

VIII

Jack sprawled in the green chesterfield in his room at the Empire, staring at the ceiling and mulling over all that he had learned the night before. He had brought a bottle of Johnny Walker upstairs with him and slished three fingers of it into his tooth glass, hoping it would anaesthetise the pain in his tooth which was bothering him again. He'd have to have it seen to, he decided. He sucked greedily on his umpteenth unfiltered Camel of the night, relishing the acrid bite of the smoke in his lungs. He was awash with emotions: loss and anger the main ones, but guilt, too, when he thought of Helen and Wendy. Most of all, he hated Roman Ferenczak and Russell Balyszyn. Between them, they had wrecked Lily's life.

Roman was gone from the town. He had moved to Hobart when he retired from the mine, spending his life cultivating vegetables, acquiring or building ugly blocks of flats to rent out, and grumbling at his wife, his eternal *shliukha* and servant, Lily had told him. Occasionally he would turn up at Queenstown, expecting Lily to wait on him, even to wash his vast-arsed underwear. He drove his own car up from Hobart at glacial speed, taking eleven hours for the journey and holding up scores of honking cars and trucks on Mt Arrowsmith and down the 99 bends into Queenstown. He was always shaking when he arrived, and it was all her fault, he grumbled, for living so far away. Lily had done nothing to deserve any of this.

'I could have made her happy,' Jack thought, musing in the chesterfield, with another stab of guilt when he remembered his wife back in Darcy Street. Darcy Street. Home. It wasn't

exactly a bed of roses back there either. He poured himself another drink and walked over to the window. Drops of rain beaded the glass and he could hear them rattling like little balls of lead shot on the tin roof of the veranda below. Less than half a mile away, he knew, Lily was in her lonely house, listening to the rain and dreading the time when her husband would shove aside the rickety gate and stamp into the house, demanding his dinner, and sitting down to eat it like a pig. Damn it, Jack thought, grabbing his coat and making for the door.

Lily shook her head when she opened the door to find Jack on the veranda again. 'Jack, you're a glutton for punishment,' she whispered, fingering the silver crucifix that winked in the dim light at her throat. 'Look, you can come in for a bit, but then you'll really have to go.' Russell was out, probably at the pub as usual, and would be back in an hour or so. Lily put on the kettle. 'Milk and three sugars, right?' she asked, spooning coffee into cups. Jack nodded. She looked so frail and so alone. He started to speak, 'Lily, I ...' but she cut him off peremptorily and turned to him with fright in her light blue eyes.

'Jesus,' she said, listening intently, her head cocked to one side, chewing on her lower lip. 'It's him. He must've run out of money down the pub and nobody would lend him any. Quick, out the back way!' She bundled him unceremoniously outside, pausing to reach up on tiptoes to kiss him quickly on the cheek. 'Bye,' she whispered. 'Take care.' Silently, she completed the prayer – my darling. She'd admitted it now, though only to herself and she felt sad and elated at the same time, then scared when she thought of what Russ would do if he found out Jack had been there.

The cold rain stung Jack's cheek where she'd kissed it and the mud of the tailings dump filled his shoes with icy slime as he edged round behind the house. There had been a garden there once but Balyszyn had long ago let it decay and now only the odd spindly cabbage, monstrously white and deformed in the sudden flare of a streetlight, reminded one it had existed.

Lily had tried with the garden but Russ was so scornful of her efforts that she just gave up trying. Over the valley, the siren moaned over at the mine and the necklaces of streetlights dulled under an increased downpour.

The front door slammed and Russell's voice filled the kitchen; a slurred bass in counterpoint to Lily's remonstrating soprano. 'I don't like fish, fuck yer,' he was saying. 'How many times do I have to tell yer, yer stupid bitch?'

Jack was soaked through and feeling his way gingerly in the dark, anxious not to slip on the muddy slope, trying to find a way to the street. Crockery smashed on the wall inside and Lily screamed. Jack heard the sickening thud of a fist on flesh and bone. He did not hesitate. He hurtled through the darkness towards the yellow light, his brain filled with a terrible red rage, and exploded through the back door. Lily was crouching on the linoleum, her thin arms raised to fend off the man who was hurling curses into her face. Russell lumbered round unsteadily to see what the noise was, his face stupid with drink, his breath rasping in his throat. It dawned on him that an interloper had crashed in through his own back door and his flushed face contorted with righteous indignation. 'Hey, get outta my house!' he roared, bull-mad and clenching his paw into a fist. 'I'll fuckin' well kill yer. You bin fuckin' me missus behind me back, yer copper cunt.'

He moved at Jack with a bottle but Jack was ready for him and sober besides, and managed to dodge aside as Big Russ lunged. Before he could turn, Jack had his arm up his back. Russ was screaming that his arm would break but Jack just twisted it harder. 'Russell Balyszyn,' he said, his voice suddenly professional. 'I am arresting you for assault ...' Balyszyn did not hear this or any more of the set formula. He was too busy screaming about what he would do when he got hold of his slut of a wife who'd set the whole thing up.

It took Jack a lot of sweat and energy, but eventually he shoved the big man into a cell down at the police station and

locked the door. The constable on duty, the young redhead James Hooley, was toothily delighted as he handed Jack a mug of his good coffee. 'We've been wantin' to get him for ages,' he said. In another cell, another nasty drunk was raging against Man and God. Balyszyn was demanding to see a doctor about his arm. A happy drunk was singing TV advertising jingles about 'Australia's biggest hardware men' until Hooley yelled at him to shut the fuck up for Christ's sake and the man subsided into huffy silence.

Jack rang the hospital. Lily had been sedated, but the doctor on duty thought that she would be okay. Jack felt guilty. There was no way that Balyszyn should have known he had been in his house, but perhaps he had divined his presence by some other means? Was it a look on Lily's face? Or the fact of two coffee cups on the table instead of one? Or would the man have flown into a paranoid rage regardless? Lily assured him that the latter was the case when he called in the next day. He urged her to make a statement. She declined. Yes, it would look funny that he had been there, he agreed, but Russell needed to be stopped. She would not budge. As a good Catholic, she believed that marriage was for life and she couldn't testify against her own husband.

The police bailed the big bastard on his own recognisance and Jack watched him go out into the street, muttering about losing a day's pay all because of a woman who was rooting half the mine. Jack stood and watched him walk up the street, his massive shoulders rolling, a hand rubbing his other arm where Jack had almost ripped it out of its socket. On a sudden impulse, Jack ran up behind him and shoved him in the back, spinning him round and banging him against a corrugated iron fence. Russ was the bigger man, but he was sick with a hang-over and Jack had the force of authority behind him. If he ever hurt Lily again, Jack warned, he would come round and tear his balls off and stuff them down his throat. Seeing the steel in Jack's sky-blue eyes, the big man swallowed and said nothing,

though he towered over the policeman like a grizzly bear.

Back in his office, Jack took a telephone call. It was newly promoted Detective Sergeant Liz Flakemore back in Hobart, scarcely able to contain the glee in her throaty voice. Jack had got to know her reasonably well in the course of a number of investigations, including the Adams murders. What she had to say concerned the fall from grace back in Hobart of Sergeant Gordon Paisley. Paisley had taken over the synagogue vandalism case when Jack left and the daubing and defilement had started afresh, and he had made an utter balls-up of it. The attacks had got violent, with someone shooting through the windows of the synagogue and death threats in the mail to Gregor Rosenberg. Paisley had arrested Simon Calvert, only to have to let him go when Inspector Langdale got wind of what had happened and intervened. Now Calvert was threatening all kinds of action against the police. Boss Aloysius O'Flaherty was so enraged that he had carpeted Paisley and threatened to demote him. It was all *Schadenfreude* on her part, Liz giggled, but it couldn't have happened to a nicer bastard.

Aloysius Michael Patrick O'Flaherty was a ruddy faced, no-nonsense sixty-four-year-old Irishman who had risen to his post by dint of sheer hard work and a sharp brain that belied the racist stereotype of the 'Thick Mick' that had greeted him on his first day on the job. As a boy, he'd fled the rain and priests of De Valera's Ireland, hoping for adventure. He'd signed on with the British Army – an act for which his diehard Republican father would never forgive him – and ended up fighting the Japanese in the Far East in 1945, after which he made his way to Australia, drifting through Devonport and an unhappy stint on a dairy farm on his way to Hobart.

When Paisley entered his office, Boss O'Flaherty fixed him with a baleful green eye and bade him rather peremptorily to sit, as one would a particularly wicked schoolboy or even a criminal suspect. Paisley took a hard seat under a framed print of Dublin's Halfpenny Bridge curving over the Liffey, his nose

twitching with fear, staring uneasily at the Irish tricolour flag in a glass case near the window next to photographs of hurling teams and horses. He smelled Popery, holy water, incense and perhaps Fenianism in here, but his righteous Shankill Road bigotry was swamped by the tide of fear he felt at what O'Flaherty was likely to say. O'Flaherty, it was said, had once caused a notorious Lygon Street gangster to cack in his pants and confess simply by looking at him and saying nothing. Now, O'Flaherty took his time, laboriously signing some documents with a venerable Parker fountain pen before he deigned to deal with the miscreant quaking before him. Paisley, he knew, was an Orangeman's son with a dread name from the Black North, but he didn't hold that against him, having long ago jettisoned any sectarian passion. What did concern him was Paisley's monumental stupidity. In a nutshell, he thought Paisley a real drongo.

'*Sergeant* Paisley,' he said, his brogue still strong despite all the years he had been away from the Ould Sod, emphasising the title. 'Would you care to explain to me how it was that you came to arrest a man despite all the evidence indicating that he was innocent?'

'Er, it's *Acting Inspector*, sir,' said Paisley, his moon face beginning to sweat.

'Not for long, it isn't,' said O'Flaherty, his voice deceptively mild.

'Sir! Well, I er, knew that Calvert was responsible for anti-Israel propaganda, so naturally I put two and two together ...'

'And came up with what, six? Ten?' O'Flaherty was drumming his fingers on his desk, an ominous sign, and the sweating Paisley knew it.

'It was an honest mistake, sir,' Paisley whined.

'Don't you act the maggot with me, *Sergeant*,' said O'Flaherty, increasingly irritated. 'Did you not know that Chief Inspector Martin had already definitively ruled your man out as a suspect?'

‘With all due respect, sir,’ Paisley stammered, distaste for his old adversary jostling with his fear of O’Flaherty. ‘Inspector Martin has made mistakes before ...’

‘What a pack of scangers! Don’t you compare yourself with Chief Inspector Martin, you cute hoor!’ shouted O’Flaherty, completely losing patience. ‘Listen, *Sergeant* Paisley, there are three classes of eejit, did you know.’ His voice dropped to a menacing hiss. ‘Firstly, you have your eejit: the common or garden variety. Next, you have your feckin’ eejit, but then, t’irdly’ – here his voice rose in volume – ‘you have your *complete feckin’ eejit*. But you, Paisley, are in your own class: you are a COMPLETE FECKIN’ EEJIT ALTOGETHER! Now get the hell out of my office. It’s only six months I have until retirement and I don’t want you bugging up the rest of my career. Is that clear? Just one more incident and I’ll demote you to junior constable or have your arse right out of the Force entirely.’

Paisley crept out the door smarting like a schoolboy who has just received six of the best in the headmaster’s study. As he was leaving, he passed Liz Flakemore who had been eavesdropping. She had a restrained smirk on her face and Paisley’s eyes raked hers viciously. As he skulked off down the corridor, Paisley could hear O’Flaherty ordering Chief Inspector Martin’s immediate recall from Queenstown and muttering about demoting incompetent detectives. Again, he didn’t qualify Jack’s title with the word ‘Acting’, either. Paisley raged silently: fuck O’Flaherty and the Pope; fuck Jack Martin, the Eye-tie bastard; fuck Liz Flakemore, the jumped up Goodwood lezzo tart. Fuck the Big Noses who had started all this strife with their endless whinging about nothing. Fuck ’em all, he’d get even, he snarled, wolfing down the smoke of his cigarette.

Thus it was that Jack got orders to pack up everything and return, post haste, to Hobart. Jack stuffed everything in his suitcase and put all his paperwork in order at Little Orr Street. He rang Helen to let her know and was gratified that

she seemed pleased that he was returning rather earlier than expected. The following morning, he called in to say goodbye to Lily before driving back to Hobart. She looked so small and forlorn, lying there on the white pillows of her hospital bed, although she assured him that they would be discharging her later in the day. There was a sullen bruise extending right down one cheek from her eye almost to her jaw, and one eye was closed up. He bent down and kissed her on the cheek, too afraid to kiss her on the lips, though she bade him mentally to do so and had a terrible longing in her eyes. ‘You’ve got to leave him, Lily,’ Jack implored, at the same time sick with the knowledge that he could offer her nothing but advice and platitudes. Once he could have offered her everything.

Jack loaded his gear into the car and headed out of town but then, acting on a sudden urge, he turned the car off the main road and drove through the back streets into Smelter Street, where he had lived as a child. He had toyed with the idea of visiting the old place but had been too busy, and he wasn’t sure in his own mind that he really wanted to go back there. The memories were too depressing and he knew that the places that had once loomed so large in his life would be diminished by the years.

When he got there, it was worse than he’d feared. The house – Grandfather Johnstone’s house – was still there, but it was a dismal ruin. The bull-nosed veranda roof was rusted completely through and the veranda floorboards were dangerously rotten. The weatherboards of the house itself, long unpainted, were all warped and cracked, and there was not a single intact pane of glass in the whole place, though faded rags of curtains fluttered like flags of surrender to remind one that this had once been someone’s home and they’d simply given up on life. The house was like a broken-backed dog, seeking to hide in the tall weeds. Another few years and it would collapse in on itself and the block would revert to bush.

Pop Johnstone had been a keen gardener, painstakingly

mulching and manuring the thin quartzite soil so that he could coax fruit trees and regular vegetable crops from it. There had even been flowers, sprouting in red, blue and yellow confusion, their scent making Jack swoon when he was a child. Once, sitting out with his mother, he had stooped to pluck a bloom and had disturbed a snake slithering beneath. He had been inconsolable for days. Now, everything had gone to seed in one tangled mass of tree trunks and creepers, damp, dark and rotting in the rain. Here and there, poking out of the weeds, were bottles that had once contained sherry, muscat, or Stone's Green Ginger Wine. A vision of his mother came into his mind: she'd got in brandy on pension days. Jack shuddered and turned on his heel. There was nothing for him here and soon there would be nothing to say that Grandfather Johnstone and Dawn had ever lived here, or even walked the earth.