely. I kill him myself. I kill him.'

64. The File on Wilbur

The Doc walks through Greta's shack, collecting soiled clothes, towels, tea towels to launder. He checks the pockets of Jaffas' shorts. He finds a scrap of paper, grimy and tightly folded and re-folded. Curious, he unfolds it and reads the childish script:

mi hermano

estoy vivo, robado, en Egipto.

su hermano

José

More Spanish. He wonders what it means.

The Doc checks the curious text in the library. He clicks 'Spanish into English'. 'Prisoner in Egypt' tells him nothing. The piece of paper seems to be significant to the boy. *A mystery.*

The shorts dry quickly on Greta's clothesline. The Doc replaces Jaffas' scrap of paper in the shorts pocket.

Doc has news for Greta, and he feels close enough to her to ask

a question he has suppressed until now. 'You and Wilbur are old friends?'

'Not friend now.'

The Doc raises an eyebrow. 'What happened?'

'Jimmy bring drugs. Used with young fellas, with Ambrose, all time. All time.'

'What sort of drugs?'

'Sniff some, swallow some, drink with grog. Sometime use needle, you know. One time Jimmy real sick. I call ambulance, he go in hospital.'

'Here? In the Flinders?'

Greta nods. She stands and turns away. 'Jimmy come out hospital, more drugs, all sort. Ambrose too. When Jimmy see Ambrose not wake up, he run away. Real quick. He don't want see police. He run. I glad he gone.' She paused. 'This time, when he come back, he bring this little fella. I send Jimmy away.'

'Greta, why do you think Wilbur ... Jimmy ... brought this little red-headed fella here?'

'Don't want talk about Jimmy.'

'Well, I'll mention one last thing, some news you'd want to know. That urine test you wanted me to do ... Jimmy's test. It's negative.'

Greta regards him, digesting doctor words.

'His urine was mixed with water from the toilet. It was diluted; that meant the drugs could be harder to find. So I did some sums and made allowance for toilet water. I tested it four different ways – no drugs. That means he's clean. But just to be sure, I sent the urine to the forensic lab in Adelaide. They test for rare drugs, fancy ones – all negative. No drugs. No ganja, no speed, no coke, no benzos, nothing ...'

Greta stares, shakes her head. 'Funny fella, that Jimmy.'

The old lady grunts, 'Too late. Jimmy clean now. Too late ...'

Wilbur's urine is negative, but maybe drugs hurt his brain permanently – I mean forever.

The Doc consults the hospital records. He finds no file for Wilberforce James Reynolds. He tries the three names in various sequences: no record of a patient admitted with a drug overdose by any of those names.

Google is more fruitful. Records of convictions, of court cases, of a number of aliases, of misappropriation of a Medicare card. The stolen card was of a Gil Israel.

The hospital holds records of Gil Israel's admission in a stupor. A thirty-year-old man was found unconscious. The patient was a known drug user. Toxicology tests done in Adelaide were positive for a remarkable number of illicit drugs and prescription drugs, including LSD and PCP.

The latter is new to the Doc. Wikipedia lists side effects: *paranoia ... belief in messianic status ... ideas of superhuman powers ... eclipse of the superego ...*

The Doc sits for a while in thought. He closes the computer. *So the messiah has come and gone. He's fulfilled his historic mission, his destiny. All the grand biblical imagery, the great themes: he's brought the boy here, a sacrifice, a lost lamb, a lamb found. A child restored to a lamenting woman ...*

He opens the computer again.

Perhaps it's not too to find Greta's boys.