

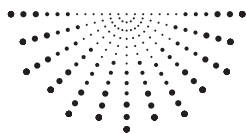
HER STOLEN PASSENGER





# HER STOLEN PASSENGER

WHO IS HARRISON'S MOTHER?



DANIEL NORRISH



Her Stolen Passenger

Copyright Daniel Norrish

[www.danielnorrish.com](http://www.danielnorrish.com)

Independently Published

Action, Crime, Thriller, Suspense, Kidnap, Australia.

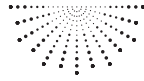
No character, organisation or collection of people in this book is based upon fact. No event or occurrence in this book is based upon fact. This novel is entirely fiction. Do not believe the words within this publication, but please enjoy the read.

*This one is for John Norrish. No kid has ever had a better friend, hero, and father. Thanks for everything, mate.*



1

# HER STOLEN PASSENGER

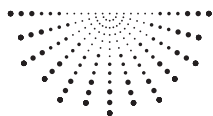


**Daniel Norrish**



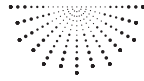


# PART I





## HARP



May Harp can smell the smoke as she watches the fire swallow her home in a writhing, squirming mass of brilliant heat. In the darkness of the sweaty rainforest at midnight, she sits behind the steering wheel of the Ford Thunderbird at the far end of a gravel track, just before the turn. She blinks, and when she puts a hand to her face to wipe the thin strands of black hair from her eyes, she feels that the muscles of her jaw are as hard as fists.

Harp sighs and shakes her head, swears to herself, and winds the crank on the door to drop the window. The night air is warm on her face, and Harp flicks on the air-conditioning with a quick snatch at the dashboard.

She watches the destruction ahead of her (the turmoil and chaos of screaming neighbours and terrified volunteers) with a tight, almost flat frown.

There are no streetlamps or nearby houses so deep in the rainforest, so the world outside that enormous point of flame is entirely black. The faces of the nearest palm trees, all entombed by vines, hang down to stare at the carnage, but the trunks of these giants are lost into the natural gloom outside of this human interference.

Even from this far distance, Harp can tell the firefighters apart from the civilians. The reflective strips of high visibility material on their uniforms move from the blaze out into the darkness and back again like swooping magpies.

Something in the house explodes, and a plume of red flame with black smoke slips out over the mud and sparse, tall spears of lawn. A frantic chorus of screams is projected out into the rainforest.

Harp swears again, this time in Mandarin, and this time much more fervently. Her frown deepens until one of her crooked front teeth points out of her head in a tiny triangle. She presses the little "A/C" button on the dashboard of the car to turn off the cool air, and she cranks up the heat as high as it will go. She places a palm over each ventilation duct in front of her and wraps her thin fingers over the plastic like talons. Beads of sweat begin to form on her forehead, and they reflect the red, orange and yellow of the burning. Thin trickles of the salty body fluid run down her thin frame, under her shirt, from armpits adorned with coarse, dense black hair.

The animal of that murderous fire seems to be growing tired as the peaks of the tallest tongues dip and sway and finally die. The bungalow in front of Harp, now a pile of destroyed building materials, is smouldering and the spears of water from the firefighters' hoses seem to be calming the final glowing patches. Steel stems topped with floodlights are erected to light the scene as the onlookers trudge off into the night with torches and small lanterns.

People are resting and removing layers of protective clothing. There's so much moisture in the air now that the beads of sweat from Harp's face have swollen and run in rivers to the collar of her top.

A tall man in a Queensland Fire Service uniform approaches her vehicle. He's scratching at his short blonde hair and slipping in rapid, unsteady bursts on the gravel path. He reaches the vehicle, and he's holding a firefighter's helmet under his arm like a roman soldier.

"Miss Harp?" he begins, but she does not move, and she does not reply. Her palms are still pressed to the ducts pumping hot air into her car, and she continues staring at the place her house once stood.

"They told me to talk to you before the police get here. Well,

before the important cops, I guess. There are a few coppers dealing with the onlookers—”

“They want you to talk to me before the detectives get here. So talk,” Harp says in quick, defined syllables.

The man shuffles his feet, and he opens his mouth to speak once more, but Harp looks up at him with furious black eyes sitting in thin sockets and nothing, but air comes out of his mouth.

“Talk,” she repeats.

“The building is totally destroyed, I’m sorry, there’s nothing left. But, there’s a safe in the floor of the bedroom that we think might have survived.”

“It’s blast-proof, it’ll be fine.”

“OK, well, um.”

“What?”

“I was asked to find out if it’s, you know, good to open?”

“Good to open?”

“Yeah, if it’s dangerous for us to open.”

Harp lets out a short chuckle and says, “Why would I rig a trap to a safe in my own room? How am I supposed to sleep on top of that?”

“OK, so it won’t, you know, explode or anything?”

“It’s full of money, and there are a few guns. I’m sure whoever opens it will be pleased.”

“OK. There’s something else.”

“I know people are dead in there. Tell me how many bodies?”

“One.”

“What? Only one?”

“Only?”

“Yes!” Harp barks and her lips tremble as she draws in two shuddering gulps of stinking oxygen, “Is there only one body in the house?”

“Yes, I’m so sorry, but it’s a child. An infant in a crib.”

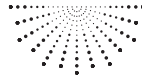
“Just the one child? You’re certain?”

“Yes, well, we haven’t uncovered anything else, there still might be—”

Harp turns the key in the ignition and spins the car around in a

DANIEL NORRISH

spiral of screeching tyres and flung gravel. She flicks the headlights on, engages the high-beams and accelerates into the night.



Taylor Wu pulls her car over to the side of the slim, muddy road as she hears the sirens of the fire trucks approaching. The vehicle is dark green, and on such a black night, it's as camouflaged as a toad. Tears stream down her face while the baby in the backseat screams and screams and screams. The noise of the wailing in the car makes Wu all the more nervous, and she pulls short, rampant breaths into her lungs without any control over her diaphragm.

"Shhhhhhhh, please, please Harrison. Please be quiet. Shhhhhhhh," she begs the infant as he lies on his back in the bassinet. He cannot lift his head, and his tongue pokes out of his mouth in a wet triangle.

Wu can't see past the bend in the road ahead, but she can hear the sirens of the firefighting trucks approaching and, in an instant, the rainforest is soaked in red flashing lights.

Wu shrieks as the huge vehicles suddenly turn the corner ahead, and the lights from the massive machines blind her momentarily.

Now they've moved on, and the cacophony of alarms slips away towards the distant glow to the north.

Wu takes a moment to force a single, deep breath into her lungs. She wipes the veil of tears from her eyes and shoots Harrison a fake

smile before moving the car back onto the road. Harrison is still screaming. His eyes are black marbles sunk into his soft, chubby head. The combination of Down Syndrome and the cute, thin eyes of a half Thai- half Australian infant gives him an endlessly precious appearance. Unique.

Harrison is, at once, a miracle of resilience and a monument to congenital disorders. Harrison is potential. In the extra lines around Harrison's eyes, and in the wider gaps between his toes, some see the potential for Harrison's disability to be a burden. Dependence. Others find the potential for joy. Endless, boundless, existence affirming joy. After the hundreds of appraisals and critiques and judgements that followed Harrison's diagnosis, he still grows and cries and smiles like any child.

As Wu nears the river, she sees the sign stating, 'Daintree Rainforest Ferry,' and she parks the car at the back of the line of vehicles. There's a round woman pacing up and down the column of vehicles collecting the ticket fee and balls of fat gather on her cheeks as she smiles at Wu.

"Good evening, two dollars, please. Are you all right love?" the fee collector asks when Wu winds down her window, and Harrison's cries fill the night.

"Yeah," Wu begins as she wipes her face once more, "we're fine. He just hates travelling at night."

"Awwwww, bless him. Is he yours?"

"Yes, he's mine. Yes."

A giggle leaves Wu's lips as she looks back at the tiny boy.

"How precious. How old is he? Let me guess, nine months?"

"Close, he's fourteen months."

"Hmm, they can be a handful, can't they?"

"They sure can," Wu snuffles, "but we're not going far tonight."

"That's good, enjoy your evening little guy," the attendant finishes, collects the fare, and waves to the backseat.

. . .



THE SOLID PLATFORM OF THE FERRY FILLS WITH CARS AND THE CABLES that hold it on its track dip slightly as the bulk of the machine moves out over the crocodile-infested river. The vehicle creeps across the black water and sneaks quietly through the dark night.

Other passengers are peeking out of their car windows and glimpsing down at the liquid, or up at the black, cloudy sky, but Wu stares back at Harrison and smiles. As the ferry reaches its destination at the other bank, the first cars move slowly onto dry ground and accelerate off into the night.

Wu follows a moment later, steering her vehicle onto the sealed road and quickly bringing the car up to the speed limit. She looks back behind her and into the rear-view mirrors at the people following her away from The Daintree Rainforest National Park. The brilliant balls of light from another vehicle's headlights are ruining her vision, and she squints to see if she can recognise the vehicle. This car is right behind Wu, and she slows a little to warn the other machine to back off, but the daunting car moves to sit just a few centimetres behind her boot.

"No," she groans as she realises it's a red Thunderbird.

"No, no oh God no, it can't be her," Wu prays as she presses her foot down on the accelerator and speeds ahead of the pursuer. A decent gap stretches out between two cars, but then the Thunderbird jerks forwards and approaches once again.

Wu can't push her vehicle any harder, and the steering wheel is trembling in her white-knuckled fists. The Thunderbird approaches, bearing down on Wu and taunting her with its superior speed.

"No, oh, what have I done?"

The Thunderbird swerves on the road, missing the rear of Wu's car by no more than a couple of centimetres and Wu is certain that the machine will knock hers and send her vehicle into a chaotic, spiralling roll.

Wu slams her foot down on the brake and throws the car onto the emergency lane beside the road. Wu's vehicle's rear end skids to a halt and Wu looks up to the passing Thunderbird to see a pack of young men laughing and waving obscene hand gestures down to her.

"I'm sorry, honey," she says as she looks back to the wailing infant.  
"It's going to be all right, I promise."

CAIRNS IS LIT WITH YELLOW STREETLIGHT AS WU, AND THE CHILD arrives in the early hours of the morning and Wu parks the vehicle in the car park of a seaside hotel. She steps out into the warm air and leans on the vehicle for a moment to stretch. Harrison is asleep, so she silently gets into the back with him. He garbles, and he's snoring in tiny, quick puffs. Wu places a hand on his warm belly, and the infant settles into a silent and tranquil slumber.

"It's going to be all right," she says as she closes her eyes to rest for a moment.

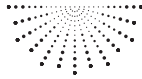
When she opens them, the sun has risen above the horizon and the final remnants of morning dew are returning to the sky. A young couple is glimpsing at Wu periodically as they walk hand in hand towards the nearby hotel. Wu steps out of the vehicle, and an old man walking a dog through the car park deliberately looks away.

"Good morning sunshine, are you hungry?" she asks Harrison as she unclips him and raised the infant to rest on her bosom. He clutches at her collar and makes unimpressed sounds until Wu sits back in the car, undoes two shirt buttons and offers to feed the young boy. The muscles in his neck are still too weak to hold his face to Wu, so she supports the back of his head with a gentle palm. His mouth does not have the strength needed to immediately latch and suck, so Wu waits patiently. She encourages the little battler to fight for his nutrients until Harrison's instincts force his tired lips to work. He drinks slowly, but he drinks a lot.

As soon as Harrison seems content, Wu carries him to the main road, and she draws two thousand dollars out of an ATM.

"Everything is going to be all right."

## HARP



Harp leaves the Daintree River Ferry behind in that dark, evening forest and her red Thunderbird charges onto the main road. There are no cities in the distance or passing towns, so the horizon is entirely black, and grey with the passing bulbs of clouds. She slips past every other vehicle around her, and soon she's barrelling down the highway. She slides the machine into a service station advertising unleaded petrol for 61.7 cents per litre and stumbles down out of the car. She stands here, bent and hunched and groaning with pain, and she pulls out her long, fibreglass hiking stick from beside the seat.

Holding the extendable stick in-between her legs, Harp forces her back to straighten. She produces a small bottle of pills from her pocket and swallows a couple before filling the car with gas in the lonely lot.

Her legs move her between the fuel pumps and into the service station easily, but her spine threatens to topple over, and Harp clutches to the elongated hiking stick to support her back.

"Are you all right ma'am?" the young attendant asks as she arrives at the counter and pays the bill.

"Yes, yes, thank you for asking. But, I do have a small problem. I was supposed to meet my son earlier today, and I got lost."

"Oh, that's too bad."

"Could I please use your phone?"

"Of course."

The attendant scratches his nose, and Harp notices the valley of a harelip surgery scar below his nostril before he passes her a small beige handset, stretching the winding cord from a dock beside the register. He retreats back into an office.

Harp reaches over, taps at the numbers with agitated jabs and she puts the speaker to her ear.

"Who's this?" a male voice answers.

"Have you heard about the fire?"

"Oh damn, Harp? That you? Yeah, I heard."

"What are you doing?"

"Hey, come one, don't be like that. Just 'cause I don't work for you no more doesn't mean I'm gonna ignore ya. We've been trying to find you."

"Good."

"We're on the way up now. We're almost at the ferry."

"Come back to the last servo on the highway. I'm here. I'm on the move."

"What? Why? Your goddamn house is on fire."

"The house is gone. I don't care about that. Find Wu."

"Why? Wasn't she in the house? I thought she'd be with you."

"No. She's disappeared, and there was only one kid inside the fire."

"Only one?"

"Yeah."

"Which one?"

"Is that a serious question? How the hell would I know that? It'll be weeks before the charred-bloody-crispy body is identified."

"Damn. I'm sorry—"

"Shut your mouth."

"Yeah, you're right. We need to find Wu."

"Yes, we do."

"OK. I'll put the word out, and I'll meet you at the servo in fifteen minutes."

"Good. Be quick. I don't want to stay in one place. The cops just found a kid's body in my house. They're looking for me."

Harp hangs up and calls out, "Thanks again," in a sweet, chirping tone as she walks out of the building.

She moves with her stick and that quick, unsteady stroll out to her vehicle and drives it across the street to sit at a highway rest stop. A spattering of small, white moths congregate around the lights of the car and Harp listens to the snap and crack of the cooling bonnet in the hushed space beside the road. When Harp sees the vehicle of the men she's waiting for arrive at the petrol station, she flicks her lights at them, and they drive over to park beside her in the vacant bitumen plot. All windows are rolled down and the four men in the second car announce how sorry they are.

"Shut your mouths, all of you. What have you done so far?"

"Big Ben spoke to—" one of the passengers begins to answer, but the driver cuts him off.

"I've spoken to the boys in Brissy. If she goes south, they'll be waitin'."

"That's too far. We need to get to her before then. We need to find her now. I don't want this to draw out."

"Where do you reckon she'll go?" Ben asks through a beard so dense that his lips look like nothing more than fingertips.

"Definitely south, there's too much road to the north and not enough people for a little Asian slut to blend in."

"Sydney?"

"If she's an idiot. There are so many cameras and toll booths on the highway that we'll find her straight away."

"Do we need to watch the airports?"

"No, she doesn't have a passport; she's here illegally."

"Good. Canberra?"

"Forget that, let's find her tonight."

"All right, well," Ben begins as he sticks a thick finger into one nostril and scratches around a bit. He flicks a long string of snot out

the window, and it spirals through the air like the tail rotor of a helicopter. He says, "We're watching her credit card, and we'll know if she gets a parking ticket in that green piece of junk she drives, so we'll find her soon enough."

"Good. When you find her, I want you to tell me where she is and back off."

"What? Why?"

Harp widens her eyes so that the men can see the rims of the huge black bowls within them and says, "Because I'm going to get her myself."

A passenger in the second car mutters, "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"What? Who said that?" Harp asks the back seat of the vehicle.

"What he means is," Ben says, "this is really Angela's problem, with the kid and all, so don't you reckon we should probably put everyone on it? We don't want to screw it up."

Harp leans back in her seat and grins to herself. She takes a moment to mutter something in Mandarin before looking back and saying, "Boy's, little boys, I'm going to do it because I know you'll screw it up."

The men all look to one another and Ben says, "We can do—"

"I don't care what you think you're capable of; this needs to be done properly. We're talking about my grandson here. There will be no excuses and no errors."

"If you say so."

"What did Angela say when you told her about the fire and the body?"

Ben doesn't answer; instead, he looks forward through the dirty windscreen and shakes his head.

"What does that mean?" Harp asks.

"No one knows where she is. She was at a club in Surfer's Paradise last week, and she was really, really messed up and—"

"That's just bloody perfect. Perfect. Christ, she's so hopeless," Harp continues to mutter under her breath, and the men all stare down at their laps.

"Listen to me, Ben," now Harp points a bony finger at him, "find that useless boyfriend of hers and, are you listening?"

"Yeah."

"Cut off one of his feet if he's lost her too. Do you understand?"

"Jesus, yeah, all right. I get it."

"I'm not playing now. We're going to sort this out now. Agreed? Tonight."

"Yes, boss, whatever you say."

"Good. Now, you're all going to go back into that petrol station I was in and make sure they don't have surveillance footage of me, destroy every cassette. You're going to make sure that the little prick behind the counter forgets seeing me. You're going to stay together in a group tonight and call everyone we know. In the morning, you'll wait by the phone in the Mossman house. I'm going to call you tomorrow, and you're going to tell me where I'm going to find the whore. Agreed?"

"Yes, boss, whatever you want."

"All right, get out of your car."

"What?"

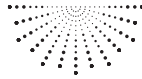
"The police will be looking for this vehicle, so we're going to swap."

"Fine, no problem."

The men exit their car and stand waiting as Harp steps out of the Thunderbird and takes a moment to straighten her spine in a series of jolting cracks. When she's sitting in the new vehicle, Harp says, "All right. I'm going to drive south for a while, so I'll already be on top of her when she appears."

"Wait a sec," Ben begins, "what happened out there? I mean, in the house?"

"Just do your damn job."



The sun is hot on Wu's face as she sits outside a little café with a black crocodile on the sign. There are people strolling up and down the footpath in their bathers, and children are standing beside the road with no shoes. The park on the other side of the street is freckled with teenagers lying on colourful towels, and small dogs on long leashes sniff at the round bases of palm trees. The sea breeze blows the menu off Wu's table, so she moves inside. Here, under the morning air conditioning and beside the fridge full of soft drinks, she hugs Harrison to her chest. His perfectly white skin is a sharp contrast to her pale buttery tone, but he smiles up into the mother's face as if he knows they will share the same fate.

Wu is bouncing Harrison on her tubby little belly when she notices a note on the paper menu that reads, 'Please order at the counter. Thank you.'

She steps up to the register, and a short, brown-haired woman with a chin dimple asks, "Good morning, coffee or breakfast today?"

"Apple juice please, thanks, and two scrambled eggs on raisin toast."

"On raisin toast?"

"Yes please," Wu beams with her most exaggerated grin, and the



waitress nods back at her before Wu hands over her credit card, then returns to her table.

"What do you want to do today, my sunshine?" Wu asks the infant. Harrison giggles as he grips Wu's fingers and she bobbles him on her thick, soft thighs.

The food comes, and Wu eats quickly, sipping at the juice as she looks out towards the busy street and the park and all the kids skateboarding.

"Excuse me, where are the bathrooms?" she calls to the barista.

"Just behind the café, you walk through that hall, past the kitchen."

"Thanks."

Wu stands in a slow, lazy stretch and kisses Harrison on the forehead as she carries him into the thin hallway. It's long, and she turns left, and pushes open a door and ends up standing in a wide room full of steel top benches and cooking equipment. The space is loud, and two women at the other end of the room are shouting to each other, laughing.

Harrison begins to wail over all the noise, and his face turns bright red.

"Shhh, it's all right, my sunshine."

"Are you looking for the dunny?" a young man with sweat patches under his arms asks.

"Yeah, sorry."

"No worries, happens all the time, just go back the way you came and follow the hall to the right."

"Great, thanks."

Wu kisses Harrison's forehead again and bounces him a little as she walks. He settles as they emerge from the building and enter a little concrete courtyard. The tall, plastic bins here are all a deep green, and they all have little black wheels and streams of sticky looking muck dribbled over the rims. They sit beside a wire fence that sags at the top like a roll of human fat. Wu finds the doors leading to the male toilets and the female toilets, and she leans into the scratched wooden panel to open it.

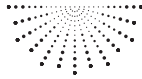
Wu uses the facilities, and she looks at herself for a moment in the

mirror. She didn't bother with makeup this morning, and a new zit is poking out of her chin to join the swathe of acne on her face. She looks at the zit for a second, then gazes down at Harrison and pulls a funny face before walking out of the bathroom without tending to the blemish.

She's on the way back into the café when something catches her eye. Wu doesn't recognise it so much as notice the shape and colour. To the side of the little concrete courtyard is a wire fence leading to a small car park. In that small car park is a white ute, a yellow motorcycle and a red Thunderbird.

Wu's feet cautiously step her up to the fence, and she stares at the vehicle with a trembling jaw. She stares at it for a long time, and she reads the licence plate out loud. She finds the door to the fence, and when she tries to open it, she finds a thick padlock holding the deadbolt in place. Wu turns around and walks cautiously back down the hallway, towards the cafe.

## HARP



“She’s in Cairns,” Ben announces to Harp through the orange handset of a public payphone Harp has pressed to her ear.

“Good.”

Harp looks out of the clear, plastic capsule and gazes at the banana plantation beside the road. The horde of low trees have wide, green leaves fanning out at head height, and a sign on the fence reads, ‘Private property. No photos. No work’. The sun assaults the earth with powerful, burning magnificence, but the world is still damp so early in the morning.

“Where are you?” Ben asks.

“Besides the highway, not far. Your car needs a service.”

Harp looks at the white piece of junk she’s been driving and adds, “In your line of work, you need something reliable. Don’t they pay you properly anymore? Don’t they teach you anything?”

“Come on, Harp, give it a rest. We’re helpin’ you instead of workin’. Where are you on the highway?”

“South of Cairns.”

“Further south already? How long were you driving? Did you sleep?”

“Shut your mouth and tell me exactly where she is.”

"She used her bank card to draw two grand down near the beach, not far from the port. Do you know where I mean?"

"Maybe, near the park?"

"That's it, by the last strip of restaurants before the ocean."

"She's going for breakfast."

"You reckon? Why does she need two grand?"

Harp scoffs, and grips at the little booth she's in to twist her back and crack it. She gazes up to see a black spider in the corner of the booth, and she pinches it between her thumb and rude finger, letting the smashed star of twitching legs drop to the floor.

"Why does she need all that cash?" Ben repeats.

"That's obviously her max daily withdrawal limit. She wants to go into hiding. She'll want to draw another two thousand bucks as soon as she can, but she won't get the chance. I'm not far away."

"Oh yeah, of course."

"In two hours, you will find a payphone and call this number, call this payphone I've called you on. Then move to a different payphone to call again on the hour, every hour, until I pick up. I'll bring the child back here. Wu's just a stupid whore; we'll finish this today."

Harp hangs up and moves back to her car with a grin firmly planted on the bottom of her face. She cries out in Mandarin, claps her hands together and the locusts in the dirt around her car take flight as the engine starts.

THE VEHICLE RATTLES BACK THE WAY IT CAME, AND IT FOLLOWS THE BIG green highway signs to the heart of Cairns. Harp parks the machine at the port, and she steps out into the mid-morning, tropical warmth. There are tourists everywhere, and a gargantuan ship rises out of the sea to cast a shadow on Harp's vehicle. The smell of sweet fruit dances on the air, and the rolling-rattle of skateboards are everywhere as Harp hobbles through the park.

Harp stands on the grass of the open space, across from the popular strip of restaurants, and she looks at the individual eating areas. There's a two-storey bar with a fake kangaroo out the front, a

little chicken burger place, a gift shop, a café with a crocodile on the sign, and a tiny room lined with tourism brochures.

Harp walks quickly, her torso shuddering, past the fake kangaroo and into the bar.

She takes a deep breath and forces her scowl up into a smile. She calls out, "Hi there, how are you this morning?" to the bartender with an enthusiastic wave.

"Morning, I'm good, you?" the tall, moustached man replies.

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"Beer? Cider?"

"No, not right now, I'm actually looking for my friend."

"Cool, what does he look like?"

"She's a young Thai girl with a round face. She's short, and she's travelling with a baby."

"A baby? Nah, haven't seen her. Sorry."

"Are you sure? It could have been a few hours ago."

"I'm certain. I've been here all morning, and I would remember a kid. Maybe you want to get a drink and wait?"

"That sound's lovely, but I really need to find her. Thanks, maybe later."

Harp moves over the hot, paved sidewalk to the chicken burger shop, and asks the same question with a polite smile, and the teenager at the counter disappoints her.

She moves down the line and peeks into each shop and asks a few questions until she enters the café with the crocodile on the sign.

Harp's glare flicks around the restaurant, and she sees an old man yawn, a child select a can of Fanta from the fridge, and Ben speaking to the girl at the cash register.

"What are you doing here?!" she shrieks, and the old man is so startled he almost falls from his chair. The child leaps back away from the fridge to hide behind a rack of souvenirs.

"Harp?" one of Ben's buddies snaps.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!"

Ben stutters, "I'm—I'm helping. I'm—"

Harp shambles forward, knocking over a chair, and the few

patches of customers in the café turn to stare. Out on the sidewalk, someone drops a paper cup of tea.

"Get out of the way," Harp urges Ben, and he stumbles to the other side of the room.

Harp asks the waitress with the dimple in her chin, "Listen, listen carefully, have you seen a little Thai girl with a young boy?"

"Yes, yes they were here only a minute ago."

"Where are they now?"

"I don't know. I thought they were still here."

"Find them!" Harp orders the men, and they each charge off in a different direction with Ben running down the little hallway to the bathrooms in long, lumbering strides.

"Listen to me, girl," Harp begins and steps forward. She drops the hiking stick and grabs at the waitress's collar. Harp leans on the young girl, and she screams, and Harp says in a frantic whisper, "Shut your mouth and tell me, tell me—"

"What? Please don't hurt me, what?"

"What did the kid look like? What coloured skin did the kid have?"

"What? I don't understand."

"Tell me!" Harp tightens her grip, and her knuckles press into the soft flesh of the waitress's throat, "Was there something wrong with the baby? What coloured skin?"

"White, the baby was white, and it was all fat with weird eyes. Short, fat neck."

"And the mother?"

"The mum was Asian."

Harp grins, and releases the girl, and squats to pick up the hiking stick.

"White? With a disability?"

The waitress nods in little, terrified tremors.

"Back here, Harp, in the kitchen." Ben's voice fills the restaurant and Harp charges on towards the thug.

He's standing with the young, sweaty chef in the doorway to the kitchen, and Ben tells the kid with a firm growl to, "Tell her what you told me."

"The girl you're looking for came in here, and she- she- she asked for help."

"Yeah, and?"

"She was in the toilets, and she wanted to leave through the back, and she showed me her receipt, so I knew she'd paid—"

"I don't care about the damn payment!"

"I opened the gate; she said her car was out the back and she needed the nappies, and she didn't want to carry the smelly kid back through the café."

"Show me," Harp orders, and Ben drags the little man into the back courtyard. The little man points a trembling finger at the gate, and then steps away and presses his back against the bins with his palms up in surrender.

Harp looks out to the car park for no more than two seconds before she points her hiking stick at the red Thunderbird.

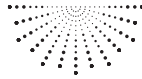
"That's the car I gave you to drive last night. That's my car."

Ben grits his teeth and nods.

Harp continues in a low, trembling drone, "That, Ben, is the car that's always parked in my driveway when Wu babysits. That's the car she's seen a thousand times. That, Ben, is the only car she knows is searching for her."

"I'm sorry—"

"Shut your mouth and find her. Today."



Wu is clutching Harrison to her chest as she runs away from the cafe, and the child is squealing a high-pitched wail directly beside her ears.

“Shhhh, it’s all right sunshine, everything is all right.”

The world around Wu is so hot it feels as though something warm is pressed to her skin and even though tears are rolling down her face, the skin on the peaks of her cheeks has dried and flaked. She feels a moment of reprieve as she passes under the shadows of trees or building awnings, but she can still smell the body odour emanating from her perspiring skin.

Wu hurries forward, and she glimpses to the left as she steps out onto the road. A car to her right swerves and honks, and she leaps backwards, pressing the infant into her body as if her bones could protect Harrison from a speeding Hyundai.

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” she whispers, and Harrison’s shrieking strengthens, “Shh, shhhhhh, I’m sorry, we’re all right.”

Wu makes it back to where her car is parked, and she fiddles with the key for a moment, swearing and kicking at the door in frustration.

“Come on, come on, come on, please...”

The key turns in the lock, and Wu flings open the back door with a



crazed twist of her body, but as soon as she's leaning over the seat, she takes a deep, calming breath. She fakes a smile at the infant and forces her lungs to slow their rampant pulsing.

"It's all right. It's all right sunshine. Everything is going to be all right."

Harrison calms as Wu rubs his belly and places him gently in the bassinet.

"I love you, so, so much. It's all right David, my sunshine. We're going to be all right."

Wu straightens her back and lingers in the concrete lot for a moment. She snatches the credit card she used to withdraw the cash and pay for breakfast out of her purse with furious, self-loathing fingers.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she grumbles as she slaps the thing to her forehead.

Wu is about to bend the piece of plastic when she notices an old man with a patch of white stubble on his skinny chin sitting on the sidewalk, asking the passing tourists for change. Wu glimpses back into the car at the resting Harrison before running over to the man and dropping the valuable card at his bare and calloused feet. She shouts her pin number over and over in quick, clear sentences.

"What?" he asks.

Wu turns to walk away, then turns back and pulls every piece of plastic from her purse, letting them drop to the concrete like shot and dying ducks.

"I'm sorry," she announces.

"What? I don't understand? Do you need help?" he asks.

"Be careful. Just, please, be careful."

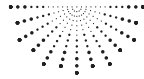
"Thank you, thank the Lord, and thank you," the man is chuckling as he shuffles around on his knees, gathering the loot.

"Thank you!" he calls once more as Wu sprints back to the car. She's out of breath again as she places both palms on the back seat window, and stares in at Harrison with desperation awash across her countenance.

DANIEL NORRISH

He's sleeping, and Wu's still crying. She turns on the vehicle and watches the old man as he skips up to an ATM.

## HARP



Harp is standing in a hotel room with Ben's three friends and the old man to whom Wu gave her bankcards. The room is small with two single beds and a balcony looking out over the beach. Below, there are children in bright, thin shorts, women in diamond-shaped bikinis, and men rubbing coin-sized dollops of sunscreen into their balding scalps.

In the warm and humid hotel room, the old man is sitting on one bed with his scrawny knees tucked up to his chest, and a pair of brand new black shoes encasing his feet. The patch of white stubble on his chin is moving so quickly it appears to be vibrating while his jaw trembles beneath petrified eyes.

"What are your names?" Harp asks the standing soldiers.

"Chris."

"Vince."

"Sean," they announce like school children. They all have thick wrists and thick necks and skinny legs in blue jeans, and they all stare at the floor. They stare at the floor, and they stare at Ben's beaten and throttled corpse. He's twisted and bleeding slowly on the green carpet while Harp wipes the blood from her hiking stick and takes two more pills from the little bottle she carries.

Harp says, "You work directly for me now. Ben is retired, and I need help."

She pulls a small wad of yellow fifty-dollar bills from her pocket. The men's eyes lock on the small fortune as Harp holds it in a steady fist.

"Who's going to lead your little troop?" she asks.

"I will," the man who introduced himself as 'Sean' says as he looks up to meet Harp's piercing stare. He has long blonde hair and brown eyes with a tiny nose that seems too small for his skull. He wears a single black stud earring in one ear, and there are three black tattoo lines on his neck that poke up out of his plain red shirt.

Harp passes him the money and says, "Fine. You're going to coordinate a search. Wu doesn't have much money, not enough to last her very long, and she doesn't have a credit card. She won't be able to stay in any decent hotels or anything like that. We'll find her in a campsite or hitchhiking on the side of the road somewhere."

Sean clears his throat and asks, "What if she actually goes camping? She could get all the gear she needs and move into the bush in a tent or something."

"Nice thought, Ben wouldn't have considered that," Harp begins as she steps back to lie on the vacant bed. She stretches and twists her back before settling and continuing to address the congregation horizontally.

"Wu's got a baby with her; I doubt she'll want to take him into the bush. We'll find her in a country town to the south somewhere."

"What if she heads north again to turn us around?"

"She'll be too afraid of the cops up where we come from," Vince adds and Harp nods.

"And the cities? How can we be sure she won't disappear into the crowds in Brisbane or something?" Chris asks.

Harp opens her mouth to answer, but Sean blurts out, "Too many cameras."

"Yep," Harp says, "You'll find her in the country to the south. Where's Angela?"

"No idea," Sean replies, "we found the boyfriend, but he didn't know."

"She's a goddamn disgrace. Either she's heard what happened to the house and hasn't bothered to call or she's been arse over tits with that rubbish in her nose for a full week."

"What do you want us to do about her?"

"Nothing. I'll find my daughter. She'll be in a casino somewhere, you watch, as soon as she needs money she'll surface."

"Do you want help with that?"

"No. I'll find Angela myself."

"Have the cops contacted you yet?" Sean asks.

"They're probably trying. I don't care."

"And what about him?"

The collective attention of the killers in the room turns to the old man as if the alarm on his watch has just interrupted them.

"Old fella," Harp says to the doomed individual, "you're going to tell us everything you saw. Understand."

"Yes, yes. Of course, no worries. I saw her car."

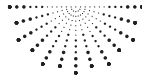
"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I can help you, just don't hurt me. She's driving a green, boxy thing."

"She's still driving that green car?"

"Yeah, dark green, definitely dark green."

"Perfect."



Wu drives south. She's falling down the map of the country, passing over great rivers and small streams. Whole, bulbous islands appear and disappear far out to sea while gargantuan inland mountains rise and fall in her peripheral vision like gods being forgotten.

The sky is so blue that the horizon over the ocean seems to be a mirror of that aqua body of water as Wu speeds on, and thousands upon thousands of waves crash in a series of unnoticed, unfaltering, and unstoppable ripples. Each barrel of salty sea a mere morsel of that huge, monolithic ocean that simultaneously presses its soft and murderous bosom to the corner of every continent; each wave a mere moment of the world's soft, destructive, and perpetually repetitive cycle.

Wu's vehicle moves through towns and small cities and the temporary bricks and steel and glass of all these tiny places sink away behind Wu as she whispers to her stolen passenger.

She does not stop when the sun begins its descent to the evening horizon, or when the shadows of the streetlamps lay long and lazy across the cooling bitumen roads.

"Shhhh, shh, shhh, it's all right sunshine. We're all right."

She fills the tank with fuel again, and she changes Harrison's nappy somewhere outside of Townsville, and the pause in the migration only costs Wu fifteen minutes of her escape.

She flies down the highways and meanders through thin streets adorned with tall green trees, the car accelerating onto busy main roads or slowing to let school children pass on zebra crossings.

Still, Wu travels south.

The sun has long retreated from this corner of the globe, and the moon has commanded the sky for several hours as Wu slows to a halt beside another ocean-view hotel. She cradles an exhausted, comatose Harrison as she enters the lobby and walks past a tower of brochures advertising flights and ferry trips to Hamilton Island or the Whitsundays. The receptionist smiles and looks up from her computer screen.

"Good evening, oh isn't he the cutest," she says with thin lips on a long, pointed face as Wu approaches the desk.

"I'd like a room please."

"Fantastic, we just need a credit card and some form of identification. A driver's license would be perfect."

"No problem," Wu smiles until she opens her purse, and sees that every slot for any kind of card is empty. She sticks her fingers into the fabric pockets and scratches around, searching for anything that could have her photo on it, but there's nothing. She swears to herself and announces, "I'm sorry, but I don't have a credit card or any ID."

"Pardon me? Neither?"

"I'm sorry, but I only have cash."

"That's no problem for the payment, but we require ID."

"Yeah, um, I actually left my purse at home. It's being mailed to me, but I won't get it for a few days. Is it all right if I just show ID before I check out later in the week?"

The receptionist stretches her long face into a wide, apologetic frown and says, "Unfortunately it's our policy to record some form of identification. We won't share this with any third party; it's just for our own security. A passport is also sufficient."

Wu stands there for a second, loitering in the fluorescent glow of

the lobby while the sounds of an anonymous orchestra play softly through the unseen sound system. She hopes the woman will offer another option, but nothing comes.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist repeats.

WU ATTEMPTS TO FIND A ROOM THREE MORE TIMES, AT TWO MORE hotels and a hostel, before giving up.

She drives the car to a grassy spot beside the beach, and she allows herself a single moment to pause and release a massive yawn as she steps out of the vehicle. Before she has a chance to join Harrison in the backseat, Wu notices a sign that reads, 'No Camping. We Prosecute'.

She returns to the driver's seat, tilts her head and yawns again, then drives back through the town and further east, away from the built-up areas. She sleeps sitting up in the backseat of the vehicle, hunched over in a ball like some kind of burrowing mammal in an underground den.

The sun does not wake her; instead, her slumber is interrupted by someone tapping on the window.

Her brain is in the process of pulling her back to waking life while her breathing rattles, then her lungs take a single, powerful breath as her eyes open and she sees someone is outside with a torch.

"Urghh, get lost."

"No. You can't sleep here. Get out of the car."

Wu emerges from her mechanical retreat and frowns into the face of a policewoman. The policewoman is standing with her hands on her hips and her eyebrows arched up in an expression of pure, exasperated arrogance.

"Damn it, I'm sorry," Wu begins.

"Is that a child in the car?"

"Yes, it is, and maybe, could you point that torch somewhere else? Sorry to be a pain, but you'll wake him up if you keep shining the torch at him."

A car flies past on the road before the policewoman says, "He



should be asleep indoors, not out here,” and waves a sweeping palm out in the direction of the road.

“I know, I’m sorry, but I was getting tired and I saw a sign saying that drivers are supposed to rest every couple of hours. I dunno, I guess I just dozed off.”

“You dozed off at three in the morning? You didn’t come out here specifically to sleep?”

“I dozed off. I set an alarm to wake me up but—”

“I don’t believe you.”

A blade of fear slices straight through Wu as she looks at the police car. There’s another officer behind the wheel, and he’s speaking to someone on the radio. The back seat of the vehicle is empty, and it threatens her the way a soaring hawk might threaten hiding rats.

The policewoman looks back to the police car, following Wu’s gaze, and she’s about to say something when Harrison’s screams fill the calm night. The wail explodes from the vehicle, and the scene becomes the picture of irritation as Wu shouts, “He’s hungry!” over the sound. A small, white and brown owl leaps from its perch in a nearby tree and its wings flash as white triangles in the night as it flies away.

The policewoman asks, “Do you have some food in the car?”

“He’s breastfeeding.”

“All right—”

“What? I couldn’t hear you,” Wu yells.

“I said ALL RIGHT, get going. Now.”

“Thank you, have a nice night.”

Wu picks Harrison up out of the vehicle and presses him to her chest. As the female officer gets back in her car, the sound of male laughing replaces the baby squealing, and Wu hears the word “Retard”.

WU DRIVES SOUTH, AND HER EYES DROOP UNDER THE WEIGHT OF THE early morning until she finds a petrol station offering free coffee for drivers. She fills the car and purchases a huge paper map. Wu takes a moment to let the caffeine stimulate her perception while she spreads

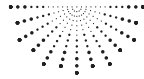
the map out on the bonnet of her car. It shows the main highways and divergent routes leading all the way down to the bottom of the country.

Harrison clings weakly to Wu's neck as she hooks a forearm under his nappy and leans so that Harrison is lying on her chest. She points at the map with her free hand.

"There? Want to go there, my sunshine?"

Harrison smiles, and Wu says, "Good. It's going to take a couple of days to get there, but we'll be safe. They can't find us there with so many people around."

## H A R P



*H*arp's hiking stick is the first part of her to enter Conrad Jupiter's Casino on The Gold Coast, but the rest of the murderer follows quickly behind a skinny arm. She walks on thin legs with that thin stick like a terribly wounded spider.

The carpet is patterned with irregular black and white checkers and every table and chair seems to shine or sparkle or, at the very least, emit small reflections from a glossy shell. Magnificent crescent chandeliers hang in two perfect rows from the roof, filling the room with a golden glow.

"Can I help you?" a young, broad-shouldered employee asks as Harp scuttles around him.

"No, that's sweet of you to offer, thank you, but I'm visiting my daughter. I already know the room number." Harp smiles at the man, but as soon as she turns her head and looks towards the elevators the skin on her face slumps like melting cheese to mould a morbid scowl from those devious lips.

"How lovely. Enjoy your stay," the man calls to Harp as she walks away.

Harp is the only person on the elevator, and it throws her into the

sky with precise, deliberate propulsion until the doors slip open again and she emerges into the hallway.

It's so quiet in the centre of the hotel passage that it seems like Harp is the only person in a capsule entirely removed from the rest of the world. She moves forward on the left-hand side of the hall and hears tiny snippets of lives as she passes the doors to individual rooms. In front of 1011, the muffled pang and bash of rock music. 1013, a woman moaning. 1015, nothing. 1017, men cheering and laughing.

Harp stops at 1019 and taps her hiking stick on the door.

The faint sound of something shrieking drifts into the hall. It's a high-pitched, long squeak and Harp swears in Mandarin as she places an ear to the wooden barrier between her and her offspring.

She bangs with a solid fist. BANG BANG BANG.

"Come on, Angela, open the door," she says.

BANG BANG BANG.

"You don't want me to kick this door down."

BANG BANG BANG.

A female voice cries out a muffled, "I'm coming, chill."

The door swings open and a young girl looks out into the passage. She has black hair, brown eyes that sit in almost-round sockets the shape of rugby balls and white skin. She has her mother's scrawny frame and the same, thin hands.

"Hi mum," she says as Harp pushes past her into the accommodation. The door is closed with a hushed click, and the women move into a cramped room.

"Look, mum I—"

"Wait a sec; I need the bathroom."

Harp moves to the only other door in the place and presses down the handle, but it doesn't move. She tries again, but the lock refuses to cooperate.

"I don't care who's in there, just come out."

The door slowly creaks open and a boy wearing nothing but underwear, with a shaved chest, stands in the tiled room. He stands on one leg while he holds up the other limb. The bottom half of his

suspended leg is cocooned in thick bandages, and the appendage is obviously missing a foot.

Harp's inconvenienced expression turns to jubilation in an instant, and she begins to cackle as she pulls the boy back into the bedroom and Harp takes his place in the toilet. She slams the door, and the sound of urine on water follows, but the cackling doesn't stop until Harp emerges. The boy hobbles back into the bathroom, closes the door, and the snapping sound of a lock cracks into the quiet dwelling.

"Look, mum I—"

"What is that noise? That shrieking?"

"The music? It's strings, a violin." Angela moves to a block of dials and buttons on the wall and twists something. An orchestral score grows in the room and Harp says, "It's not bad. Leave it on but turn it down."

"OK."

Harp looks around the room at a wall of curtains drawn tightly together, a single king-sized bed, a grey television that's almost a perfect cube, and four wigs sitting on fake plastic craniums beside a microwave.

"Open the blinds. I love the way these hotels show off their views."

Angela turns and clasps the fabric as Harp silently steps closer. As the young woman throws open the blinds, Harp pulls off the wig Angela is wearing. Angela spins around with the speed of an embarrassed woman and the completely bald girl gasps, a naked head superimposed in front of a glorious view of the beachside city at midnight.

"Do not deceive me," Harp says, "not with words, or wigs, or anything."

"OK."

Harp lies on the bed and straightens her spine, stretching like an uncomfortable cat.

"I wasn't running from you. I wasn't hiding from you guys. I owe this dealer, Tazzy, some money," Angela says.

Harp replies, "The mattresses in nice hotels are too soft. Before I moved to Australia, I slept on a concrete floor with eleven other

women in the same room. No, that's not right; we were girls; none of us were women. Not then. I hate soft mattresses,"

She peels her back from the blanket to lie on the floor, repositioning herself on the carpet beside the bed.

"Tazzy is—"

"I know Tazzy. Is he aware that you're my daughter?"

"No, I doubt it. We don't exactly discuss family stuff." Angela skips up onto the bed and falls to her belly to gaze down onto her mother.

"I'll sort it out," Harp says.

"He isn't the guy who hurt—"

"I know. I know who hurt your boyfriend."

Angela smiles and Harp's loose face curls into a grin at the sight of her daughter's pleasure.

"That makes you happy?" Harp says, "That violence? You're a lot more like me than you think."

"Yeah? Does that mean I can come work for you?"

"No. I didn't come here to whore out my daughter. Pick a career; I don't care what it is. You can do anything. I never had that choice."

"Anything?"

"Of course, it's your life. I don't care what you do; I just want you to be happy."

Angela's smile is so wide that the skin on her bald head shifts and she says, "Thanks mum, but what about you? Would you have done something different when you were my age if you could have chosen?"

Harp shakes her head and says, "But you will. Anything in mind?"

"I like numbers, math—"

"I'm not talking about gambling, is that how you got in debt with Tazzy?"

"Nah. Drugs. You want some?"

"No, thanks."

"Sure?"

"No, thanks."

The pair of them falls silent for a moment, and Harp grins as her daughter smiles again.

Angela says, "I want to develop computers."

"Computers?"

"Yeah, software. It's the way they run. I'm teaching myself to code, and I'll try to develop some stuff."

"Like what?"

"I don't know yet. It's just interesting. It's the way the machines think, you know? People program the thoughts of an object; it's real sci-fi stuff."

"Good. Pick a school or a course or something, and you can go. I'll pay."

"They can be expensive, and I owe Tazzy cash already."

"Don't worry about that, don't worry about anything. I told you already; I want you to be happy. Do you remember when we use to feed the crocs in the river by the house?"

"Yeah, that was awesome."

"Yep. I still do it sometimes."

Angela releases a single giggle before she asks, "On Sunday mornings?"

"Yes, when else? It's just like it was when you were young, except you're not there."

"I'm down here now."

"Why don't you come back for a while? We can plan something special."

"Thanks, mum, I'll visit, but I'm down here now," Angela smiles, but Harp's face sinks into a frown.

She says, "Angela, I've been here for ten minutes, and you haven't asked about Harrison."

"Yeah, where is he?" Angela looks around the room.

"Did you not even notice that I didn't bring him?"

"Well, I—"

"Shut your mouth. My house burned down a couple of days ago. Harrison was inside."

"Oh, God." Angela shoots up to sitting and clutches at her face, peeking out over the tips of her fingers. "No," she adds.

"Harrison was inside with Wu, and her kid and the house went up in a blaze. But, the fire department only found one burnt baby inside.

Angela asks, "Where were you?"

"Where was I? Where were you!?"

A moment of silence passes, and Harp says, "Wu has kidnapped Harrison. Your boy is alive."

"What?"

"We almost had her, but Ben screwed it up. It might take some time to find them, but we will. I'll bring him back to you."

"Pl-please hurry," Angela stutters as she sniffs and wipes at her eyes.

"What do you want to do? You can come with me to find her, or move back north. What do you want?"

"I don't know. I'm doing pretty well now. I think I—"

"You want to stay here? In a casino?"

"Yeah." Angela swallows, clears her throat, and the melancholy that was in her a moment ago is replaced by a narrow frown on her hairless and indifferent skull.

"Do you care about Harrison at all?"

"Of course!"

"That's what you're supposed to say, but do you mean it? He had open-heart surgery only six months ago, and you don't seem too worried. Do you care about Harrison at all?"

"Yes, yes I mean it. Please, please find him."

"You have had the easiest time as a mum. For Christ's sake, I bought you a lactating hooker as a bloody nanny, you've had no responsibilities whatsoever. I took care of all the medical concerns, including his heart. Wu provided the sustenance and the nurturing so you could go off drinking and working up a drug debt. Christ, you did nothing."

"Please, you need to find Harrison. I miss him."

"You could have come to see him earlier in the week; you were supposed to pick him up three days ago."

"Is that how long it's been? Jesus, I've lost track."

"Yeah, sure. Fine. I'll pay Tazzy and give you some more cash to



stay here and learn about computers, and I'll find Harrison. You just relax, but I want you to learn something."

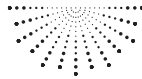
"What do you mean? I want to learn about computers and—"

"No, that's not what I'm talking about," Harp snaps. "Learn about your son's development. Learn about the challenges you'll face. You're his mum, I know this isn't what you wanted, but talk to some other mums."

"Kelly is—"

"Not your junkie mates! Find some mothers with young boys with down syndrome. Commit to this life."

"I will, I promise I will," Angela says as she nodded. "I'd do anything for Harrison."



Wu avoids Brisbane, and she sleeps another night in the car, parked in an official roadside campsite. When she wakes, families are packing up tents and caravans are disposing of small bags of paper plates in the yellow bins beside the toilet block.

Wu changes Harrison in the ladies' bathroom, and there are two women in there brushing their teeth above the concrete sinks. Wu smiles and lies to them about where the child has come from, and Wu puts a dab of their toothpaste on her finger to scrub inside her mouth. Harrison screams until he's in the car and Wu feeds him by removing her entire top behind the veil of morning dew on the backseat windows.

It's the first time that dew has formed on the car overnight, and they travel south once more, further away from the Queensland heat. They're inland when they cross the New South Wales border, and there's a forest between them and the sea. Gargantuan trees with white trunks spear up out of the ground, and there are few leaves on these wooden fingers until the very peaks. On the ground, a person could stroll easily between the wooden pillars, but the canopy is so dense that the human world here exists in everlasting shadow.

Wu drives her car into Sydney from this inland route, and she's naively laughing as if she's achieved something when her vehicle pulls up to the tollbooth. She fumbles for change as the cameras film her and the frowning attendant tells Wu to, "Move it, lady," from a fake-tanned face so orange it looks like a satsuma.

Wu joins the pulsing city traffic, meandering around the parks and open spaces and she finally parks the car beside a cramped, one-way street near Central Station.

"Central, this is where we want to be. Right in the middle," she tells Harrison. He's awake and smiling, and his head is flicking around crazily, his eyes focussing on every passing stranger in the thick inner-city crowd.

"Come on sunshine, let's go for a walk, yeah? Won't that be nice?"

Wu walks quickly through the throngs of women in suits and men in high visibility vests. Clumps of young people move down the footpath in awkward huddles, and Wu must step into the doorways of shops to avoid them. People on bikes share the road with hesitant or forceful cars and the peddlers sometimes roll up onto the sidewalk to avoid death by the hand of a reckless driver. There are tall buildings everywhere, and they're all coated with graffiti or scaffolding around the base. The footpaths themselves are flat and sturdy and the people, although impatient, seem happy.

Wu enters a convenience store and asks if they have any work going and the man behind the counter shakes his head without opening his mouth. She enters another convenience store of the same name and a man who looks very similar responds with the same silent rejection. Wu leaves, dejected and confused, and instead, makes her way to a bar. She's asked to take Harrison away before she can inquire about employment.

She tells the infant, "That's all right sunshine, we're OK. There's still some time before it gets dark."

Wu enters and leaves eleven more premises before the streetlamps flick on and the professional people in ties with briefcases disappear from the street.

Wu enters a bar boasting twenty taps of beer and she stands, nervously biting her lip, between two men in thick, black canvas jackets. There are booths all along the main wall, but most people are standing at the bar, and most of them are men drinking from large, round glass tankards.

"Yes, love?" the barman calls. He's wearing a plain white shirt, and black jeans and his hair is slicked back as if he's part-way through swimming laps in a public pool.

Wu says, "Hi there, I've worked in a bar before, and a restaurant and I'll work whatever shifts you like. I'm looking for a job."

The men in canvas beside Wu each take a half step to the side, and they look at her with mirrored smirks. A woman across the room points at Harrison and then straight at Wu's face and says something to the people around her, but the words are lost in the noisy pub.

"Hmm," the barman begins, "a job for you or for the ankle-biter?"

"Me, please. I'm happy to do anything."

"We do have a position."

"Yes?"

"Yes, I do have a position available."

The men in canvas look at one another and burst out laughing.

"As a waitress?" Wu asks.

"No."

"Um, well, what?"

The barman looks around at the patrons, who all seem interested in his reply, and says, "Behind the bar, with the beer."

Wu lets out a nervous breath and someone, somewhere, starts shouting at the barman for a drink. He doesn't look around; instead, he points to steel keg that's sitting behind the bar, and he says, "Only problem is, you need to be able to lift that. Can you do it? Are you strong enough?"

"Yeah, definitely."

"Really?" he says as he moves to stand over the solid container. It stands as high as his thigh, and he bends down slightly to wrap his fingers around the rim. "Really?" he repeats before he releases a howling, ear-splitting scream and his face turns the colour of an

infected wound. His spine straightens a little, and the vessel lifts a few centimetres from the floor before he slams it back down.

"You did it! You beast!" a cry comes from the crowd as a chorus of laughter fills the wooden room.

"Your turn," the barman says, "come back around here; I'll hold the little fella."

Wu walks quickly through the crowd and takes a second to peer around the room at the mosaic of smiling, nodding faces that watch her. She kisses Harrison on the forehead, and there are a few more chuckles as she passes the baby to the stranger. The kid looks strangely content in the arms of the slick barman as if Harrison has been waiting his whole, short life to linger behind those taps.

Wu plants her feet on either side of the steel barrel. It's massive beside her, standing taller than Wu's hips. She grips the rim, whispers a little encouragement to herself and lifts as hard as she can.

The keg launches up from the floor, and it's as high as Wu's chest before she starts to scream. She drops the nearly weightless thing, and the sound of that metal bouncing is the only audible noise above the cheering and raucous applause.

Wu retrieves the child, turns bright red and says, "It's empty."

People are still laughing when the barman pats her on the back.

"If you and the kid need some work, we can find you something. No worries."

"Thank you, thanks."

"No worries. Want a drink?"

"Oh, um, no thanks."

"Well, that's going to be a problem," the barman flicks on a tap and pours a light, amber coloured liquid into a small glass. "To work here, you need to drink beer."

Wu takes the gift and sips at it as one of the men in canvas adds, "And it helps if you rhyme, some of the time."

The barman sticks out his hand and says, "Pierre."

"I'm Wu," she replies as they shake.

"Cool, you can start tomorrow at ten A.M. Go relax, you look

tired,” Pierre adds as he points to a barstool away from the service area.

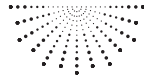
“Fantastic. Look, um,”

“Yeah?”

“I just drove into Sydney, do you know anywhere I could get a room for the night?”

“Yeah, no worries.”

## HARP



In the morning, Harp walks away from the casino, and she moves through the parking lot of the casino-hotel in a zigzagging motion between the cars with her shambolic, three-pointed gait. She can see the ocean at the end of the road and Harp pauses to sit on a low brick wall. The skin on her bare neck is peeling in the heat, and there is a thin layer of white foam on the insides of her lips. The street she is walking down is not busy, but two little girls are standing against the window of a thrift shop and sharing an icy pole.

"You all right miss?" one asks.

Harp doesn't answer, but when a man in a singlet with a water bottle approaches, she leans towards him and snatches the drink from his hand. Harp pours every drop down her throat and tosses the bottle to the ground without replacing the lid.

The victim of the petty theft swears and reaches out with tense, hairy fingers to grab Harp, but when he sees the hiking stick, he just shakes his head and picks up the plastic vessel from the floor. The little girls quickly step away, and the one holding the icy pole hides it behind her back.

Harp walks ahead and onto the bike path beside the beach. The

shallow waves timidly approach the dry land and sweep up onto the draining, angled shore in slow caressing curves. Gulls cry scwarp into the air as they soar above the cooking Earth and they quietly mutter the same, scwarp, as their little red legs piston across the cracked concrete. Men stand with white bellies folded over the elastic hips of their board shorts and women lie still and smiling and pink beneath huge umbrellas. There are sunglasses and towels and hats everywhere, on bodies and in the sand, and parents call out to children who refuse to listen.

Harp removes her shoes and drops them into a bin and steps out onto the sand. A flicker of pain appears upon her face, and she wiggles her ankles until her feet have sunken below the singeing substrate. She stands and watches people as they move to join friends or into the ocean. She watches as they put their wallets and keys and jewellery in bags or shoes or under towels. After a full ten minutes of staring and pretending to smile, Harp wanders over to a collection of unguarded women's clothes. She picks up a pair of small, flat-bottomed shoes, pulls a ring of keys from them and puts the shoes on her feet. No one watches Harp as she walks away from the beach and starts the engine of a new vehicle.

She drives for fifteen minutes before she stops at a phone to make a call, and then she turns the car around and gets onto the highway and begins to follow the signs to Sydney.

It's two o'clock in the morning when she passes over The Sydney Harbour Bridge and sinks into the suburbs beside the harbour. She leaves the car in a loading zone and walks through the streets ignoring the drunks and the cab drivers. There are bats flying in straight lines over the heads of all the dopey and dreary humans still stumbling on the empty streets and cats watch the evening commotion from the safety of bins.

Harp leaves the sidewalk and moves down a thin and strangely well-scrubbed alley. There is no rubbish or graffiti or even broken glass at her feet as she knocks on a white door below a red light.

When the door opens, the world around Harp is highlighted and loud with music, and the scene beyond that barrier is like something



from a long-forgotten civilisation. There are women everywhere, and they all seem to be missing garments. Some stand without tops, some without bottoms, but all are grinning below layers of makeup like stripped, scrubbed clowns. The walls and floors and roof are all black so that every naked curve appears to be impossibly suspended in a kind of forceful, beckoning limbo. The tables and chairs are all a very, very dark wood and the only things that shine are the beads of condensation on the glasses of the few drunken men who loiter in this peculiar funhouse.

There is a beast of a woman still holding the handle on the inside of the door with fat, pig-hands and, as her eyes pass over Harp, she releases a single curse word, then turns and runs back into the brothel.

Harp waits on the doorstep, a traveller in a foreign land.

The bouncer does not return. Instead, an older woman with crusty red eyes approaches Harp. She has with her a man so tall that his shoulders and the long-barrelled shotgun he carries are clearly visible above the craniums of every prostitute.

The mouths of each man in attendance drop open at the sight of the behemoth and they crowd together as if this soldier could hurt them more than those laughing, summoning women to whom they offer up their souls.

"May Harp, a guest," the madam says in four precise syllables with a voice as clear as a bird's chirp. Harp nods but does not reply.

"Why are you here? A customer?"

"My daughter—"

"Angela."

"Yes. Her son—"

"Harrison."

There's a pause, and the room is entirely silent as the song playing through the speakers ends before another begins.

"Yes. Harrison. He's been kidnapped," Harp says.

"Not by me."

"I know. I know who did it, and I know she's in Sydney. I'm looking for her."

"I don't care."

"I brought cash."

"You'd better come with me then."

The two women, both queens of kingdoms that exist only in the eyes of people who know where to look, walk in silence up a winding flight of stairs and into a small office. There are a few more male faces there, and they all watch Harp, and each face sits atop a body festooned with weaponry.

Harp and the madam sit in wide, wing-backed chairs beside of wall of television monitors that all show different versions of the same filthy act.

"Give me the cash and tell me about this child abductor."

"Her name is Taylor Wu—"

"Give me the cash."

"I'll give you a thousand now and another thousand when you find her."

"Is that a joke? That's nowhere near enough money."

"Eve, I'm not asking—"

"You call me Miss Eve, you filthy chink-whore. In my opinion, you've not earned a single God damn thing," Miss Eve says, and she leans forward in her seat, those red-crustled eyes blinking and opening like barnacle-covered clams.

Harp says, "I'm not asking you to do anything, just point me in the right direction."

"What are you going to do with that gimpy back of yours?"

"Never mind that."

"Oh, I mind, I mind a lot. I know that tart won't escape with her life once you get hold of her and I don't think you plan to move the body back to your pineapple eating, cane-toad licking state."

Harp smiles and says, "You're right. There will be a body."

"A body in my city and you reckon you can buy me off with two grand?"

"Fine. How much?"

"Five grand now, nothing after. We're not bloody kids anymore, you pay, and I work, no stuffing about."

"Good."

Harp sticks her fingers into a fold in her pants and withdraws a thick bundle of notes. She counts them out, then turns them upside down and counts again before passing them to the nearest guard.

"There's ten grand there," Harp says.

"Ten?"

"Yes. There will be a body tomorrow morning, then another after you find Wu."

"Fine. Now get out."

HARP EXITS WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD, AND SHE WALKS BACK OUT INTO the cool and windless evening. She turns to the left and walks around the block, peeking into the windows of locked shops and through the glass panels of hotel facades. She circles the block again, and now she seems more interested in cars. She studies the vehicles resting in the tight spaces on the side of the street or parked in the secure bays behind locked fences. Finally, she stops moving at the sight of a vehicle that's been reversed down an alleyway. It's facing back out towards the road, and there are dumpsters lining the walls on either side of it. Harp considers the vehicle for a moment, then shuffles towards the back of it to conceal herself behind a huge steel dumpster.

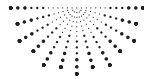
She stands still and silent as if she were protecting that piece of anonymous property for a full hour. She wipes a strand of hair from her eyes, coughs and returns to silence for another two hours.

The sun is beginning to rise, and the world is being slowly brought into a fresh day as the behemoth from the brothel strides down the alley with a set of keys in his hand. He sneezes and scratches at his groin as he unlocks the vehicle. Harp stands, unseen, in the shadows. He pops the trunk of the car and lays the shotgun in a towel, and then wraps the towel back over the weapon before he closes the trunk and moves to sit behind the steering wheel.

In a single, swift and confident motion, Harp pulls her shirt off over her head, wraps her fingers in the fabric, pops the boot of the car

back open, and retrieves the gun. The behemoth pokes his head out of the vehicle with a confused and audacious look upon his face.

Without moving, Harp fires a single cartridge from the long barrel into the nose of her target with an eardrum-splitting bam. She returns the gun to the trunk and hobbles to the other side of the car, where there has been no eruption of gore, and she walks away without glimpsing back to the twitching fingertips of that nameless warrior.



Wu rents a room in a house that's connected to another house by an enormous, inner-city backyard, and there are fourteen people living in the duplex. Every single one of the other housemates is twenty, twenty-one or twenty-two years old, and three of them work in the bar that has now employed Wu, 'The Barrel'.

There are only two female occupants, other than Wu, and there are only two toilets. During the day, a handful of the young adults lie hungover or drinking on one of the many beanbags and at night, anyone who isn't working sits and sips cheap wine with orange cordial in the communal yard. The friends constantly barbeque because they cannot all congregate in the small kitchens and the closest of comrades use the bathrooms in pairs.

A boy named Joseph has a broken leg, and he sits up with Harrison while Wu works. In return, Wu brings him the half-eaten burgers and pies that customers leave behind in the pub, which he slathers with imported American barbeque sauce and consumes by the dozens. Despite this, he is fit and muscular, and there is often a woman with a kind smile in his room or sitting by his side across from the barbeque.

Wu is there, happy and settled, for a full month before Joseph asks, "Mate, what are you still doing here?"

Joseph and Wu are in Wu's room, and she's sitting on the bed with Harrison while Joseph stands lop-sided, the broken leg recovering quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"It's good that you're here, I like it, but why? Don't you want your own house and space for Harrison?"

"Yeah, but I can't have that."

"Why? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"I don't have any money. I spend everything I make, and this place is the cheapest around."

"That's not true. We're all in the same boat here, no one has much, but we all decide we like it in this house. You could move into a smaller share house or something."

"There's free childcare in this dormitory."

"HA! Yeah, but I can walk now. I can come see Harrison anywhere."

Wu smiles and says, "I just really like it here."

Wu leaves Harrison with Joseph and steps outside to walk the short distance to The Barrel. It was a warm day, but it's getting cold now that the sun is setting, and Wu strolls past a youth centre and an ice cream shop and another bar. She smiles at a young man smoking a cigarette, and she drops a fifty-cent piece in the hat of a blind man sitting on the side of the road, tapping drumsticks on the pavement. She arrives at The Barrel and puts on a denim apron and steps up to the taps and looks at the person sitting in front of her.

Harp grins back at Wu with a smile so pointed it looks like a beak.

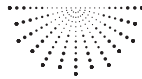
Harp's hiking stick has been laid on the counter, and the old killer lifts the thing and swings it over the beer taps in a wide, whipping arc. It smashes into Wu's face at eye level as she stands astounded and unbelieving in the same spot she's stood so many times before. Wu accidentally pulls two bottles of clear spirits from their resting places as she crashes to the floor and the sound of Harp's crazed footsteps can be heard over the astonished gasps of the customers.

Pierre appears on nimble feet to stand in Harp's way, and he valiantly reaches for the old woman. Harp spears the end of her

hiking stick into the middle of Pierre's throat, and he is on the ground, gasping, without ever actually touching his attacker.

Wu is five whole steps outside of the Barrel, and she's running with her head back and the apron spread across the front of her like pathetic armour. She gallops past the ice-cream shop and the blind man and the smoker, and she'll be home to Harrison in one more minute, just one more minute.

## HARP



Harp is sprinting through the late afternoon streets, and she passes the ice cream shop, and then the blind man as the sounds of drumsticks tapping on pavement fill her ears. Her rapid legs are throwing her hips forward and Harp's failing, unreliable spine is flicking around until a puff of smoke stings her eyes, and someone's foot slips out to trip her. Her sprinting feet collide, and she's airborne, sailing quickly through the early-evening breeze. Harp breaks her fall with her hands, and the skin is sheered from her palms before she's up and running again, blood left behind in two crimson swathes.

She's screaming in Mandarin, and the stretched faces that line the footpath are staring as they move out of her way.

Harp charges through the door behind Wu, and she stops in a front hallway of the enormous duplex. Rows and rows of doors to bedrooms and bathrooms confront the mad pursuer and not one of them gives up a clue as to their contents.

Harp begins throwing open doors on sleeping housemates and men playing Nintendo. One of the doors is locked, and Harp smashes it open to find a young woman in the shower.

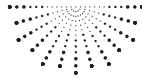
Harp screams and moves in a destructive, rampant search through every room of the house. When a boy asks her what she's doing, she



slaps at him with the stick over and over and over until his fingers are red and pulsing and he limps whimpering from the squabble.

Harp charges into the backyard, emerging from the house in a rapid flurry of thin ankles as if she has been pushed from that expansive home.

A dozen pairs of eyes are sprinkled across a massive open area, and they stare back at her in silence and not one of these pairs of eyes belongs to Wu or Harrison.



Wu drives west through the night, and the air is so cold outside of the heated car that she must wind down her foggy window to check her blind spot in the mirror as she changes lanes. The nose of the vehicle is angled to the sky as she climbs the winding, thin stretches of The Blue Mountains. The world is black, save for the moving patches of light projected by the car's headlights. In these moving patches of light, Wu sees pale, speckled rock and sheets of moss like dirty, vertical carpet. Wu slowly pulls her vehicle off the road on a long, flat stretch to feed and change Harrison. The infant makes no sound as the woman tends to him and he's asleep in seconds after he's returned to the bassinet.

Wu's legs are moving with short, tight steps, and she jogs on the spot for a moment, wiping the frosty exhaustion from her eyes. Her breath hangs around her head in pulses of white fog as if it were a restless spirit seeking refuge in her skull. She wanders into the bush to pull down her pants and squat, and there are flowers all around her naked arse. These bulbs of pollen are round at the base with a hundred soft tendrils pointing to the sky. They look like upturned hands with reaching fingers, and they're so red that Wu can still see

the blood colour of them in the dark. She picks one and places it on the dashboard of her car as she returns to her miserable retreat.

She sleeps in a campsite again, and she does not bother inspecting the long-drop dunny or evaluating the other travellers sharing the gravel patch. Instead of driving away, she walks the short distance to a town beyond a sign stating, 'Katoomba' as the sun begins to throw golden rays down on the road that brought her to this place. It seems somehow biblical in the freshness of that free and pleasant day, and Wu has not frowned since she first pressed Harrison to her chest today.

The town centre is little more than a post office and a pub and a trinket shop selling tourist knickknacks. Nothing is open so early in the day, so Wu sits at the most comfortable bench within view, and soon she sees the square face of a bus trundle up the steep hill into the town.

The vehicle halts its rumbling progression, and an old woman with grey hair takes a full twenty seconds to exit the angular machine. She steps down slowly with a look of determined concentration on her face as she watches the little blue shoes she's wearing find the concrete. As she moves, the bus driver skips down from his throne and shifts a large suitcase from a seat onto the sidewalk. The old woman sighs and turns and waves, but the bus is already gone.

She looks down at the suitcase and nods, and her gaze scans the scene to which she has just been delivered. As soon as the woman notices Harrison, she says, "Little darling, what are you doin' out here in the cold?"

"We came into town for something to eat, but I think it's too early."

The women smile at each other with identical, tight grins.

"Yes, surely. It's just gone six," says the new arrival.

"Six? When will the town open up?"

"Not 'till at least eight. You might find a coffee before then. Evan Tedral runs a little bakery down the hill, and he'll be baking." She pauses to point back the way the bus had come. "He's a bit of a prick though, he might not like the sight of the child, and just between you and me, I reckon he has a little bourbon with his mornin' muesli."

“Really? That’s no good.”

“Surely not great, but if he’s not on the squirt at daybreak, then he’s got no excuse for the bloody soggy pies he’s been sellin’.”

Wu begins to laugh, and Harrison opens his eyes to look up at the chuckling thief.

“Tell you what,” the woman begins again, “If you carry my bag, I’ll carry the child, and the pair of you can have breakfast with me.”

“Yeah? You don’t mind?”

“Nah, you’re doing me a favour, I struggle to lift my luggage. I’m Kris with a K.”

“Wu.”

Harrison looks from one face to another with his tiny blinking eyes as he’s passed to the stranger. His brow crinkles with confusion until Kris gently presses her warm forehead to his and speaks to him in soft, loving whispers. He giggles and reaches up to touch her cheek as Wu retrieves the bag.

“I’ll show you something first, before we go home. Don’t worry. It’s close,” Kris says.

The trio moves up the main street quickly, the adults fighting off the cold with rapid, short strides. The old buildings of the town are pieced together from huge white-stone blocks, and the hard rock is so plain and lonely that it seems to emit the early chill.

They walk through a wide car park to a viewing platform that’s suspended out over a gorge. Below them, the crowns of magnificent, ancient trees form a blanket over the land and birds move across this blanket, appearing as scuttling insects to the women from such a height.

“We call them the three sisters,” Kris says, nodding towards a rock formation ahead.

A long ridge extends out from the left of the platform and the trees that cover it thinly before finally disappearing altogether at the border of three massive peaks.

The diamonds of boulder hug one another like family members and Harrison seems transfixed by the way they interrupt the greenery.

"You like those ladies little one? You'll be a handful someday," Kris says.

"He's already causing a little trouble."

Wu follows Kris as she walks along the boundary of that epic stitch in the surface of The Earth. They cut into the town at the midpoint of a hill and Kris leads the expedition up a short garden path to the door of an old cottage.

Upon entering, Kris cries out, "Chris, honey, we're home," and a man somewhere ahead replies, "Who's we?"

"Oh, sorry darling, I made a friend, and she's brought her baby over for breakfast."

"A baby?"

Deep, shuddering footsteps approach from somewhere in the house and the floorboards tremble below their vinyl covering. A man with long legs and arms and a perfectly round belly appears. He's got no hair on the top or the bottom of his head, but spindles of dark fibres fall from his nose to give the appearance of a simple moustache.

"Good morning," Wu gives a little wave.

"Hi. There's a baby? Can I hold it? What's its name?"

Kris replies, "His name is, wait, what is his name?"

"Harrison."

"Oh, lovely, little Harrison. This is my son, Chris."

"Hi, I'm Wu."

Chris nods, but his attention is locked on Harrison as he asks, "What does he do?"

"What does he do?" Wu repeats, "Nothing really yet, he hasn't started crawling or anything like that."

"Hi, little Harrison. Can I hold him?" Chris asks without looking up.

"Sure," Wu says, "But I'll help. You need to support his neck because it's not very strong yet. He can't hold up his head."

Chris asks, "Is he sick?"

"Not sick, no, he's got Down Syndrome. It will just take him longer to do the things kids do."

Chris stretches out to take Harrison, but Kris says, "Now, you sit down, and you support Harrison. Sit in the kitchen."

They all move through the little home to a tiled room, and Chris takes a seat at a tiny square table in the centre.

"Support Harrison's back and his head like I'm doing, see?"

"Yes, mum."

"Don't drop him, just let him snuggle into your lap."

"OK, mum."

The child is passed on once more. Harrison and Chris gaze into each other's eyes as if they're each studying a complicated work of art. None can say what either man sees ahead of him at such a moment. The origin of all that has ever been and everything that is to come lies still and weak and useless in the lap of an old fool. Harrison's uncomprehending stare peers up from that place to which he had no choice in going, that stranger's lap. He is the very personification of potential. Chris is leering at the pink ball of flesh and seeing a thing that is the dawn of every single man on this planet; a curious image of a blank canvas before the world has an opportunity to impact upon the final appearance.

"He's cool," Chris mutters, but the women do not hear him over their chatting.

"What was that, darling?" Kris asks.

"Nothing, what are we eating?" Chris replies.

"Would you like to cook for us?"

"Yeah!"

Chris passes Harrison to Chris's mother, and Kris passes the baby on to Wu as the man in the room begins to rummage through the fridge.

"Did you name your son after yourself?" Wu asks.

"Sort of. I thought I was having a girl, and my name is actually Chrystal. He wanted to be the only Chris with a C, so now I'm Kris with a K."

"That's nice."

"We called him Junior in school, but when he got to high school, the other kids picked on him too much."

"Oh, that's terrible."

"He was picked on a lot."

"But not anymore," Chris announces as he looks back to the women, "Now it's just me and mum in the house all the time. Isn't that right mum?"

"That's right darling."

"Yep. Mum and me forever."

Kris leans in towards Wu and whispers, "He left for a while, but it didn't work out."

Wu nods and Kris asks, "Tea?"

"Yes, please."

"Me too, mum. Lots of sugar."

Wu adds, "Lots of sugar for me too please."

Chris turns and asks his guest "You like sweet stuff?"

"Yeah, I think sugar is one of nature's best gifts."

"Do you like spice? Chilli?"

"I'm from Thailand; I love chilli."

An expression of pure exaltation erupts over the face of the cook, and he says, "Chipotles are smoked jalapenos. They're the best. They come all the way from Mexico. We'll have them."

"All the way from Mexico? Brilliant. Sounds lovely."

"What does Harrison like?" Chris asks, and Wu replies, "Milk."

"We've got spearmint milk."

"No darling," Kris interjects, "breast milk. He's still feeding from his mother."

"Oh, OK. I wouldn't give a baby chipotles anyway. Babies don't like spicy. Babies like sweet, though; that's the best for babies."

A mug of tea is plunked in front of Wu, and she asks, "Does anyone else live in the house?"

"No, no. Just Chris and Kris in the cottage," Kris says with a chuckle and everyone laughs along. "Chris's father was not a good man. Is Harrison your first?"

Wu says, "No, he isn't. Wait, I mean yes. Yes, he is. The man who got me pregnant was bad too. I never—" she pauses for a moment, "Don't worry. I won't bore you with the story."

“Go on, tell us,” Kris urges as Chris concentrates on the pan over the stove.

Wu leans towards Kris and says, “I never even knew his name or anything.”

“Sometimes that’s for the best.”

“Yeah,” Chris barks into the small room, “my dad is a dick.”

As the mirth begins to die down, Kris asks, “Is it hard to be his mother. I mean, because of his medical problems.”

“It’s not the Downs that’s the problem, I don’t even think about it much anymore, I just feel blessed to have him. They’re so easy to lose, all kids. I’d do anything for my baby. But, yeah, the medical problems are tough. Harrison had surgery on his heart when he was only a few months old.”

“Is that common?”

“For Downs, yes, I think the doctors said about four in ten kids have heart problems. Harrison’s condition was a hole between a couple of chambers in his heart, but it was minor.”

“How is that minor?” Chris scoffs and immediately apologises.

“I know,” Wu smiles and shakes her head, “That’s what the doctors said. They said he needs open heart surgery, but they said I shouldn’t worry, it gets a lot worse. Some kids have bigger holes in their heart that damages all of the chambers. Harrison is fine now, mostly.” Wu is still smiling as she blurts out, “I just don’t want him to be dead,” and to her amazement, Kris takes her hand and says, “I know what you mean.”

A plate of food is laid in front of Wu.

“Wow,” she says as she looks down on the perfect dome of fresh tomatoes, red onion, basil and eggs.

“It’s a buttermilk omelette with raisins for the sweet and chipotle for the spicy. That’s a bruschetta mix on top because mums need fresh foods too,” Chris announces.

“That right, darling, we do,” Kris says.

Wu says, “Chris, this looks amazing. Where did you learn to cook like this?”



“Dunno. I mean, I didn’t learn anywhere, that’s just what tastes good. What would you like for the top?”

“Um, maple syrup?”

“Yep, we have maple syrup. But, can I make a suggestion?”

“Please do, you’re the expert.”

“How about a balsamic glaze? It’ll go better with the savoury stuff.”

Wu puts her fork down and starts a round of applause that carries on while the giggling man retrieves the needed condiment from a pantry.

Wu takes a few bites and stops to say, “Chris, really, this is the best breakfast I’ve ever had.”

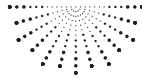
“The best breakfast is chicken and waffles.”

“That does sound good. I’ll bet your chicken and waffles are the best in town.”

“Yep, mum thinks so.”

Wu leans back over the meal and starts to eat once more as Kris asks, “So Wu, where are you headed?”

## HARP



Harp is standing outside a shopping centre with a slew of clear plastic bags at her feet. There's a huge complex of department stores behind her and families are moving into and out of the building as if they were all molecules of a single organism delivering and retrieving nutrients.

Harp watches the car park, and her mouth is curled down into a frown so miserable that it seems as though her lips have drooped, died and fallen there on the bottom of her face.

"Those bags look heavy miss, need a hand?"

The wrinkles on Harp's head rearrange to force the grimace into a grin, and she turns to see a young man about to pick up her bags.

"Thank you, but I'm just waiting for a friend," she notices a woman with a baby in a pram watching the boy and Harp calls out, "What a lovely young man you've raised."

"Yes, he's very polite."

The boy says, "Have a nice day," and he trots back to the mother.

When Harp turns back to the road, there's a blue ute parked up on the kerb and Sean is approaching her. There's a small red skull earring dangling from the side of his head, and he's wearing a white singlet, so his tribal chest tattoo is clearly visible.

"Making new friends?" he asks.

"What's that on the side of your head?"

"An earring."

"You're wearing women's jewellery."

"It's just a fuckin' earring."

"Watch your language."

"What?"

"I said, watch your language."

Sean's standing in front of Harp now, looking down at her and he spits on the path beside them.

Harp says, "Listen to me, I'm not angry at you, not yet. You seem to have a decent brain on your shoulders, I've seen better heads on boils, but at least your brain works."

"OK."

"You work for me now, and I do not hire thugs because they are worthless. A thug has no value whatsoever. You are not a gangster. You are a soldier. You are a warrior. If you conduct yourself deliberately, with strength, confidence and forethought, you will be more powerful than ninety percent of the fools I am going to ask you to kill. Do you understand?"

"Did I do something wrong? I brought you a good vehicle; it's legal, the cops aren't even looking for it."

"That's great, really, it is, but this occupation of yours is serious business. As soon as you meet a man who's better at your job than you, the chances that you'll be murdered increase immeasurably."

"That's pretty over the top."

"Do I seem like a woman who is unsure about this lifestyle?"

"No."

"Every word that comes out of your mouth, every item of clothing that's pulled onto your body must be deliberate. Everything you do should be calculated and planned, and you will never, ever react without some kind of cunning behind your actions. You have a cash-based business and, right now, you look and sound like a man who would be easy to abduct, torture, rob and bury in the desert."

"Jesus, I never thought of it like that."

"I promise you, I promise that some of the bad buggers you've already met in your life have considered killing you for your money."

Sean looks down at himself and scratches his brow. Then he unclips the earring and drops it into his pocket before meeting Harp's gaze again.

She says, "Do not wear jewellery. If you wear something cheap, your enemies will think you're bad at your job. If you wear something expensive, there's more value to robbing you. Wear dark clothes, because you work at night, and cover up the tattoo. You're white, a tribal tat makes you look like you're not happy with your lot in life and being a career criminal is a choice. You are happy with your situation because you chose to do the horrible things you do, get it? This lifestyle of yours is your preference, not your last resort."

"Yeah. I mean, yes. And I won't swear."

"Correct. Swearing is weak. It's an accidental outburst, and you must become a very deliberate person."

"OK."

"I know I sound like a boring schoolteacher, but you'll thank me someday when you've got a job like mine."

"I'm sure I will."

"Do you have any idea where Wu is?"

"No, the boys are searching, and I have people with an ear to the ground, but nothing has come up yet."

"It will. She'll screw up, and we'll find her."

"What will you do until then?"

"I'm going to head south," Harp says as she clutches a bag of the supplies. Sean picks up the others, a loaf of bread squashing as the bundle of bags mould together, and the pair of them move to the ute.

"Why south? Why not wait here in Sydney?" Sean asks.

"I'm not welcome."

"Because you run that massage parlour in Queensland? Why do the people down here care?"

"No, it's not that."

"Can't you tell me?"

"I could, but there's no point. If they send someone to hit me, I'm gone. You make no difference."

"So, tell me."

"You really want to know?"

"Yeah."

"Fine, it's not a secret," Harp shrugs. "I was a whore here, and I took over a small business."

"Took over?"

"It was a hostile takeover."

A pair of chuckles burst from Sean's lips, and he says, "I'll bet it was."

"Someone tried to knock me off, but they made a mistake. I was in the hospital for months, and the doctors said I'd walk with a stick for the rest of my life. The person who had organised the hit approached me after, and they told me to run. They said that they'd let me live if I left the country."

"So, you moved a few hours north?"

"Nope. I shot him twelve times with this tiny little .22 calibre rifle," Harp says, and with every word that leaves her mouth, the glimmer of joy in her eyes seems to grow brighter.

A man pushes a rattling trolley past the ute as Harp adds, "We were in a bar in Parramatta, and I was too weak to carry a serious weapon, hell, I fired a shotgun the other morning, and I thought the top of me was just going to fly away. The rifle was bolt action, so I had to fiddle with the mechanism between every shot, and between every shot, his begging became more pathetic. We had time for a whingeing, screaming conversation as I made my way through all the ammo I was carrying."

"I think I heard something about that."

"Maybe, it was forty years ago now."

"Forty? Whoa."

"Yes. He had two guys in an office out back, and the gutless fools threw bundles of cash out to try and get me to leave."

"What did you do?"

"I left the money on the floor, and I set the place on fire. His two

mates came running out, screaming, and I shot them both, but they lived.”

“You let them live?”

“I didn’t put much thought into it. I didn’t care about them either way; the job was over. I wouldn’t have shot them at all if they hadn’t thrown money at me.”

“How is throwing money at someone a bad thing?”

Harp bites her lip and looks back over her shoulder at a pair of children in matching uniforms as they chase each other in and out of the automatic doors to the shopping centre, giggling and tripping over their own feet.

She says, “They knew I was a whore, so they thought I’d just go away if they chucked some money at me. No one ever offered me cash until I asked for it after that day, and when I did ask for money, people paid, no problem.”

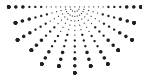
“So how did you end up in Queensland?”

“I was weak. I was savage, but realistically, I had no force behind me, and my body was trashed. I got a contract to move north; actually, it was more of an informal invitation. It wasn’t feasible for my enemies to come up and get me, I wasn’t worth the trouble.”

“And now you’re heading south.”

“And now I’m heading south.”

Sean asks, “Do you expect there will be more trouble down there,” and Harp replies, “There had better be,” before she enters the ute and drives away, leaving Sean behind.



Chris and Kris's cottage in Katoomba warms as the sun makes its way to a proper vantage point in the sky. Kris offers to change Harrison's diaper, and Wu rests on a couch in the living room.

She lies back with her feet on the floor, and her eyelids fall shut. Wu wakes in the evening in a frantic daze, and she runs around the small house calling out, "Harrison? Harrison?"

"Relax, it's all right, everything is fine," Kris assures Wu as she steps into the hallway, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Where's Harrison?"

"He's asleep in the other room."

Kris leads Wu to an upstairs bedroom, and Harrison is sleeping in a small, pink cot.

"I still had this from when Chris was young," Kris says, "so when you fell asleep, I thought I'd move Harrison into here for a while."

"Oh, thanks."

"No problem."

"What time is it?"

"About seven."

"Seven P.M.?"

"Yep."

"I'm so sorry. I'll get moving."

"No need, stay the night."

"I should get going."

"Don't rush off; it's nice to have guests. Stay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, no problem."

"OK. That sounds great, thanks."

Wu picks Harrison up, and the baby screams as soon as he's airborne. Wu feeds him, and the three of them move downstairs. Chris meets them in the kitchen, and they eat bowls of hot minestrone with spiral pasta, and Wu feels herself falling asleep again in an hour.

They move the cot downstairs in an awkward, shuffling triangle and set it beside the couch so Harrison and Wu can sleep side by side. The living room is filled with snoring and, in the morning, Wu wakes to a fantastically sweet smell radiating from the kitchen.

Wu follows the aroma and finds Chris making waffles in the kitchen. Kris is nowhere to be seen, but Wu sits at the table with Harrison and Chris says, "I make the fried chicken last because it's best hot."

"It smells amazing," Wu says.

"Thank you."

"Have you ever considered working in a kitchen? You'd make a great chef."

"Yeah, I wanted to. I did for a little while."

"What happened?"

"I worked at the pub, and people loved my food, everyone said my stuff was better than all the rest, but then they were mean to me."

"Why?"

"They were mean to me."

"What happened?"

"I didn't want to drink alcohol with them or go out to the parties or anything like that."

"And they were mean to you?"

"Yeah, they didn't like me."



"I'm so sorry."

"So are they. People ask me when I'm coming back to cooking. When I go shopping with mum, people ask when I'll be working in the kitchen again, and I tell them I had to leave because the others made me feel bad."

"That's so sad."

"Yeah, I was pretty upset. I liked the work, and the customers were all very nice, they always told me I did good, but the people weren't nice."

"And now no one gets to enjoy your food."

"Yeah, no one except mum and you and maybe Harrison when he's older."

"I'm sure Harrison will love that."

Chris places two steaming plates on the table, and there's a scoop of something pink melting on the top of the waffles.

"Kids are the best," Chris says.

"Are you going to have kids?"

"Definitely. My girlfriend wants them too."

"You have a girlfriend?"

"Yeah, Karolyn, she's the best. She rescues animals that get hit by cars."

"She's a vet?"

"No, she just works at the rescue place. She likes the animals. Possums are her favourite; mine too. We like their little hands," Chris says, and he wiggles his fingers like a possum beside his face.

"And does she like your cooking?"

"No."

"No? Really?"

"She's a vegetarian because she likes animals."

"So why don't you cook vegetarian food for her?"

"It's too hard. She doesn't even eat cheese or milk. Even Harrison has more fun with food than her."

Chris reaches out and tickles the baby's belly as Wu laughs.

Wu says, "I see. She's vegan."

"Yeah, but we walk on the mountains, and we pick the little leaves

that the animals like to eat. Karolyn likes that. She says we cook together for the animals she rescues, but we don't actually cook anything."

"That sounds lovely."

"Yeah. That's a mild strawberry semifreddo," Chris points to the pink ball on top of the waffles. He adds, "It's like ice cream, but not as hard. It's softer. It's only got a hint of strawberry because it's just supposed to sweeten the dish and cut through the habaneros."

"Habaneros? Like chillies? I don't see them."

Chris smiles and replies, "That's because they're diced up really small in the waffles. The waffles are very spicy, but the fried chicken is mild."

"It looks amazing," Wu says as she chops little sections of everything and bundles them into her mouth.

"Whoa, this is fantastic," she exclaims.

"Yeah, it's mum's favourite."

Wu takes a bite of the fried chicken on its own and says, "Does this chicken have sugar on it or something?"

"That's the best bit; it's a trick."

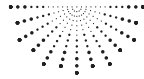
"What?"

"I use vanilla bean in the batter for the fried chicken and habaneros in the waffles. The chicken tastes sweet, and the waffles are spicy. It's a trick."

"Chris, you're a genius."

"Thanks. That's what people tell me when I cook."

## HARP



The blue ute's engine is rattling with a loud, spiralling rumble as Harp steps on the accelerator. She's past the tollbooths and the cameras, and Sydney is only a ridge upon the horizon behind her like the spinal plates of a long-dead dinosaur. Melbourne is a whole day away, but there are towns and cities and holes in which a woman with a baby could hide in between here and there. There are holes that need to be searched and scorched, and somewhere out there, on the burnt sand of this massive country, there is a child who clutches to the teat of a woman already bound to infanticide.

Harp pulls a small bread roll from one of the plastic bags beside her, and she chomps on the thing with crooked teeth and pale, cracked lips. The bonnet of the ute throws back single points of the sun's blinding reflection, and Harp squints with her already narrow eye sockets so that passing drivers wonder if she's fallen asleep.

She takes another bite of the bread roll, and she remembers the only legal occupation she's ever had. She worked in a bakery when she first arrived in Australia. It was in a little town in the Northern Territory, and the owner had made up a fake trophy that said, 'AUSTRALIA'S BEST PIE THREE YEARS RUNNING', but this

bakery had never made Australia's best pies. Harp would arrive at four A.M. every morning, seven days a week, and she would line small tins with thick sheets of defrosted pastry. She packed each pie with a measured scoop of filling, and placed a circular cap on the top, and cut a symbol in the cap to signify the variety. Then she cooked them, and, at eight A.M., Harp stood behind the counter and sold the little meals in white paper bags with single portions of tomato sauce. At three P.M., she would make the fillings for the next day, and by five-thirty, she'd be standing by the highway.

Harp would wait beside the long, bitumen road, and she'd watch the headlights of approaching road-trains, and she fondled her crotch as they passed. Most of them honked and continued driving, but some stopped. If a vehicle pulled over onto the dusty, red shoulder beside the highway, Harp would open the passenger side door, and the driver would ask, "Where you going?" and she'd say, "I don't mind as long as you give me twenty bucks."

Then she'd ride for a while with her head between the driver's legs, and when he dropped her off, she'd do the same back in the direction of the bakery. She tried to make one hundred dollars a night, and sometimes she made more. Sometimes she made nothing and, for the next week, the customers of the bakery would ask her, "Where did you get those nasty bruises?"

Harp takes another bite of the bread roll, and she remembers the night she didn't go back to the bakery. She sat in the passenger seat of the road-train, and a man named Devon let her sleep until they stopped for the night. He took her into the dark, lonely bush, and she woke the next day with horrible black marks around her neck. It took three days to get to Sydney, and when she got there, she couldn't find a job in a bakery.

THE BLUE UTE IS MANUAL, AND HARP'S ENTIRE BODY WAGGLES IN THE car seat as she reaches down for the gearshift with her left hand and throws out her left foot for the clutch. There is no music in her capsule, and the only sounds in her sectioned world are the motor and

the clicking of her munching jaw and her thoughts; Harp's incomprehensible thoughts.

The dark and horrible things dwelling in her mind are interrupted as a motorcycle begins to draw closer and closer and closer to Harp's ute's rear bumper. The motorbike is rattling up the space in between the car lanes and growing to a massive focal point in the rear-view mirror.

The biker accelerates beside her and bangs a hand on the roof of Harp's ute and points to the side of the road. Harp pulls the car onto a grassy patch beside a park, and the bike stops a few metres behind.

The rider does not dismount. Instead, this interceptor sits with a black helmet covering his face and a long-sleeved black shirt tucked into black gloves hiding every other inch of skin above his jeans.

Harp mutters, "Come on then. Where I'm sending you, no one likes to be left waiting."

The biker dismounts and strolls, still disguised, to the passenger side of the ute. The smell of male body odour fills the vehicle as this stranger opens the door and sits down, making the left-hand side of the ute dip below the right.

Harp slides her right hand down to sit beside her seat.

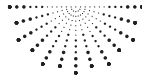
There is nothing there for her to grab and she holds nothing, but the masked rider says, "Harp, get your hand off that knife."

Harp answers, "You're sitting there like I invited you. Whoever you are, you're not welcome."

"Oh, come on mummy, is that the way you treat family?" he says as he removes the helmet. Harp puts both hands back on the wheel and shakes her head in long, disbelieving rotations.

"Do you remember me?" he asks, but Harp doesn't answer.

He says, "Should we go get a beer?" and Harp replies, "Haven't I bought you enough?"



*I*t's morning, and Kris says, "Don't worry about the cot, we can move that back later."

Wu is stretching her arms through the sleeves of a jacket as Harrison squirms on the cushions of the couch. The makeshift bedding in which Wu slept is folded neatly, and Harrison is swaddled properly again, prepared for the crisp morning outside the house.

Wu sits on the ground with Harrison in front of her. She places a pillow under the infant and moved him onto his belly.

Kris asks, "What's that you're doing?"

"It's a physio exercise," Wu says. "It's supposed to encourage Harrison to use his neck muscles. Strengthens his back too."

"All right, you look pretty comfortable. You can stay another night if you like," Kris says.

"Thanks, but I should be heading off." Wu raises the dreary-eyed infant to her shoulder and adds, "And thanks again for last night; I slept like a baby."

Kris points to Harrison and says, "And so did he, I'll bet."

The pair moves back towards the front of the house and Chris emerges from the kitchen.

"Where are you going now?" he asks.

"Just back to my car, it's parked a little ways out of town."

"Oh, all right, I'll walk with you."

"That would be nice."

Chris and Wu are making their way down the front path of the house, with Kris waving on the porch, when Chris asks, "Where are you going?"

"To my car."

"No, after that."

"I'm not sure."

"Why? Why are you leaving if you have nowhere to go?"

"I just have to."

"Why?"

Wu giggles a little and replies, "Actually, I'm just trying to find somewhere new."

"But not here?"

"No, I love it here, but I want to go a little further away," Wu clarifies as Chris shuts the gate behind them.

"Was someone mean to you?" he asks.

"Yeah, they were. Now I just want to be somewhere else."

Chris nods so passionately that his shoulders bounce with his head.

"I get it."

"Do you?"

"Yep. Know where I'd go?"

"Where?"

"It's called Balranald. It's a little town, not too far away, but far enough. I think it's a few hours' drive. I'm not sure."

"Why there?"

"Because it's built around a river and it's quiet."

"Do you like the water?"

"Not the beach, there's too much sand, but Balranald is different. It's very far inland, there's no ocean, but there's still a big river, and the bush is full of animals because there's not too many people there."

"That sounds nice."

Chris stops walking, and there's a peculiar, inquisitive look on his bald head.

"Will you go?" he asks.

"Um, well, actually yeah. Why not? You make it sound very peaceful."

"How will you stay there?"

"What?"

"Where will you live?"

"I'm not sure yet, maybe someone will be as nice as you and your mum."

"Nah, wait here," Chris says and he turns and starts to run back towards the house with long, lumbering strides. Kris is still on the porch, and she moves back into the house with him. In a moment, Chris reappears, and he's carrying a huge, green roll over his head.

The parcel is the size of a short bar-fridge and Kris gives Wu a thumbs-up from the front door of the house.

"This is a swag," Chris says as he returns to Wu and she nods along.

"You roll it out and sleep in it," he continues, "there's a mattress and a pillow inside. You'll fit in there with Harrison."

"Oh no, I couldn't take this off you."

"Yeah, take it. I want Harrison to be warm and safe. He'll like it in there."

"Really, Chris, it's lovely, but I can't."

Kris is still wagging a thumbs-up to the trio on the path.

She calls out, "It's fine."

Chris adds, "I only slept in it once. Now I have a bigger one that Karolyn fits in too."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, please take it. You can stay at the caravan park. They like kids there."

"OK. Great, thanks. How much do you want for it?"

"Just take it. It's a gift."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep."

. . .



AS THEY ARRIVE BACK AT THE CAR, CHRIS SAYS, "IT WAS LOVELY HAVING you stay with us."

"Thanks for inviting me, I had a great time."

"I don't know how far it is, not too far, but if you follow the main road through town and take a right when you get to the end, you'll get to Balranald."

"That's wonderful, thanks for all your help," Wu says as she clips Harrison into the bassinet in the backseat.

"No problem, seeya," Chris says.

Wu opens the door and sits behind the wheel and notices the thing she left up there on the dashboard. Chris is walking away, and Wu jumps back out of the car and takes a few steps towards him before he spins around.

"Take this, maybe your animals will like it," she says as she passes him the red flower.

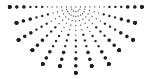
"Oh yeah, it's a waratah. Karolyn loves these."

"Give it to her then."

"I will. Drive safely," he says as he reaches out with his long, lanky arms and hugs Wu. Chris adds, "Seeya Harrison," and Wu turns over the ignition of the car to continue her escape. Katoomba is filed away in the bank of memories in her mind, and Harrison sleeps peacefully in the back of the car once again.

They drive away from the town, and the silence presses into Wu's ears again. She feels a horrible loneliness restrict her breathing, and she frowns as the vehicle accelerates, leaving everything behind again.

## HARP



Harp looks across at the motorcyclist sitting in her car, and he's staring right back into her eyes. The passenger has a skinny head with cheekbones that are so pointed they could be knuckles.

"You stink," Harp says.

"Come on, grandma. Let's get a beer."

"I know you're broke and I'm not giving you another cent. You won't get a beer out of me."

"Look, I know about the fire. I know Wu has taken my son," he snaps in quick little sentences.

"He's not your son."

"Yes, he is. Harrison is my boy. He's my blood."

"How do you know that?"

"Angela and I were engaged."

"Do you need a biology lesson?"

"What?"

"Asking a girl to marry you doesn't get her pregnant."

"I know she saw other men. Why do you think we—"

"You ran away from her because she was pregnant, not because

you finally figured out she was screwing half the blokes on your street."

The man's huge, round nostrils flare below his green eyes, and he says, "That's not what happened."

"Yeah, it is. You saw a scared little girl, who was becoming a scared little mother, in the piece-of-arse you liked to screw, and you ran away."

"I left because she cheated on me."

"You're an idiot, and you've always been an idiot. She loved other men the whole time you were together because she never liked you. She brought them home to me for family dinners, and we laughed at how thick you were. You weren't even the only one when you first met and fell in loooooove."

The man slams an open palm down on the dashboard of the car with a bam, then he slips that red and swollen palm behind him and pulls a thick revolver from a hiding place in the back of his jeans.

"You are a witch; do you know that?" he says as he sticks the muzzle into Harp's neck so forcefully that she starts to cough.

"You're not even human, are you? You're something else, something worse," he drones on, pressing Harp's neck to the window and crushing her gullet. She flicks in her seat, and the barrel slips from her neck and the man shuffles back so that his spine is pressed to the door and he's pointing the gun at her with both hands.

His breathing shaking, and he shouts, "What's in your hand? What do you have?" through twitching lips.

"Granite, do you really want to do this with a witch?"

"You don't have a gun, do you?"

Harp says nothing.

Granite says, "Don't move. This is a .38. It'll knock the top of your head clean off."

Granite pulls the cuff of his long sleeve shirt over his hand and the gun, so it's hidden under the fabric, and he steps out of the car. The street beside the parked blue ute has an intermittent stream of vehicles rolling over the top of it. Cars are whizzing along beside

Harp and Granite in quick flashes of colour and Granite glimpses at the traffic as he makes his way around to the driver's side door.

He opens the door and says, "I swear, I'll end you right now if you give me a reason."

"Are you a little nervous, young man?" Harp taunts.

"Shut up!"

Granite's eyes are wide with hatred, and his jaw is clenching and waving side to side intermittently as he points the concealed pistol at Harp. His other hand slips beside her seat and under the chair, then under her arse.

Harp mutters, "My daughter and me too? You're a real stud."

"Shut up! Damn you! Whore! Shut up!" he barks as he pushes her over to the side and slips his empty hand into the crevasse of the car seat.

Granite grins and steps back until the heels of his boots are on the bitumen of the road.

"I've got you, don't I?" he taunts, "I've caught the great, big, scary May Harp unarmed."

All the skin on his scrawny face is lifted by the massive grin, and he's laughing as a tow truck misses crushing him by no more than a few centimetres. The driver speeds past and releases a single, deafening honk.

All the muscles in Granite's tense body twitch.

The long-sleeved shirt hides the sight of the gunshot and the honking masks the sound, but as Granite's finger snaps back on the trigger, a bullet launches from the weapon. The sphere of lead slips past the blue ute, and it sends up a puff of sand as it buries itself in the park.

Harp shouts, "Jesus! Be careful, you idiot!"

"No, you be careful. You be careful!" Granite snarls, "You be careful, get it? You better watch it, Harp. I'll do you in, I will."

"What do you want?"

"We're going to find Wu."

"Seriously? You're going to follow me?"

"No. I'm riding with you," Granite announces, and he jogs around to enter the vehicle again.

When the pair of them are in, and the doors are locked, Harp asks, "What about the bike?"

"I don't care about the bike."

"So, what do you want? More money? I've given you enough."

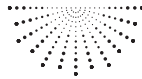
"No, I want to see my son. Drive."

Harp's thin fingers twist the key in the ignition, and she asks, "Why? Why do you want the kid?" as she steers back onto the road.

"Why do you want him?"

There's silence in the vehicle until Granite continues.

"I want to be a father. I'm going to raise that boy."



Wu follows Chris's simple directions away from Katoomba, but she does not see a sign for Balranald. She drives down out of the mountains, leaving behind those spectacular, voluptuous stones and she stops when she arrives in Bathurst. Once more, the tall angles of concrete and glass and steel replace the natural, rolling curves of nature. Once more, the wind blows through the town and nothing, save a few tall trees, sways or dips to its will; none of the bricks or windows breathe under the gentle caress of the breeze.

Harrison is crying, so Wu sits in the back seat with him and feeds him with a small towel draped over her chest. There are people moving up and down the sidewalk and a young boy, whose eyes sit naturally below the level of the car roof, stops to stare. Wu looks back at him, and the boy watches with a puzzled, concentrating expression as if he's trying to remember Wu's name. A large, hairy hand grabs at the boy's wrist and pulls him away before Harrison is content and Wu removes the towel.

Wu carries the infant over the footpath, and she stops for a minute to purchase and consume a steak, bacon and cheese pie. With grease on her fingers and a few tiny shards of pastry on her cheek, Wu

carries Harrison into a newsagent. She wanders up and down the aisles until she finds the map section. As she's paying for the map, she asks the droopy-eyed teenager behind the counter, "Do you know where Balranald is?"

"You on the way to Balranald? You wanna know where it is?"

"Yes, please, I'm going there this afternoon."

"Seriously? Balranald is about eight hours that way," he points, and Wu trudges out of the store.

She drives through the midday heat, and she's still driving when the sun goes down, and the world turns cold again. The radio cuts in and out as she drives through small towns and beside apple orchards lined with the thick trunks of trees that are, no doubt, more mature than the back-packers who Wu sees tending to them. Wu is still driving when all the shops and gas stations beside the road close up for the night. Harrison wakes intermittently, looks up at the world around him, cries until Wu reaches a soft hand back to soothe him and then falls asleep again.

Wu stops the vehicle one hundred kilometres before Balranald, and she sleeps in the back of the car with Harrison, his tiny hand reaching out to her in the darkness.

IN THE MORNING, WU PULLS INTO THE TOWN AT EXACTLY NINE A.M., no earlier, and she stops in front of the reception at the caravan park. A little bell jangles when Wu opens the door, and she can hear the soft words of a woman somewhere in the room, but she sees no one.

The building is a dark brown brick house, and there's a counter at one end of this room that makes it look like maybe it was once a private bar or a parlour of some sort. Within the confines of these walls are thin wooden shelves lined with containers of cereal, bread, chocolates, vegemite, tomato sauce, toothpaste, disposable razors and other travelling essentials. There's a wire rack wreathed with colourful key chains and magnets and tea towels, and they all say "Balranald" and they all cost a dollar and fifty cents, regardless of quality.

Wu carries Harrison over to a fridge full of soft drinks, and the little man reaches out to the cans that look like whole kegs when compared to his tiny form. On top of the fridge, there's a stack of fruit with a handwritten note that says, 'Politicians are like bananas. They go in green and come out yellow, and there isn't a straight one amongst the PRICKS!'

Wu laughs with a loud snort a woman calls out, "Just a minute!"

Wu replies, "No hurry, take your time," as she spins around and tries to find the origin of the pleasant female voice, but she can't find the attendant, and there is no space left in the room for a person to hide.

Wu wanders to the counter and stands in front of the cash register. A woman appears, crouching, behind the bar and Wu sees a small gap in the wall, only a metre high, that's hung with beads. The strange porthole looks more like something a dog would frequent, much less a grinning, welcoming woman.

"Hi there," the employee beams and Wu replies, "Good morning."

"Are you here to stay?"

"Yes please, I just need a camping spot."

"Lovely. It's eleven dollars a night, and you can choose your section from this map here." She points to a framed black and white drawing on the wall and says, "It's a little cooler in on the river at night, because of the wind, but the sunsets are nicer."

"I'll take somewhere warm please."

"Sure, in this corner here then." She points and writes something in a ledger and then asks, "Is she staying with you in the tent?" as she points to Harrison.

"Harrison will be, yes."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I have two girls and when I see young ones I just think of them."

"Don't worry, I met a woman yesterday whose son slept in a pink cot, and Harrison had a little nap in there, so he's certainly in touch with his feminine side."

The women giggle together, and all eyes are glued to the pink head of the infant.



"So, he's sleeping in the camp with you too?"

"Yes," Wu replies.

"That'll be fun for him, are you in the mood for a little adventure, Harrison?" there's silence for a moment as if she's waiting for a reply. "He's lovely, is he on solids yet?"

"Some. I was mixing in some cereal with the milk, but he hasn't taken to it yet. Travelling makes it difficult too."

"It's no big deal, trust me, one of mine started on the cereal mix at six months, and the other waited until almost a year. Just let me know if you need any more blankets or anything, we keep spares. I'm Gloria."

"Wu. I think I'll pay for a week in advance if that's all right?"

"Of course."

Wu hands over the cash and Gloria asks, "Do you need a receipt?"

"No, thanks."

"Great, you're just out there to the right. Number eighteen."

Wu is about to leave, but she stops suddenly and points to a little fridge that's sitting on top of a coffee table in the corner. The appliance says 'Coca-Cola' on it, but there is nothing inside except for a few foil trays of tiny, cooked crayfish tails.

"Are they for sale?" she asks.

"Yep. Five bucks a tray."

"Whoa, that's cheap."

"Yeah, my husband pulls the yabbies out of the river here in the camp, and he cooks them at night. Those ones are a day old, but they're still good. We'll have a fresh, hot batch coming out of the pot at around six tonight if you want them warm."

"Yeah, definitely."

"You look pretty excited, have you ever had them before?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You're in for a treat then. They're freshwater, so they're a little different to crab or lobster."

"All righty, well, you'll probably see me and Harrison tonight then."

"Splendid."

. . .

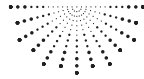
WU MOVES THE VEHICLE TO HER SPACE, TRAVELLING AT ONLY EIGHT kilometres an hour through the crowded campsite, and she leaves Harrison in the car while she retrieves the swag.

She unrolls the thing and lays it on the ground and looks down at it. It's a huge canvas sleeve, a metre and a half wide and over two metres long. It has a gaping open end like the mouth of a whale shark and Wu peers inside to find that it's complete with a thin mattress and pillow.

A single tent pole fell from the bundle as Wu carried it and now she uses the metal bar to prop open the gaping maw, and this erects the back of the massive sock so that it's now a tunnel of fabric.

"Nice," Wu mutters, and she retrieves Harrison and gently crawls into her new home.

## HARP



“So, where do you want to go?” Harp asks Granite. He’s sitting there with the pistol hidden in the little pocket on the ute’s door, and Harp looks over to him, a picture of wrinkled irritation. The world flies by the window in an anonymous blur of shoulders and street signs and shrubs.

Granite asks, “Where were you going? Did you have a plan?”

“You’re the boss now, don’t worry about me. Where do you want to go?”

Granite scoffs and says, “I know you’re looking properly. I know you got people out there searching.”

Harp replies, “So where are your people? What does your reconnaissance say?”

“Shut up. Where ya going?”

“Melbourne, but only because I didn’t have any better ideas. I don’t know where she is.”

“Really?” Granite pauses, but Harp doesn’t answer. He says, “Damn. I thought you were a bloody hot-shot. You should already know where she is.”

“I don’t.”

“Fine. Damn it. Let’s go to Melbourne.”

"What are you going to do when you find Wu?"

"Shut up."

"Let me guess: you want me to kill her, then you'll kill me and take Harrison? You get no points for originality."

"For God's sake Harp, just be quiet. I know what I'm doing."

"You know nothing," Harp says, "you're a child. You're just a baby yourself, and you want to be a dad? You're an idiot."

Granite pulls the gun back into view and asks, "And you're so smart? Going to Melbourne?"

"What's wrong with Melbourne?"

"Why would Wu go from one major city to another? She just got caught in Sydney. She just got found in a city full of millions of other people, and you reckon she's gonna do the same thing again?"

Harp waits a moment and the line that creases her brow reveals that some new consideration is passing through her brain.

"It's the only option I've got," she says.

"Harp, it's the only option we've got."

"No. I want nothing to do with you. I made that clear two years ago."

"You paid me to leave your daughter alone. The arrangement was made before Harrison was even born. That kid out there with that baby-killing slut did not exist when we shook hands."

"That was the one, and only time I will ever shake your hand or make a deal with you. We're not lawyers; there is no defining contract in this. I paid you to disappear, and you're back on a technicality. Our lives are not as black and white as the lives of all those people out there," Harp falls silent as she waves a hand in front of her, gesturing at the world into which they drive. She says, "I say you've broken our deal and—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've heard this all before. You're the toughest and the nastiest and the best connected, and you'll kill me the first chance you get. Guess what? You don't have the gun, and no one will give a damn when I cut you up and bury you in pieces in the desert. Will they?"

"You talk tough, but how do you plan on cutting me up? It's not an

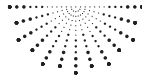
easy task; trust me. Did you bring a chainsaw? Are there a bolt cutters hidden in those skinny jeans? Do you know how to cut a ligament? What will you do if the ground is too hard to dig? And where's your shovel? Where's the axe to get you through the tree roots? You have no idea what you're doing."

"No one will care, will they? No one will care when you disappear?"

"OK, tough guy. Sit there with your smirk. Tell me you're in charge. Make me sweat. In three hours, I call a number and the man on the other end of the line will tell me what I want to know. He's going to tell me if Wu can be found yet. Then he's going to do whatever I ask of him. How long do you think you'll last if I tell him a fool named Granite has taken me hostage?"

"Shut up. I don't—"

"In three hours, we might know where Wu is. Are you going to make me disappear before then?"



It is not night yet, but Wu has been lying in the swag for a few hours, and she cannot nap, but Harrison has not woken once. Wu can see his smiling face in the green dim of the swag, and there's more room in here than they need, but their heads are almost pressed together in the sanctuary. Their bodies and their souls are bound in that fabric womb, and Wu calls the child 'David' as she whispers to him and softly strokes the thin wisps of hair on his head.

The canvas barrier muffles the sounds of the world outside, but the noises of children laughing, and the dull thuds of feet hitting footties are audible in the hideaway.

"It's all right sunshine. We're OK. Don't be afraid, David. I'll never leave you again."

The child's eyes open as slowly as the passing of a cloud, and he's given the nipple before he begins to ask for it.

When Harrison is done, Wu exits the little tent and carries the infant away from the caravan park. She walks, and Harrison's face mirrors her expression of wonder and curiosity. The pair find a thin river, and they watch teenagers without shoes standing on the bank with fishing rods. The young people, three boys and two girls, pass a pair of short rods between them and they don't bother checking the

bait or keeping the line taught. One of the girls glances around, then takes a huge sip on a pink water bottle. Her face contorts in disgust, and a boy takes the obvious liquor from her. He places a small, hairless hand on her arse and she presses her chest against him as he drinks. His expression holds strong and adult until he exhales, and the girl grimaces in the cloud of his breath.

The girl and the boy linger there, holding one another, and they look deep into each other's virgin eyes. Wu looks down to Harrison, and he's staring up at her. All four of them in that clear patch of trickling water, including Harrison, are wondering if any of the other billions of people on the planet feel the same as they do. They wonder if they are somehow unique in the line of evolution and the trillions of humans who have wandered this rock and loved and given birth and died, all in the same order as one another. All now dead bar this fresh, temporary spattering of ageing and itinerant souls.

Harrison sleeps some more on the bank of the river, and so does one of the young men fishing. The pair of them look strangely similar with their limbs curled in to rest against their torsos and one of the young women points Harrison out to the others. They giggle and drink from the bottle again.

Wu walks away from the river in the late afternoon, and she finds a second-hand bookstore. There are large paperbacks in the window, and the names of the authors of these tomes are printed bigger than the titles on the cover. She moves into the shop and her feet clunk on the dark wood floorboards as she searches for the classics section.

Wu purchases a little orange book with a penguin on the cover, and as she's paying for it, the expert at the counter asks, "And for him?" nodding at Harrison.

"He can't read yet."

"I mean, maybe you'd like to read to him."

"I know. Sorry, I was just playing. What do you recommend?"

"What does he like?"

"Milk and crying, but I doubt you've got either of those to spare."

The woman's eyes narrow in a quick snap of shock, then she

smiles and asks, "Do you think he'd like a baby book, or would you rather read him something that you'll enjoy too."

"Is this appropriate?"

Wu points to the novel she's just purchased, and the saleswoman shakes her head with disgust, "No, not for a child, Lord no. You don't want to expose him to any of that at such a young age. Has he heard the story of Captain Nemo?"

"The fish?"

"No dear, not the fish."

Wu walks out with a second novel, this one about the sea, and she wanders slowly back towards the campsite.

Beside the road, there's a tin roof above a table, and this table is lined with magnificent bags of oranges. In the centre of this array is a piggy bank and on it is written two single symbols: \$1

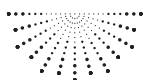
Wu grins to herself and drops a dollar in the charity box before snatching up some of the treats. She returns home and shuffles into the swag again and begins to peel away the skin of the fruits with her hands outstretched, hovering above the sand outside.

Sweet juice drips onto the ground, and Harrison watches, squirming in the limited space beside Wu.

"I could stay here forever," Wu tells him as she takes her first bite.



## HARP



Harp is sitting in a pub beside a thin country road, and the doors to this place are all pressed shut against the cold. Granite has half a jug of beer in front of him beside a schooner glass, and neither of these killers knows where they are in Victoria. Neither cares.

The globes that light this sleepy place are all yellow, and they all hang from thick black wires and only half of them work. The dirty windows block the brilliance of the sun, and they're too dirty to be seen out of, so they look like hazy vertical skylights pressed into the brickwork. The sun is setting, and these vertical skylights are turning more and more amber by the minute.

The only other person in attendance is the haggard barkeep, and he pays no attention to the customers, save for when their glasses are plunked back down on the bar empty.

Granite asks Wu, "Are you callin' them or are they callin' you?"

"Think about that question for a minute and see if you can answer it without any help."

"Just tell me."

"How could they possibly know where we are? How could I have

organised to have a conversation from this particular pub? We don't even know where we are."

"You're supposed to be tracking someone down," Granite pauses to drain the glass and top it up from his dwindling jug. "I thought you might have a technique or something."

"A technique?"

"Yeah," Granite finishes as he downs the rest of the liquid and calls out, "Another, thanks mate."

The bartender pours another jug and wanders over with it, and he says, "You need a second glass?"

"Nah, and it's her shout," Granite answers.

"It's her shout again?"

Harp nods and places a ten-dollar bill on the counter and says, "This little pervert wouldn't shout if a shark bit him."

The barman bursts into a fit of hysterics with his sideburns forced away from each other by the chuckling mouth like two lovers waiting on opposite sides of an earthquake.

"Just call them now," Granite urges as the barman places a couple of gold coins in front of Harp before he strolls away again to stand over an open, glossy magazine.

"Not yet. Not till six."

"Just call them."

"No."

"I can make you call them."

"Fine. Then they'll know something is wrong. I'll call when I said I'd call. I've never done it any differently."

"Fine. We'll wait, but if you tell them anything about me—"

"Yep. I'm dead. I got it," Harp says.

Granite leans in so close to Harp that the beer on his breath forms a thin mist on the side of her ear and he says, "I would love to put a hole in your forehead."

"I know, but you need me. Isn't the world an annoying little place?"

They both sit on the high stools at the counter, and Harp's gaze stays fixed to the polished mirror behind the bar. Granite drinks some

more and orders another jug of beer, and then he hops down and takes a step toward the toilets.

"Wait a sec," he says, and he turns and looks into the reflection of Harp's face in the mirror.

She's grinning, and she asks, "Is there a problem? Off you go; I'll just wait here."

"Damn it."

Granite glimpses over to the barman and sees he's got his back to them while he pours the next drink. Granite grabs Harp by the arm and drags her to the men's toilet with a few quick paces. He pushes her towards the far end of the long urinal, and he points the gun at her.

"I'm not running," she says.

"Good, wait there," Granite says as he turns slightly away from her and fiddles with his fly.

Harp says, "Why would I run away when I've got such a lovely view here?"

"Shut up!"

When Granite starts to piss, Harp says, "I don't know what my daughter saw in you, I sure can't see much now."

"Shut up! Damn it, woman!"

"Granite, it's—"

"No."

"Granite, it's—"

"NO!"

"It's six o'clock."

"Damn it!" he shouts as he returns his member to its hiding place and ushers Harp back out into the bar.

"Can I please use your phone?" Harp calls out across the room.

The barman glances up and replies, "No. No phone."

"Please, come on mate," Granite adds.

"I said no. Get lost."

"You'd better be careful," Harp says, "he's really tough."

The barman laughs, and Harp slowly makes her way towards him, the hiking stick releasing a loud tap every time it hits the ground.

"The thing is," Harp begins over the tap, tap, tap. "Thing is, my niece was actually robbed here a week ago."

"Robbed?" the barman replies as his attention moves from the magazine to Harp.

"Yeah, her purse was stolen while she was in the bathroom and I was just going to let her know that you have cameras in here, so she can look into the incident."

"There aren't any cameras in here."

"What about those?" Harp points to the corners of the room.

"Nah, they're just for show."

"Really? I feel like you're just saying that to get me to leave you alone. If you have the tapes, I can take them now, no skin off your nose. Then you won't see us again."

"Lady, they don't work. Go home."

"Well, what about the ones out front?"

"Urgh," the barman begins, and he turns to wave his hands at Harp and shout, "They don't work, they're just a deterrent, we don't want to film no one, now get outta here."

He turns back and, while he's still muttering to himself, Harp hoists one of the heavy stools above her head. Her spine trembles and shudders under the weight, but she brings the wooden seat down on him with all the force and momentum she can muster.

"Nah!" Granite blurts out as the barman is thrown forward over the magazine and he rolls back onto the tiled floor. He's lying on the ground with both arms extended above his head and Harp steps over the battered fool. She picks up a bottle of bourbon in one hand and a bottle of rum in the other, and she smashes them, one by one, into the thin skin over his forehead. Blood swirls through the pooling alcohol in thin, defined streams.

Granite blubbers, "Oh Jesus. Oh, Christ Harp, you done it now."

"Shut your mouth."

"You killed him."

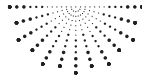
"No, if I were killing him I'd put the bottles in his mouth or his neck."

Granite is standing on the other side of the counter, and he's pointing the gun at Harp in a trembling fist.

"Do you see the phone?" she asks.

"What?"

"The phone. Where is the phone? I told you, I always call on time."



At six o'clock in the afternoon, Wu carries Harrison to the reception of the caravan park. A crowd has gathered around the building, and everyone over the age of sixteen seems to be drinking beer from a tin can sleeved in foam or neoprene. There's a large family, three adults and four kids, huddled around a gazebo closer to the water as if they're afraid that the thing will fall over and wash away without their body weight to hold it there.

Wu doesn't recognise anyone, not even Gloria (the woman she met that morning) but she nods to the friendly faces, and she makes her way to the front of the pack. Ahead of the congregation is a small pit with the red coals of a fire smouldering away within it. On top of the coals is a huge cauldron suspended on two long, cracked and rusted crowbars.

Three men toil over the boiling water, and they're bringing a dead, red ball of yabbies out of the heat with a steel net on a broom handle. A woman in a Geelong football jersey is cracking the cooked animals in half and preparing them for consumption. She has pink and raw fingers, but she doesn't seem to notice as she tears the meat from the shells and places it on trays in a cloud of steam.

"Five bucks, thanks," she calls out when a pile of trays has been

constructed beside her. A young boy takes the money from the strangers and says, "Cheers," to every single hungry face as he tucks the cash into a bum-bag on his right hip.

WU SITS WITH HER DINNER BESIDE THE RIVER, AND HARRISON WATCHES a pair of ducks swimming in concentric circles. Wu picks up one of the boiled mouthfuls, and she's about to take a bite when she hears, "Wait, Wu, wait a sec."

Gloria is shuffling down the bank towards her. She's holding a jar of something orange and calling out, "Try them with this, it's the best."

"Thanks," Wu says as Gloria passes her the jar.

"It's just seafood sauce with a little extra sugar, but they're ten times as good with that sauce."

"Great, they look lovely."

Wu dunks the fat end of a yabby tail into the jar, and she stuffs the dripping morsel into her mouth. She chews and smiles, and Gloria says, "Good, huh?"

"Bloody good, thanks."

"No worries. So, you having fun here?"

"Yeah, today I—" Wu starts to say something, but she coughs instead.

"Oh," Gloria says, "need a glass of water?"

"No thanks," Wu replies as she releases another rasping cough.

"Are you all right? You don't look too flash."

"Yeah, I'm fine, a little got caught in my throat."

Wu says as he coughs again.

"It's just," Wu splutters and spits on the ground between her feet. "It's just," she pauses and swears and adds, "my mouth is a little tingly."

"Tingly?"

"Yeah and, I dunno."

"What?" Gloria pats Wu on the back and says, "I'll get you a glass of water?"

"I can't breathe."

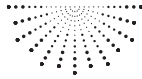
"What?!"

"I can't breathe," Wu repeats as she falls back onto the bank, and Harrison begins to cry.

Wu stands up in a quick motion, and Gloria asks, "What's wrong?" but Wu can't reply. She bends down to get Harrison, but as soon as her head is as low as her hips, she topples over.

Gloria leaps up and shouts, "Someone call an ambulance!" as Wu rolls down the riverbank clutching at her throat and reaching up to Harrison.





Harp is standing over the top of the battered and bleeding bartender with the boxy cradle for a phone in one hand and the earpiece in the other. She feels the barrel of the gun pressed to her temple as she winds the dial to connect the call and waits while the dull ring tone drones on.

Granite says, "Don't start anything. Don't start something I have to end."

"Yeah?" someone asks on the other end of the phone line.

"Where is she?" Harp says.

"Who is this?"

"Where is she?"

There's no response for a while, and Harp can hear a muffled conversation on the other end of the line.

"Where is she?" she repeats.

"W- we don't know," the voice on the phone stutters.

"Put Sean on the line."

"Sean isn't here."

"Where is he?"

"We don't know. What do you want us to do?"

Harp hangs up without responding, and she starts swearing in Mandarin.

Granite asks, "What they say?"

Harp stomps down on the unconscious bartender below her, screeching her fury in short, chaotic squawks and destroying the face of the man on the ground with her heel.

"Jesus Christ, Harp, settle. What did they say?" Granite asks.

"What do you think? Do I look like a woman who's got what she wants?"

"Damn it. Well, we'd better get going. If someone comes in now, we're screwed."

Granite vaults over the bar and grabs a few beers from the fridge. He snatches a bottle of whisky from the top shelf and points toward the door with the pistol. The two of them move out to the car, and they speed from the parking lot with a plume of gravel and orange dirt projecting out behind them.

"WHERE SHOULD WE GO?" GRANITE ASKS AS THE COUNTRY ROAD unravels behind them.

"Melbourne."

"She's not going to Melbourne."

"Do you have a better idea? Really, I'd love to hear your thoughts."

Granite sits silently fingering the mechanisms of the revolver on his lap.

Harp says, "We'll go to Melbourne, and I'll call them again in four hours."

"Damn it, this is going to take forever," Granite says as he pulls a beer from under his seat and cracks the top. He drinks it, and then he drinks the other two beers, and it's been almost an hour since they left the bar when Harp reaches an overtaking lane on the thin highway.

Paddocks surround the road, and they haven't seen another driver for about ten minutes. It's dark, and the world ahead of the car is illuminated by two triangles of yellow light running from the front bumper, but without any trees or shrubbery lining the ditches

here, there is very little for the light to fall on. The overtaking lane on the straight, bitumen strip stretches out to give the car more space.

All of a sudden, a pair of headlights appears on the road behind them, and the driver speeds past the blue ute in a single, rapid thrust. Harp watches the reckless motorist as he moves his car in front of Harp's and slows right down.

Harp slams on the breaks and the two vehicles drop to a crawling speed amidst the sound of screeching tyres.

"What's this jerk doing? Is he messing with us?" Granite asks. Harp doesn't respond and Granite winds down his window to yell at the stranger.

"Get out of the bloody way!" he shouts before ordering, "Come on, Harp, pass this prick."

Harp moves into the right lane and accelerates to get around the other car. A yellow sign saying 'Overtaking lane ending in 500m' slips past the duelling vehicles.

Harp pulls the ute up beside the other car and Granite yells, "What's wrong with you?!" as the driver rolls down his window.

Granite takes a deep breath as if he's about to shout again, but Harp reaches down, leans on the gun that's still in Granite's hand and stuffs the muzzle into his groin.

"Get off!" Granite barks as he looks to Harp and snatches the weapon up to his chest. As Granite turns his attention back to the other driver, the other driver reaches out of his car, into Harp's ute, and jams a long-handled knife into Granite's shoulder.

Granite screams in pain and swears and wraps the fingers of one hand around the attacker's arm while he aims the pistol.

"I'll kill you!" Granite shrieks. "You're dead!"

Harp slams on the vehicle's brakes and everything that's not strapped down is thrown forward. There's a tube of lip balm, a pair of sunglasses, Harp's hiking stick and the gun airborne in the car as it skids to a halt beside the road.

The ute has stopped and, in the light of the dashboard, Granite is trying to slide down into the space at his feet where the gun has been

thrown. He's still shrieking, and he's trying to slip down into the small space without agitating the massive knife that's stuck in his shoulder.

Harp undoes her seatbelt with a flick of her scrawny wrist. She pounces on the top of Granite with both of her arms and all of her fingers extended like the talons of a striking falcon. She presses him down in the pit of the passenger seat, and Granite bellows, "WITCH!" before she pulls the blade from him and plunges it back into his left lung, lower down his chest.

He's bucking like a furious, wild horse and Harp's weight is thrown back to her side of the car. She pulls the handle on the door and leaps from the vehicle and lies flat on her belly in the dirt.

Three quick gunshots sound, bang, bang, bang! And a hail of glass follows Harp onto the thin grass. The other vehicle has stopped behind them, and two feet step out of the driver's side.

Harp shouts, "Wait! Give it a minute!"

The feet retreat into the blackness behind both cars and Harp crawls on her guts toward the back of the ute.

"Stay back!" she yells out into the darkness.

The passenger door of the ute opens, and Granite's feet shuffle clumsily in the night. There is no more screaming, only a wet, strangled gargle. Harp crawls to the back of the vehicle, beside the rear left-hand wheel, and two more pistol shots snap off, bang, bang! With the flashes and stink of burnt powder in the country blackness.

Harp scrambles to her feet and charges at the limping, whimpering Granite with her shoulders slumped forward in the absence of her hiking stick. She pounces with both feet leaving the ground and her clothes fanning around her so that she looks like something drifting through water. Harp's chest collides with Granite, and she grabs the knife again with both talons. She slashes it up towards his face, cutting everything between his diaphragm and forehead in a wobbling trench. When she rolls off of Harrison's dad a second later, the life has left the young father.

Harp lies on the ground for a moment, stretching her spine in the pool of blood.

"Is he dead?" Sean asks as he sprints up to the slaughter. "Harp, are you there? I can't see nothing out here! Where are you? Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm on the ground over here. I'm good. He's stuffed. No worries."

"Jesus, sorry I left you like that, I couldn't think of any other way to get him. I couldn't get his neck properly, just the shoulder. I don't have a gun on me."

"Nah, don't apologise. That was inspirational."

Sean helps Harp to her feet, and she regards him in the half-light of the ute and says, "Why are you still wearing that singlet? I told you to dress better."

"Really? You're going to hassle me about my shirt after all that?"

Harp doesn't reply, so Sean adds, "I haven't been home, I followed you from the shopping centre."

"You followed me the whole way?"

"After that story, you told me, I was only going to watch you out of Sydney. I saw the biker with a gun, and I assumed you'd drop him at some point. Who is he?"

"He's Harrison's father, Granite."

"What? No, who is he? What's his actual name?"

"That's his name. Granite."

"He calls himself Granite?"

"No, his name is actually Granite. That's what his parents called him."

The sound of quick, adrenaline-laced chuckles can be heard over the clicking of crickets, and the distant bah of sheep and Sean says, "There's something else."

"What?"

"A woman at a campground in Balranald, with no documents, has been taken to the hospital. She's Thai, no paperwork or identification, sleeping in a campsite. It could be Wu."

"Good. Sounds like she's heading west. We'll burn Granite's body with the ute, and we'll be there by morning. Is Harrison all right?"

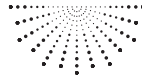
"I don't know. I've got no reason to think he's not. We just heard the emergency ambulance transmission, and it only concerned the

patient who'd just arrived in town that morning, and no one knows who she is."

"All right. Put him back in the driver's side, and I'll get anything of mine out of the ute. I've got some clothes in there."

Harp gathers up the bags and her hiking stick, and she's unscrewed the fuel tank cap. She is fiddling with a short hose when Sean says, "What do you want me to do? Go back and get the others?"

"Nah, they'll just get in the way. You and me can sort this out. You drive, and we'll get the whore together."



Wu is lying on her back on a hospital bed, and she still feels the dwindling remains of the anaphylactic shock in her system. The blood is pumping through her body as if she's finishing a middle-distance race, but she has not moved in an hour.

"I really need to go," she says to a passing nurse.

"Darling, relax. Gloria has Harrison safe and sound. He'll be waiting for you in the morning."

Wu turns and looks at the emergency ward around her. The curtains that could divide the space are thick and lime-green, but they're all bunched up against the wall. There are six other beds here that are made up with blue sheets and porous white blankets, and they're all pointed towards the centre of the space. It's small and quiet, and only one other person is being attended to; a drunken old man with a cut on his foot who drifts between sleep and incoherent grumbles.

The nurse returns and asks, "How are you feeling now?"

"Much better, that was scary," Wu says.

"Yes, it always is. Don't worry. You're fine now. I'll just get my forms, and we'll fill out your details, all right?"

"Yes, of course, thank you."

The nurse walks away for a moment, but by the time she returns, Wu has already gathered up her belongings and fled the building.

SHE MOVES QUICKLY THROUGH THE NIGHT, AND THE COOL AIR FEELS thin and icy on her red cheeks. Her breath leaves her in a rapid, puffing mist that's caught in the lights of the quiet, country street. She presses her hands to her face, and although her fingers and her cheeks are freezing, her head feels like it's cooking. Wu watches the windows of the houses she walks past, and she imagines the people within them. She imagines safety and warmth and comfort, but she sees no people, and she only hears the occasional cluck of a chicken or bark of a dog.

A solitary man rides a bicycle up behind Wu, and he passes her in a flurry of pumping legs. There are no lights or reflective strips on his bike, and Wu says, "Be careful, it's dangerous," into the night, but the cyclist disappears into the blackness, and Wu can barely hear the clicking of his bike chain.

WU MAKES IT BACK TO THE CAMPSITE ON FOOT, AND SHE TAPS ON THE door to the reception. No one answers, and there are no sounds coming from inside, so Wu moves around the building knocking on windows and calling out, "Gloria? Gloria? Where's Harrison?"

One of the windows suddenly glows with light, and dull footsteps approach the back door.

"Wu, You're back? That was fast," Gloria says as she emerges from the house. She adds, "How are you feeling?" before Wu can comment.

"I'm fine."

"Fine?" Gloria places her cool palms on Wu's jaw.

"I'm good. I'm perfect."

"I didn't think you'd be back so quickly. Allergies like that are pretty serious."

"Yeah, well, it was a simple fix. A quick jab."



"That's great, do you want to see Harrison? Of course you do, I'll get him."

Gloria retreats into the home and calls back, "Come in, don't stand out there in the cold."

Wu takes three steps over a floor lined with rectangular tiles no bigger than squares of a chocolate block before she sees Harrison being carried back towards her.

"He's been an angel. I thought he'd start screaming as soon as his mother was out of sight, but he went straight to sleep."

"Come here, sunshine," Wu whispers as she holds the infant, "I won't leave you again, I promise."

Gloria says, "You can stay in here tonight, there's a spare room, and it's warm."

"No. Thanks, but I think I'll go back to the swag."

"A swag?" Gloria shouts, "You can't sleep in a swag after all you've been through."

"I'll be fine."

"Come on, I insist."

"No, no I—"

"I insist."

"I'd rather—"

"Come on—"

"I said no!"

The two of them breathe in and out in time with one another for a moment, the awkward silence stretching out between them.

"I'm sorry," Wu says.

"It's OK."

"I'm sorry, I just," she pauses, "I just, well, everyone at the hospital was bossing me around, and I'd just like my own space."

"Of course, you know where I am if you need me."

Wu thanks Gloria again and promises to visit in the morning, but she's fled again before breakfast.

## HARP



Sean and Harp are moving through Balranald in the early hours of the day and Sean is driving, his hands almost touching at the peak of the steering wheel. They slowly drive past the medical station and a boat ramp and a second-hand bookstore. No one is moving around so early in the day, and both sets of their eyes turn to survey the scene from deep, black pockets.

"Where are you from?" Harp asks.

"New Zealand, Auckland."

"You don't have an accent."

"I came here when I was young."

"Is that why you have the tribal tattoo?"

Sean nods, his gaze still concentrating on the dreary world outside.

"So, you think you have some connection to the tribes out there then?"

Sean grins and says, "My grandfather on my mum's side raised me. He's Maori."

"You're very white."

Sean's grin stretches until his teeth are visible, and he says, "So is Harrison. Maybe he'll get an Asian tat someday."

. . .

THEY PULL INTO THE CAMPSITE, AND THERE IS ONLY ONE MAN MOVING around. He's carrying a roll of toilet paper and a toothbrush, and he doesn't look anywhere other than straight ahead, towards a caravan sitting up on concrete blocks.

Sean announces, "This is the spot the ambulance was called to. She was staying here, or she was just eating here, something."

Harp opens her door and takes a second to twist and stretch her back on the dashboard of the vehicle before stepping out.

"If it was Wu," she says, "she'll be gone already."

"Yeah, but this is a better place to start than Melbourne."

They walk up to reception, watching the borders of the caravan park, and Harp knocks on the door. No one answers, so Sean bangs on the wood until someone swears at him from inside and appears.

"What? It's so early. We're not open yet. Can't you read the signs?" Gloria snaps.

"We're looking for someone," Sean says, and Harp moves to stand in front of him.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you," Harp says, "but we're looking for our friend and, guess what I've done?" she lets out a fake giggle and pats Sean on the shoulder. "I've gone and forgotten where she told us she was staying."

Gloria says nothing; she just looks out at the two exhausted travellers on her doorstep from a face scrunched into a mix of agitation and concern.

"My friend is a young Asian lady named Wu, and she has a small boy with her. His name is Harrison; he's a real sweetheart. Have you seen them?"

Gloria takes another moment to inspect the pair, and she says, "No, sorry. I haven't seen anyone like that."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, sorry. I would know if they were here. I work on the front desk."

"Oh, really? That's too bad," Harp exhales and turns to ask Sean, "Where do you think she could be then?"

"I dunno," Sean says with a shrug.

Harp looks back at Gloria and says, "I'm actually a little worried because we were supposed to meet last night. I have some medicine for Harrison and Wu was supposed to pick it up."

"Really?"

"Yes, I mean, I hope it's not urgent. What do you think? Harrison takes it regularly, for his lungs, he wheezes, you know? He's not well. He had a heart problem, because of his disability, you know? And when the little ones have trouble with their hearts, they get problems all over. Harrison needs medication for his lungs. But I guess he could go without for one day. Maybe I should call the police or someone? They can find people. I'd hate to think the young man was ill," Harp says.

"Oh, he wheezes? Because of the Down Syndrome?"

"That's right, poor little angel. His chest just gets so tight. The doctors say he's always at risk of an infection. I think Wu might have some of the medication, the stuff Harrison takes every day, maybe, but she doesn't have the emergency medicine. That's the one she needs to give him immediately when he has a serious problem."

"Oh? Oh, no, um, did you say Harrison?" Gloria asks.

"Yes, that's right."

"Oh, yeah, I think, maybe I do remember them. Wu had an allergic reaction and had to go to the hospital, so she wouldn't have been able to meet with you."

"Oh no, is she all right?" Harp asks as she brings her hands up to her face in a façade of concern.

"Yes, she's fine. I saw her later on last night when she got back. She's fine, don't worry. I'll take you to her now," Gloria says, and she steps out of the house.

"Oh, you're wonderful, a lifesaver," Harp says, "Thank you very, very much."

Sean and Harp glimpse at each other before following Gloria over the bare grass.

"Wait a moment," Gloria says, "this is their spot."

"Right here?" Sean asks as he looks down on an exposed and empty patch of ground.

"Yeah, I don't understand. Wu paid for a week in advance."

"She's a strange one," Harp adds. "Did she say where she was going?"

"No."

"She didn't mention a direction or anything?"

"No. Oh, this is terrible, what about Harrison's medicine?"

"Yeah, he's in trouble."

"Oh no, well, most people travelling through are on the way East. I suppose she could be heading to Sydney or Melbourne."

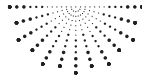
"No, I doubt it. She just left Sydney."

"Probably Adelaide then," Gloria finishes.

"Yeah, I think we'll try to catch her in Adelaide."

"Did you want me to call the police for you?"

"No, thank you."



Wu does not stop driving, save for relieving herself and changing Harrison, until she reaches Port Augusta. She sleeps for five hours in the swag beside the road, and the wind blowing up from that nearby Southern Ocean is so cold that she's woken every time she accidentally touches the canvas of the swag. She trembles through the night, and she presses Harrison to her, and he grips at the fat roll below her chin.

Wu's on the move again before daybreak, and she takes an hour-long nap in the middle of the day. When the sun is up, the metal on the outside of the car is so hot that Wu instinctively stands an extra pace away from the vehicle while she's filling the car with petrol. At night, the temperature in the desert around her drops so low that both Harrison and Wu's noses constantly run and she's afraid the young man will fall ill.

She drives over long, straight roads and the huge, rectangular bodies of wombats killed by cars lie still and lifeless beside the bitumen. The paddocks here are full of crops or sheep with brown wool. Not brown by birth, but brown from the dirt of the dry land that's constantly kicked up by their lethargic, warm hooves.

Wu stops earlier than she has in the past, pulling into a motor inn

at only four o'clock in the afternoon. She's allocated a room by the highway, and she sits under the air-conditioning vent and feeds a naked Harrison. The child giggles in the blow of cool air and Wu spends a long time looking down into his smiling face. Someone has written the word 'skank' in black marker beside the bed and Wu glimpses at the graffiti before she shakes her head and relaxes back onto the bed.

They lie together in the bath and Wu sings soft songs to Harrison as he smacks at the water with goofy, sporadic motions. When she begins to laugh, his eyes lock onto hers, and he laughs as well, as if they'd just told a joke that no one else in the world understands.

Wu walks a fairly long way to the seaside, a full forty minutes, and she sits in a park and eats golden fried fish with potato wedges, sour cream, and sweet chilli sauce. There's a beautiful, big pub there on the water and Wu watches the people drinking and smoking and yelling across the room at the footy, then she strolls home along the silent, dull street. She takes Harrison into the bath again, and he dozes, half asleep, as she cradles him above the still water.

In the morning, Wu does not leave until the girls cleaning the neighbouring room tell her that she must. The pair of grey-haired cleaners say, "We need to get in there to do our jobs, we can't wait, not any longer."

They stand by the door, sighing loudly as Wu quickly packs her things. As Wu steps past with Harrison, one of the women begins to say, "Cute bab—" but she stops mid-sentence, and her friend leans back to tell Wu, "That's too bad, sorry about him."

She drives west again, and now she is thoroughly plunged into the desert.

The plant life lies flat on the ground in short bulbs and single, dead trees look like inverted bolts of black lightning in the distance. There are pieces of burnt and burst tyres by the road and any of them that curl a certain way look like snakes. Waggles of heat radiate from the bitumen and signs remind drivers that it is a long, long way until the next amenities. A long, long, way until water, and food, and fuel, and sanctuary.

Wu arrives at a petrol station with a statue of a whale perched above the cracked and sweltering ground. There's a pub there with a line of people sitting at the bar drinking from short bottles without conversing as if the only company they require is the drink in front of them.

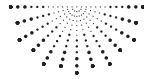
Wu loiters for a moment and watches the cars fly past, and she listens to the European accents of the people taking photos standing below the whale statue. She drives on, and the world around her is so flat that it could be a huge stretch of the sea floor. There are no animals larger than a fist, save the birds of prey, and there is no water, but the local flora manages to continue living parched and salty and small.

The sun hangs massive and divine in the heavens, but the long, flat and straight road through the Nullarbor dwarfs even this monolithic presence.

Finally, a smattering of brick structures approaches as the car trundles forwards.



## HARP



Harp and Sean are standing in front of their vehicle, and they're looking down on a huge map that's been spread across the bonnet of the car. The sounds of aeroplanes interrupt their conversation as Harp leans over the paper with a hand on the bumper to steady her torso and a finger pointing at locations.

"You keep the search going here," Harp says as she points to Adelaide, "And I'll move further west."

"If you keep heading west, you'll end up in the desert. You'll be over a day's drive from anywhere. How will you get Wu if she doubles back?"

"I won't. You will."

"Seriously? Didn't you kill Ben for that?"

"He died because he screwed it up. Don't screw it up."

"No problem."

"He said the same thing."

Harp begins to fold the massive map, and Sean says, "We won't be able to contact each other for a while, not if I'm searching and you're driving."

Harp grins and replies, "Just find her and lock her down. I don't care if you need to strap her to a chair or put her in a Goddamn

straightjacket. Don't let her go. When you're settled, call the boys back east and tell them where you're staying. They can tell me how to reach you when I contact them later."

"Sure."

"And if you get Harrison, keep him safe."

"Of course."

"I'm taking the car," Harp finishes as she sits down in the vehicle and turns over the ignition.

HARP DRIVES ON AND SHE MOVES THROUGH PORT AUGUSTA AND THE wheels of her chariot rattle forward to take her into that land of straight, gruelling roads. She stops in a motor inn, and she's allocated a room beside the highway. She takes off all her clothes and hangs them over chairs and the corners of a small table, and she sits under the air-conditioning unit. Someone has written the word 'skank' in black marker beside the bed and Harp glimpses at the graffiti before she shakes her head and relaxes back onto the bed. Harp does not bathe, and she does not eat. Her eyes droop shut, and she slips back onto the bed and rests until thick streamers of sunlight spear into the room and disturb her.

She's up long before the staff members commence cleaning the rooms and she's driving again after eating a single choc-chip biscuit that she finds in the tea tray.

Harp races out onto the barren plain, and she's driving on the same highway that Wu used less than a day before. The desert becomes a single, encircling vision in all directions with low shrubs and sand and sun and rock and very little else. Harp's heading towards the West Australian border and she knows there is only one single motel there on the boundary between the two states. She knows it is a very, very long way away, and there is nothing but wasted space between here and there.

Harp presses the accelerator to the floor, and she smiles at the thought that the only way to get caught by police out here if you're driving at one hundred and forty kilometres an hour is to drive up

behind a cop car accidentally. The fuel indicator is ticking down so quickly that the movement is clearly visible, but Harp pushes on.

Hundreds of kilometres slip past Harp's window, and still, there is very little more than low shrubs and sand and sun and rock.

Before she knows what's happening, there's a car ahead of Harp, and she's slamming on the brakes, and the car in front is slamming on theirs, and she's managed to bring it down under fifty kilometres an hour, but Harp still smashes into the rear of the other driver with a mighty BAM!

Harp's car is spun off the road, screeching and sending grey smoke up into the air, and the vehicle in front is bashed ahead into the ditch beside the bitumen.

More smoke rises slowly from the destroyed nose of Harp's vehicle. Twenty seconds ago, she was flying alone, and now she's stopped. She curses in Mandarin before opening the door and falling out onto the road. She curses again, and she's lying on her belly beside the wreck.

Two young people are crouched in each other's arms up ahead, and as Harp rolls onto her back, a few pieces of glass slip into her shoulder as it rotates on the road. She pushes herself, on her back, across the road and away from her smashed car.

Harp can hear the couple running towards her, but she doesn't look. The sentences, "Oh my God!" and "Is she all right!" are thrown into the desert air, and the young couple is bending over Harp.

"Are you all right?" someone asks, but Harp doesn't answer.

"Stay still, I'm sure someone will be along soon," a blonde girl is saying. There's dark makeup around her eyes, and her lips are slathered in purple gloss.

Harp's eyes are only half open, and the sun is blinding her as she says, "I will scour the Earth for that thieving whore."

"What?" a boy with brown hair and a ring in his eyebrow asks.

"The stick, my stick," Harp mumbles and points to her destroyed vehicle.

The boy sprints to the vehicle, and he repeats, "The stick, her stick," as he leans into the smashed car. He brings Harp her hiking

stick, but he insists, "Just lie there, really, just relax. You're going to be OK."

The girl is jumping up and down in the middle of the road and waving at nothing as she bites the purple colouring on her lip.

"Oh damn," the boy says as he stands and points at Harp's hair. "Look at her head, is that blood?"

Harp gingerly runs the fingertips of her right hand over her scalp, and all five of them return to her vision dipped in blood.

"Water," Harp whispers and both the boy and the girl run to her with water bottles.

"The map," Harp continues.

"What?" the girl asks.

"The map. There's a map in my car. Bring it to me."

The girl brings Harp the map and says, "You don't need this. We can't go anywhere; the cars are trashed. This is the only road. Someone will be along soon. Someone will help us."

"Yes. The only road. There is no other. Everyone must pass this spot. She's come through here. Everyone stops at the WA border. She'll stop at the WA border."

"Do you think she's concussed?" the girl asks the boy and Harp says, "Almost certainly," as she stands.

"Whoa, come on now, don't be stupid. Sit down."

"No." Harp takes a few steps, and her attention is drawn to a huge, furry pile of skin on the road.

"What's that?" she asks.

"It's a roo, that's why we had to hit the brakes," the boy says.

The girl adds, "Yeah, I'm so sorry, I had to brake. We couldn't help it."

As if the animal knows it's being discussed, the pile of broken bones moves a little to the side.

The girl says, "I'm so, so sorry. We're really sorry. I'm a good driver. It just came out of nowhere."

"I don't care about the accident, you won't get in trouble, but who's going to take care of the roo?"

"Take care of it?" the girl queries and the boy falls silent.

"Yes. You have to kill it."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't drive a car into an animal and leave it in the middle of the road."

"Who cares about the roo?"

"I care."

"We could be in real trouble, hell, we might have died."

"If you had died, you would have killed yourselves. That would have been the end of it. Now you've started something else. You've involved that animal. You can't just decide it's not happening."

"Well, what should we do?"

"We do nothing. You drove the car. You hit it. You end its life. That's the rules."

"What rules?"

"I didn't make them up. They are just rules."

"We're not going to—"

The boy starts talking but Harp shrieks, "Quiet! This isn't up for discussion. This is the girl's fault. The girl ends it."

"Jesus," he says, "fine, I'll do it."

"The girl ends it, not you."

"Hold on a minute; this is getting ridiculous."

All three heads turn and survey the road, but there are no new arrivals. Still just low shrubs and sand and sun and rock.

Harp barks, "Do it."

"I can't, I-I don't even know how," the girl says.

"The rock," Harp says as she points to a huge stone beside the road.

"Now you listen here—" the boy says as he points a stern finger, but Harp grabs a shard of glass from the road, steps up to him and slaps the boy across the face with the hiking stick.

"Do it! Or I'll cut you both."

He says, "She won't," and then he notices that Harp is clutching the piece of glass so tightly in her hand that blood is running over her fingers.

No one speaks as Harp stares at the stuttering boy.

The girl begins to weep, and the black makeup around her eyes

runs in long rivers as if it planned to stain and leave a permanent reminder of this awful moment.

She can barely carry the large stone, and she shuffles toward the kangaroo with the weapon pressed against her belly, legs bent. The boy shakes his head and puts his hand over his mouth, but he makes no sound.

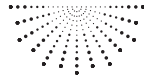
The girl stands over the creature, and it looks up at the weeping executioner with a single pleading eye. She hoists the rock over her head and slams it down so hard it seems as if she's trying to damage the tarmac below the pulverised creature.

In a second, both of the youngsters are huddling together and crying beside the road, and they look back at Harp intermittently, shying further away from her as she begins to walk. The young couple's conversation is whispered and contained, but the words "Police," and "Psycho," float clearly on the desert wind.

"I will chase that whore to the ends of the Earth," Harp says.

"You're crazy!" the boy screams at her.

"Get the animal off the road and stop crying," she calls back, and she carries the two water bottles, with the map, along the highway.



Wu steps into the motel room she's just rented and the fat around her chin softens and droops as a frown pulls down her face. There is one small bed, a ceiling fan, and a single cracked window looking out onto the pale dirt outside. Nothing else.

Wu kisses Harrison on the head and forces a smile as she flicks on the fan.

"We get to snuggle up in here all night, my sunshine," she coos to Harrison as she sits and bounces him on her thick legs. He giggles and the fake smile on Wu's face quickly blends into a series of wrinkles that displays her content with Harrison. With Harrison and nothing else.

Wu changes and feeds the child, and she's carrying him through the motel grounds an hour before sunset. The colour of the world is deepening, and the black shadows are now blue, the white sunlight gold.

The motel is more like a small settlement than a hotel. There's an expansive toilet and shower block, and a few women are hanging around the entrance drinking red wine from paper cups. There's a stable towards the boundary where travellers with horses are combing or just staring up at the huge animals. There's a barbeque

area beside a small, empty and fenced pool. Chickens and pet ducks are wandering around without restraint, and two dogs have found a shady patch under a tree to sit and pant and regard the world around them with snouts split by long, toothy grins.

The whole village is propped up on a cliff that gazes out at a distant shoreline. The water is several kilometres away, and a single, orange gravel track leads to the waves as if it were a track to the only gate of a citadel. From the top of the cliff, on that high vantage, the horizon seems much further away, and all watchers are filled with the notion that this Earth is much, much larger than we know.

Wu finds a restaurant attached to the reception, and there's a separate pub attached to that. In here, again, it seems to be a whole, self-contained society. There are older men and women eating quietly in the bistro while children play in a courtyard that wraps around a small garden pond. Tall, healthy trees line the outer fences so the place could be nestled in a forest, rather than a desert. The bar is decorated with the pickled bodies of the local creatures with scorpions and pale, sun-bleached snakes floating in glass jars labelled 'Liquorice' and 'Dolly-Mix' and 'Vegemite'.

Wu sits in the restaurant with Harrison on her lap, and a waitress automatically brings over a highchair, but then says, "Hi guys, order at the counter when you're ready."

Wu looks over the menu and carries Harrison to stand at the back of a thin line leading to a loud, clanking register. There's a woman tapping on a black calculator without glimpsing at the menu, and she's nodding along as the ordering customer speaks without glimpsing at them. Orders are placed in seconds, not minutes, and the workers in the kitchen can be heard cursing in between loud exchanges of laughter.

When it's Wu's turn, she says, "Can I please have the calamari with some chilli sauce and maple syrup, thank you."

The woman's eyes snap up in her skull to meet Wu's hesitant gaze.

"Pardon me?" she asks.

"Calamari with chilli sauce and maple syrup, please. Thank you."

"You mean, like, on the side?"



“Sure, or on top; it won’t make any difference in the end.”

The worker nods and puts the order through and, while Wu is still standing there, a chef comes running out with the docket.

“What’s this?” he asks.

The woman on the till says, “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Both?”

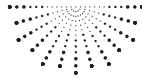
“Yep.”

“All right.”

Wu sits and drinks half a glass of moscato with her food. Individual faces poke out of the kitchen one by one to watch her chew on the peculiar combination and Wu waves at them, frightening them, as they glance at her.

Wu and Harrison return to the room, and she sings to him until the kidnapped child falls asleep smiling on her tiny bed.

## HARP



The highway through the desert follows the border of the ocean like a prisoner patrolling the barrier to his cell. Harp moves with spry legs and a crippled spine in between the road and the water as if they somehow contained her. The all-encompassing ocean ripples to the south as a single, momentary image of the spectacular and immense chronicle of the natural realm. To the north, that strand of bitumen proving that humankind can lay a strip of its pleasing upon anything. A strip of its pleasing to run a fleeting stitch across the timeless surface of this young planet.

Everywhere, there is sand and rock and dry, taunting shrubbery. Everywhere there is scorching heat.

Harp carries the two water bottles in her left hand and in her right she grips the handle of the hiking stick. The top of her wobbles with a nonsensical dance as her legs stroll perfectly between the stones and little, yellow desert flowers.

Lizards that have only ever seen predators and insects watch this strange pilgrim the way a person might watch another person who has lost their whole head and carries on walking. Harp looks back at the little, scaled tormenters and scowls, but they watch on, more interested for the attention.

A patch of red blood has dried brown on Harp's shirt, and she pokes at the wound to make sure that it's not bleeding, and when she's content that she will not die from this, she walks on.

She walks on for hours upon hours, and she stops and looks to the sun where it approaches the horizon, and she lies on the ground, stretching her back. She looks at the map again as the daylight begins to fade and then she folds the thing into a fist-sized ball and stuffs it in her pocket. Harp stands and continues to walk through that passage between the road and the sea.

A helicopter slowly approaches from behind, and Harp quickly pulls off all her clothes. She scrunches them into a bundle and lies on top of them and curls her body around the base of a small bush. She tugs at the spindles of the plant and pulls them down to drape over her. The helicopter doesn't pause or alter its course as it moves over the hiding, naked body of the crazed and delirious walker. She stands and dresses and walks on.

Ants chew on the soft flesh of Harp's ankles as she takes the tiniest sips of water, leaving both bottles almost full.

A police car speeds along the highway, siren blaring and lights flashing. The tiny birds leap from the ground and fly in dead straight lines away from this strange, screaming visage and Harp cackles as the same car makes the return trip two hours later. Soon it is very, very dark and there are ambulances and fire trucks randomly searching the roadside and soon there are civilians with torches. Harp carries on as unnoticed as a bat flying through a moonless, midnight sky.

After many, many hours, she sits and rolls on her spine for a minute. The sun has been replaced by the freezing evening wind, and the desert throws a gale from the Antarctic to Harp in what seems like an attempt to refrigerate her. She digs in the shallow sand and builds a kind of nest from stones to sink away from the breeze, and she sleeps curled and shivering and wild.

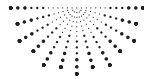
When she wakes, she wakes buried, and her hands are filthy with the substrate of that formidable territory. She lies still and watches the morning sun climb towards the heavens, and she takes some time to let the rays warm her like a serpent.

Harp moves forward. Her skin is as scratched and bruised and peeling as the flesh of a rabbit infected with myxomatosis. Her hair falls around her head sharp and haggard and those squinting eyes, partly blinded by the sun, watch the world from behind that keratin-curtain. Sweat stained her clothes long ago, but she does not sweat anymore. Still, Harp only sips at the water.

She holds the hiking stick in both hands now, and she moves the point ahead of her to stabilise her torso, then she steps to it, then she moves it again like a frog taking every leap as a single endeavour.

She finishes a water bottle, and the liquid doesn't even seem to reach her belly; it just wets the rasping tubes of her throat.

The sun begins to dip, and then it falls from the sky, and Harp burrows into the ground for another frozen night.



As the sun begins to rise, Wu wraps herself in the warm blankets of the motel and feeds Harrison in a cocoon of toasty, shared body heat. When the noon heat has replaced the morning chill of the desert, she switches on the ceiling fan, and she lies with Harrison, cooling under a light sprinkling of sweat.

She carries the infant into the shower block and finds a coin-operated heater. Wu has no coins with her, but an older woman tells her that, "There's still some juice in that one on the end," so Wu washes Harrison first. When the warm water expires, she washes in the cold and makes elephant noises until Harrison smiles at her. He very rarely laughs or giggles, and most happiness is just a response to Wu's mood.

She reads the description of the steak on the restaurant menu; then she reads the description of the fish and chips. Wu drinks a small beer while she decides on her meal, and she releases a long, pleased sigh as she decides on the chicken burger with onion rings instead of chips. She eats with small bites, savouring the flavour of the melted cheese and the salt on the fried chicken, and she doesn't finish the whole meal. There's a jug of water on the counter near the register,

and she refills her little cup three times before feeding Harrison in the bathrooms.

Wu sits on her own in the restaurant drinking light beer until a man in a white collared shirt steps into her vision and says, "Didn't you see the pub over there?" He points towards the separate bar.

"What do you mean? I saw it."

"Don't sit here on your own then, come for a chat."

"I've got him," Wu points to Harrison, and the man shrugs and says, "They got cordial and milk and stuff."

Wu carries the infant into the pub, and a few heads turn to nod at her. There's a skinny man in a black overcoat with no shirt underneath smoking at the counter, and he extinguishes the cigarette when he notices the baby.

"Thanks," Wu says.

"No worries."

Wu sits at a tall table, and two other women come to sit with her. One of them is wearing a twisting frangipani flower in her golden hair, and the other has perfectly round tortoiseshell spectacles propped up on her button nose.

"Hi there, I'm Sam," the golden-haired arrival announces.

"I'm Petra, mind if we sit?"

"No, of course not. I'm Wu."

"And who do we have here?" Petra asks as she pushes her glasses up to the top of her nose.

"His name's Harrison."

"Hi little fella, welcome to the desert," Sam waves and Harrison stares up at her with huge, pondering eyes.

"What are you two up to?" Petra asks.

"We're moving west."

"To Perth?"

"Um, yeah."

"That's nice," Sam says, "Perth is lovely. We're just coming from there."

"Oh great, so you've got the big drive coming up?"

"Yeah, that's right. We're driving on tomorrow," Petra says.

"It's a long stretch, but it's quite pleasant. It's very peaceful."

"We've done it a couple of times, it's not bad," Sam says, and Petra adds, "Not bad if you're in a car, did you hear someone is walking it?"

"Walking? Is that possible?" Wu asks.

"I don't know, maybe. Apparently, there was a crash, and someone just walked away. Now they can't find her."

"They just can't find her? Do they think she's fallen or something?"

"I'm not sure, emergency services are out looking, but you'd think that it wouldn't be too hard to spot a woman on that strip. It's so bloody flat you could spot a bull ant," Sam says, and Petra adds, "Yeah, as long as the bull ant wasn't lying down."

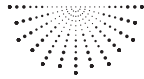
Wu asks, "Do you think she's lying down then?"

"Yeah, I reckon," Petra says, "I reckon she's at fault for the prang. Maybe she doesn't want to pay for the smashed-up cars."

Sam turns to her and says, "Yeah, maybe. Maybe she's banged her head."

"I tell you, she'd better hope they find her today. No one can keep on going out there."

## HARP



*H*arp's eyes have sunken down, and the skin of her cheeks hangs over her frown like the loose coat on a hound. She sips at the water, and she walks on. She breathes through her nose because her mouth has lost all moisture, and her legs have turned a very light shade of orange from the dirt.

The ocean remains as a constant reminder of moisture, and the cars that traverse the road with stereos and air conditioners call out to her like half-remembered dreams.

The skin around Harp's fingers has cracked and flaked away, and she's left with the pointed hard nails of a corpse. Her shoes press to the contours of her feet, and every step brings a trail of agony up to the knee. Still, she walks on.

As the sun reaches its peak in the sky and begins to drop down in front of her, Harp begins to rant in dry, rasping whispers.

"Wu," she says, "Thief. Whore. I'm coming. Harrison. I'm coming."

Harp drones on and she finishes the last of the water in the middle of the afternoon.

"To the ends of the Earth."

She walks on with the hard angle of the sun's rays striking her pupils just before the end of the day.



“Go ahead and run. Hide. I’ll find you. Today, tomorrow, forever. I’m coming, Harrison. I’m coming.”

Harp continues forward, and her shoulders are slumped so far forward that her posture more closely resembles that of a vulture than a woman.

Just before the stars begin to pop out of the black blanket over the world, a small rabbit hops from some unseen hiding place in the ground.

Without thought or poise, Harp screeches and clubs the animal with her stick, and she stands over the stunned and twitching ball of fur, staring down at it in disbelief. She licks her lips and grins. Harp looks back over her shoulder as if she’s checking for people with whom she’s expected to share, and then she falls on the squeaking vermin with tearing fingers and gnashing teeth.

Harp’s found a new reservoir of energy and she digs in the dirt with her fingers and comes to rest in a pit with the blood of the creature still staining her chin.



Wu eats raisin toast in bed as Harrison sleeps. When he wakes, she brings him down under the blankets with her again and feeds the impatient boy.

“Where do you want to go?” she asks Harrison, and he babbles nonsensically.

“Perth?”

Wu finishes her morning ritual, and she drives the car down the long, straight road to the beach. She lifts Harrison from the vehicle in the bassinet, and they sit under a tree at the border of the sand and watch the waves together.

Wu takes Harrison down to the water and holds him above the final trickles of the surf so he can kick at the sweeping dribbles. She carries him to the rocks and points out the yellow and orange crabs that traverse the cracks there, but he shows no interest.

She places him on the sand and says, “Where I’m from, the beaches are made of rocks. Don’t worry; they’re more like stones, smooth stones. I want to take you, I want to go home, but I can’t. We can’t go.”

When Harrison begins to fall asleep again, Wu puts him in the bassinet, and she reads her book in the shade until she dozes off as well. His crying wakes her and she feeds him, and she digs a small

hole at the very edge of the ocean's reach. The pair lies side by side on the sand, and they both watch as single slips of salty water trickle into the hole after each wave and Wu makes a truck noise as she tips sand into it. Harrison giggles constantly, and they return to the motel a little after midday.

Wu parks beside the pub and carries Harrison inside in the bassinet. Petra and Sam are there again, on the same stools, so Wu leaves Harrison on the table with them and says, "I just need to pee. I'll be right back."

SHE TAKES A MOMENT TO WASH HER FACE WITH THE COOL BORE WATER in the sink, and she spits out the little that gets in her mouth.

When she returns, Petra and Sam are whispering to each other in bursts of excited stammers. Someone outside screams, and Wu feels her jaw drop open. Sam and Petra are signalling to her with their hands, and they both start shouting when Wu approaches.

"Guess what!"

"You'll never believe it!"

"Guess what we just saw!"

## HARP



*H*arp is growling to herself in Mandarin as the sight of the little settlement appears before her. It's only a few kilometres away, and she can see people moving around with towels and toothbrushes.

She scrambles over the desert floor, ignoring the bushes and twigs as they dig into the bottoms of her legs. She's close, and she takes a moment to survey the horizon. There are no other buildings, at all, in any other direction.

She's cackling and still speaking to herself in that hushed tone of hatred as she approaches the border of the uninhabited desert. There are fewer rocks here, and less shrubbery, and tyre tracks split the patches of soft sand.

Harp steps onto the cleared ground of the accommodation with a cackle.

People are moving about and chatting to one another, but the sight of Harp emerging from the desert freezes every living creature, and each face turns to stare at the wretched arrival.

Her clothes are torn to shreds to the point where a breast hangs out of the garment like a third, more comprehensive eye and her thin legs poke from pants that no longer consist of as much material as

socks. The rabbit's blood highlights the bottom of her twisted, grinning face and the smell of offal radiates from this fiendish pilgrim.

The skin on her hands and neck is lifting from the flesh in long, opaque sheets and two patches of her burnt scalp as are showing through her thin strands of matted hair.

Harp's eyes are ringed with a yellow crust, and her throat is so dry that the sound of her rasping breath is louder than her footsteps. White foam is glued to her lips, and a red rash has crept from her nostrils to the corners of her mouth.

She scrambles through the camp with her hiking stick in front of her, and she moves sideways on bleeding ankles looking like a crab that's been called forth from some sulphurous sea deep within the molten core of the Earth.

"Get it water!" someone shouts as if the speaker is too afraid to label Harp a human and all the while Harp is cursing in a language that the people here do not recognise.

She looks at no one, and a crowd follows as he throws open the door to the reception with a crack.

"My God!" the man behind the counter cries out, and he takes a nervous step backwards as Harp approaches.

"W-what, what can I do for you, miss?" he asks.

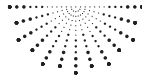
Harp doesn't reply. She clammers up over the desk and clutches at the ledger that sits open on the tabletop.

"My Lord, what do you need?" the attendant continues, "Someone help!"

Harp tosses the hiking stick down and collapses onto the floor and rolls onto her back, the ledger in her hands, and she twists with her bare and scrawny limbs on the dusty floor. She stares into the pages of the book and sees names and phone numbers and room allocations.

"WU!" she shrieks, and the watching mob releases a short, loud cry.

Harp's emaciated finger finds the name 'Taylor Wu', and it finds a 'check-in' date and the room number. The filthy nail of that pointing digit continues across the page, but it does not find a 'check-out' date.



Sam asks Wu, “Oh my God, seriously, guess what we just saw?”

Wu says, “While I was in the bathroom? I don’t know, what?”

Before Sam or Petra can answer, the sound of a door being thrown open and a mob of people charging into the adjoining restaurant bangs out into the space, and someone somewhere breaks a glass.

“Water and food! We need water and food! Now!”

Everyone in the pub is on their feet in a second, and they charge through the doors to the bistro.

The waitress says, “Come on, Greg, you order food at the counter like everyone else.”

“Shut up!”

“Don’t talk to me like—”

“Shut up! We don’t need a meal. We need food, something with a lot of sugar,” a man in an Akubra hat is demanding as he gestures to the kitchen.

“So, what do you want?”

“It’s an emergency,” he continues as he jumps the counter and runs into the kitchen. A woman that followed him into the dining room

snatches the whole water reservoir from the table and carries it out the door shouting, "Water, I got the water!"

"What's going on?" Wu asks Sam.

Petra grabs Wu by the shoulder and says, "She came walking out of the desert. Do you believe it? She just walked out of the damn Nullarbor like a camel."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I guess it's the girl they're looking for. But I thought she was old," Petra says and turns to Sam. "Didn't you?"

Sam adds, "Yeah, an old nip," and she looks at Wu and says, "I mean an Asian, an older Asian woman."

Wu almost drops Harrison's bassinet as the breath in her lungs leaves her in a single massive exhale.

"Let's go look," Sam says, and she leaves quickly with Petra; both of them taking agitated, half running steps like kids on the way to a canteen.

Wu follows with slow, hesitant strides. Harrison is screaming, but she ignores him as she bites her lip and steps out into the sunlight. She follows the swarm of people moving to the reception, and she stops when she hears, "WU!" screamed out of the pack.

Wu's vision blurs with a sudden rush of blood to her head, and she feels as though she might collapse.

"No, no, no," she whispers to herself, and Harrison's screaming grows louder.

Wu fumbles in her pocket for her car keys, and she takes a step forward.

A man moving in the other direction announces, "She doesn't even speak English."

Wu reaches out with the tip of her toe and creeps closer still to the bustling, frantic room.

"WU!" The murderous cry comes again and Wu sprints back to where her car is parked. She drops Harrison in his bassinet onto the front passenger seat, and she starts the engine.

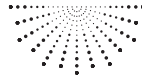
Harrison is still screaming, and a tear rolls down Wu's face as she barks, "Quiet, please David, come on sunshine, be quiet."

DANIEL NORRISH

The infant's distress grows to an ear-splitting pitch and Wu shouts, "Just shut up!" as she speeds away down the only road.



## HARP



Water and lamingtons are given to Harp as she squirms around on the floor of the reception, and a huge, fat woman drops to her knees behind Harp to prop up her torso.

Harp barks in Mandarin and scratches at the helper until the large woman crawls away and Harp lies back down on the floor.

“Eat and drink girl, come on,” a voice from the gathering speaks up over the heads of everyone there. “Give her some space,” the voice continues, “get out, damn it, what’s wrong with you people? Stop staring. She needs help.”

Nobody is moving.

“I said get your arses outa here, or you’ll be driving on, damn it.”

The crowd disperses, and a couple of young men usher the people away while the man in the Akubra hat sits down on the floor beside Harp.

He points his legs out in front of him and leans on the wall and says, “I’m Greg. This is my park, are you all right?”

Harp drinks more water in huge, greedy gulps, but she doesn’t speak.

“Slow down, you keep that up, and you’ll be seeing it again.”

Harp rolls onto her side and vomits and drinks from the jug again.

"Now just slow down, you're all right," Greg says as he takes the jug of water off Harp.

"What's your name?" he asks, but she doesn't answer. "Are you OK? What do you need?"

There's still no response.

"Do you speak English?"

"I speak," Harp manages to blurt out.

"Good. Just nod if you don't need anything special, I mean, if you think you're going survive the next ten minutes with just the water and cakes."

Harp nods and closes her eyes, and Greg says, "Good. You lucky little S.O.B. Take it slow, you'll be right."

WHEN HARP OPENS HER EYES AGAIN, SHE'S LYING ON A BED IN ONE OF the motel's rooms. The ceiling fan is on, and Greg is sitting in a wooden chair by her side. The cool sheets feel like icepacks on her skin and Harp runs her fingertips over the soft mattress, thinking of the holes she dug in the desert.

"Relax," he says, "you fainted, I think, there's an ambulance on the way, but it's going to take a while."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine, but you're not dying. There are some poor buggers out there that'd be keen to swap beds with you."

Harp tries to sit up, but her back fails, and she falls onto the mattress to stretch.

"Did you snap your back?"

"Snap it?"

"Twist it, jerk it, whatever. Did you hurt your back in the prang?"

"No, it's an old injury."

"That's a plus, I suppose."

"Yeah, it's fantastic."

"You need to get your arse into a shower and get all that blood off you so someone can take a proper look at your head."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Nope. I thought you were already dead when I saw you lying on the lobby floor."

"I'll be fine."

"What happened?" Greg asks as he removes his hat, runs a hand through his sweaty hair and leans towards Harp.

"I walked half the way," Harp says.

"From where?"

"I drove a while out of Ceduna and ran into something. I don't really remember. I think I hit a roo. I don't remember. I was past halfway. I think I got thirty minutes past the halfway mark. Then I walked."

"God damn, that's crazy. Why didn't you stay on the highway? Why didn't you flag down some help? I've never heard of anything like that."

Harp tries to sit up again, and this time, she succeeds.

"That's nothing," she whispers.

"Nothing?"

"When I was nineteen, I walked to Darwin from China."

"What? Bollocks."

"Yes, I did. Not the whole way, obviously. It took over a year."

Greg leans back and says, "I'm looking at you now, and I'm thinking I shouldn't ask why you walked here from China."

"You've got good instincts. Thank you for helping me."

"What else do you need?"

"Nothing."

"Don't be stupid. What else do you need?"

"Really?"

"Yeah, of course. Don't be polite. Christ, you should be dead. What do you need? Anything."

"Food, water and fresh clothes."

"Of course. There's water there in the jug, and I'll get you the rest. Wait here."

"I'll shower and meet you back here in five minutes."

"Yeah? Are you all right to walk?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Are you sure? Do you need me to get you, someone? A lady? Do you want me to get you a, um, a woman to help you in the shower?"

"No. I'm fine, thank you."

Harp limps on her stick to the shower block with the eyes of random patrons staring at her as she hobbles. As she steps into the communal area, everyone else leaves, and one of the other women passes her a towel.

"Do you need anything else? Here, use this," the woman says as she passes Harp a bar of soap.

"Thank you. I'm fine."

"Just shout out if you have any problems. Do you need some change? For hot water?"

"No, definitely not. No hot water, just cold. Thank you."

The cool, clear water runs over Harp's body and turns to a dark brown muck by the time it swirls in the drain. Harp runs her nails over her skin to scrape away the blood and the dirt that's turning to mud. She coughs, and spits and blows long, black strings of snot onto the tiled floor until her body shivers uncontrollably from the chilled water. Then she steps out and dries herself and gazes at the long, dark strips of filth on the towel.

WHEN HARP RETURNS TO THE ROOM, GREG IS ALREADY THERE, AND there's a folded pile of clothes on the bed beside a plate of sandwiches.

Harp has the towel around herself and Greg steps toward the door, but Harp says, "Wait for a second, please, I need to ask you a few questions."

"No worries, I'll come back once you've changed."

"Oh, just look the other way, you don't need to leave."

"Sure."

Harp draws the blinds of the single window closed, and she sniffs the ham in the sandwiches before she sinks her teeth into the stale bread. Harp can't help but groan with pleasure as she swallows and feels the ball of solid nutrients drop into her barren belly. She dresses

while Greg faces the wall, then she takes her torn shirt and fashions it into a wide noose.

She holds the noose in one hand and lays the towel down on the floor behind Greg's turned back.

"Where are you heading to?" Greg asks, and in a single motion, Harp knocks the hat off his head and slips the noose down to tighten over his neck.

Greg's hands shoot up to his throat and Harp stomps down on the back of his knee. He topples forward with Harp on top of him, and she tightens the noose further as she wraps the towel around his mouth.

He's choking and silently waving his hands around, but when he tries to stand back up, Harp knocks his arms and his legs so that he crashes back down, and Harp feels the air driven from his lungs.

"Shhhhhh," she says, "I'm not going to kill you. Just go to sleep."

Greg's flailing arms stop moving, and Harp feels his body go limp beneath her.

She takes the noose off his neck and the towel from his mouth, and she steals a ring of keys from his pocket. Harp checks to make sure Greg is still breathing, still unconscious, then ties him up with the bedsheets and steps back outside, back into the heat of the desert.

HARP WALKS AWAY FROM THE ROOM WITH HER HIKING STICK AND THE sandwiches, and she moves across the open grass to the blocks where Wu was staying. She finds the room number that she saw in the ledger and Harp knocks.

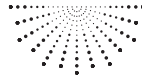
There's no answer, so she shuffles to the back of the building and counts the windows until she finds the one she's searching for; Wu's window.

Harp smashes the glass with the hiking stick, pulls the curtains out of the way and peers inside. The room is empty except for a box of diapers.

Harp charges out into the car park and scans all the vehicles,

searching for Wu's green car. She curses to herself, and she fiddles with the keyring until she has a Honda key in her fingers.

She tries the key in the door of four Hondas before it fits in a little white car. She sits down behind the wheel, bites into a sandwich and tears away from the motel. Five minutes pass before an ambulance races past Harp, heading in the other direction, on the way to the camp.



*W*u doesn't know where she's heading, but she speeds away from the motel.

She doesn't recognise any of the names of places on the big green signs beside the road, but there are long, long distances between them all and Wu continues to press her foot down on the car's accelerator.

There are thin tracks jutting off the main highway, but they all seem temporary, and Wu's afraid that they will lead to even smaller towns with no escape from the demon that pursues her across the gargantuan, sunburnt country.

She's panicking, but Harrison is sleeping soundly in the back seat as if he were growing accustomed to this routine.

Wu drives for eight whole hours, stopping only for petrol and bathroom or feeding breaks. Eventually, there is no more highway remaining. The road splits, and the choice between left and right sits ahead of Wu like an ominous coin toss. There are two choices and, no doubt, two opposite outcomes.

Wu spins the steering wheel to the left and accelerates towards the bottom of the country as the final rays of sunlight retreat back over the horizon once more.

. . .

THE FURTHER WU DRIVES, THE MORE GREENERY SHE SEES, AND SHE selects a patch beside the road in which to make a camp for the evening.

Wu steers the car off the safety shoulder of the road, and she creeps the machine in behind a curtain of thick tree trunks.

Wu sets up the swag, and she lies without sleeping with Harrison breathing in short, content puffs beside her.

She hears the thumping of the giant, jumping animals and the loud footsteps of something else inspecting her rudimentary campsite and Wu cannot even bring herself to close her eyes.

She does not get a moment of sleep, and the sun rises to wake Harrison from his dozing while Wu trembles, cold and agitated and lost in that patch beside the road.

She's driving again, and she finds herself approaching the ocean once more, but she doesn't stop. She turns and speeds along the south coast of the country until she can no longer stand the gruelling journey.

Wu begins to weep without cause or catalyst, and she asks Harrison, "What am I doing? Please, someone, tell me, what am I doing?"

No answer comes, and Harrison continues watching the child abductor as her breakdown drags her into a deep pit of despair.

"No more," she weeps. "I can't, please God, I need to rest."

A sign is drawing closer on the patch beside the road, and even at such a distance, it seems bright and promising to Wu.

She's bawling, and snot is running over the acne on her chin as she reads aloud, "Welcome to Bremer Bay."

She sniffs and coughs and releases a few more massive sobs before wiping her face and clearing her throat.

"All right," she begins, "a week. Just a week, please. I can rest a week."

Wu steers through the town and watches the houses as they pass. There are kids everywhere, and very few adults and every house seems to have a small boat sitting on a trailer in the driveway. She sees a mechanic, and a general store, and a petrol station, and another



mechanic, and every road away from the centre of town seems to be pointing to a beach.

Wu selects a local road at random and follows the thin gravel track down a hill to a beach covered in small children. None are wearing shirts, regardless of gender, and they're all sitting in the sand and digging a moat for a wide, short sandcastle. Two men glance at the kids, then to a couple of huge fishing rods mounted in white pipes in the sand, then to the beer cans they're holding, then back to the kids.

Wu drives back up the hill slowly, gazing out over the low trees to an emerald and navy-blue ocean. She's passing the petrol station once more, and when she notices a bright orange sign advertising pies, she realises that she is immensely hungry. As if the pair in the car shares the same stomach, Harrison begins to cry as Wu parks the vehicle.

"I know, I know, I'm coming," she tells him.

After the child is fed, Wu carries him inside. The shop is larger than she might have guessed from the outside, and two massive chest freezers of ice cream lay in the centre of the room like ancient sacrificial altars.

"Hey there," a blonde man with very, very tanned skin calls from behind the counter.

"Hi."

"Fuel?"

"No, just something to eat."

"No worries. Nice kid."

"Thanks, his name is Harrison."

"Well g'day Harrison," he says to the baby before looking up to Wu and adding, "He seems well behaved. My girlfriend has got a belly full of arms and legs too, hope my young one comes out like this little fella."

"Oh, every child is precious. But, they all stink, and some of them bite."

"Huh?" he asks, but Wu steps away and smiles to herself.

Wu does a lap of the store, strolling past fishing gear for sale and bags of lollies, but she ends up back at the counter, gazing up to a couple of whiteboards that act as menus behind the register. There

are no prices written down, and Wu tells the man, "There aren't any prices up there."

"Yeah, I know what it all costs."

"OK, some fish and chips please."

"How many bits of fish?"

"Just one."

"How much chips?"

"I dunno, a regular amount."

"Sure, about four bucks worth?"

"Yes, please."

The man turns and barks, "One bit of fish and four bucks worth o' chips," into the kitchen behind him.

He looks back and smiles at Wu.

She asks, "So how much is that?"

"What did we say? One fish and four bucks o' chips? How about six dollars twenty-five?"

Wu looks behind her for a second before she says, "Are you asking me what the price is?"

"Yep, are you happy with that?"

"Yes, thanks."

Wu gives the man a ten-dollar note, and he passes her back four dollars in gold coins.

"Hold on, didn't you say six twenty-five? You've given me too much change."

"So I have, give me one of those back," he rectifies the mistake and asks, "Vinegar? Chicken salt?"

"Yes please, to both. And can I please have some caramel sauce on the side?"

"What? You want ice cream?"

"No, no, it's for the chips."

"You're joking."

"Nope. As serious as a heart attack." Wu says, and she turns her back to end the conversation and wait for the meal.

The food is quickly prepared, and the blonde bloke calls out, "Fish and chips, with, um, caramel sauce," even though Wu is the only

customer. She collects the parcel of butcher's paper and asks the man, "Where can I find a room in town?"

"The pub's got a few spots out back, but most of the blow-ins sleep on the beach or at the caravan park."

"Are you allowed to sleep on the beach?"

The man scratches his head for a second and his expression is drenched in deep consideration.

"I dunno," he replies, "no one has ever asked."

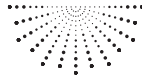
Wu thanks him and she sits in the passenger side of the parked car with the door ajar, eating the meal in the dry heat. She adds a packet of salt to the little tub of caramel sauce before pouring it over the chips. She tells Harrison, "We should have gotten the ice-cream too," and he says nothing, but she adds, "I'm not going back in there."

When Wu's finishes, she continues on her tour, and she drives up and down the little side streets of the town until she finds a beach beside a park.

She drives the car through the open, grassy space and parks it in some sand behind a toilet block so that it's not visible from the road.

"Into the swag again, my sunshine?" she asks Harrison.

## HARP



Harp follows Wu and Harrison, without ever actually seeing them, for hours. She passes the same rest stops and fills the stolen car up with petrol at the same station, and eventually, she sees that the highway she's driving on is ending in ten kilometres.

Harp steers the vehicle through a small country town with roads twice as wide as houses. There are absolutely no people on the footpaths anywhere, and there is an empty parking lot beside a post office. There's a statue of an ANZAC soldier in the middle of a roundabout in the town centre and Harp circles it, searching for life. She drives back to where the post office was, and she parks and waits there, thinking for a moment.

As if delivering a gift to Harp, a man steers a black motorcycle up to the post office door and leaves the engine running while he slowly saunters inside. Harp watches with her mouth open in an attitude of sheer disbelief before she scurries up to the motorcycle and steals it.

HARP FINDS THE FINAL FORK IN THE HIGHWAY AND CONSIDERS THE options carefully. There is space to keep running to the north, there

isn't to the south, so she twists the handlebars of the bike and accelerates to the right.

She drives the vehicle for the rest of the day, and she enters a town that appears to be stuck in a lost decade. The facades of the buildings are all wooden, and they have balconies on the second floors that make them look like saloons. Each of these buildings has a single, triangular sign jutting up above the door, then another on the roof, to give the varied properties of the town a uniform appearance. Many of these buildings have numbers painted on them to brag about the year in which they were established, and the oldest of these have bell towers too.

There's a sign pointing to 'The Biggest Open Cut Gold Mine!' and the stores have names like 'Wild West', and 'Prospector'.

Harp drives the motorcycle a half kilometre out of town and stashes it in the bush beside the road before walking back to the main strip of buildings with the hiking stick tapping out a rhythm as she moves.

She walks straight into a huge pub with the main entrance on a corner so that the rest of the building fans out behind it like the wings of a hospital. Everything inside is wooden and polished, and there are signs advertising 'SKIMPIES!' but there are no women here, skimpy or otherwise.

Harp puts her elbows on the bar and a man with a perfectly shaven face except for a single eyebrow that reaches from one temple to another, asks her, "What would you like this evening?"

"Water," she replies, and the man does not react. He stands perfectly still until Harp says, "Sorry, gin with two wedges of lemon, and a glass of water on the side."

"And tonic?"

"No. Actually, I'll have two."

"You mean a double?"

"Nope, two separate. Two glasses of gin, each with two slices of lemon and ice and nothing else. I like the hit of lemon."

"No worries."

The man brings the drinks and Harp pays and asks, "I'm actually

looking for my daughter. I can't seem to get a hold of her. She's just a smidgen overweight, pretty though, and she's got a child with her."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"Their names are Wu and Harrison."

"Nah, sorry."

Harp sits in the corner of the bar, and she sips the gin slowly. She gazes around at the empty room, and she drums her fingers on the table.

"Do you mind if I use the phone?" she calls out and the barman says, "Go ahead," pointing to the far end of the counter.

Harp leans over and dials and presses the phone to her ear, and a man answers, "Yeah?"

"It's me, how do I get a hold of Sean."

"It's you. Finally, we've been waiting. We've got no idea what we're supposed to be doing."

"Why, do you have some news? Have you heard something?"

"No, but—"

"Give me Sean's number."

"All right, Jesus, I'm just glad to hear from you," he says before he reads out the number and Harp writes it on her arm with a pen that's sitting in a jar beside the phone.

"So, what do we do now? Where do we go?" the man asks, but Harp just hangs up.

She calls the number she was given, but she gets no response. She orders another gin and takes her seat again.

She waits at the table while the afternoon crowd starts to pile in. Men in orange vests with muddy boots and others in collared shirts with leather belts line up at the counter and girls appear on the other side of the bar. The working women are wearing thin, bright gold bikinis with the sides of their nipples showing like skin coloured, new moons. A bloke in a black shirt starts work behind the bar too, and older ladies arrive in dresses to locate and smooch their lovers in the crowd.

It's loud in here now with the sound of glass being plunked down

on wood and people trying to talk over each other and Harp stands to walk through the mob.

"Hi," she greets a clump of young men who are all, simultaneously, rolling cigarettes, "I'm looking for my daughter. Her name is Wu, and she's got my grandson with her, Harrison."

"You might try the pool down the road, that's where all the kids go on hot days," one of the young men says.

"Oh no, Harrison is just a little over a year old, so they'll be together."

"Nah sorry, haven't seen no babies."

Harp asks another group, and then another and a woman says she might have seen them a week ago, but she can't remember exactly when.

Soon Harp has made her way across the whole room, and she's walking back towards the exit when a new arrival pushes through the doors. He's tall, and there's no fat on him except for a single strip of blubber under his chin. His hazel eyes are glassy even before he makes it to the bar and holds up two fingers.

Harp walks up behind him and asks, "Excuse me, sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for my daughter. Have you seen—"

"She a gook too?" he asks, swaying slightly.

"A what?"

"A gook. Like you," he grins.

"Um, she's from Thailand, yes."

"Hmm," he grunts and swigs the beer that's delivered to him and adds, "I seen Thai's."

"All right, I'm looking for Wu."

"Her name's Wu? Wu? That's her actual name?"

"That's what everyone calls her. Her first name is Taylor."

"Taylor Wu. Huh?"

"Yes, she has a baby with her named Harrison."

"He another gook?"

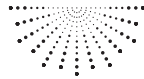
The group of people closest to Harp and the bigot move to the other side of the room before Harp says, "He's actually white, his father was white."

“That’s lovely, what a great country we live in.”

“So, have you seen them?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I’m not talking about it with you,” he finishes with a massive burp in Harp’s face, and the muscles in her jaw tighten with rage.





Wu sleeps in the swag on the beach in the evenings, and she lies on the hot sand with her book during the day. When Harrison is awake, she reads his novel to him. His book is about the ocean, so she points to the crashing waves in front of them, and she pretends that she's telling him a story about that same patch of water. She pretends that maybe the characters diving deep into the bowels of the Earth were ancestors of hers, and she's passing on the information of Harrison's great, great, great, great, great grandfather. But she's only pretending.

She walks over the rocks with Harrison, and sometimes he rolls his eyes to watch as the water smashes into the stones and sometimes he points, transfixed, to things that don't seem exciting to Wu.

Wu builds a fire when no one else is around, and she cooks sausages over the flames by holding them there with long-handled tongs. She places the meats in fresh, soft bread and she smothers them in tomato sauce. When she's impatient, she cuts the sausages lengthwise and opens them up and tells Harrison, "Like butterflies. Yum."

She walks to a clear patch beside the mouth of a river where fishermen clean their catches, and the pelicans wander goofily

towards her, making strange croaking noises in their throats. Wu sometimes eats at a restaurant on the top of a hill, looking down on her camp, and sometimes at the petrol station, but the price of fish and chips is always different.

On the fourth morning, after she's finished feeding Harrison at her camping spot, a young boy strolls onto the beach with a surfboard. The sheet of fibreglass dwarfs him, but he has a huge smile on his face as he stares out at the surf. Wu looks back up the track, but no other friends or parents appear to join the youngster.

He leaves his board in the sand as he skips up onto a boulder that sits half-submerged in the water. The boy's short brown hair falls over his forehead as he walks towards the water line on the massive rock.

Wu is all the way over on the other side of the beach, and she's watching as a heavy wave crashes into his knees and knocks him over. She's watching as his head hits the rock and he sinks into the surf.

"NO!" she screams, but no reply comes, and the child is lost from vision.

Wu sprints over the sand with Harrison screaming where she holds him to her chest.

"Where are you?" she cries out. Wu looks back across the beach, but she's the only person there. She's standing at the base of the boulder, and she screams, "Are you all right?"

When no answer comes, she kisses the bawling Harrison on the forehead and places him gently on the sand.

Wu scales the rock with short, quick extensions of her arms and legs and peers over the edge to find the whitewash here turning red. She slides down towards the crashing waves, and she sees a small hand clinging to a crack in the rock. A face rises out of the surf for a moment, and the mouth sucks in a half a breath before it's pulled under the waves.

"Reach up, I'm coming," Wu shouts down as she lowers herself towards the water. The bulbous form of a heavy wave approaches like the bared teeth of a predator, and Wu dips a toe into the water to find a stable rock on which to stand. Her foot finds something solid, and she squats quickly and pulls the child up from the battering onslaught

of nature as the terrible swell throws her back onto the unforgiving stone.

Wu clings on, and the boy is up and coughing and gripping at her shoulders.

"It's all right, you're all right," Wu says as the boy splutters and coughs, and another wave smashes into them, leaving a dense white foam around Wu's thighs.

"Take deep breaths," she says, "come on, you're OK. You need to climb now, quickly."

Wu and the boy rise from the tempest of that crag and blood is running over the side of his face. Wu looks back to find Harrison but instead sees that a four-wheel-drive ute is slowly looping over the sand and it's heading back out towards the main road. Wu jumps up and down, screaming, "Help!" as the bleeding boy whimpers at her feet.

The vehicle stops suddenly, and there's a man charging towards them in less than a second.

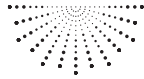
He screams, "Are you all right? What's wrong?"

"He's hit his head, help him."

"What have you done mate, let me see," the saviour is saying as Wu leaps from the massive rock. She lands on a loose stone and slips and smacks an elbow on the ground, but she's up immediately.

"Harrison? Harrison?" Wu is calling, but Harrison is nowhere to be seen.

## HARP



After the bigot burps in Harp's face, he turns and strolls away.

Harp walks straight out of the hotel and onto the sidewalk. She walks in a big loop around the premises, and she glances up at the balcony of the second floor. She regards a section of wall below it and a dumpster and a tree that's growing over the roof and then she walks back inside and up to the bar.

She looks over to where the barman with a monobrow is playing checkers on the counter with a gentleman whose red beard is so long he must lean back from the gaming board to avoid accidentally moving the pieces.

Harp signals to the barman, and he bounds over to her in a few steps.

"Gin?" he asks.

"No thanks, I was just wondering if you rent rooms here."

"Yeah, upstairs. It's thirty bucks a night, pay now and check-out by ten A.M."

"Can I get four nights please?"

"No problem."

"And, if it's not too much trouble, could I have a room on the far

western side? I don't like it when the sunrise wakes me up early in the morning."

"Yeah, of course, the sun over the super-pit is a pretty special sight, but not if you're trying to get some more sleep."

"Great, thanks again. How do I get up there? Those gins have gone straight to my head, and it's bedtime for me."

HARP TRAVERSES A FLIGHT OF STAIRS AND FINDS HER ROOM AND WALKS straight past the bed and onto the balcony. She looks up and down the street a few times and watches the windows of the building across the road.

She drops her hiking stick to the sidewalk below and reaches out over the railing to the tree that's growing over the roof. Harp lowers herself from branch to branch until she's on the footpath and she takes a moment to stretch her back before wandering off out of town.

She finds her motorcycle again and rides it back to the main street and parks it in the shadows across from the bar. She turns the vehicle off and lingers there, dark and furious and patient in the silence.

Harp watches the patrons leave the pub in the dull glow of a streetlight, stumbling and swearing, until there are only a few serious drinkers remaining. When the racist who burped on Harp exits the building, she turns on the engine of the bike without switching on the headlights.

He sways drunkenly and slips down the kerb as he struts towards a nearby car park. He tries to get his keys in the door three times before he actually succeeds, then he collapses onto the seat.

It's a while before the engine of his car starts, but when it does, the vehicle shudders forward in fits of acceleration and urgent braking. The bigot is on one of the main roads heading out of town and Harp accelerates to pass him before he gets up to speed.

She turns on her headlights and drives several kilometres ahead, glimpsing over into the paddocks beside the road. She monitors the flat patches of crop, and she notes the fences and the trees and the dam banks.

Harp slows and puts on her hazard lights and pulls the bike off into a ditch, and then she throws her flimsy bodyweight into the side of the vehicle, and it topples over. Harp stands in the silent night and watches the bitumen ribbon as it unfolds over the hill from where she just came.

Soon the headlights of a car approach and Harp waves her arms in the air until the car pulls over.

The bigot steps out of the vehicle and says, "Who's that?"

he belches, "What are you doing?"

"I'm so sorry, sir. I just slipped off the road there, and my bike is stuffed."

"Stuffed?"

"Yeah, it's not working."

"So, what's wrong with it? What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know anything about cars. I thought maybe you could help?"

"Jesus Christ, trust you. It's not a bloody car for a start," he begins as he approaches, "I thought your country was full of bloody tuk-tuks and scooters and bikes and every other bloody thing."

"I'm sorry it was just an accident."

He wanders to the bike and starts to fiddle with it. Harp walks around his car to the rear door on the driver's side, and she silently opens it. She takes off her shirt and wraps it over her hands

The bike's engine bursts to life and the bigot calls out, "What do you reckon is wrong with this?"

"I don't know, you tell me."

Harp sinks into the fog of body odour as she leans into the vehicle and digs through the rubbish on the floor. She grips something hard, cylindrical and long, and she stands back up in a quick jerk of her shoulders.

Harp says, "While I've got you, I just wanted to check, have you seen my friend Wu?"

"What?"

"Have you seen my friend?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember at the bar I asked if you'd seen my friend Wu?"

"Oh yeah, Wu. Wu. What a stupid name," he's chuckling as he revs the engine of the bike and he adds, "There's nothing wrong with this, you're wasting my time. Just drive the bloody thing out of the ditch and get going."

"Wu? Have you seen Wu?"

"No, I haven't seen your gook buddy, now get going. Get outta here."

He's making his way back to the car now, and he's raised a palm up to shield his eyes from the high beam headlights.

"You definitely haven't seen her."

"No."

He's on the other side of the open driver's door now, and he's squinting, and he asks, "What are you doing?" as he stumbles towards his seat.

Harp spears the screwdriver she found near his back seat through his neck so that the vital pipes within it are entirely lanced through.

He sits down in the driver's seat as if nothing has happened and he's making strange, throttled gurgling sounds.

"Don't try and talk. You're done," Harp says as she pulls her shirt back on over her head.

He grabs at the handle of the tool, and Harp says, "Don't pull it out, fool, it's in your jugular. I'm telling you: you're done."

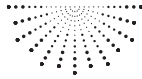
Tears roll down his face, and he looks up from his seat with a peculiar, uncomprehending expression.

Harp stands over him and says, "I'm going to find my friend and my grandson, and I care very much about what happens to both of them. Do you know what I'm going to do to you? Huh? I'm going to drive your car into the paddock behind us, with you dead in it, and I'm going to crash it into the dam. Then I'm going to sneak back into my room through the balcony and go to bed. Tomorrow, I'm going to listen to everyone in the bar, including the cops, as they tell each other that you had it coming, you stupid drunken prick. No one will care that you're dead. Will they? They'll just be happy you didn't crash into another car or a pedestrian. Won't they?"

Harp stops speaking, and she's staring into the eyes of her victim as he clutches at his neck and the door and the steering wheel and his movements are becoming groggier and groggier.

"You racist prick. No one will care that you're dead and I will tell my gook friends about this, and we'll laugh at you while the coroner measures the alcohol content of the cold blood in your corpse."





Wu is sprinting over the beach in a chaotic zig-zag and screaming, “Harrison?” while the saviour is helping the frightened, bleeding boy as he climbs down from the boulder.

The man is holding the boy’s head in his hands, and the boy is trembling, but the boy still looks up and tells Wu, “Over there.”

He’s pointing, and Wu follows his directions to find Harrison crawling down the beach, towards the crashing, dragging waves. He’s smiling, and he’s babbling to himself so much that it looks like he’s talking to someone. Harrison’s tiny hands are pulling him over the beach with jerking, slapping motions and Wu is sprinting, her wet feet flicking the sand up around her in violent eruptions. She’s too far away. Harrison’s fingers are wet and a frown bursts onto his face, but Wu charges ahead and snatches him up as the bleeding boy is being ushered into the back of the four-wheel drive.

“I need help,” the man yells as he leans into the vehicle, over the boy. Wu races to his side with Harrison screaming in her arms and she stands behind him on a bloody patch of sand.

The man yells, “Damn it, he’s cut his eye open pretty bad.”

“His eye?”

"No, no, just his eyebrow. Just get in there and try to stop the bleeding."

"All right."

"You're going to have to, um—" he pauses to swear and Wu shoulders her way in beside him to look at the wounded child. "You're going to have to clamp it shut with your fingers. Quick, get in here."

"All right, just, um."

"What?"

"Please drive safe; I've got the baby."

"Yeah, yeah, get in."

Wu clambers into the back seat, and the boy shoots her a petrified look from below a veil of blood.

Wu holds Harrison with one arm while she grips the boy's eyebrow with the other hand. His fingers reach up and grab at his head, and the wetness of the wound makes it slippery. As the vehicle accelerates up the hill, Wu's fingers slide away, and she sees the bone of his skull like a polished, half-buried river stone.

The man drives them to the medical post, and then he starts swearing and banging his hand on the steering wheel.

"What's wrong?" Wu asks.

"It's bloody Sunday, isn't it? They're closed."

"What are we going to do?"

"Don't worry," he says as he drives out of the car park, over the kerb and footpath, and Wu clutches more tightly to Harrison.

The vehicle speeds down suburb streets until it screeches to a halt at a plain-looking brick home.

"Meg! I need help," the man calls as he steps out of the car, and a middle-aged woman runs out of the house.

"What's happened?" she asks.

"He smacked his head on a rock," he says, and the two of them crowd together around the boy. Wu takes a step back as they push the bleeding boy into the house, his feet leaving red prints on the front steps.

Wu follows and sways Harrison slightly to calm him, but he doesn't stop shrieking.

The injured boy is taken to the kitchen, and the man swipes the plates on the dining table to the side, two of them shattering into a puzzle of splintered ceramics. The man lifts the boy and lays him on the table, and the woman appears with a red metal toolbox full of medical supplies.

She has proper, hospital quality gauze and a bottle of sterilising solution with a curved nozzle on the end. She washes the gore off the boy's face and onto the kitchen floor, and she speaks to him in relaxing, calm tones. The table is drenched in swirling pools of liquid, and it drips off like light rain from a blocked roof gutter.

The boy's breath is rampant, but it is gradually calming in the presence of this dutiful, composed woman.

The man says, "Grit your teeth mate, you're going to be fine, but this is going to sting," as the woman produces the stitching needle.

The boy squeals and struggles and the man shouts, "Cut that out and grit your bloody teeth!"

There's a little cursing and a few cries of pain, but the boy is safe, and the kitchen is swept and mopped, and everyone involved has washed the blood off them within the hour.

WU LOITERS AROUND THE DRAMA AS IF SHE FEELS OBLIGATED AND THE man finds her in the corner of the kitchen when the commotion has died down.

"Meg reckons he'll be fine, how are you?" he asks Wu.

"Me? Yeah, I'm fine, you?"

"I'm fine, thank you for that. You saved his life; you know that? You saved that boy."

Wu shakes her head and looks away.

"No really, I can take him home to his mum now. He's got a few smacks coming for being out there alone, but he'll live. Thank you."

A female voice calls through the house, "It's supposed to be my day off," and the surgeon enters the little room with a big smile on her face.

"I'm Meg," she says as she reaches to shake Wu's hand.

"I'm Wu; you were amazing back there."

"It's my job. I'm the doctor."

The man says, "I'd better get him back to his place," and he walks out of the room, "Come on, mate, time to go see mum."

The boy skips out in front of the man and laughs, and the boy says, "I'm gonna tell mum I lost the eye."

"You'll lose more than an eye if you start telling your mum fibs."

"Who's gonna get my board?"

"Who's going to clean my car?"

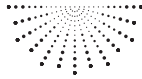
"Huh?"

Two doors slam out in the street, and diesel engine carries the men away.

"How about some Tea?" Meg asks.

"That sounds great, but I should get going. Harrison seems pretty rattled."

"Fair enough. Pop in whenever Wu, I'll be here or at the med post."



Harp is sitting at the bar in that old mining town at around noon when the policeman enters. She has a gin in her hand, and she's facing away from the door, but when his boots fall on the wooden floors, her ears fidget a little.

She doesn't look in the direction of the cop until he strolls into her peripheral vision. When the blue uniform hits the corner of her eye, Harp turns and says, "Oh my, a policeman."

He nods at her, and the monobrowed barman walks up to where he's standing at the bar.

"It's a bit early for your mob to be at the pub, isn't it mate?" the barman jokes, but the officer doesn't smile.

"Have you heard the news?" he asks.

"Not unless it's in the paper. What?"

"Andrew Millan died last night."

"What?"

Another drinker shushes a table of card players in the corner, and all eyes turn to watch the officer.

"He was driving drunk," says the officer, "and he seems to have run off the road and into a dam."

"That's terrible, where?"

"Just a little west, on the Patterson farm."

"Oh, that's too bad."

"Was he drinking here last night?"

The barman's long brow scrunches up over his nose in concern.

"Of course, he's here drinking every night. And every other day, for that matter."

The officer shakes his head and says, "Were you aware that he was intending on driving away from this premises?"

"No more aware than the cops in this town."

The officer's frown stretches down towards the bottom of his face, and he says, "What time did he leave?"

"Around closing, at about midnight, I guess."

"Are there cameras here?"

"Come on, Frank, you know there aren't any cameras, and you must know he deserved it."

"I can't comment on that."

"Of course not," the barman says as he holds up his hands, then drops them down to rest on the counter.

"Every incident is inspected. Was there a big crowd here last night?"

"Decent. Maybe eighty people."

"Anyone strange?"

"Strange? Like how?"

"Didn't fit in, out of place."

"No. The only customer I didn't know was that lady," he points at Harp, and she looks around, feigning confusion. The cop turns from the barman, and the barman says, "Hey, we still on for Friday?"

"No, it's Saturday now," he replies, looking back over his shoulder.

"Right-o. You won't be working?"

"No, this will be done by then."

The officer approaches Harp and asks, "Do you have a moment to answer a few questions?"

"Of course, has there been an accident?"

"It's looking like that, yes. A man crashed his car last night and passed away."

"Oh, how awful," Harp moans. The officer nods and Harp notices that he has the most lovely shade of blue eyes stuck back in sockets that have browned and wrinkled under the sun like the skin on green grapes.

"Yes. Did you know Andrew Millan?"

"I'm not sure; I just got here yesterday. I might have met him."

"He was a tall man, fairly slim."

"I'm not sure. If he was here yesterday, I probably saw him."

The barman leans over and shouts, "He came in a little later than the rest of the mob, and he's got a round face. Um, he was wearing black jeans with an Aussie flag on his belt buckle, I think."

"Oh yes," Harp says, "I did meet him. He was hurt? That's too bad."

"Unfortunately, he's passed away," the officer says.

"Oh, just awful. Did he have a family?"

"A wife, but they're separated."

Harp nods and the officer asks, "Did you speak to him?"

"Yes, I spoke to everyone. I'm looking for my niece. I was following her back to Perth, but I guess I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere because I lost her."

"Did Andrew seem peculiar at all?"

"I didn't know him. He was very drunk, and I suppose I shouldn't say this, but quite rude."

A grin cracks the lips of the officer for a moment before he sniffs and wipes his face as if that amused expression needed to be physically removed.

"That sounds like him, did you see him leave at any point or, maybe, talk to anyone particular in the crowd?"

"No, I'd love to help, but I can't. I had a couple of gins, and I was in bed, upstairs, quite early."

"You slept here? In the rooms upstairs?"

"Uh-huh, yes."

"What time was that? When did you go to bed?"

"Oh, I don't know. Well, um, I don't want to give a wrong answer. Am I allowed to guess?"

"Yes, please do."

Harp crinkles her brow and thinks as the barman calls out, "Frank, mate, she wouldn't have been down here much later than seven."

The policeman nods and asks Harp, "Does that sound right?"

Harp giggles under her breath and says, "Oh, I suppose. I thought I might have lasted a little longer than that; I must be getting old."

"Thank you," the cop says as he stands and starts to move to the table of card players in the corner.

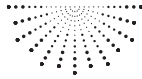
He turns suddenly and asks Harp, "Do you need help?"

"Pardon?"

"Finding your friend? Would you like me to contact someone for you? Or check to see if your friend has popped up anywhere else?"

Harp takes a moment to answer, but eventually, she says, "No, that's all right. I'm sure you're busy. I'll catch her in Perth."





Wu is standing on the grass beside the beach and Harrison is a few metres away while the sun is resting behind a dark black cloud.

“Come to mummy,” Wu calls as she gestures to the infant. “Come on sunshine, time to crawl again. Come to mum.”

Harrison is scooting his bum over the ground with slow, clumsy movements while a four-wheel-drive comes creeping down the path and parks beside them.

The man who drove the vehicle to save the boy steps out and Wu says, “Hello again.”

“Hi. I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself properly yesterday. I’m Baz.” He’s quite a few years older than Wu, and he’s got a blend of dark brown, grey and black hairs in his rough stubble. There’s a kink in his nose, and he’s constantly sniffing as he speaks.

“Don’t worry, we had more important things to worry about yesterday. I’m Wu.” She reaches out to shake his hand, but he says, “Oh, I won’t touch you. I’ve got the sniffles.”

“OK, sure, how’s the boy?”

“He’ll be fine, I mean, he is fine.”

“Good. I put his surfboard over there.” Wu points towards the toilet block.

“Thanks. I think his mum is sending him down with some biscuits to thank you, but he’s in school all day.”

“Of course, his friends must think he’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah, he’s wearing an eye patch, and his dad drew a skull and crossbones on it with white-out.”

They laugh, and Wu looks down to see Harrison is sitting at her feet.

She picks him up, whispering to him, as Baz says, “What were you two up to just then?”

“Nothing much. Yesterday was the day he decided to start crawling. He’s a bit behind in his development, so I’m hoping he’ll jump ahead now if he’s thinking about crawling.”

“They know how to pick their moments, don’t they? Is he your first?”

“Yes. Are you a father?”

“I was. He’s beautiful; you’re very lucky. I actually came down here to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“I noticed that you’re sleeping in that swag and it looks like the weather might turn sour tonight, would you like to come stay with me?”

Wu takes a moment to look back over her shoulder at the little tent. She looks up at the black clouds and says, “I’m not sure, I’m not planning on staying very long.”

“It’s up to you. I’m a terrible cook, but my wife will be back in a few days.”

“All right, that sounds nice, and I think Harrison will be glad to be indoors for a while.”

Baz helps Wu roll up the swag, and she drives behind him, up away from the water. They cruise through the town, past the general store and the petrol station, and they end up at a small wooden house beside an old, abandoned grocery store. The windows at the front of the store are speckled with black spots, and

the floral green curtains that hang inside are drawn and dusty and faded.

The driver's window of Baz's four-wheel is rolled down and a hand waves out to signal to Wu to park on the left as they stop.

"This is it," Baz calls.

Wu gets out of the car and walks behind him as he squeaks open a little white garden gate and leads her around to the back of the house. There's a gazebo that's overgrown with passionfruit vines and two cars resting in an open garage.

"Me and the missus are working on them," Baz says, pointing a finger in the direction of the vehicles.

He stops at a back door that leads into a small room that's almost entirely made of glass. He slips a key into the door and says, "You can come out here to sunbake if you like. It's quite pleasant inside with the air-con when it's really hot."

He pushes the door out of the way, and they move inside the old house. There's a linoleum kitchen and a few carpeted rooms completed with a whole catalogue worth of old, dark wood furniture. One of the carpeted rooms is hung with pink posters, and the surfaces are lined with Disney toys.

"Oh, you have a daughter?" Wu asks.

"No, um, actually she passed away. We just keep her room like that."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. It's probably best if we keep this closed," Baz says as he shuts the door to the shrine. He adds, "I'll show you your room," as he pulls a tissue from a box on the kitchen table and blows his nose.

Baz leads Wu through the front door of the house, back towards the street and he says, "I don't know why, but we always come through the back. Habit, I guess."

He opens a second door that sits off to the side of the porch and leads Wu into the small room.

It's cosy, with wooden floors and a good quality camp bed that looks a little like a military stretcher. There's a wide filament heater to the side and a tall fan beside that.

"It's perfect," Wu says, and Baz replies, "It's simple, but it's dry and warm. You'll be glad to be in here when the rains come up over the ocean."

"Great, thank you."

"I'll leave you to it then. You saw the bathroom on your way through the house. Just come in when you get hungry, or you want to watch TV. Seeya Harrison."

"Sounds good."

Baz leaves, and Wu sits on the firm bed with Harrison on her lap.

She says, "I know someone who would like this hard bed, but she's nowhere near here," and Harrison's gaze wanders around the space.

"This is nice, isn't it?" she asks him.

Wu puts Harrison down on the floor and stands back from him, forcing him to attempt to crawl.

"That's it sunshine," she cheers him on, and they're dancing around like this for an hour before there's a knock on the door.

Wu pauses for a minute and waits. There's another knock.

She twists the knob and pulls and looks out onto the porch and a small boy with a skull and crossbones eye patch is gazing up at her with a single, nervous pupil.

"Hi, I'm David, thanks for saving me and here's some biscuits," he recites in a loud, forced sentence.

The colour drains from Wu's face, and she asks, "What did you say your name was?"

"I'm David. Thank you for saving me."

He looks back over his shoulder at a woman standing on the footpath and Wu slumps over, leaning on the doorframe.

The woman waves and calls out, "Thank you, thank you so, so much."

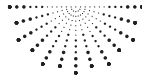
The woman signals quickly to her son, and he repeats, "And mum made you some ANZAC biscuits."

The woman on the street shouts, "David!" and he tells Wu, "I mean, I made you some ANZAC biscuits. I made them to say thank you."

Wu takes a cake tin from the boy, and he says, "Seeya round," as he runs back to his mother.

Wu steps back into the room and sits on the bed with the cake tin on her lap. The tin is blue, and it has a drawing of a red parrot on the lid. Small, soft tears are falling onto the parrot's beak, and they pool on the hard metal of the container.

## HARP



Harp is leaning over the bar, using the pub's phone again, and a couple of the regular drinkers wave at her as they exit. She waves back and says, "Drive safe," with a fake smile while the dial tone hums on. The bar is empty, save for the barman and an old grey couple in matching red shirts that say, 'Every day's a sundee when you're catchin' barramundi!' Harp looks over to them, and she sees that the old man is watching her with one good eye, and one that looks like it's covered in a thin, barely transparent film.

"Hello?" Sean's voice answers on the other end of the phone line.

Harp turns away from the staring eye and says, "Finally, I've been trying to reach you."

"Where are you?"

"Don't worry about that. I almost met up with her."

"Did you? That would have been a happy reunion. Where might that have been?"

"Eucla."

"Where is that?"

"On the West Australian border."

"On the WA border?"

"Yes, we've headed west, and it's got me thinking."

"This sounds promising," Sean says, and the joy in his tone is undeniable.

"There's not a lot out here."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have a map with you? Something with WA on it?"

"Yep. I mean, yes. I do."

"Have a look at the south-west coast, between Norseman and Perth, all south," Harp says.

"Yes, looking at it now."

"How many decent sized towns do you see?" Harp asks, and there's quiet on the line for a minute.

"Um, only about nine or ten?"

"That's what I think too. Bring about ten or our friends over for a party. Split up and have a look around the great southern real estate. If we all spread out, we should be able to track down that thing we're looking for, even if it moves."

"Yes."

"Get it?"

"Yes. We're on the way. Where should we meet you?"

"I'll go to Perth and wait up there. You don't need to meet me. You organise the gents down south."

"This sounds good."

"Yes. You organise, and then come meet me."

"Perfect. We'll see you soon."

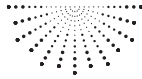
"I hope so."

Harp hangs up and walks out of the pub and down to the edge of town. At the very limits of her vision, off on the horizon, she can see two police cars parked on the road where she's hidden the motorcycle. She can't see any police, but the bush there is thick with tall, black stems of trees and Harp knows that if anyone looks back along the road, they'll definitely notice her.

She gazes over to the car park at a dozen vehicles, and she looks back into the bar where three men are drinking, their wallets and keys

on the table between them. Harp plasters her rehearsed grin across her face again and steps back into the pub and wanders over to where the men are drinking. She greets them as she glimpses at the keys on the table.





Wu carries Harrison inside the little wooden house after the sunset, and she finds Baz sitting on a large, buttery-yellow armchair in front of a boxy, brown television.

"Hi there," he says.

The floor of the room is raised up a step above the rest of the house, and Wu's footsteps make a dull thumping sound on the carpet that's as thick as lawn. There are a few dark wood cabinets here with dull trinkets and patterned plates on display.

Wu puts Harrison on the ground, and he immediately shunts over to the space below a dining table where the legs of chairs spear down at his level like tree trunks.

"He's moving pretty well now," Baz says.

"Yeah, he doesn't always crawl, but he can move around. I need him to keep trying. He needs to develop the strength."

The television is showing a few children running through a lighthouse, and Baz says, "I'm watching 'Round the Twist'. It's a kid's show, but it's not bad."

"Sounds good."

Wu sits off to the side, and she watches Harrison as he fumbles around the chair legs.

"Want a beer?" Baz asks.

"Yes, please."

He stands and walks out of the room and returns with two small glasses. The bases of these vessels are heavy, and they're dimpled with pyramid indents in the heavy glass.

Wu sips the beer and watches Harrison and glances over to Baz without speaking. He's drinking quite quickly, and she struggles to keep up. The pair finishes their beverages only seconds before the advertisements, and Baz asks, "Refill?"

"Yes, please."

He returns with the topped-up glasses, and the pair begins sipping away again as the program resumes. Again, they finish just in time for the ad breaks, and again the glasses are refilled. This goes on for an hour before Baz asks, "So what's your plan down here?"

"I think I'll head up to Perth in a couple of days if you don't want me gone before then."

"No, you're fine. Stay however long you want. Why Perth?"

"I've heard it's nice."

"It's all right. Bremer is better."

"I'll bet it is."

"So, you're just travelling then?"

"Not really, I guess I'm looking for somewhere to settle for a while. I had to move in a hurry."

"Because of the father?"

"Pardon?"

Baz scratches at the stubble on his chin and says, "Sorry if I'm wrong, or, you know, out of line here, but you're rushing around with a young baby, and you're on your own. It looks like you might be running away from Harrison's dad."

"Yes, that's it."

"Shame. Harrison seems like a great kid."

"He really is," Wu says as a toothpaste advertisement pops up on the TV and Baz rushes off for more beer.

Wu stands and picks up Harrison and bounces him over her chest. She leans him back away from her on one forearm. The black

diamonds of his thin eyes wave from left to right as his head hangs back on Wu's fingertips. She whispers soft words of encouragement, and he strains to turn his chin and search for her voice. The sunken arch of Harrison's nose points to Wu, and he holds her stare for a full twenty seconds, supporting his own head with tiny, battling muscles.

Wu is so completely ecstatic with the connection that tears from in her grinning eyes. At the sight of her jubilation, Harrison beams with his whole body. His arms and legs flick a little while his lips curl and the skin on his forehead lifts to pull his face into the smile. In a moment, Harrison's head sinks back down, and Wu wipes her eyes before she follows Baz out of the room. She finds him rationing out beer from a tall brown bottle the size of a champagne magnum.

Heavy rain begins falling on the house, and it sounds like handfuls of gravel on the tin roof.

"Bet you're glad you aren't out there now?" Baz asks.

"Yeah, thanks again. Do you want some money for letting me stay?" Wu replies.

"No, of course not."

Wu carries Harrison out into the little glass room, and Baz follows with the drinks.

"This is my grandfather's place," he begins. "I never understood this glass room when I was young, but now I do."

"It's tranquil."

"Yeah, it is. It's strange, but it's more tranquil in bad weather. It kinda makes you feel safe, right?"

"Yeah."

"Pop lived here with my grandmother and a bunch of kids, and he ran the store beside the house."

"That old shop?"

"Yeah. It used to be the town's only market, but I didn't want to keep it going, and a couple more opened up closer to the petrol station."

"What do you do?"

"I fix cars. When I was younger, I planned to be the best footy

player the west had ever seen, but that never took." He laughs and asks, "How about you? I mean, before the move?"

"I, um, worked in a hotel."

"A waitress or a barmaid?"

"A few different things, sometimes a barmaid."

The pair sips their drinks, and Harrison sticks his hand out to caress the glass window that's lined with the trickles from the storm.

"My missus, Lena, is at a funeral up in Perth. I offered to go, but she's staying with family, and there's not much room in the house."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. I didn't actually want to go."

"No, I mean I'm sorry someone passed away."

Baz shrugs and says, "That's what old fellas do."

A loud trumpeting sound comes from the living room, and Baz says, "Ooooo! The news is on. We'll watch that, then make dinner. Do you like braised-steak and onions?"

"I'm not sure I've ever had it before."

"All right, well we've got tins of braised-steak and onions, or tins of spaghetti."

"I'm easy."

"Good."

## HARP



Harp is sleeping in a hotel in the Perth CBD, near the station. She is on the opposite side of the massive southern continent from her burnt, ruined home in the rainforest. There is little rain here, but the world revolves around water. Children play on the banks of The Swan River while older teenagers water-ski and row long wooden boats in the early mornings. Swimming is compulsory and surfing strongly recommended. Packs of laughing, clumsy mates hire boats and fish in the deep troughs of the ocean and dedicated adventurers explore the coastal reefs with scuba tanks strapped to their spines and spearguns clenched in their fists.

There is a desert to the east and vineyards with complicated webs of reticulation hug the dry plains, but Harp spends her days patrolling the streets. She finds rough-looking characters and asks them about an Asian woman with a white child, and she asks them if they know anyone else who might be able to help track Wu down. She has no luck.

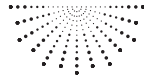
She inquires at a huge science museum beside the freeway that draws in crowds of primary school children in bright uniforms, and

she thinks that this might be the kind of place Wu would bring Harrison, but to no avail.

The city is small for a city, but far more developed than any country town and wide patches of suburbia spread out from the central river. Harp walks up and down the beaches, inquiring at funky little cafes and speaking to the owners of chain supermarkets, but no one has seen Wu. She pretends to be interested in the dogs of the young people who loiter on the dog-beaches, and she pretends to be interested in yachts when she meets sailing enthusiasts. No one can help her. She visits the brothels and massage parlours and gambling dens, and she speaks to people surrounded by bodyguards, and they all ask for money without offering any original ideas as to how Harp might succeed.

She sits in her room in the city and thinks for hours and hours and hours, but inspiration does not strike. Harp waits by the phone like an eager lover, but it does not ring. Days turn into a week, and Sean calls to say that there is talk of someone fitting Wu's description in the south, but it's all patchy, and none of the soldiers has actually seen the child abductor.

As the days draw on, Harp makes new friends in her new city, and she waits as patient as a deity for any sign of the woman to whom her existence is now devoted.



On the first morning at Baz's house, Wu enters the kitchen to find him dressed in a mechanic's uniform with loose pants and a dark shirt.

"Morning Wu, morning Harrison. Time for work," he says and Wu replies, "Looking sharp."

"There's bread over there near the toaster, cereal in the cupboard above the stovetop and eggs in the fridge. Help yourself to anything you want."

"Thanks."

"If you get bored, you might want to go next door and have a look in the old shop. It's like going back in time."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

"Great, the back door isn't locked. Just be careful of snakes and spiders."

"Of course."

Baz is whistling while he strolls out of the back door and he sings a few words at a time of whatever song is playing through his head.

Wu puts Harrison on the floor, and the child's eyes scan the new territory with little turns of his head. Wu drops bread into the toaster and opens the fridge. She pulls out the margarine and rummages

around until she finds a jar of strawberry jam and a bottle of orange juice.

“Toast for mum, and what would you like today?”

Wu pours herself a glass of juice and slathers her toast with jam, and when she puts the jam jar down, she realises that the container is the same as the glass from which she’s been drinking. She looks into the cupboard and laughs when she finds that all of the glasses and cups are recycled condiment containers. The little beer glasses were once jam jars, and there are larger, wider vegemite jars cleaned and stuffed at the back of the cupboard.

“Would you like to go back in time?” she asks Harrison as she lifts him up and carries him outside.

She picks a passionfruit off the vine growing on the gazebo with one hand and juggles Harrison so that she can tear it in half. The juice runs down her fingers, and she licks it up as Harrison watches and reaches out to the tart yellow liquid.

“You can’t go straight to this. We’ll try berries first, or maybe some of that juice,” Wu says as she kisses him on the forehead.

The pair moves around to the back of the shop, and thin vines have grown over the corner of a heavy wooden door, so Wu drags them away in long, tearing tugs. Harrison’s attention is fixed on the overgrown greenery beside them until Wu steps forward and grabs the door handle.

The door moves out of the way slowly, and Wu bounces Harrison on her hip and softly sings as she carries him inside.

The melody of her voice is soothing in the dark, mouldy building, and she walks to the centre of the rectangular room as if she’s consciously keeping her distance from every single surface. The roof is low, and there are spider webs everywhere, and Wu looks up, then shifts a little to her left to avoid a long, thin strand that’s dangling from a broken light fixture near her scalp.

The storage area at the back of the shop is lined with wooden shelves that have copper struts separating the planks, and Wu touches one to find these struts are still shinning orange under a layer of dust. There are cardboard boxes of all shapes and sizes, and the soft



material of them is flaking away like angular croissants. The words on these boxes are familiar, but the branding is entirely alien. There's a box for shoe polish with a kookaburra and a tomato sauce carton with the smiling face of a living tomato. There's a box for laundry powder claiming to have "WHAT WOMEN WANT!" and cigarettes that promise to be less irritating than other brands.

There are glass jars containing all manner of rusted washers, screws, bolts, nuts, nails, hooks, and things to bind things to other things. There are glass jars half full of something that looks like more melted glass and others containing strange, clear and dormant liquids.

Wu finds a stack of old photos, and she thumbs through them silently. There's a picture of a man standing over a tiger shark in a small, tin boat. The man is drinking a beer, and the shark seems to be staring up at him, its teeth bared like a dog. There's a photo of a man standing over an emu, with another can of beer, and there's another photo of another man with a slew of dead rabbits in a pile that reaches the height of his hip. He's drinking beer, and there's a child beside him with a bloody cutthroat razor, smiling up at the camera with his teeth showing in a shining, tipped crescent.

Wu walks on towards the front of the little, dead market, and she emerges into the main part of the store, behind a low counter. There is a square patch of clean benchtop and no cash register. There is a wall covered with hooks and hanging implements, but nothing is hanging there. A massive candy cabinet sits to the left, and the outside of it is lined with cracked blue paint, but the inside is perfectly preserved. In this cabinet, little triangular signs label lolly jars that have clearly held no lollies for a long, long time.

"This is pretty neat, huh sunshine?"

Harrison's gaze is locked onto a drum of oil in the corner, and Wu inspects the thing, but it doesn't seem special in any way. As she's leaving, she sees more drums, and she watches Harrison's stare move from one to the other, ignoring anything at all that might interest a person who can read.

Wu runs her hands through her hair upon leaving, and she feels the wandering feet of spiders on her neck, but there are none there.

She's singing when she enters the house, and she's only just put Harrison back on the kitchen floor when she hears, "Oh my God, who are you?"

Wu brings Harrison back up to her hip and turns, and a thin woman in a black dress is standing on the other side of the room.

Wu hesitates, and the woman asks, "What are you doing in my house?"

"I'm sorry, you startled me," Wu gasps.

"I startled you? Who are you?"

"I'm Wu, I'm sorry, I met your husband yesterday, and he invited me to stay a few days."

"Barry invited you to stay?"

"Baz said—"

"You call my husband Baz? When did you say you met?" she asks, and she turns her head slightly as if this tiny change could somehow give her a whole new perspective.

"Yes, I'm so sorry, I thought he would have called you. I was camping on the beach, and I met Baz, I mean Barry, when a boy got hurt, and we took him to the doctor's, but she wasn't there, so we went to Meg's house. Barry said I should come stay here because there was a storm."

"Who hurt the boy?"

"No, no, he slipped at the beach. His name was David. I'm so sorry; Barry said you were away."

"Look, I'm just going to call him. Please- maybe- please, just don't go anywhere."

"I'm sorry, you're Lena, right?"

"How do you know my name?" she asks, and it does not sound like a question that should be answered.

She picks up the phone and dials, and her stare is shifting from Wu to Harrison, and she seems equally confused by the presence of a child in her house.

"Hi, Barry, there's someone in the house."

The conversation continues, and Wu is standing and pretending not to be a part of the marital argument.

"Well, it would have been nice if you'd called."

A pause.

"It's my house. I can come home whenever I want."

Wu says, "I'm just going to leave, I'm sorry for all this. Sorry."

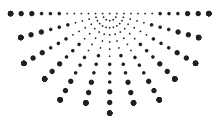
Wu walks out the front of the house with the woman marching behind her trailing the phone cord.

"I'm sorry," Wu repeats, "I didn't mean to be a pain."

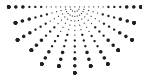
Wu pulls the car away from the house, and she's driving again. This time, she's headed north.



## PART II







Harp is sitting in the dark of her hotel room in Perth. It's a small room with a bed and a chair and a little square TV. There's a bath, but there's no lamp near the bed or VCR with the TV or shower nozzle over the bath. There's a window, and the single, huge vertical blind is pulled down so that a square of light glows along the inside of the windowsill. This daylight has been building for a while now, and the glow around the blind is almost full, almost white.

Harp yawns, and her crooked teeth stick out of her head like pieces of a dropped coffee cup. She stands and moves to the window and tugs the blind, so it retracts, and looks outside to see the café on the corner is just opening up. People are strolling over the footpath purposefully, checking their watches and waving at the silver buses that are decorated with the white silhouettes of cats.

A knock sounds at the door, and Harp waits a moment. It comes again, and she says, "I didn't order anything."

There's no reply except for another three dull taps.

Harp watches the entrance and steps to the side of the room, near the door to the bathroom.

A female voice says, "You can't jump from this height, not with your back, so you'd better open up."

Harp's bony fingers slowly turn the door handle and a short woman in a police uniform that's two sizes too big steps into the little room. She looks like a child wearing her older sibling's clothes, and she wanders straight into the middle of the space to sit on the bed.

She says, "Go ahead and lie down on the floor, that's what you like to do, right?" She's wearing a pair of reflective lens sunglasses under a police cap, so the only visible parts of her face are the thick lips, and thin strands of brown hair ending over her ears.

Harp closes the door and snaps the lock on without speaking.

The cop says, "I feel like I'm meeting someone famous."

"What?"

"You. You are a very special person."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Harp whispers as she shakes her head.

The policewoman crosses her legs, and leans back on her elbows on the bed and says, "You were on trial for a double murder when I was in the academy. We watched the guilty verdict on a little TV in a bar in Northbridge, and the barman made the band stop because there were so many cops there watching. Everyone cheered when they walked you away. Do you remember?"

"Did you just ask me if I remember the day I was convicted?"

"Whoops, silly question."

Harp clears her throat and asks, "Did you cheer?"

"What do you mean?"

"When the bar full of people cheered as they walked me away on TV, did you cheer too?"

"Of course, I had to pretend to care with so many officials around. I want to ask, did you do it? I mean, you pleaded innocent, but almost everyone does."

Harp takes a moment to study the stranger and the stranger smiles, waiting patiently under Harp's appraisal.

Harp asks, "You want to know about my case? Why? I've already been convicted. You can't take me to trial again."

"Oh, relax, come on. I just want to know. No one is in trouble here; pretend I'm not a cop."



"What difference does that make?"

"Seriously, I'm just a fan. I want to know what happened."

Harp leans back away from the stranger and says, "When I got to the bedroom, he'd already stabbed her. I shot him before he could do any more damage, but she died anyway. They both died, but I only killed the bloke."

"Yeah, I remember that's what your lawyer said. But I dunno. I was in training back then, and I had such big dreams for my career, and even then, I wanted to be a detective. I wanted to figure out how the mind of a psycho worked. Curious, I guess. I saw you, and I just couldn't help but get a weird little obsession going," the policewoman raises both hands to point all her fingers at Harp as if she's preparing to fit a hat on her scalp. She continues with, "So I looked at the evidence, and it seemed possible that you could have stabbed the hooker and then shot the guy she was with and blamed it on him. How can he argue? Right? He's dead. Isn't that possible?"

"The woman said that the bloke had stabbed her before she died."

"Yes, she did. But I wonder—"

"What? What do you wonder?"

"I wonder if you might have told her you'd kill her family or something. Maybe she said the guy stabbed her because she knew she was bugged regardless, and she didn't want to wind you up. Isn't that possible?"

"The detectives at the time investigated that."

"So what? It's still a strong possibility."

Harp curses in Mandarin, then says, "It's possible that the Lord descended from heaven to do the deed himself, but I don't see a lot of point in trying to prove that. Is your little show supposed to impress me?"

"Good question, I actually asked myself that on the way over here." The officer pauses and points to the end of the bed before adding, "Why don't you sit down? We're going to be here a while."

"No."

She shrugs and leans forward to rest her elbows on her knees.

"I'm Penny."

"I don't care."

"That's rude, but whatever. I actually asked myself if I wanted to impress you while I was putting on this stupid bloody uniform this morning. You see, if you're impressed, then I've impressed you, and I'm an impressive person, and blah, blah, blah, whatever. But if you're impressed, it makes you a little weaker, doesn't it? It makes you, what's the word?"

"The word isn't necessary. I'm not impressed."

"It's on the tip of my tongue, um, human? If you're impressed with me, then you're human. I suppose that's why they say you shouldn't chat with your idols. Is that right? I can't remember the proper saying."

"Are you actually a police officer?"

"Yep. I have a gun and handcuffs and all sorts of stuff." She points to her equipment vest and the pistol on her belt.

Harp asks, "Do you really know who I am?"

"You're May Harp, and you are a hero of mine. Or a heroine, I don't know the correct phrase. It's probably heroine."

"You're joking."

"No, no, I'm not. You're the best at what you do. That's admirable."

"You're a cop."

"Yes, I am."

"And you admire me?"

"Yes, I do."

"You don't have any moral objections?"

The stranger laughs, shakes her head, and replies, "I don't have morals. We're going to get on fine."

"Good. What do you want? Other than an autograph."

"HA! That's funny. I'm glad you're funny. Some crooks can be so dull. I want money."

"I'm starting to understand."

"I'm sure you are."

"How much?"

"Five grand and you'll never see me again. Obviously, I won't tell

anyone you're in town and blah, blah, blah, whatever. Ten grand and I'll help you do whatever it is you're doing out here."

"How do you know I'm doing anything?"

"You have two brothels on the east coast. One in Queensland and another in Melbourne and you haven't called either of them in a week. Your little cabin, or bungalow, or whatever it was, burned down with a child inside it. I doubt you've come to sunny little Perth for a relaxing vacation."

"I like vacations."

"No, you don't. You're here for something."

Harp steps past the bed and sits on the floor.

Harp says, "It strikes me as odd that a policewoman would offer her services without even knowing what she's offering. You're undercover, which is strange because you're in uniform."

"HA! Wouldn't that be a cool tactic? Go undercover in uniform?"

"Don't tell jokes; this isn't a fun situation. You're a cop and a liar. You shouldn't be here. Get out."

"No."

"No?"

"No, I'm not going anywhere. I understand you're hesitant, or nervous or whatever, but I'm going to work with you. We're going to work together."

Harp leans back and stretches her spine and says, "I'm not working. I'm on holiday. Get out and tell your copper buddies to leave me alone."

"No."

"This is getting repetitive."

"I come from a long line of cops. My father was a—"

"I don't care."

"No, but seriously, my dad was a cop, and he told me stories of the amount of loose cash he used to see floating around crooks. I mean, it's astounding, isn't it? That people sit in offices their whole lives and blah, blah, blah, whatever." The policewoman stands and says, "I don't want a paycheck or a pension or anything like that. You have the money that I want, May Harp, you've already earned it. You've already

stolen it and hidden it from the taxman. But, I can do things with a badge that you can't. We'd make a good team, why do I care if you stab some hooker and blame the bloke she was screwing?"

"You'd be willing to help if I said I'm here to kill someone?"

"Hell yes, I assume you are. That's the price of murder, ten thousand buckos. I mean, if the job is something softer we can work out a discount. I'll do a bank job for half, damn, I'll do a smash-and-grab for free."

"What did you say your name is?"

"Penny."

"I don't trust you."

"You can trust me. I just want to get paid."

"I'm not paying you."

"Think about it for a moment. Your gut reaction is to turn me away, and that's fair, but I could have come here to extort you."

"I'd trust you more if you were an extortionist."

"Take a deep breath and think about how much easier your life will be with a cop on your side. How much money is ten grand to you? Really?"

Harp slumps forward, so her elbows are resting on her knees. She scratches at the side of her head with her thin, pointed nails, and she stands. She moves to the window with a few awkward steps and looks out at the hordes of people who move anonymously over the footpaths below. She doesn't bother counting, but she's knows there are hundreds of people just in her line of sight and in a second, there will be a totally fresh batch. By tomorrow, thousands of people will wave traversed that one small patch of the city and thousands more will be on the way.

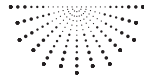
Harp says, "Fine. Let me think about what you can do for me," and sticks out her palm to shake the copper's hand.

"Good. Remember, I'm Penny," she says, "but I don't shake hands."

"Really?"

"Yeah, trace evidence is a bugger, trust me. I don't want anything of yours touching me, or vice versa."

"That's a good start."



Wu arrives in Perth in the evening, and she drives up the long, winding coast. Harrison wakes and starts to scream in the back, so Wu parks the car beside the beach and feeds him while she watches the white of the waves appear in the darkness of night. The bright foam charges up the beach like skeletons attempting to crawl back to the world of the living before being swallowed once more by the night and by the relentless, concussive slamming of more waves. She peers out that never-ending plane of black ocean in the night, and she watches the glorious, flickering triangles of silver reflection that the moon lays upon the rippling surface.

As soon as Harrison is content, Wu drives on. She drives north until there are very few houses remaining and many more factories and warehouses, and then she turns around to drive back the way she came to merge onto the freeway heading south. The skyscrapers of the city appear on Wu's left, and she glimpses over to them periodically as she tries to remain focused on the road ahead. She leaves the main artery of the freeway behind and steers the vehicle along the side of a huge river.

Wu passes a brewery and several small boatsheds before the road

forces her inland once more. She moves the car up a long hill, beside a university campus with a huge clock tower, and she drives past a bar named after a sailor. Wu parks as soon as she sees an 'OPEN' sign on the window of a fast-food burger shop.

The midnight street here is cluttered by a throng of young drunks. There are teenagers in black jeans or cheap dresses everywhere. One girl is vomiting into a rubbish bin while another holds her hair. A boy with a thin moustache is lying in the middle of a disabled parking bay smoking a cigarette. His eyes are closed, and the ash falls from the end of the durry to sprinkle the insides of his nostrils. A pack of drunkards are walking through the drive-through of the burger shop and pretending to be in a car, shouting 'BEEP BEEP,' and 'HONK HONK'.

Wu looks back to Harrison, and his eyes are open, but he seems more intrigued than afraid of the shambles outside. Wu steps out of the car and surveys the chaos more closely. Everyone is hugging, singing or dancing, and not a single frown can be seen on any face. It's very loud out here with broken, slurred conversations, and the smell of fried food hangs in the air as thick as mustard.

"Are you all right miss?" a voice makes Wu turn, and she's looking at an Aboriginal man sitting on a safety rail beside the footpath.

"I'm fine. Thanks."

"It's a bit rowdy tonight, isn't it?" he asks. The young man has long, curly hair and a single, skinny line of beard that follows the contour of his square jaw before jutting up over his top lip.

"Yes," Wu says, "it's busy out here."

"There's a nightclub in behind that wall there, and it's student night tonight."

"Oh, I see. You seem pretty sober."

"I'm driving. Were you looking for someone? Maybe I can help."

"No, I just wanted to get something to eat, but I don't think I want to go inside."

"They're drunk, but they're all harmless."

"I've got my son with me too."

He steps away from his seat, leans down to look into the back of the car, and he says, "Oh, look at the little fella. He's great."

"Yeah, but I can't take him inside."

"Nah, good call. There's a hot-dog van parked beside the club, but there's usually a line."

The boy points, but Wu says, "I'll just go hungry for tonight."

"For the whole night? Where are you off to?"

"Nowhere. I just drove into Perth. I was planning on being here early enough to find a cheap hotel, but that didn't happen."

"So where will you sleep?"

"In the car."

"What? That's crazy."

"I have a swag."

The boy's mouth opens in a smile so complete that it seems to split his whole head in half. He asks, "Are you serious?"

Wu replies, "Yeah. I have no choice. I've done it before; it's not too bad."

"That's nuts. Why don't you come back to our place?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't worry, it's not weird or anything. I have a house with a couple of uni mates, and there's always someone on the couch. Or you can sleep in the swag on the back porch, but it'll be colder in the morning than it is now."

"I don't know."

Someone calls out, "Damo, it's burger time, bro!" and the designated driver Wu has been speaking to turns to shout, "Legend!" at a young man walking out of the restaurant.

"I'm Damo, and that's Zeke," the driver says, and Wu points to the car and replies, "He's Harrison, and I'm Wu."

"So, do you want to come with us? Zeke's pissed, but he's a decent bloke."

The other boy joins them, and his blue eyes are half shut under the weight of all the alcohol in his brain.

"It's true," Zeke slurs, "I am drunk, and I am a good bloke. I'm Ezekiel."

"That's an interesting name," Wu begins, "is it religious?"

"Yep. Mum and Dad are Jews, but me and this black fella here are hunter-gathers, aren't we?"

"By that," Damo says, "he means he's unemployed and he's lucky he has me to pay the rent."

"Exactly! One big happy family. Oh, and Kel is coming back to ours tonight."

Damo turns to address Zeke, and the two men lower their voices.

"Kel again? Bro, she's got a boyfriend."

"Yeah, he's coming too."

"Does he know about you two?"

"No, of course not. I invited him back to throw him off the scent," Zeke says as he taps his nose and winks.

"You're crazy."

"Awwww, I'm crazy for you too big fella. Are you jealous?"

Damo laughs and says, "Get in the car, you dopey prick."

He turns back to Wu and asks, "It's up to you. I have a fold-out couch in my room, and I have uni in the morning, so it's straight to bed. You won't have to see the riff-raff again, and you'll have somewhere warm to crash."

Zeke shouts, "You should listen to him, he can tell it's going to be cold out tonight by the way the stars—"

"Shut up and get in the car."

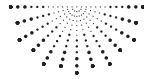
"His ancestors have warned him that tonight will be—"

"Shut up and get in the car!"

"All right," Wu says, "he seems harmless, and I don't really like that swag or sleeping in the car too much, not in the cold."

"Cool. Follow me back to our place then. It's not far."





Harp walks through Northbridge with her hiking stick, and people are moving out of her way as they see her approaching with her speedy, shambolic steps. She walks past a playground and a kebab shop and, eventually, she enters an underground car park through a big, red door.

Penny is waiting, in her police uniform that's far too loose on her, and she whispers, "G'day, did you consider the offer?"

"Yes," Harp replies, and the words return to them in a sharp echo off the surrounding concrete structure. Somewhere in the honeycomb building, a car door slams, and it resonates like a gunshot.

"So, you want a little help?"

"Yes."

"Great! This is so exciting," Penny says with a giggle.

"How? You don't even know what we're doing yet."

"Breaking the law is always exciting," Penny confirms as she fiddles with the pistol on her belt. "So, what's the plan?"

"I need you to find a vehicle."

"Boring."

"It was stolen in Sydney, and the thief doesn't realise the value."

"I see. So, it's lined with contraband; that's a little more fun."

"Forget the fun, you fool," Harp says as she hands over an envelope.

"There's more than ten grand here," Penny says without opening it.

"That's fifteen thousand dollars. You work for me now. You're going to find the vehicle, and then you're going to vanish. As soon as I say we're done, I never want to see you again."

"Yeah, that's standard procedure. Give me the details."

"Here." Wu passes Penny a folded piece of paper and adds, "Be quick and don't do anything when you find the vehicle."

"What do you mean?"

"You find it, and I'll pick it up. The location is all I need from you."

"Fine, but it won't necessarily be too quick."

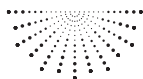
"Why?"

"I can't go through official channels. I can't start a recorded and formal search without someone asking too many questions. What I can do is let you know as soon as an infringement is linked to the vehicle."

"That could be months or even years."

"Don't worry; I can talk to some people and get a few more eyes working for us. I've got some tricks up my sleeve. I'll get your car."

"Good. You had better get to work now then."



Wu wakes on the fold-out couch as Damo is dressing in the dark.

"Sorry," he says, "I didn't mean to wake you, go back to sleep."

"It's fine. I like the mornings."

Wu sits and yawns as she strokes the hairs on Harrison's head. He stirs in his sleep, and Wu pulls her hand away from him.

"Are you going to school now?" Wu asks.

"Yeah."

"What are you studying?"

"Psychology. Zeke and I both have a stats tute this morning, but I don't think he'll get up."

"Does he like to sleep in?"

"The sleeping isn't his problem."

"I suppose not."

"You're welcome to hang around. The TV downstairs only works with tapes, and I think a couple are asleep on the floor down there, but whatever."

"Great, thanks."

Damo walks a little closer in the dark room and whispers, "How did Harrison sleep?"

“Good. He’s a great sleeper.”

“Awesome. I’ll be back in a couple of hours, but don’t feel like you have to hang around ‘till then.”

“Great, have fun.”

Damo huffs and says, “Not at a stats tutorial.”

He leaves and shuts the door behind himself with a hushed click. Wu feeds Harrison in the dark, and she holds the infant to her warm skin as he suckles. The room is filled with the musk of male sweat, and Wu thinks of the rooms back in Queensland. She thinks of the hot, sticky open air outside, on the balcony of the brothel in which she worked. There was a chain of red fairy lights on the wooden platform, and she would stand there and wave at the men in the street. She thinks of the smell of the customers who entered. Some of them would stumble in drunk and filthy, and Wu would lead them, swaying and burping and grinning, to a special room that held nothing more than a shower. That was Harp’s idea: a separate room in which the men must shower; the showers in the other places she’d worked were connected directly to the bedrooms. Harp was smart like that. She told Wu that she was to keep every room perfectly clean, and any natural, organic smells should be tended to with candles and incense and open windows. After the men showered, Wu would inspect them for rashes or puss or signs of illness, and she’d already know how much work it was going to take to send them back out onto the street. When the men weren’t drunk, they were either crippled by nervous energy or absolutely expert in debauchery. The expert men would be showered and naked in under a minute, and every word they said would be laced with the most soul-crushing, depressing apathy, and it would not improve as they paid her.

Wu looks around the musky, dark room and she says to Harrison, “This place is all right, isn’t it sunshine? Where would you like to go today?”

She strokes his head and whispers, “Are you sick of the beach yet? There’s a river here too. We could have a little picnic on the bank, would you like that?”

Harrison makes a small noise in this throat, and Wu kisses the top of his head before she puts her shirt back on and walks downstairs.

THE MORNING SUN IS BRIGHT, AND THE HOUSE HAS WINDOWS ON EVERY wall, so there's no need to turn on a light. Zeke is nowhere to be found, but a young couple is sleeping in the living room. The boy is on the floor, and the girl is on the couch, and the girl's snoring is twice as loud as the boy's.

The house is filthy. There are dirty dishes on the counter and in the sink and on the little coffee table near the TV. There are beer cans and bottles on the floor beside the full kitchen bin, and someone has spilt something between the burners on the stove.

Wu wanders around the house, tidying the small patches of mess and singing to Harrison. Before long, Zeke emerges from a hallway at the back of the house. He walks straight to the bathroom, swaying a little as he moves.

When he reappears, Wu says, "Good morning."

"Oh, hi. How did you sleep?"

"Good, thanks."

"That roommate of yours didn't try anything naughty, did he?" Zeke asks, but before Wu can answer, he continues with, "I'm just messing with ya."

Wu fakes a smile and asks, "What are your plans for the day?"

"Eat, sleep some more and then go in to uni."

"You're going to class?"

"Nope, going to the tav."

"The what?"

"The uni bar. The tavern."

"Oh, that sounds fun."

"It is. You wanna come?"

Wu shakes her head and replies, "No, no, I have the little one."

"He can come too."

"I don't think so, but thanks."

"No worries."

Zeke sits on a tall stool at the side of the kitchen and says, "You don't need to clean up; it's our mess."

"I don't mind."

"All right, thanks."

"Do you want me to make you some breakfast?"

"What?"

"Breakfast. I can make it for us. You seem pretty hungover," Wu says.

"Really? That would be awesome."

"Yeah, do your friends in the living room want some?"

"Nah, they sleep all day. Honestly, they won't get up until the afternoon."

Wu puts Harrison on the floor, and Zeke says, "Look at him go," as Harrison starts to crawl.

"He only just started crawling," Wu says as she cracks some eggs into a frying pan.

"Yeah? How old is he?"

"Fourteen months."

"Cool, I don't know anything about kids."

"He's my first, so I'm just learning too."

"What are you doing in Perth?"

"I don't know yet. I'm looking for somewhere to settle down for a while. I drove here from the east."

"How long did the drive take?"

"A little over a week, but I'm not rushing or anything."

"That's pretty good. Why'd you leave?"

Wu drops four pieces of bread down into a long, metal toaster and says, "I was bored, and I needed a change."

"You were bored over east? You'll definitely get bored here then."

The toast springs up, and Wu slathers it with margarine before sliding two eggs out of the pan to complete the meal.

"Cheers," Zeke says, and Wu adds, "I might get bored, but I'll still get the change I'm looking for."

"Fair enough. Country WA is the best. Perth is like a big country

town, but you don't get the space. You might enjoy the bush a bit more."

"You think?"

"Yeah, you get all the benefits of nature, the beaches and stuff, without living in the city suburbs."

"I was in Bremer Bay for the last few days."

Zeke has a mouth full of eggs and bread as he says, "Yeah, Bremer is nice. Try Margaret River and Dwellingup next, they're down south, but nowhere near as far as Bremer."

"I'll have to look into it. I should probably get going."

"Why? I thought you didn't have any plans?"

"I don't want to outstay my welcome."

"Don't worry about that. You cooked and cleaned; you're always welcome."

"OK, great."

"You sure you don't want to come to the tav?"

"No, thank you. How far is the river? I think I'll go for a walk."

"It's close. The main highway out there is Stirling Highway; just turn left and follow it all the way to the bottom of the hill. It'll probably take twenty minutes to get there."

"Great, thanks."

WU WALKS DOWN THE HIGHWAY, AND SHE SEES STUDENTS WITH BOOKS AND cars full of young people. There are girls in netball uniforms waiting for a bus, and there's a clump of teenagers smoking in the car park of a pub.

Wu finds the river, and she points out the boats and the birds to Harrison and he stares blankly at the world as she bounces him on her hip. She follows the riverbank, and the university tavern is right beside the road as she passes a yacht club, but she doesn't go in.

The foreshore curls back so that Wu cuts through a few side streets to find the highway again and she eats a kebab at a table of students. They pretend not to notice her and Harrison as they discuss the implications of their most recent anthropology lecture. Wu

pretends not to notice that the students all stare at Harrison when they think Wu isn't paying attention to them.

When Wu returns to the house, she knocks on the door and calls out, "It's Wu."

Damo opens the barrier and says, "Just in time. Harrison, do you like Aladdin?"

Harrison stares back at the stranger and Damo adds, "Because we're just about to watch it."

Wu and Harrison enter to find a few more young people camped in front of the TV.

"Hey guys, this is Wu and Harrison," Damo says, and the group fires back a few names.

A tall, blonde girl says, "Awww isn't he cute? Come sit beside me cutey," and Wu makes her way to the friendly woman.

The couple that slept here last night are still asleep in the same spots and Damo passes a bottle of wine around the group until each person's glass has the same amount in it. They play the movie, and they drink whenever the monkey talks or Jafar says, "Street rat!" and Wu decides to get a glass from the kitchen as well.

She turns to Damo and says, "If I have a drink, I won't be able to drive. I'll have to sleep here again."

He smiles back and replies, "Good."



## HARP



The sun is hiding behind a veil of grey clouds and a strong afternoon breeze is whipping Harp's hair around her head as she sits on a little bench on the foreshore of The Swan River in Perth. The water is lovely and clear, but the bank here is mostly mud, and the paw prints of dogs are stamped into the ground between the white splashes of the waterbirds' droppings. Harp is kicking stones and twigs at the ducks and barking at them in Mandarin as if she thinks that's the only language they understand.

Sean approaches her from behind, and Harp stops speaking when his feet fall close enough for her to hear him.

"Any news?" she asks as he sits beside her and crosses his legs.

"Wu was in a town called Bremer Bay for a couple of days. She saved a child's life." Sean is wearing polished shoes below a pair of black trousers and a buttoned-up white, collared shirt wraps his torso. He sits up dead straight with the fingers of each hand intertwined on his lap.

"When?"

"A week ago."

"And Harrison?"

"She's still got him with her, and she's still driving the same car."

"That's good news. Any other sightings?"

"No, but she could be hiding out somewhere south. She was sleeping in a tent on the beach for a while; she might have gone into the bush."

"Yes, perhaps. How did you find out about Bremer Bay?"

"Local gossip," Sean says and when Harp doesn't reply he continues with, "She got friendly with a local man, and she went to stay with him. Then the wife threw her out."

"Did you speak to this couple?"

"Yeah, I saw them myself. They don't know anymore."

"How certain are you of that?" Harp asks, and she stands to look down on Sean.

"Extremely certain. They would have told us anything."

"All right. Maybe she left and came straight to Perth. There aren't many toll booths or cameras or anything like that in this town, so we've got to track her down the old-fashioned way."

Sean leans back and picks something out of his teeth with his tongue before he asks, "How do you mean?"

"Pay some locals to keep an eye out."

"Have you started this?"

"Yes. A copper named Penny came to my hotel and offered her services for some cash."

"Her services?"

"She'll do anything for a buck."

"And you paid her? Does she know what she's doing?"

"I think so, she found me pretty quick. We'll use her and then we'll have to kill her. She's too smart."

"So she knows about Wu and the baby?" Sean asks.

"No. I've hired her to find Wu's car. She thinks it was stolen with a trunk full of narcotics," Harp replies.

"Smart move."

"She thinks I don't know who has the vehicle. She thinks it was taken in a random robbery."

"She doesn't sound all that clever."

"She is; she's just too trusting."

"How sure can you be that she's not just using you? She could be undercover."

"Perhaps. Either way, you can bury her in the desert when we're done, and we'll drive back to Queensland. Problem solved. But keep the search up down south until then. This has dragged on too long. I want to be certain we're not cutting any corners.

"No problem. Will we be topping Wu as well?"

"Of course, but I'll do her."

"Let's do her and the cop together."

"OK. How?"

Sean peeks over each shoulder, and he watches as an elderly Asian man in a blue tracksuit walks past with quick, measured strides.

He says, "In the ocean. There's so much bloody ocean out here."

"No more than home."

"Yeah, true, but that's why we use the ocean back home too."

"There's desert here."

"There's swamp back home."

"Yes, but no people go out into the desert here. Not into the proper nothingness."

"All right."

Harp scratches at her chin for a moment and says, "I'll take my time with Wu. When she finally dies, I'll put her in the trunk of her car and dump the car in the desert somewhere. I'll send Penny to inspect it, and you'll be waiting at a distance with a rifle. Bury them deep."

"Sounds good."

"Here are the details of my hotel room," Harp says as she hands Sean a piece of paper. She adds, "Call me any morning you have anything to report, I'm usually out looking after midday."



Wu drinks small glasses of very cheap white wine and the others in the house drink much, much more. The comatose couple on the couch wakes with a sudden jolt and everyone laughs while the boy's cheeks redden. When Aladdin ends, the others go to a bar, and Wu stays home to nap with Harrison. She sleeps long into the afternoon, and the banging, shouting sounds of the others returning wakes her and Harrison after dark. She feeds him formula in the kitchen and the tall blonde girl that was so interested in Harrison before watches as if she's committing the process to memory.

"I want girls," the blonde slurs and Harp replies, "I wanted a girl too, but I'm glad I have a boy now. He's precious. He's just so gentle."

Zeke stumbles into the kitchen with a bottle of red wine in his hand. "Little man, how was your day?" he asks Harrison.

"It was great," Wu says. "How was the tav?"

"Also great. I'm going out to buy smokes. Seeya in a bit," Zeke replies, and he moves off through the house with the tall blonde girl following closely behind him.

"Did you get some sleep?" Damo's voice enters the room, and Wu turns to see him watching her from the doorway.

"Yeah, a lot. Thanks."

"I was afraid you might leave before I got home."

"I was afraid you'd be black-out drunk when you got back."

"Nah, I don't like to get too smashed."

"Zeke is hammered."

"Always. The red wine turns that willy-wagtail into a wedge tail."

"What?"

"Red wine turns a little bird into a big one."

Wu laughs, and Harrison begins to giggle when he sees her smile.

She nods and asks, "Is that an Aboriginal saying?"

"Nah, Zeke is far worse than any Noongar."

Wu laughs again, and Damo asks, "Do you want another drink? I've got feral white wine or feral red wine."

"I'll try the feral red."

"That's brave," he says as he retrieves a bottle from a cupboard and pours a small dash into a short cup.

He adds, "Try a sip first; you might not want to commit to a whole glass."

Wu touches the liquid to her lips and releases a long breath out of a face that's curled into a fouled expression.

"The white then?" Damo asks.

"Yes please, with some water and ice please."

Damo pours himself a glass of the red, and he pours Wu a glass of the white and she asks, "You're going to drink that?"

"Yeah, I'll drink this so you can have the white."

"I don't want to take all of your good stuff."

"I don't mind, none of it is much good."

The pair moves into the living room and sits beside the rest of the mob and Wu puts Harrison on the couch beside her. Wu and Damo chat for a while before Harrison starts to cry. She picks him up and whispers to him, but the rest of the group are staring and pointing and, soon, she takes him upstairs to Damo's room.

Damo follows Wu to the quiet bedroom, and she says, "You don't have to come up, stay with your friends."

"Nah. I'm always with them. I want to hang out with you."

"Thanks. So how is uni?" Wu asks as she calms Harrison on the fold-out couch.

"Fine. It's dull at the moment, but only because my units are boring."

"What kind of psychology do you want to go into?"

"Clinical, but there's a lot more study before that happens. I expect I'll change my mind soon. Have you thought about where you and Harrison are going to live?"

"I was planning on Perth, but Zeke says that country WA is better."

"I agree. I'm from Geraldton. I'm just here to study."

"Where's Geraldton?"

"Up."

"Will you go back there when you're done studying?"

"Maybe. Maybe I'll go further north and work in some remote communities."

"That sounds like a pretty good plan. I might see you up there sometime."

"I'd like that," Damo says. He points at Harrison and adds, "He seems much happier up here."

"Up here in Perth? How do you know?"

"Nah, I mean upstairs."

Wu smiles and says, "Oh yeah. He's still so young; I don't think he knows where he's happiest. I promise I'll move on soon, I just—"

"Don't promise me that."

"Why?"

"I'm hoping you'll stay a while."

"You don't even know me, and I have a kid. You don't want a baby in this house, not with your lifestyle."

"Maybe I don't like the lifestyle."

"Well, OK, but you can't want Harrison," Wu says.

"Why not?"

"Don't make me say it. He's, um, challenging. More challenging than others."

"How so?" Damo asks.

"Don't be stupid, you can see he's got a disability."

"Yeah, I can see that, but I don't know anything about him. Tell me. What's challenging?"

"Oh," Wu takes a long breath and says, "Do you really want to hear?"

"Definitely, please."

"When he was born, it started with grief. You grieve for something you've lost. You have an idea of the way your life will be like as a mum, and you lose that. It's not the same as the baby dying, of course not, but it's grief. It's like the life you were making is just burned away. You're pregnant to a ball of life in your belly, and then you're the mother of a child with a disability. Everything changes, and all your expectations are lost. All overnight."

"It must be so hard being the mum."

"It's not just the mum that feels the grief, but everyone. It sounds horrible, but you have to explain to your family that they won't have the baby they expected. You have to tell your friends that everything will be different. You feel that sorrow, but you still have a wonderful, beautiful part of yourself to hold and love and when you tell people that your baby has Down Syndrome, they tell you they're sorry for you. You get pity instead of a celebration."

"That sounds awful," Damo whispers.

"Sometimes, but I've still got Harrison. I still have him. He could be taken away any second," Wu's shoulders sink, and her mind begins to wander. "Someone could take him away from me, or he could get hurt, or he could die. He could be here with me today, and if I'm not careful, if I don't love him enough, if I don't protect him, he could be gone tomorrow."

"Are there medical problems?"

Wu looks up into Damo's eyes, as if she'd forgotten he was there for a moment, and says, "Oh, yes, a few. He had an operation on his heart."

"Already?"

"Yes, pretty soon after he was born. The doctors don't like to wait. Harrison's heart should be fine now. He'll see a cardiologist every year for the rest of his life, but that should be fine. I just

worry all the time. I worry about everything for him. There are so many complications. Anything could happen. Downs kids are in danger of childhood cancers. Leukemia. Can you believe that? As if they're not already dealing with enough, Harrison might get blood cancer. I know it's still a small chance, but I worry about it all. I can't stay with you. You don't want to worry like this."

"I don't care."

"You're just saying that. You don't know. You don't understand."

"No, maybe not, but all kids are full of surprises. The idea that anyone knows or understands what's going to happen with any kid is ridiculous. I'm happy to admit I don't know anything about Harrison, and I don't want to live here anymore. I'm sick of drinking every day. I like family. I like Harrison. I like you."

Wu nods and turns her head to look around the room before asking, "What else do you like then?"

"I don't know. I have to live like this to save money while I focus on getting a degree. Having mates around constantly can be fun, but I miss family."

"Do you have any family here?"

"No, not in Perth. Back up north, I have two nephews that are about Harrison's age."

"That makes sense; you're great with kids," Wu says.

"Cheers. I'm worried I'm going to miss all their milestones. I won't see them learn to walk and talk. I guess that's just life."

"Yeah, but kids don't remember that stuff. You'll be an uncle again before they grow up much."

"I know, but I want to see it. I want to be a part of those new lives. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"It's like, I don't know," Damo lets out a nervous chuckle and says, "It's like the children are the only things that matter. Everything before, all your mistakes and stuff, everything other than the new life is redundant as long as the child is happy and healthy. Does that make sense?"



Wu looks down at Harrison for a long while, and Damo waits patiently in the silence for her to say, "Yes."

He replies, "Cool. I guess I should go to bed. I don't feel like drinking anymore."

Wu says, "Yeah, all right."

Damo asks, "Do you think Harrison is comfortable there?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because my bed is much nicer."

"For Harrison?"

"Or you."

Wu looks down at the sleeping infant and says, "He looks pretty comfortable. I doubt he'll be waking up anytime soon."

"That's good."

Damo stands and moves to the wall and flicks off the light. Wu sits silent and still in the darkness. No one moves for a moment, and all eyes adjust to the fresh black. Now the world is only seen as shapes, angles and the movement of figures.

Damo is standing, and his silhouette elongates as he pulls his shirt off over his head. A second later, the forms of his legs shrink in the black as he drops his pants and he creeps like an alien predator, skinny and trembling and breathing deeply in the cool room. The alabaster bed sheets swallow Damo whole as Wu stands. She disrobes, and the pear-shaped figure that lingers here now is somehow, all at once, more revealed and more concealed by the night.

They're in the bed together, draped in the white sheets and the blackness of Damo's body in that pure cocoon looks like a man-shaped tear in the fabric of the universe; a Damo sized black hole that chuckles and teases as Wu plunges into the mystery of it. When the sun rises, his black skin on those white sheets makes him look more human than the paleness of Wu, as if his very soul has more substance.

They're both sleeping in the soft morning light as someone knocks on the door. Wu's eyes shoot open, and Damo rolls over as Wu sits up on the edge of the bed, naked. She looks over to Harrison and finds him dreaming peacefully.

The knock comes again, and Damo mumbles, "Get lost."

"Sorry mate," Zeke's voice floats nervous and timid into the room.

Wu stands and pulls on her clothes in quick, wobbling motions, and she turns back to see Damo awake and smiling up at her.

"Morning," he says.

"Morning."

"Thanks for last night," Damo adds, and Wu is biting her lip when the knock comes again.

Damo shouts, "Go away," and Harrison begins to cry.

"Oh, sorry, bugger," he adds as Zeke's voice returns.

"Sorry to interrupt guys, but I really need to tell you something."

Wu shrugs and Damo calls out, "Sure, come in."

Zeke steps into the room and nods to the pair of them and says, "I did something dumb."

"What, mate?"

"I took Wu's car to get the smokes last night, and the cops pulled me over."

Wu curses under her breath, and Damo says, "You idiot. What happened?"

"I got done."

Wu says, "What does that mean?"

"I was breathalysed, and I've lost my license."

"Damn it. Why were you driving?"

"Because I'm an idiot."

Damo's head bobs up and down furiously, and he says, "Agreed."

Wu asks, "But, what about the car?"

"Oh yeah, that's why I barged in. Obviously, I couldn't bring it home. It's parked in a two-hour spot beside Stirling Highway, near the servo."

"OK, that's all right," Wu says.

Zeke adds, "Sorry. It's daytime now, so you might want to move it before you get a ticket. I'd do it myself, but I'm still a bit pissed."

"OK, thanks for letting us know," Wu says.

Zeke looks at her with his lips stretched into an apologetic smile, and he says, "Thanks for letting me borrow your car."

Damo laughs at him and adds, "Did you get your smokes?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Was it worth it?"

"Nah, I should've quit last week."

"Yeah. Definitely."

Zeke closes the door, and Wu immediately says, "I need to leave now."

"Yeah, of course," Damo replies, "let's leave straight away and move your car. I'll drive you down there and then maybe we can go for some breakfast?"

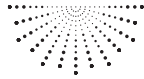
Damo is scrambling to put on his pants and shirt as Wu repeats, "No, I mean I need to leave straight away."

"Yeah, hold on a sec, just let me find my thongs. We'll get some breakfast. It'll be like, you know, a date."

"A date?"

"Yeah," Damo grins, and Wu nods to him before they walk out of the room carrying Harrison in his bassinet.

## HARP



Harp is lying on the floor of her hotel room. Her eyes are closed, and the air is moving in through her nose and out through her mouth in a peaceful, resting circuit.

Someone taps once on the front door and says, "Open up."

Harp's breathing silences and her eyelids snap open. Her pupils narrow and lock into place before she rolls onto her belly, brings her knees up under her hips and extends up from a ball like a bird launching itself straight up into the air.

She puts one hand on the corner of the bed to steady her torso, then she lunges forward and grabs the doorknob with both hands. She pulls the wooden panel out of the way, and Penny is standing in the hall with her hand resting on the butt of her service pistol.

"What?" Harp asks.

"Are you going to let me in?"

"Depends what you want."

Penny scoffs, shakes her head and replies, "What do you think? I found the car."

Harp lets the door creak all the way open so that it bumps on the wall and she retrieves a bottle of pills from a drawer beside the bed before lying back down on the floor. She takes a couple of pills, then

lifts her knees and rolls them from one side of her body to the other while Penny watches silent and frozen in the doorway.

"Come in and lock the door," Harp says as her spine cracks in a series of dull snapping sounds.

Penny sits on the bed and asks, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, it's just the morning."

"Do you want me to, maybe, rub your back or something?"

"Shut your mouth," Harp says as she climbs up the chair and spins to sit in it.

"Fine, well the car is in Nedlands, near the uni."

"What uni? Where's Nedlands?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot you're a tourist for a sec. It's near The University of Western Australia. About fifteen minutes away by car. Do you have a car?"

"Not right now, but I can get one pretty quick."

"I can't drive you. I can't have you in a police vehicle, and the car will probably have moved by now; it's parked in a tow-away zone."

"What are the details? Was it a speeding fine?"

"Nope, much better. A nineteen-year-old named Ezekiel Abelson was pinged last night for drunk driving. The car is parked nearby."

"Why wasn't I told about this last night then?"

"I was searching for you for hours, where have you been? This kid, Ezekiel, has no rental history other than living with his parents, so it might be hard to get him alone immediately. However, here's a printout of his uni timetable," Penny emphasises her speech by waving a single finger around in the air before passing Harp a piece of paper.

Harp is looking over the document with squinting, energetic eyes as Penny adds, "The exact location of the car is written at the bottom there, and this is a map," Penny pauses to pull a torn page of a map book out of her pocket. "This is a map, and I've marked all the locations that students hang out in around the school. Restaurants, bars, clubs and the local shopping centre."

"Good work."

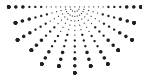
"Hold on," Penny produces a bundle of printouts and says, "These are the class lists of each of his units. There are a lot of people on here,

I mean hundreds, so start with the hangouts and then maybe try to track down some of his friends if you don't get him in the next couple of days."

"No, officer Penny."

"No?"

"No. You are going to look for him in all of these possible locations, and you are going to talk to every kid you can find. They'll be terrified of the uniform. I'm going straight to the car, right now."



Damo pulls his vehicle up behind Wu's parked car and says, "Looks like it's still in one piece."

"Yep," Wu replies.

"I know a great place around the corner for breakfast. We could probably leave the cars here and walk."

"No, why don't we go into the city? I haven't ventured out of this neighbourhood yet."

"Sure," Damo smiles and Wu carries Harrison to her vehicle. She steers the car out behind Damo and follows him as he turns the car around and makes his way down towards the river. They follow the bends of the shoreline and Wu watches Damo as he glimpses into his mirrors, looking back at her.

They park at the side of the city, where the morning crowds are the thinnest, and they walk hand in hand beside a park. Wu is carrying Harrison in the bassinet, but Damo takes the boy out of the cradle and hugs him to his shoulder as they begin to climb a steep hill.

"He's so well behaved," Damo says.

"He wasn't always. We've been on the move for a while now, and I think he's starting to get used to it," Wu replies as she fiddles with the tiny hands that are clutching to Damo's curly hair.

They stroll past a wide café with plastic sheets rolled down in front of the outdoor tables, and they're chatting about uni and work and footy until Damo says, "Hang on, what was wrong with that place?"

"Nothing, I'm just enjoying the walk."

They carry on up the footpath together, and Harrison falls asleep on Damo's shoulder while he explains the concept of plasticity in juvenile minds to Wu.

"I think you bored him," she says, and they laugh as they sit on a little wooden table outside of a restaurant that states 'Modern Australian Cuisine' on a sign beside the road.

Damo asks, "What do you think counts as modern Australian food?"

"I'm not sure. Meat pies?"

"I don't think they were invented in Australia. I just want a benny."

"A what?"

"Eggs benedict."

"Oh," Wu puts a hand to her mouth to cover her huge grin, "I thought you were talking about a person. I thought you said you want a person named Benny."

"No, no, but maybe that's the name of the person who invented the meal. Miss Benedict."

"Or Mr Eggs."

They each release a few loud chuckles until Harrison stirs and they restrain themselves into tight smiles. A waiter arrives and they both order eggs benedict and as soon as the waiter leaves, Wu says, "I'm sorry. I have to go now."

"What? We just got here. What about your benny?"

Wu smiles for a moment before biting her lip and adding, "I don't have to rush off straight away. I can stay for breakfast, but then I have to leave Perth."

Damo is silent for a moment as he bobbles Harrison up and down on his chest.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asks, "I didn't mean to pressure you into last night; I thought you wanted to."



"I did want to. I still want to. I just," Wu stops speaking, and she looks at the ground.

"You just what? Come on, you can tell me."

"I just have to go."

"Why? Why don't you get a little place in Perth and we can start again? We can have a nervous first date, and I'll pretend that Harrison makes me uncomfortable, just like any bloke on a first date."

"That sounds fantastic, but I can't."

The food is delivered, and Wu cuts everything into small pieces before taking Harrison. She holds him with one arm and picks up the already cut pieces of food with a fork while Damo sits quietly and stares at his breakfast.

"Someone dangerous is trying to find me," Wu announces.

"Are you in trouble? Do you need help?"

"No one can help. I need to run and hide."

"What do you mean? You're going to keep moving? Like, forever?"

"I don't know. I can't decide."

"You need to stop and deal with this at some point. Call the police."

"I can't."

"Why not? I'll take you there right now. There's a cop shop just around the corner."

"I can't."

"Why?"

Wu stares down at her breakfast with tight lips, and she shakes her head in silence until Damo repeats, "Why?"

"Because, Damo, I'm an illegal immigrant and I've been working as a prostitute. The person looking for me is going to kill me and take Harrison, and if I'm detained, they'll still take Harrison, and I'll still be killed. I'll just be killed behind bars or in an accident somewhere. Trust me."

"Jesus Christ."

"I didn't want you to find out that I did that kind of work."

Damo is chewing on a small bite of egg, and he doesn't swallow.

Wu adds, "I work like that, but I don't feel like that kind of person."

"I don't care about your job. Are you, like, a refugee then?"

"Sort of, not really. I'm just here illegally. And I only do that kind of work because I need to. I owe someone a debt. I don't do drugs or—"

"Where are you from?"

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to have to leave you in a few minutes and I really like you. I want to leave you thinking I'm a good person."

"You are a good person. Look at your beautiful son; you're raising someone truly special."

"Do you really think that matters?"

"What do you mean?" Damo asks, "Do I think that raising Harrison matters?"

"No, I mean, do you think I'll be a good person if I raise him well?"

"Definitely, that's the most important thing in the world; a mother raising her child. Nothing else matters in the end, nothing." Wu doesn't reply, and Damo asks, "Where will you go?"

"I'll go to the bus station and get on a bus to go north. It doesn't matter where. Maybe Geraldton."

"What about your car?"

"I have to leave it where it's parked now. The person looking for me will know I'm in Perth after the car was pulled over by the police."

"Bloody Zeke," Damo grumbles.

"He didn't know. I didn't want anyone to know."

"So, this is it?"

"Yes. I wish I could stay longer," Wu says as she stands and Harrison's eyes creep open.

"Do you have enough money?" Damo asks as he gets to his feet and holds Wu's free hand.

"Um," Wu snuffles and shakes her head, "no, I can't take your money."

"Don't be crazy."

"No. I can't. No."

"Fine, Harrison can have some."

"But—"

“Don’t worry, I’m getting heaps of shifts at work. It’s fine.”

Damo smiles and leans in and kisses Harrison on the forehead as he waves a couple of colourful notes in front of his face. Harrison grabs the cash, and Wu gently pulls it from his fingers, whispering, “I’ll hold onto this for us, sunshine.”

Damo kisses Wu on the lips, and Harrison clutches his hair and giggles one last time as.

“Thanks for everything. I mean it,” Wu puts the money in her purse and gives him a wicked smile. “Really, I needed everything you gave me.”

“No worries. Seeya then, thanks,” Damo says, and Wu kisses him again on the cheek before she picks up the bassinet, turns, and walks away.

## HARP



Harp stands in the street near the uni, in the space where Wu's car had been parked, and she gazes up and down the road. She pivots on her two feet above the hiking stick and watches as the vehicles move slowly past her. A driver stops on the road near Harp and honks and points to the parking space she's blocking.

Harp ignores him as she watches packs of students migrating towards the campus.

The driver winds down his window and shouts, "Lady! Get out of the damn way!"

Harp glimpses back to the frustrated driver from the corner of her eye, but she doesn't move.

"You can't save spaces!"

The car shunts forward and suddenly brakes a metre from Harp's leg, but she stands perfectly still.

The man exits his vehicle, leaving it running but sitting askew in the street, and he puts two sets of hairless, manicured fingers on the leather belt at his hips.

"Do you need help or something?" he asks as he steps forward and waves his hands over his head as if he were trying to scare away

crows. His gaze flickers down to look at the hiking stick before he asks, "Do you know where you are?"

He moves closer, and Harp remains standing, staring into space. As the man reaches out to touch Harp on the shoulder, she spins to face him, and she flicks the hiking stick up into his groin. He shrieks and collapses onto the ground with his hands between his legs. Harp almost crushes his feet as she scrambles into his vehicle and drives it away.

THE CAR DRIVES A FEW KILOMETRES UNDER THE SPEED LIMIT, OBEYING all the rules of the road, as it moves between the locations that Penny has indicated are popular student gathering points. At every stop, Harp exits the vehicle and finds a group of young people and says, "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but I'm looking for my grandson. Do you all go to The University of Western Australia? His name is Ezekiel."

A boy in line at a supermarket says, "Yeah we go to U-Dub, but we're studying architecture on the next campus over. What does your grandson study?"

A girl with long, pink hair eating a whole carrot in a park just turns her back, and her friend says, "Sorry we don't know him," before Harp even finishes asking the question. An older man carrying psychology texts says, "Sorry, I don't know any of the younger students. I'm only here to do a few units, I feel that—" and Harp walks away before the sentence ends. Finally, three boys are walking past Harp as she asks a few young girls outside of a kebab shop, and one of the boys says, "He's at the tav."

Harp turns with a sudden snap of her head and asks, "What? Where?"

"The tavern," one of the other boys adds.

"Now? Are you sure?"

"Yep. He just bought another round. We saw him there two minutes ago."

"It's not far, but you'll want to drive," the boy says with his attention fixed on Harp's hiking stick.

“What direction?”

“It’s on the bottom side of the campus, near the river. You’ll be able to see it if you drive past.”

HARP SCURRIES AWAY WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD, AND SHE MOVES THE car in a wide arc around the school. She creeps along the edge of campus as an impatient driver behind her honks twice.

Harp finds a wrought iron fence holding in a swarm of young people with pints of beer and small circular wine glasses. She sees a few of the teenagers are drinking from dark brown bottles and there are piles of hardcover textbooks and loosely stapled stacks of papers on the corner of all of the large outdoor tables. She can hear the melodious drone of pop music, and it suddenly hits her more clearly as she rolls down the car’s window.

Harp steers the vehicle up onto the kerb and steps out of the car as the passing motorists yell obscenities. She steps up to the fence, and a man in his mid-twenties, wearing a denim vest calls out, “Come in for a drink,” and the few other mature students around him add, “Yeah,” and “Come on.”

“Sorry boys, not today,” Harp winks and they all chuckle and elbow each other in the ribs. She says, “I’m just looking for someone.”

“Who?”

“Ezekiel Abelson.”

“Is he in trouble or something?”

Before Harp can answer, Penny appears behind her, and she says, “Not yet, but it’s vital that we speak to him as soon as possible.”

“Where’s Zeke?” the boy in the denim asks his group and someone steps towards the door to the inside of the premises and calls out, “Zeke, you’re going to jail. Get out here.”

Penny turns to Harp and says, “A car was just reported stolen. The bloke who reported it said he got nussed by an Asian granny with a walking stick. Sound familiar?”

“How did you find me?”

“I didn’t find you. I spoke to about a hundred kids, and after the

tenth person told me I should check the pub, I thought I'd check the pub."

Zeke appears with a jug of beer in one hand and a half-full glass in the other, and he asks, "What's up?"

Penny replies, "Please put those down and come out here."

He places the glasses on the floor and walks around to stand with them on the sidewalk.

Harp says, "We feel you may be in danger. You were driving the car of a dangerous felon last night, and we believe she may still be in the area."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm afraid so," Penny adds.

"We're going to need you to answer a few questions."

"Are you a cop too?"

"Yes, I am. I'm a plain-clothes inspector. You should come with us."

"Go with you?"

"Yes, come with us. We have some questions." Penny nods.

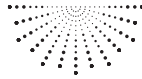
"All right, damn, let me just grab my jacket."

As Zeke steps back inside, Penny turns to Harp and whispers, "You said 'she', just then."

"What?"

"You told the kid that 'she' is very dangerous. How do you know the person who stole the car is a woman? How do you know it wasn't this kid?"

"Shut your mouth."



The bus that Wu is sitting on moves north and it passes through a thick forest as it leaves Perth. The road is narrow and the bus cruises with the left tyres running over the left boundary and the right tyres running over the right boundary as if it were a train on a track.

The heavy vehicle skirts the corners of little beach towns, but it's the middle of the night, so Wu watches the world fly past outside of her window as a single sheet of illumination from the bus's headlights. Vans full of shirtless men and topped with more surfboards than luggage struggle to pass the slow-moving transit bus on the long, straight stretches. There are patches of white sand dunes that seem to drift in the dark wind, and they glow the identical colour as the moon. Harrison cries occasionally, but he falls quiet every time without too much trouble. The bus is warm, and the world outside seems to be brisk, and Harrison occasionally points at the sea or the inland hills.

In the first hour, Wu carries Harrison to the little toilet at the back of the vehicle to feed him, and he seems infuriated by the bumpy and unpleasant meal. As Wu exits the latrine and struggles to balance on the rocking floor with the child in her arms, an older woman places a hand on Wu's wrist and says, "Young lady, would you like to swap



seats? There's no one behind me here, so you don't need to feel like you have to take the little one away."

"Oh, that would be lovely. Thank you," Wu answers as the lady in the back seat stands.

"No problem, I know it can be a little inconvenient."

After that, whenever someone visits the bathroom, they pause at the door and look down at Harrison and smile. Wu feeds him again after ten P.M. while everyone else is sleeping or trying to sleep, but she doesn't rest for fear that he'll move without her noticing.

After four hours, the bus driver announces, "First stop is Geraldton in one hour," and a little later, he reminds everyone that, "Geraldton coming up in thirty minutes."

There are trees outside the window now that have grown entirely sideways, and the wind still drives the leaves of them down so that they touch the ground as if they need to hang onto it.

They stop at a petrol station and everyone onboard files off the cramped vehicle. Some of the passengers wander with stiff legs across the road, to a park, and smoke cigarettes while others peruse the postcards beside the counter of the petrol station. Wu strolls through the aisles without purchasing anything until the driver rounds up the detached passengers like sheep.

They drive on and soon the world outside is pure desert; the barren, loneliness of it lit in two enormous triangles from the front of the bus. No plant grows higher than a short man's kneecap, and there aren't even many dead animals on the side of the road, let alone live ones. The dirt turns red, and the stars here are so brilliant that a person might honestly believe those balls of burning gas to be closer to the country towns than they are to Perth.

It's night, but dawn approaches, and it's quite light under the plump moon when the bus stops in Carnarvon. Wu steps out to stand under a few palms beside an information point with a small courtyard.

"You got somewhere to go?" the driver asks as the other passengers fade off into the night, and Wu says, "Um, not really."

"There's a caravan park back along the road the way we came in.

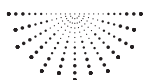
You can walk it. They'll answer the big bell outside reception at any time as long as you have cash. They won't open up for you if you've just got a credit card."

"I have cash, thank you."

"I'd drive you back, but I need to keep moving."

"Of course, thank you."

"Good luck," he finishes, and Wu turns to walk through the beautiful evening.



Zeke opens the door to his home and steps inside, past the sleeping couple on the couch, and shouts, “Damo, mate, get down here.”

No reply comes.

“Damo, honestly, are you home? Come down. The cops are here.”

A door creaks open and Damo’s voice calls down, “Cops? What have you done?”

“Nah, nothing. They say Wu was dangerous and—”

“Please come down here, young man, we need to ask you some questions,” Penny interrupts.

The two boys sit on tall barstools in the kitchen, and the women eye them for a moment without talking.

“I really don’t think we did anything wrong,” Zeke says.

“Taylor Wu is a very dangerous woman. There’s a warrant out for her arrest and, while I’ve been trying to apprehend her, you’ve been hiding her away,” Harp tells the room while the three other faces watch her.

“We weren’t hiding her. We were helping her,” Zeke pleads while Damo silently appraises the strangers in his house.

Penny says, "Helping her? Really? You were helping a wanted criminal?"

"Woah, no, that's not what I meant. She had a kid with her, and we thought she needed help. We didn't know she was a- wait, what did she do?"

Harp snaps, "She murdered a child and abducted the baby that she's now travelling with."

"Harrison?" Damo whispers and Harp's glare turns to meet his. The two of them eye each other in the tight, confined room while Zeke says, "We had nothing to do with any of that. Really, tell them Damo, come on, mate."

"This doesn't feel right," Damo begins, "do you have a badge?"

Penny barks, "Yes, I do," and she flashes her official identification at him with a quick flick of her wrist.

"I need to see that again, and I need to copy down the details. Where's yours?" Damo directs the query to Harp.

Zeke pleads, "Come on, mate, they're cops. We don't need anything from them."

Harp takes a step forward and says, "I am not going to go get my badge or a warrant or anything like that. You're going to tell me the truth, right now, or I'll come back angry. Do you understand? You don't want me to come back, do you?"

Zeke falls silent, and Damo glimpses past the killers, into the living room to see his other friends have not stirred from their slumber.

He looks into Harp's tight, excited eyes and says, "I'm sorry, I don't need anything from you. What did you want to know?"

Penny leans against the wall, and Zeke's lips are pressed tightly together as Harp asks Damo, "Where is she?"

"She's gone back down south."

"What?"

"South. I don't know where, but she said she'd just come from there and she's going back."

"You're not lying to me, are you?"

"No, definitely not. Wu said she's not going to take her car. She left it in a car park in North Perth, and she's getting on a bus. The car is in

a spot on Fitzgerald Street, a few blocks from the corner of Hyde Park.”

Harp stares into Damo’s eyes and Zeke adds, “I told Wu to check out Dwellingup and Margaret River. They would probably be good places to start looking for her.”

“You’ll be very, very sorry if you’ve lied to me.”

“I haven’t lied. She told me she was looking to start a new life and Perth is too busy. She liked it on the south coast, but it was too cold for her in Bremer.”

“There you go,” Zeke butts in, “she’s going to settle down in between Perth and the south coast.”

Harp asks, “What did she say about Bremer?”

“Um—”

“Speak up.”

“She was camping, and it was too cold.”

Harp turns and walks towards the door.

Penny says, “We’ll check that information, and we’ll be back shortly to ask any more questions we feel are important. You young men do not want to get in the middle of this.”

Harp has one bony hand on the doorknob, and she turns to stare at Damo and ask, “Why did she say she was running away?”

“She never said she was running away. I just thought she was looking for work. She just said she was trying to settle somewhere else.”

HARP AND PENNY WALK AWAY FROM THE HOUSE AND, ONCE THEY’RE back in the street, Penny steps out to block Harp’s way. She puts a hand on Harp’s shoulder to stop her moving forward, and Penny asks, “So, is that it? The thief has dumped the car and run off. Now you can pick it up and drive home.”

“That’s it. We’re done.”

“Really? You seemed pretty interested in this ‘Wu’ person.”

“I’m not. I have the car, and she’s left Perth. You and I no longer have business.”

"I can help you find her. I can't believe you're just going to let her disappear."

"I've got people in the south already."

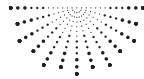
"Cops?"

Harp doesn't reply as Penny pulls a pen and piece of paper from her pocket. She begins to write something, and she says, "I can be contacted on this number on Wednesday and Friday nights. Don't call for any other reason," as she scribbles.

"All right."

"It's been a pleasure working with you. Really, Harp, you're a damn beast."

"All right. Get lost."



Tuckey's Caravan Park is noisy with children as the cool air retreats back over the ocean, and the sun warms the hot plains of the morning desert. Wu sits in a small room, and Harrison is crawling with jolting, uncoordinated movements around the borders of the space. There is nothing in the room except for the bed, a chair, a bedside table and a telephone with a winding number dial, but the bathroom is clean and sliding glass doors lead from the sleeping area to a tiny back porch.

Wu says, "Sunshine, don't go too far," and Harrison looks back at her with an expression of mischievous pleasure.

She showers with the bathroom door open, and Harrison watches her from the other side of the glass. He puts his chubby palm on the transparent barrier as if testing the solidity of the thing and he slaps at it a few times.

After Wu has dressed, she carries Harrison through the park outside and drops her key on the counter at the reception desk.

There's a young man sitting there with a collared shirt the same colour as the nearby desert sand, and he asks, "Another night, miss?"

"No thanks, not straight away. I'm actually here to visit family; I just need to get track them down. How do I get into town from here?"

"You came by bus in the middle of the night, right?"

"Yeah, that was us."

"Great, well you would have been dropped off in town by that bus. If you follow Robinson Street there, that's the main road, it'll take you back to the middle of Carnarvon," he half stands and points to the entrance.

"Perfect, thanks."

"No problem, seeya later."

Wu walks slowly, and she lengthens her stride a little to stretch her legs on the narrow concrete footpath. The dirt beside the road is an orangey-red, almost the same tint as rust, and the long, diamond leaves of gum trees flick around in short spirals as the wind rattles the smallest of the white branches. The main street, Robinson Street, only offers a single lane in each direction but the bitumen could easily accommodate three parallel vehicles with extra room for parking. The cars creep along the road without bothering to accelerate and, soon, Harp can see a line of dusty, sleepy stores.

She walks on, and she stops to survey the street from the footpath beside a large hotel with crimson walls around three separate front doors with yellow balconies above. There's a post office to the right, and an information point ahead and the joining streets here seems to spear off from each other in wild angles like a child's drawing of a star. Massive, thick-trunked trees with long, hard sleeves of flat seeds stand gargantuan in the generous median strip and bushes with orange or purple flowers are sprinkled throughout their shadows in the soft sand.

Further on down the road, Wu finds the fascine. It's a long strip of water that sits still and calm, and it begins far away to the right, much further than anyone in the town could possibly see. The gorgeous blue stream carries on until it widens for the ocean and there's a long footbridge to the other bank with thick, wooden pillars suspending it above the cool water. Stones have been forced into the bank of the inlet to suspend the mass of earth up above its surface, and a neat, dirt track runs the length of the pleasant barrier.

Harrison begins to cry, and Wu looks around to find that there are



no other early morning walkers anywhere nearby. She feeds him on a park bench and finds a café serving 'Coffee and Cake \$3.99'. She looks in her purse and frowns at the sight of the dwindling bundle of cash.

A woman wearing a thin white singlet, with the muscles and bones of her shoulders as defined as fingers, is waiting behind a register and Wu asks her, "Is there a special on cake without the coffee?"

"No, sorry. The coffee is a dollar with the cake. The cake is always three dollars."

"OK, can I have one of those please?" Wu asks as she points to a very slim chocolate biscuit.

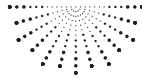
"Great, that's two dollars thanks."

Harrison is moving sideways over the grass as Wu sits on a shady patch of sand by the water.

"What are we going to do now?" she asks Harrison. He looks up at the sound of the kidnapper's voice, and Wu adds, "Don't worry, I'll think of something."

Wu stands and slaps her hands together to throw a sprinkling of crumbs down on the ground before she picks up Harrison and begins walking back through the town.

## HARP



Wu's green car sits, as promised, in a space in North Perth and Harp looks briefly at all the tickets that have been placed under the windscreen wipers. She moves around the side of the vehicle to look into the windows, and she pauses by the boot to survey the public area around her. The main street is nearby, and people are strolling up and down the path, looking at watches and holding back dogs on short leashes.

There's a bus pulling over, and it hisses to a stop while Harp fiddles with the door handle and fails to open the trunk of the car without the keys. She looks at the bus, and it's heading to 'Wellington St', and she calls out to ask one of the people still waiting at the bus stop, "Pardon me, sir, I don't mean to interrupt, but where was that bus heading?"

"That bus there? Just gone?"

"Yes."

"The station on Wellington Street."

"It's heading to a bus station?"

"Yeah."

"Brilliant, have a lovely day," Harp finishes with a polite wave.

She turns and scowls in the direction that the traffic is moving,

and she follows, walking, in the wake of the bus. It turns, and she can't keep up with her crippled, shambling steps. She pauses, leaning on a tall yellow traffic light pole and asks a passing woman, "Excuse me, how do I get to Wellington Street?"

"Just keep going until the end, I think that's Roe, the name of the street doesn't matter. Turn left, and you'll find a big, curving bridge that will carry you over the train station."

"A train station? Is the bus station there too?"

"Yes, right next door."

HARP ENTERS THE BUS STATION IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY WITH patches of sweat spreading over the fabric under her arms. A woman with a round face that folds over the tops of her round glasses is sitting in the ticket booth. She watches Harp's approach from behind the tight spectacles, awash with apathy.

"Good morning, how are you today?" Harp asks as a shipment of people in suits stream off a bus and walk past with briefcases and handbags that hang down to their hips.

"Where are you off to?" the attendant asks, and the movement of her mouth makes her glasses shift a little, so they look like they're trying to wriggle free of the fatty restraints.

"I'm not off to anywhere just yet, I'm actually looking for someone."

"Looking for someone? No one really stays around here; I doubt you're going to find them."

"They're not here now. My daughter got on a bus heading south with my grandson and, silly me, I've lost the little piece of paper she wrote her new address down on."

"That's going to make it difficult. I'm sure she'll try to contact you soon."

"No, well, I'm supposed to ship the things she couldn't carry on the bus."

"You'll need to find the full address then. We don't take down personal details."

"If you could tell me where they've gone, what town, I can contact my family in the area."

"Oh yeah?" the woman asks as she coughs into her hand.

"Yes, I have some friends in a few different places in the south, so if I can figure out where she's gone, it won't take long to track down her new place."

"That's a good plan, what do they look like?"

"Wu is a young Thai girl, a little overweight with pimples on her chin. My grandson's father is a local boy, so my grandson has fair skin."

"So, a chubby Thai girl with an Aussie baby? How old is the child?"

"About fourteen months now."

"Sure, I'll just call someone," she says as she picks up a phone. Harp listens to her repeat the description and says, "Uh-huh, yep, yep, thanks," before hanging up.

Harp stretches a fake smile across her face and asks, "How did you go?"

"That was Julie, she's in a booth on the other side of the station, and she's the only person here who worked yesterday too."

"Great, thank you."

"She says she sold a ticket to Katanning to a little Asian girl with a baby in one of those carrying things like a baby-basket."

"A bassinet?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

"They're going to Katanning?"

"Yup."

"There wasn't anyone else?"

"Not by that description, not that Julie saw. I think Andrew starts his shift in a few hours and he was rostered on yesterday too, so maybe he saw someone else."

"Wonderful, you've been a great help. I'd like a ticket for the next bus please."

"I doubt Andrew saw anything that Julie didn't. The people waiting for the buses leaving Perth usually arrive early and hang around for a few minutes."

"Great, thanks again, can I please have a ticket for the next bus to, where did you say it was?"

"Katanning. It's about four hours to the southeast. There's a bus this afternoon at five-thirty."

"Perfect, just enough time to go home and freshen up." Harp smiles as she places a yellow banknote on the counter and the attendant prints a small, paper ticket from a machine.

Harp wanders away, checks the time, and she's about to leave, but she suddenly stops before she hails a cab. Harp stands for a moment, silent and nibbling at her lip with sharp teeth, then she quickly turns and walks back into the bus station.

She moves to the other ticketing booth and finds a young girl with olive skin and dark hair, reading a black and white comic book.

"Hi," the girl greets Harp as she leans on the windowsill of the booth.

"Hi there, how are you today?"

"Not bad, yourself?"

"I'm doing well, thanks for asking. Your name isn't Julie, is it?"

The girl taps a little plastic nametag over her chest and says, "Yes, it is."

"Great. I just spoke to your colleague, and she informed me that my daughter may have gone to Katanning."

"Oh, that was you asking? Yeah, she left yesterday."

"That's great. I just wanted to double-check with you that this was the case."

"Yes, that's correct, a young Asian mum with an infant."

"A white baby."

"Yes, I think so," Julie nods, "that's correct."

"No one else by that description has bought a ticket?"

"No one else going south."

"What do you mean?"

"There was a mum who came in and wanted to go anywhere north."

"Anywhere?"

"Yes, she just wanted the first bus."

"Really? And the mum going south to Katanning, did she ask to go anywhere south?"

"No, she was certain. She was totally set on Katanning. I've seen her here before; she must go down there regularly."

Harp clears her throat and asks, "And where did the second woman go? The lady that wanted to go anywhere north?"

"She bought a fare up to Carnarvon, I think. Two fares, one for her and the other for the child. She called him Garry or Harry or something."

"Harrison?"

"Yes, that's it. She'll be there by now."

"Lucky her. Can I please have a ticket on the next bus?"

"Sure, that'll be sixty-five dollars."

"No problem."

"And it leaves in three days," Julie adds with a smile.

"What?"

"The next bus will depart on Monday at five P.M."

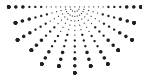
"So, what's leaving earlier?"

"Nothing. That's the only option up there unless you get a flight."

"Fine," Harp grunts as she turns to walk away.

"Do you want a ticket?" Julie calls out, but Harp doesn't look back.

She's standing beside the road again when a patch of blue catches her attention out of the corner of her eye. Penny is standing in her police uniform, watching Harp from the other side of the road. Harp turns to face Penny, and Penny shakes her head at Harp before turning and quickly walking in the other direction.



The wind is rushing through the town, and it hits Wu in a burst as she turns a corner and begins walking up Robinson Street. She carries Harrison in the bassinet, and she turns the little cradle so that the force of the wind hits the plastic and not the child. Her stomach is rumbling, and her feet are sore from the days and weeks of moving, but she walks on. She passes a petrol station and two mechanics, and she sees a huge sign that reads 'BAIT' above the door of a small, brick building.

As she pushes the flyscreen out of the way, a bell jingles and a man stands up from where he's sitting behind a high counter. Behind the counter, there's a little camping stool beside a television that has a black and white screen the size of a paperback novel. On the TV, men in sleeveless jumpers and short shorts are chasing an oval ball around an oval field and there's an open can of lemonade on the floor beside a sleeping cat.

"Hi there, looking for something in particular?" he asks, and he grins at Wu from under a 'Fremantle Dockers' cap with eyes as blue and radiant as the lights above ambulances.

Wu gazes around the store at fishing rods, portable stoves, knives,

inflatable mattresses and spear guns. She says, "I'm looking for a swag."

"No problem. Follow me."

He steps out from his little nook and strides between a chest freezer and a rack of snorkelling masks.

He says, "There we go," as he points up to the corner of the roof.

There are several large swags and bedrolls on a high shelf above the smaller boxes and plastic containers.

"Anything specific?" he asks.

"Probably just the cheapest you have. It's just for me and him." Wu nods at the pair of eyes that watch the man from the safety of the bassinet.

"OK, well these here are all one hundred and ten dollars," he motions to the left, "And these go up in price. They're cross stitched so that a tear won't stretch out more than a centimetre."

Wu glimpses up and sighs and asks, "I don't mean to be a pain, but I just got into town, and I don't know my way around. Is there anywhere I could find one that's second hand? Sorry."

"No problem, I'm happy to help. Might I ask, is it just the price that's the issue?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you want to look at a tent then."

"Aren't they more expensive?"

"No, everybody thinks that because of the size, but it's the material that you pay for. These," he points to the more expensive swags, "Are high-quality canvas. These here," he points down below to a stack of small boxes and adds, "Are polyester tents."

"Oh, all right."

"So, you can get a two-person tent for forty dollars."

"Great, I'll have one of those please."

"Sure. Do you have a ground mat and a sleeping bag?"

"No. I don't think I'll need a ground mat."

"Suit yourself, but not having a ground mat will actually make you colder than not having a sleeping bag."



Wu shakes her head and grins and says, "Now you're just trying to sell me more."

"Suit yourself," he smiles back, "but lying on the cold desert ground will draw all the heat out of you. It's conduction, sorry."

WU WALKS OUT OF THE STORE A FEW MINUTES LATER WITH A TENT, sleeping bag and a ground mat and she has very, very little money remaining in her purse. She shuffles the boxes under her arm so that they sit on top of one another and she carries Harrison out of town. The pair of them are on the move for over an hour, and Wu must stop every few minutes to rearrange her cargo and take a few deep breaths. A small, white and brown goat steps out of the bushes ahead of Wu and she gasps when it looks back at her with those flat, horizontal pupils. The little thing bleats and skips over the road and four more of the motley looking things follow it while Wu tilts Harrison so he can watch their little horns disappear into the bush.

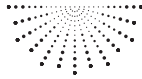
Wu watches the straight sides of a bridge up ahead as she moves towards, what she assumes is, a mighty river. The human structure looks like a huge wooden triangle as the furthest point of it comes together at the end of Wu's vision. She steps onto the platform and looks over the side and finds absolutely no water. The river is as dry as the desert around it and twice as flat. A massive strip of sand sits parched and dead between the two high banks, and Wu swears to herself as she absorbs the grandeur of the drought. She stands and stares at the barren stretch for a full minute before stepping off the bridge and walking along the bank.

The bank is cluttered with low, brown grass and trees without leaves stand as scaffolding for long swathes of creeper vines. Wu walks on, juggling Harrison and her purchases through the bush and beside the riverbed until she sees water up ahead. A single finger of salty, brackish water caresses this slightly inland spot, and Wu drops the camping gear. She takes a moment to tickle and whisper to Harrison before she opens the cardboard box containing the tent.

She erects the plastic structure beside a tall, thin tree with a bulb

like the head of an enormous, colourless tulip at the base. The sand here is red and soft, and the pegs of the tent slip into the ground easily. It takes an hour, but Wu's temporary home stands and wobbles slightly in the breeze long before the end of the day. She unpacks the ground mat and the sleeping bag, and she brings Harrison into the warm chamber she has built.

## HARP



The plane that has carried Harp to the desert bounces slightly as its thick wheels scrape along the airstrip. The small engines sputter for a while, and it moves away from the centre of the runway. A stream of large men with steel-capped boots move down the collapsible staircase and three of them turn simultaneously to offer to help Harp shamble down to ground level.

“No thanks, I’m fine but aren’t you lovely for asking,” she says to them.

One of the steel-capped gentlemen drives her to the centre of town, and she absorbs the sights around her like a botanist studying small variations in plants.

Harp walks into a bar with the word ‘HOTEL’ above the door, and she asks about Wu and Harrison, and she’s disappointed to hear that the barman has never once, not in fifteen years, seen two people of those descriptions enter together. In a second-hand store that looks out onto the fascine, Harp is told, “No kids in here today, sorry,” by an elderly woman knitting. She walks to the petrol station, and she remembers that Wu isn’t driving, and she asks anyway, and she’s disappointed again.

In a tiled café, Harp eats a piece of carrot cake and drinks a strong,

bitter coffee. She asks a waitress wearing a thin white singlet, with the muscles and bones of her shoulders as defined as fingers, if she's seen an Asian girl with a white baby and she says, "Yeah, she was here with the little fella this morning."

"This morning? Today?"

"Yeah, only a few hours ago."

When Harp returns to the street, she's grinning, and her crooked teeth are on display as she makes her way back towards the hotel.

The barman says, "Welcome back, ready for a drink?"

"I am, yes, please. A gin with lemon."

"And tonic, right?"

"No, no, just the Gin with lemon and I think I'll stay in Carnarvon a while; do you rent rooms?"

The barman pours the gin over a few ice cubes and squeezes the lemon and replies, "We certainly do."

"I'd like to pay for a full week, please, and you know what, throw another splash of gin in there."

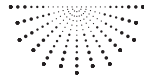
"Great. That'll be two hundred and ten dollars for the rooms and nine bucks for the drink."

"No problem, can I please use your phone?"

"Of course."

Harp tries to call Sean, but no one picks up. After a second gin and another hour has passed, she calls again, but again there is no answer.

Harp orders another drink, and she's still smiling, still eager. She carries the short glass to a little stool beside the window, and she sits in the shadow of a potted palm and stares down Robinson Street at every passing face.



The night is cold, and the walls of the tent flap in the wind as if the fabric was caught on the breath of a tremendous animal, but Harrison only wakes and cries once. Wu feeds him and, as soon as he's done, she presses him to the warm, soft skin of her belly. She lies awake for an hour, and she listens to the cacophony of sounds in the world outside of her polyester sanctuary. She hears something moving through the grass and the trees above her tap and clack at one another as the small animals run across the intertwined branches. The screams of birds are carried across the empty border of the riverbed, and there are insects calling to one another in languages comprised solely of percussion. She brings Harrison back up to a safe place beside her chest, and she allows herself a few more hours of sleep.

She steps out of the tent in the morning, and she pees on the slope of the riverbank, so the fluid trickles down away from the simple camp. She sits with Harrison for hours in the shade of the trees there before deciding to wander down to the riverbed. She carries him on her chest as she strolls over the hard dirt ground towards the distant sea and little yellow finches flutter above her head.

When she turns to head home, she climbs the bank and moves back the way she came by hiking through the sparse bushland. The

flora here is light enough so that Wu can zigzag around the plants and she knows she'll eventually walk into her camp.

Her stomach is speaking to her and, as if that organ is calling out to direct Wu to her next meal, she turns her head to see a tree freckled with orange balls. As she approaches the tree, she sees other citrus plants dotted around a clearing, and she tells Harrison to, "Shhhh, keep it down, Shhhhhh, sunshine."

She crosses a gravel track and steps over a fence that's so dilapidated it looks like something someone might have left there by accident. Wu crouches on her haunches below the pointed leaves of a mandarin tree, and she waits, watching for any movement. There is none, and she sees no houses or sheds or signs of development at all. Harrison lies content on his spine as Wu picks six mandarins and she smuggles the bushel back to her camp with Harrison clinging weakly to the collar of her shirt.

The night is cold again and, again, it is far louder than any place should be so long after the day has ended. Wu only sleeps for three hours as the walls of her portable home rattle in the wind and something rustles in the bushes just outside. Wu steps out in the morning to find three white, spotted goats sleeping in the grass and they leap up from their slumber as the zipper on the tent sends a loud, vibrating sound out into the bush. The bleating animals scatter, and Harrison cries out, but he calms as Wu sings to him in soft, pleasant tones.

She investigates the orchard more thoroughly, and she wanders up and down the gravel track, searching for the home of the farmer who must tend to the bountiful garden. She finds no sign of life beyond the useless fence and strip of gravel, so she takes a slew of oranges and then returns for more mandarins.

The colourful fruits sit in piles beside the tent's door as if they were lawn decorations and Wu feasts on the sweet flesh of the treats until she can't possibly eat any more. She's smiling, and she sings three words of Harrison's favourite song before a man's voice shouts, "What the hell are you doing down here? Are you sleeping here? Where did you get that fruit?"

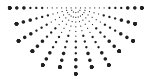
Wu is on her feet with Harrison in her arms in an instant, and she sees a man with torn clothes and long, ratty hair staring at her with fury in his eyes. His look softens into something more confused as he sees Harrison and says, "Is that a baby? What are you doing? You can't have a baby down here."

Without a second thought, Wu turns and runs through the bush. The low shrubs are whipping at her knees as she sprints and thorns stick into the soft patches of skin above her ankles, but she does not stop. She continues to flee with Harrison screaming in her arms, and she finds the main road again and follows it until she can't bear to take another step without resting.

The red dirt marks the backs of her thighs and her arse as he sits on the ground and fights to catch her breath. She calms Harrison, and she looks to the setting sun as that falling ball of heat withdraws to let the air cool once more.

Even before Wu checks her pockets, she knows she's left her purse behind with the bassinet. She has no money, shelter or any way to get warm and she's still a stranger in this unforgiving desert.

## HARP



The hotel in which Harp has installed herself has a coffee shop in the front room, and this little chamber is already busy when she exits her bedroom at dawn. She asks a few of the early patrons if they've seen an Asian girl with a baby, but they all shake their heads.

Harp eats breakfast in the café where she heard Wu had been the day before and she watches the street outside. There are a handful of early morning professionals moving over the footpath, but only a handful. By the time the professionals have all gone to work, Harp is walking the streets with that three-pointed shuffle she has perfected. Everywhere she goes, she asks for Wu and announces a description as if she were a sheriff searching for a felon. She asks in the post office, the market, the Chinese restaurant, the library and even the bottle shop, but the location of Wu eludes her.

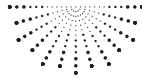
In the afternoon, she returns to the café in which she ate breakfast and asks the waitress if she is certain, absolutely certain, that she's seen, Wu. The waitress describes the child abductor as perfectly as a lover could describe their soul mate and Harp retreats to the hotel to stare down the main road again.



As she's sitting and peering into the windows of every car that drives past, Harp recognises the face of a former colleague.

"Penny?" she whispers to herself as she stares at a woman in a black shirt behind the wheel of an angular, bright green VW Passat. The car moves slowly down the street as if it were a predator waiting for something edible to step out into its path and it turns and vanishes at the fascine.

Within seconds, Harp is punching in Sean's phone number on the plastic cradle behind the bar, but again, no one answers.



The moon is bright once again, and Wu can see the main road ahead of her clearly without the need for an artificial bulb. She walks slowly, and she shivers in the night air, but if Harrison makes a sound, she stops and waits for the child to fall asleep again. She turns on the riverbank and squats in the dirt, making sure the child is going to be absolutely silent.

Wu stalks through the bush and takes extra time to make sure that her feet fall on patches of soft sand. She makes no sound, but Harrison coos quietly as she approaches the tent.

The fruit lies where it was dropped beside the door, and even the mandarin peels have not been disturbed. The tent has not been taken down or destroyed, but the entrance is closed so that Wu can't see if the precious items are still inside.

She carries Harrison closer, lingering on the border of the narrow clearing. She waits, and she hears nothing. Wu moves on, and she lowers herself onto one knee at the edge of the tent. She grips the zipper and draws it along its track at an agonising, measured pace. The world around her does not change, and she can see her possessions resting in the tent where she left them.

Wu crawls inside and her heart races as she gathers up the bassinet

and her purse. She's about to crawl back out into the bush when she stops and starts to stuff the sleeping bag into its wide, plastic sock. It's hard to squeeze the bulk of it into the container, and it takes longer than Wu had hoped, but soon it's done, and she's pulled the drawstring tight.

She's crawling back through the entrance of the tent and Harrison is still fast asleep and—

"Don't run away again," the ratty-haired man's voice commands, but Wu can't see anyone in the cover of the bush. She doesn't move, and he says, "I can see you in the tent there," and he is very close. He is so close that his soft, calm words fall on Wu like screams, and she feels as though he might reach out and grab her without even taking a step.

"I'm sorry," Wu whispers as if there's still a chance she can sneak away.

He coughs in five loud bursts, and Wu feels the muscles in her face and neck tighten.

"For what?" he asks, and when she doesn't answer, he says, "What are you sorry for?"

"For stealing the fruit."

"I don't care about the fruit. Were you sleeping out here?"

Wu hesitates a moment and says, "Yes."

"You don't have a fire going or a vehicle or even any food. Where's your water? Jesus Christ, I doubt you're camping here. Are you homeless?" he continues to speak, and Wu stares out in the direction of his voice, but she can only see the spindly, black outlines of plants.

"No, I'm not homeless, I just don't have anywhere to go."

"But you're not homeless?" he chuckles, "If you say so."

"I'll go, just let me go."

"Go? What? You're not going anywhere."

"Please, I'll leave. I'm so sorry."

"Leave?"

"I'll go, please," Wu starts to move forward again with Harrison pressed to her chest, and one hand in the dirt and she says, "Please, just let me go, please."

"Wait a minute," he says, and the silhouette of a man emerges from

the cover of the trees. "Just wait, why are you running away? You look like you need help."

Wu pauses, still on her hands and knees.

"Help?" she says.

"Yes, I can help you. Just, bloody, settle down."

"But you're so angry."

"What? I'm not angry. Why would I be angry?"

"You said I couldn't be down here."

"No, I said you can't have a baby down here. That child needs to be indoors. You need to keep the little fella out of the cold. Stand up, come on."

Wu drops everything except for Harrison, and she stands with the child pressed to her chest.

"You must be freezing, Jesus," he says. "Now, if I turn on a torch, you're not going to scamper off like a bloody fox again, are you?"

"No."

The yellow light of a torch illuminates the scene with a click, and the beam is pointed straight down to the ground so that Wu can only clearly see the legs of the man. He's wearing blue jeans and elastic-sided boots, and he's so skinny that there are creases in his clothes where the garments have been folded over themselves.

"I'm Leon," he says, "who are you?"

"My name is Tina."

"And the child?"

"Evan."

"It's a boy?"

"Yeah."

"Great, nice to meet you. Now, what are you doing out here?"

They stand in silence for a moment, and Leon says, "Fine, don't tell me. I don't care all that much, but Evan should be indoors. He's too young to be sleeping in the desert with no water."

"We've been fine so far."

"Fine?" Leon chuckles again, "If you say so, but why don't you come back to the house and sleep in a warm bed. We can pack up your

camp in the morning and figure out what you're going to do from here."

"Um, I'm not sure."

The beam of the torch climbs up Wu's legs until the focal point of it is sitting just below Harrison.

The man says, "Mate, you're turning blue. The kid is going to get sick. Maybe he'll be all right tonight and tomorrow, but he will get sick, and it'll be all your fault."

"All right. Just let me get his bassinet."

"I can grab your stuff."

Leon steps past Wu and bundles up the things she's left in the dirt. While he's juggling the items, the torch beam is waving through the air like a spotlight searching for aircrafts.

"Follow me," he says, and Wu walks behind him to the gravel track that Wu had found beside the fruit trees. He holds the light a few centimetres behind him, and Wu gets the most benefit of the brightness.

They step off the track, and Leon pauses at the ruined fence to say, "There's no gate, just step over the wires. Be careful."

They walk through the orchard in the dark, and Wu asks, "Are these trees yours?"

"Sort of, yeah, I suppose, but you're welcome to whatever you can pick."

"Really?"

"Sure."

The pair walks on and, in the light of the moon, a large square structure emerges from the latticework of trees ahead. Leon starts to whistle in loud, short bursts and he says, "Killer, we have company. Settle."

Wu's face scrunches into a ball of concern, and she can see the shape of something sprinting along the ground.

She says, "What is—" before a huge, black dog races out of the darkness. Its long, pointed snout is as high as Wu's belly button, and it only needs to look up slightly to sniff Harrison.

"No!" Wu shrieks and Leon snaps, "Settle!" at the beast.

The tall, black thing shrinks away into the night again, and Leon adds, "Don't worry about the killer there, he's harmless."

There are two steps up onto a wooden patio, and Leon opens a door without using a key. Wu follows him inside, and he continues to light their way with the torch and nothing else. Wu gets a glimpse of a small, carpeted space to her left and a kitchen ahead and the walls are made with huge, white blocks the size of pizza boxes. They turn down a hallway on their right, and the torch illuminates a brown vinyl floor. Their feet make loud banging sounds as if the ground was hollow and when Leon says, "You can sleep here, on the right," they stop moving.

He pushes open a white door with a creaking, flat handle and the room beyond is a carpeted space with two single beds, a dusty vanity table, a tall closet with keys sticking out of the locks and a huge, double window.

"Thank you," Wu says as she flicks the light switch.

"That doesn't work."

"The light?"

"The electricity."

"There's no power?"

"Nope."

"I don't understand."

"I don't have electricity. I'll explain in the morning. You can hang on to the torch; I don't need it. Keep following the hall to the end, and you'll find the toilet. None of the ceiling lights work so hang on to the torch."

"Um, all right," Wu replies.

"Do you want anything? Water or food?"

"Some water would be lovely."

Leon hands Wu the torch and vanishes into the inner darkness of the house. The sounds of him turning on a tap and clinking a couple of glasses return out of the black before he appears with a cordial bottle of clear water and a familiar-looking glass. Wu studies the glass and realises that it's a cleaned-out jam jar, the same kind of jar that Baz in Bremer Bay used.

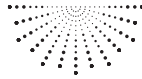
She smiles, and Leon asks, "You happy?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. I'll see you in the morning. I'll be up at first light, and you'll hear me, this is a loud house."

"OK," Wu says, and Leon vanishes into the darkness. She calls out to him, "And thank you!" before she hears another door open and close.

## HARP



Carnarvon shuts down at two P.M. on Saturday afternoon. The cafes, the bars, the post office, the supermarket and even the petrol station lapse into a siesta. Harp sits on her bed in the simple hotel, and she ponders the situation. Full days have expired now, and she's heard no more than a single report of an Asian mother. Wu has become something closer to myth than fact, like an extra-terrestrial that only one person in a village claims to have seen.

Penny is here, and she is not in uniform. She is not reliable.

Harp leaves the rented hotel room and strolls down an old wooden staircase. She looks back over her shoulder at an empty beer garden, and she wanders out to the vacant street. There are no 'Closed' signs on shop doors, but there are no people around to inform of this fact. She waits a full minute and sees no one and then she hobbles down the centre of the colossal road until she reaches the end, the fascine, and she looks out over the water. Small boats are moored in the thin bay, and there is a blue kayak on a little sandy beach, but there is no paddler in sight.

Harp turns and begins shuffling back through town as a green VW emerges from behind a building far off in the distance. It looks like a single marble rolling through the hallway that is the massive, single-



lane road. It's creeping along the bitumen as slowly as if it were searching for a place to park and, in a few seconds, it has moved on into one of the side streets. Harp makes her way quickly to a brick pillar at the front of a bank, and she presses her back to the barrier. She listens, and she hears the low rumble of an engine approaching.

The car turns down the main road, and Harp can see it approaching in the reflection of the bank windows. As the car passes, Harp manoeuvres around the pillar, so the car continues on without stopping. The vehicle is about ten metres further down the main drag when Harp sidles out onto the road behind it. She takes twelve steps before she's in the centre of the street and she stands hunched on the bitumen. The tip of her hiking stick rests on the ground between her legs, and her arms are folded over it like an exhausted and enraged bladesmith resting on her sword.

The VW brakes suddenly, but it's too far away for Harp to see into the windows or into the mirrors at the driver. She doesn't move and the reversing lights of the car flick on, but the vehicle sits motionless. Harp and the machine are frozen, studying one another for a full minute before the car's reversing lights switch off and the tyres spin. Black smoke fills the air as the car speeds away down the street. The sound of the engine screaming in that empty place bounces off the brick faces of buildings and Harp can still hear it accelerating after it has turned, far off into the distance.

Harp scrambles back to her hotel, and she enters the bar.

"Someone there?" a man's voice calls out.

"I need to use the phone."

"Only for customers and we're not serving again until four," the voice replies, but no one emerges from the back rooms of the pub.

"I'm staying here; I've got a room upstairs."

"Oh, OK. Of course, go ahead. The phone is just—"

"I know where it is."

She reaches over the bar and pulls the cradle of the phone up onto the counter, and she dials Sean's number again.

Someone picks up, and Harp says, "Sean, I need—"

"Hold on. It's Adrian. Sean isn't here."

Harp grits her teeth and a growl rumbles up her throat until she asks, "Where is he?"

"We don't know. We haven't heard from him in days. I kinda thought he was with you."

"He's kinda not! Give him a message, tell him I want him to come north to Carnarvon."

"OK, I can do that. Do you want anyone else? I can come up."

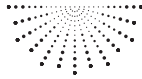
"NO! You fools stay where you are. Spread out and wait for the whore to surface. She'd better not slip past you!"

"She won't, I swear I—"

"If she does, I'm going to come after all of you. Do you understand? Put the word out. This is not a task for individuals. If anyone fails, anyone at all, you're all failures to me. Do you understand?"

"Ye-yes. I get it. Everything is—"

"GET IT!" Harp screams into the receiver and slams it down, sending the cradle sliding back over the bar. There's a coffee cup beside where the phone is supposed to be placed, and it contains pens, pencils, a highlighter, a box cutter, an eraser and a whiteboard marker. Harp snatches up the box cutter and paces out of the room swearing to herself in Mandarin. There's a man hiding behind a door in the office, and he watches the crazed old woman throw the door open as she moves back towards the accommodation.



Loud footsteps rumble through the house as Wu opens her eyes to the brightness of the morning. Harrison is still sleeping, and Wu rises without waking the child to explore the home. She opens the door and steps out into the hall and turns to silently shut the door behind her. She tiptoes back to where she knows she'll find the kitchen and Leon is standing with his back to her beside the sink.

"Good morning," she whispers.

"Morning!" he bellows.

"Shhh-Shhhh."

"Did you just shush me?"

"Sorry, Harrison's asleep."

"Who's Harrison?" Leon asks without lowering his voice.

"I mean Evan."

He frowns and turns back around to tinker with something on the floor. He twists to the side a little and Wu studies his profile. He has a spindly, brown beard with brown eyes, and, between them, Leon has a huge nose that curls down at the end. His clothes are all torn with small holes around the joints, at the armpits and knees, and his hair

falls over his head in thin streams like rain running off something spherical.

"Thanks again for letting us stay."

"No worries," Leon says without looking up.

"What are you doing there?" Wu asks as she steps around the side of a kitchen bench to look down at him.

"Need a little fire," Leon says.

"Fire?"

He's got a propane gas bottle on his right side, and an orange tube connects it to a single huge stove-style burner. The burner is sitting on a cracked and blackened concrete slab that's been dropped in the corner of the room. Leon has a barbeque lighter in his hand, and he sparks it twice over the burner before it bursts to life. Triangles of red and blue flame flicker above the cast-iron device until Leon places a frying pan full of water on top of it.

"Tea or coffee?" he asks, and Wu says, "Tea, please."

He nods and steps back to a low, white cabinet that has empty panels patched with flyscreen instead of glass.

Wu looks around, and there is a dining room table in the centre of the large space with a carpeted den at the far end. In the den, some armchairs are lined with woollen stitching and a fireplace that's built into the wall and sealed with a glass door. The kitchen is divided from the dining and lounging area by a narrow wooden bench but, in the linoleum space, there is no stove or microwave or fridge. There is no television or stereo anywhere in sight, and two light fittings on the ceiling are missing bulbs.

The water in the pan is spitting, and Leon tips it into two enamel cups that sit in the sink. Some of the boiling liquid spills over the metal and steams until Leon runs the tap and washes it away.

"Sugar?" he asks, and Wu shakes her head. He adds, "I don't have any milk, sorry."

Leon carries the two cups to the dining table and sits and motions for Wu to join him. She sits and wraps both hands around the cup, and she continues scanning the peculiar house with her appraising gaze.

"What are your plans?" Leon asks.

"I don't have any yet. I'm looking for a place to settle."

Leon nods and slurps his tea.

"This is a lovely home," Wu says, and Leon nods again.

He drinks some more, then he looks into the bottom of his empty cup, stands, and he walks towards the bedroom. Wu leaps to her feet, but before she says anything, Leon turns left and enters a little room across the hall from where Harrison sleeps. Wu follows, and there's a long, concrete bathtub that stretches across one wall and Leon turns the tap to let a torrent of water begin to fall into the vessel. Wu studies the tub and finds there is no shower and there is no second tap for a variety of temperatures, only the one.

Leon walks out of the room and Wu follows him without speaking. He pulls on his elastic-sided boots and steps out onto the front patio and Wu walks behind him with bare feet.

A black dog rushes up to Wu with a huge, toothy smile, and the smile only dampens for a moment as the beast sniffs at Wu's ankles.

"That's Diomedes the Doberman dog. He's friendly."

Wu follows Leon and Diomedes follows Wu and the three of them stroll in single file around the house. They walk beside a room that has walls that are constructed by a series of miscellaneous glass doors and the varied space above each door, below the roof, is lined with fine, rusted wire netting. They walk below an old galvanised iron water tank that is suspended a full five metres above the ground on a scaffolding of metal poles. Water is dripping from the structure and Leon says, "I'm trying to fix that."

Starting a short distance from the house, there's an orchard of such varied fruits that it would be impossible to name them all after a single glimpse. There are dates, mandarins, lemons, limes, oranges, mangoes and even custard apples just in the first row that's visible from the yard.

"They're the trees," Leon says as he waves a hand in the direction of the orchard.

"They're beautiful."

Leon stops at a short cast iron furnace that's suspended above the

ground on rocks, and he opens the hatch. He peers inside and then steps over to a pile of wood. Diomedes licks Wu's palm as she watches, transfixed by curiosity, and she crouches to pat the dog.

There is a long, black-handled axe beside the woodpile and the back of the head of the axe is as thick as a sledgehammer. Leon singles out a piece of wood from the pile and swings the dense weapon at the stump. It splits open with a huge crack, and Wu instinctively stumbles backwards. Leon looks at her and asks, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"You don't need to apologise, just stand back. It's a wood splitter; it's going to split some more wood."

After a minute, several chunks of wood are lying splintered and smashed apart, and Leon feeds them into the furnace.

"What is that?" Wu asks.

"This is going to heat the tub."

Wu nods, and they walk back around to the house. She looks at Diomedes, and the dog trots away, disappearing into the dense ring of trees.

"He's looking for birds," Leon says, pointing at the big dog.

"He doesn't like birds?"

"Nah, they picked on him when he was small. Now he's big."

"Yes, he is."

They enter the house, and Leon leaves his boots by the door.

"Aren't your bare feet cold?" he asks.

"Yes, a little."

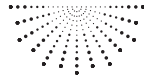
"You can have the first bath. Take the little one in with you, but be careful, it can get pretty hot. There are some towels behind the sliding door in the hallway."

"Great, thanks."

"What was that boy's name again? Harrison?"

"No, Evan."

Leon grins and says, "If you say so."



On Sunday morning, Harp leaves her room to find a few young men are sitting in the beer garden at the back of the hotel clutching steaming mugs. She walks on, and there's no one in the little coffee shop in the front, not even an employee. She stands on the sidewalk and stares at the same handful of shops and little restaurants, and she turns and walks slowly up the main road, away from the centre of Carnarvon. After a while, she comes across another petrol station, and she tries the door, but it isn't open.

She wanders further, and there's a caravan park with a few young children playing at the entrance. Two of them have plastic yellow cricket bats, and a few more kids are throwing rocks for them to hit. The kids pause as Harp walks past and into the little reception room.

"Morning miss," an employee in a shirt the colour of the dirt outside says.

"Good morning, young man, and isn't it a lovely morning?"

"Yes it is, it's going to be another great day."

"That seems to be most days up here."

He smiles so that his teeth sit plastered in his head as obvious as jewellery, and he asks, "What can we do for you? The rooms won't be

clean for another couple of hours, but you're welcome to have a look around and maybe have a coffee."

"I might do that, thank you," Harp takes a deep breath, and she looks around the room. There are old black and white photos of Carnarvon on the walls here, and she takes a moment to study a sepia image of a camel lashed to a wooden cart like a Clydesdale horse in Britain. The camel is hauling an enormous pack of wool, and there's a tram in the background beside the fascine.

"I might get a coffee," Harp repeats, "but I have a question first."

"Great, shoot."

"Have you seen a young Asian girl with a baby, a very small baby, a little over a year old?"

"Maybe, um."

"It's my daughter, and I think she got in the other night, but I haven't been able to find her."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. There was someone like that. A woman arrived by bus, and she came in here a while before the sun rose, I think. She said she had family in town."

"By bus from Perth? And she had a child?"

"Yes."

"And was the child Asian too?"

"I don't remember, sorry."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"Nope, I asked if she wanted to stay here another night and she said she was meeting family in town; she's probably looking for you too."

Harp's eyes widen, and she says, "Yeah, that's probably her. Do you know where she went?"

"Just into town, I haven't seen her since."

"Are you sure? You haven't heard anything else or seen the child or anything?"

"No, no they just walked down into town."

"All right, you have a lovely day now."

"You too."

Harp leaves, and she crosses the wide country road to visit a little



shop with a sign advertising 'BAIT' over the door. She enters, and a small cat rubs on her leg as a man in a purple 'Fremantle Dockers' cap asks, "Morning, need something?"

"Actually, I'm just looking for someone. A mum with a small child."

"No one has been in yet today."

"It was probably earlier in the week. She's an Asian girl with—"

"Oh yeah. Yeah, there was a mum in a couple days ago, maybe a few."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She bought some camping gear."

HARP IS LICKING HER LIPS AS SHE EXITS THE LITTLE 'BAIT' SHOP, AND she whispers to herself in Mandarin, chuckling every few words.

As she's passing the petrol station, she sees a woman's hand behind the entrance flicking at the locks and the hand turns the 'Closed' sign to 'Open'.

Harp enters, and before she has a second to say anything, a woman in a blue apron, behind the counter, cries out, "There you are!"

Harp looks over her shoulder, and she glimpses towards the drink fridges, but there's no one else in the place.

"What?" she asks, hobbling towards the woman.

"Your mate was in here the other day."

"A friend of mine?"

"Yeah. She didn't leave her name, but she was looking for the lady with the hiking stick."

"Was she? That must be my friend Penny, isn't she a sweetheart?"

"Yes, she seemed so," the woman adds as she begins to tie up her hair with a wide, black scrunchie.

"I'm glad you found me," Harp says, "Penny and I have been the very best of friends for, maybe, um, a good ten years now. Did she leave a number to call her on?"

"Oh, yes, she did. She said she was trying to surprise you, but I guess the secret is out now."

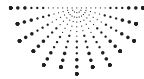
"She's always playing silly games."

“That’s nice.”

“Do you think I could get that number? I’ll track her down and see if I can’t give her a little shock myself.”

“Great idea, here you go,” the attendant hands Harp a contact card for a motel and says, “Have fun, that place is on the fascine, just to the left of the second-hand shop.”

“Well, aren’t you helpful, thank you very much.”



Wu finds the concrete bathtub surprisingly comfortable, and Harrison has enough room to splash around while Wu holds him up. It's so deep that Wu is sitting entirely upright and she still must tilt her chin up to keep her mouth out of the soapy liquid. She can hear Leon's footsteps approaching on the other side of the door, and he calls in, "You guys all right in there?"

"Yes, thanks."

"The water is going to keep heating up, so just get out if you're uncomfortable. If you like, I can bring a big tub of cold water and leave it by the door, then you can just add cold if it starts to cook you."

"It's perfect, don't worry, thanks."

The footsteps retreat and Wu sinks into the tub, letting the water fill her ears and nose and letting the water slip over her scalp like the warm hand of a masseur. She's holding Harrison up so that only his little belly and legs are in the water and he stares blankly as Wu emerges again. Wu brings him closer to her face, and she blows bubbles in the water. She drapes her wet hair over her eyes and then pulls single strands of it out of the way, and Harrison seems nervous until she blows more bubbles.

They play for a full thirty minutes, and then they get out of the

tub, dry off, change and look for Leon. He's not in the kitchen, and Wu calls out, but she gets no answer. She doesn't want to venture into any part of the house that he hasn't yet shown her, so she steps outside the building and calls out, "Leon! Leon!"

"Is everything all right?" his voice comes from beyond the tree line.

"Yes, we just thought we'd see what you're up to."

"Out here."

Wu follows the voice past fig and tangelo trees, and she walks around a laundry basket full of cherry tomatoes that's sitting on the red dirt. Leon is deep in the spattering of plants, and he's picking large red tomatoes from vines that are latched to tall, dead tree branches.

"You didn't get burned, did you?"

"No, it was perfect. I don't understand; how is it heated?"

"The cool water moves into the bottom of the stove in pipes," Leon points at his fist and waves his finger around to dramatize the process. "And when it warms, it rises and returns to the tub H, and more cold-water flows into the bottom. Water follows water, hot water rises."

"I've never seen a bath like that before."

"It's old, much older than you."

Wu glances around the trees and the little points of colourful fruit, and she asks, "What are you doing now?"

"It's tomato time."

"You grow them?"

Leon chuckles and nods and Wu adds, "I mean, I see you grow them. Do you sell them?"

"Nope."

"No?"

"Nope. I eat most of them or feed them to the animals, and the rest I trade."

"Trade?"

"Yeah, it's all pretty simple."

"How do you grow them in the desert like this?"

"There's a huge underground river running below us."

"Really?"

"Yep. I have a diesel pump in a little shed that draws it up and runs it through reticulation. Most of the other blokes have switched over to using electric pumps, but, well—"

"But you don't like electricity."

Leon chuckles and nods and says, "Something like that."

Wu starts to say something else, but Leon puts the basket on the ground and turns to her and asks, "So what are you doing sleeping in a tent with a child and no supplies?"

"I don't have much choice."

"Well, you can't do that. OK? You can't take a kid out into the desert without food and water. You are responsible for him. Harrison depends on you."

"His name is Evan," Wu snaps, and she's biting her lip to restrain herself from cursing at lecturing old bugger.

"Sure it is, but you cannot carry that boy around and subject him to whatever it is that's ruining your life."

"Like I said, I have no choice."

"Stay here."

"I've done that before, and it doesn't work out."

"For whom?"

"Anyone."

"Why are you homeless?"

"I'm not homeless."

"Why don't you have anywhere to stay?"

"My husband is looking for me, and I don't want him to find me."

Leon picks the basket back up and turns to his work once more.

He says, "Lie to me; I don't care, just look after the child. Stay here where he's safe."

"We're not safe if we stay put."

"You're not safe if you run."

Wu stands silently for a moment and shakes her head.

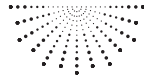
Leon adds, "You can't live out here with no water, that's a fact. Please, stay here with me."

"Why are you inviting me? You don't know me."

Leon pauses and scratches in his beard. He pulls something out of the hair and flicks it away.

“I don’t know.” He pauses and thinks some more and adds, “You were too afraid when I saw you down on the riverbank, no one should be scared like that. No one. And when you came back to get your things you were totally paralysed with terror. No one should be that scared.”

## HARP



There's no one on the street in the earliest hours of the morning before the sun pokes its head over the edge of the planet. Harp moves through residential neighbourhoods alone, hobbling and sniffing in the cold. She looks up at a street sign and turns and moves forward. She can see a dark, blank strip at the end of the street, and she knows it's the fascine. When she arrives there at the water, she finds a small motel on her right, and she checks to make sure that the name on the sign is the same as the name on the card that Penny gave to the petrol station employee. She peers down the driveways of nearby houses and the parking bays beside the fascine and Harp finds the green VW parked on the street beside the motel.

The first rays of sunlight hit the tops of buildings and the peaks of hills and soon the street is yellow with the dawn. Harp waits, leaning on a nearby tree and she watches the car and the motel. A female figure enters the street and walks quickly to the VW. Harp moves, crouched and quietly, to the back of the car and, as the engine starts, she opens the door and slides in to sit behind the driver.

Penny curses and attempts to leap back out of the vehicle, opening the door a few centimetres. Harp grips her hair in a tight fist and jerks

her back towards the centre console, then presses the blade of the box cutter to Penny's throat with the other hand. The door blows shut in a solo gust of wind.

Penny yells, "NO!" and Harp presses the box cutter into her skin, whispering, "Shhh, officer, shhh," and a spot of blood appears. Penny shies away from the blade until she's pressed back against the door and Harp flicks the locks on and says, "Give me your gun."

Penny's lips are folded back in fear while she gasps, and little puffs of oxygen are whistling through her teeth. She says, "Harp I swear—"

"I didn't say swear; I said give me your gun."

Penny gently hands Harp a pistol and Harp orders, "Drive."

"Just, relax, come on, please," she begs.

Harp sticks the point of the blade into Penny's cheek and slips it down in a single, precise motion. The wound opens immediately, and Penny's blood runs over her shoulder. She screams, and she starts to drive, her face crinkling in terror.

"Wh- Oh God, oh please, Jesus," Penny whimpers, "where are we going?"

"Out of town. Into the desert."

"OK, OK, just think for a second. I'm a cop."

"You're a crooked cop; there's no way you told anyone that you're coming out here. You're worried about trace evidence and all kinds of complicated rubbish; the last thing you want is to involve any other cops. You're alone, totally alone."

"Oh Jesus, please Harp."

"We're alone out here. It doesn't matter that you're a cop. Your job is irrelevant."

The car rolls down the main street, and there is no one, no one at all to see the blood or the panic on Penny's face.

She pleads, "You don't need to kill me."

"Why are you here?"

"Because I'm a fan!"

"You're an idiot."

"Come on; I told you I love your work. I know you're doing something out here. It must be something amazing."



"You're an idiot."

"It must be something special. You wouldn't go through all you've gone through to come out here if there wasn't some insane reason."

"You're an idiot."

"I've followed your entire life. I know everything you've ever done, everything on record. I just want to know what's going on. I want to see what you do when no one is watching."

"Why did you speed away from me when you saw me on the street?"

Penny wails, "Because I didn't want you sneaking up on me with a damn knife!"

The car begins to slow as the pair leaves the town behind.

"Speed up, we're going into the desert."

"No, please."

"Faster!"

"No, no, we'll pull over and talk about this!"

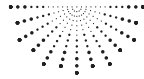
"FASTER!"

All of a sudden, Penny slams her foot down on the accelerator and Harp is thrown back in her seat. Harp loses her grip on Penny, and she's tossed to the side with a fistful of her hair snapping off in between her fingers. Harp slashes the blade at Penny in a frantic, wild motion and the box-cutter slides over Penny's jawbone and opens the muscle there like a torn plastic bag. The car careens across the width of the huge road and skids and slides and only misses one of the gargantuan central trees by a metre. The doors are unlocked with clump and Harp grabs the driver's chair to pull herself up towards Penny.

Penny begs, "No!" in a single eruption of dread as she slaps at the steering wheel to throw Harp again.

The talons on one of Harp's hands clutch to the seat, and she flicks three quick slashes at Penny's neck. Penny throws her hands up to protect her precious arteries. Both women are screaming in long, ear-splitting shrieks as the knife slashes through Penny's palm and bumps across her fingers. No one is holding the steering wheel, and Harp sees that the car is about to leave the road entirely. She stabs twice

more at Penny's head, but the driver's door is open, and Penny is lying, bloody and twisted, in the red dirt behind. Harp swears in Mandarin as she looks ahead and hears the donk! As the front of the car slams into a palm tree.



There's a flat piece of dough starting to sizzle in the pan on the burner in Leon's kitchen. It's beginning to rise slightly, and Leon flips it to reveal the underside is golden brown with a few black dots. There's a window over the kitchen sink, and Leon looks out towards the orange sunset as he waits for the food to cook. After another minute, he slides the flat piece of bread onto a dinner plate, and he places it on the counter beside a second round piece of fresh bread sitting on a second plate. Wu sits with Leon at the table while Harrison explores the space below them and there's a massive pile of diced tomato, onion and herbs in a salad bowl. The pair of them scoop the ripe salsa onto the huge circles of bread, and Wu says, "Bruschetta."

"Bless you," Leon replies.

"No, I mean—"

"I know what you meant," Leon chuckles, "I was just having a dig."

Wu puts a hand over her full mouth to giggle, and little chirps of laughter can be heard beneath them. Wu leans down and grabs Harrison and places him, on his hands and knees, on the table.

"Hey there little guy," Leon says as Harrison stares at the woman who kidnapped him.

"Let me try something," Leon begins, "Evan," He says and pauses, but Harrison doesn't react.

"Evan," Leon repeats, and still Harrison sits, staring at Wu. Leon says, "Harrison," and the infant turns to stare at him.

"Maybe he just likes the name Harrison more, right?" Leon smiles at Wu, and she doesn't smile back.

She says, "If you don't mind me asking, why don't you want electricity?"

"I don't need it, not really."

"But what about entertainment?"

"I read."

"What about essentials?"

"Like what?"

"Lighting."

"Don't need electric lighting."

"A microwave."

"What's a microwave?"

"Seriously? A microwave is—"

"I'm just having a dig; I know what a microwave is."

The pair of them pauses for a moment to smile, and then Wu says, "How about a fridge? Everyone needs a fridge."

"I have a fridge."

"Really?"

"Of course, I'm not a barbarian." They stand, and Wu picks up Harrison from the table to follow Leon into a small room beside the kitchen. The walls are lined with shelves of hundreds of jars of pickled and preserved fruits, and there are short, full, jam jars piled up on top of each other on the floor in a glass rainbow.

"Wow," Wu exclaims, "Look at all this."

"And there's the fridge," Leon is pointing to a short, wide appliance at the end of the room. It sits off the ground on four legs, and the handle is a long, horizontal piece of metal like the handle on an antique car.

"So, where's the cord?" Wu asks.

"There isn't one. It's kerosene."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I only use it for meat. There's some goat in there now."

"I saw some goats on the morning I was camping by the river."

"I'll bet you did. One of them is in the fridge there. The meat is mostly for Diomedes, he gets cranky if he only gets the tomatoes for tea."

They return to the kitchen, and it's almost dark in the house. Leon produces the barbeque lighter and a tall, glass vessel that's shaped like an '8'. He lights a wide wick that's poking up out of the top of the thing, and a cone of flame rises a few centimetres above the table. Leon turns a little dial, and the fire calms to a pleasant glow.

"See? We don't need lights."

After they eat, Leon sits in the carpeted space beside the dining table, and he produces a small paperback novel.

"I think we're just going to go to bed," Wu announces.

"Sleep tight."

"Thanks for everything."

"No problem."

The night is warm, and the home is silent, and Harrison wakes Wu up twice, but she sleeps soundly after these interruptions.

In the morning, the three of them gather in the kitchen and Leon asks, "Would you like eggs for breakfast?"

"Yeah, that sounds great."

"Put your shoes on this time."

They walk out of the house, and they turn to the left as Diomedes files in line behind Wu. He licks the little shoes on Harrison's feet as Wu holds the infant to her side, and Harrison frowns in the early morning light.

Leon leads them to a large fenced pen that's full of all sorts of small animals. There are pigs, ducks, goats, sheep and chickens. On one side of the enclosure is a water trough and three large, empty, half barrels and on the other side is a little wooden hutch. Leon squats down a little to get into the enclosure, and a turkey comes wobbling and gobbling out beside his legs.

"Watch out for Gertie there, she doesn't like strangers," he says,

pointing to the turkey. Wu is laughing with Harrison, and she's bent down to touch a few of the more curious animals as Leon passes an egg back towards the pair.

Soon they have several eggs, and Harrison is watching the animals as they stroll away.

"Wait a second, what is that?" Wu exclaims as she throws up a hand to point a huge, long-necked and fluffy beast.

"Oh, that's Cerberus."

"Cerberus?"

"Yep, he's a guard llama."

Wu's jaw falls open at this description, and she studies the heavy legs and shaggy brown coat of the sturdy animal.

"You're going to have to explain that."

"A guy came through here on the way to The Royal Show in Perth. He had a bunch of these things, and he said they had been bred to guard herds of sheep. He reckoned that they're all the rage in America."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he had about thirty of them. All of us locals were pretty sceptical, but he showed us how the animals just hate dogs. He invited anyone to bring any dog up to this yard that he had them in and the whole flock of llamas would charge if they thought the dog was going to enter. I don't know what it is about them, their smell maybe, but that thing will kick the hell out of any wild dog, dingo or fox."

"Are you joking with me again? Are you having a dig?"

"No, no," Leon insists, "I'm being honest. That thing out there is a guard llama. The trainer wouldn't even take money for him; I had to win Cerberus in a card game."

They walk back into the house and soon they're frying eggs in the pan in the kitchen.

"Did you want a bath this morning?" Leon asks.

"I think so, yeah."

"OK. I was just going to suggest that you might like to take one tonight instead. I thought you might like to help me pick the fruit today."

"Oh, yes, of course."

"I'm happy to do it myself, but the days are long out here with nothing to do. You might enjoy a little work."

"That sounds great."

After the eggs, they enter the orchard. Leon leads the way to a patch of strawberries while Wu carries Harrison in her wide, white basket.

"Pick anything that looks fresh. Go crazy and watch for snakes," Leon says, and the pair of them drops to their knees to work their way along the rows of strawberry bushes. Wu picks everything that looks brilliantly red. Some of them are covered in bugs, and some are rotten in places. Some are tiny and lop-sided, and Leon says, "They're all right," and others are still green. They move up and down the patch for hours with Harrison clumsily crawling alongside Wu. Sometimes he moves off in a weird direction and Wu stands and takes a few steps to bring him back. Sometimes he stops and waits until Wu looks at him and sings out, then he charges ahead with fresh vigour.

When the sweat is stinging their eyes, and their bellies are rumbling with midday hunger, Harrison curls up in the soft grass and goes to sleep.

"That'll do, let's go back to the house," Leon announces.

Wu stands and lifts her basket. She tries to juggle the berries while she reaches down for Harrison, but the strawberries spill everywhere, and she curses.

"Don't worry," Leon says, "I'll get him."

He stands over the sleeping Harrison with the basket pressed to his hip, and he crouches down a little. With a single hand, he puts Harrison's back and head on his forearm and Harrison's hamstrings on his fingers, so when he stands, the child is perfectly supported and resting on the side of Leon's stomach.

"You've done that before," Wu says, and they walk back to the house.

Wu puts Harrison in the bassinet, and Leon calls to her to bring the sleeping child to the side of the house. Leon has carried all of the

berries into the little glass room made of hodgepodge doors, and he's sitting on a camping chair with a small knife.

"What are we doing now?" Wu asks.

"We're going to dry these, so they don't go off straight away. Don't worry, I've already washed them."

"Great."

"Watch me."

Leon picks up a strawberry, and he cuts off the top, and he cuts it down the middle into two perfect halves with no green hair. He tosses the green bit into a bucket a few metres away, and he says, "That's scraps for the animals." Then he reaches to the side of his chair where a pile of wooden racks is sitting. They're all about fifty centimetres long, and fifty centimetres wide and bases of these racks comprise of a thin latticework of wooden struts.

Leon says, "Let's get to it," and Wu pulls up a chair beside him.

They work for another hour, cutting and laying out the little heart-shaped fruit halves until there are no whole strawberries left.

"Now what?" Wu asks.

"We need heat to dry them quickly. This is an old stove," Leon answers and he moves to the side of the room to lift and carry a large metal receptacle into the centre of the room. It almost looks like a fat animal as the round belly of it stands on four legs. He leaves the room for a minute and comes back with an armful of wood. There's a slotted door on the stove, and Leon opens it and lights a fire inside. He closes the thing up, and Wu can see the metal of it starting to warm immediately as smoke leaves through a long chimney and dances over the roof until it escapes through the mesh patches above the glass door-walls. The pang sounds of the walls of the chamber expanding sounds like ricocheting bullets.

"This is a really neat little operation," Wu begins, "aren't you worried about starting a fire?"

"No way. The fire is in the stove, and there's nothing flammable here except the racks," he replies as he points to the plain walls and concrete floor. "There's even a tin roof, no ceiling."

They eat goat steaks with salt, pepper and coriander and they



wrap it all in flatbreads, and Leon stays up reading when his guests go to sleep.

THE NEXT DAY, LEON LEADS WU WITH HARRISON BACK OUT TO THE fruit-drying room, and he hands Wu a thin, shrivelled berry. She tastes it and says, "It's like candy."

"Exactly. No need for electricity; no need for extra sugar. You're going to love the next bit."

Leon leads them back behind the pen of animals, and he opens the door to a small barn that's looking out onto a round, but empty, paddock.

Two horses stand between a circular bale of hay and a water trough, and they watch the people enter with dull, uninterested stares.

"That's Apples, and that's Bananas," Leon says as he points to each animal.

"They're strange names for horses."

"That's their favourite foods, and you know what?"

"What?"

"Apples and bananas are about the only fruits I don't grow here."

"Why is that?"

"The never grew naturally, and bananas take a lot more effort."

"What do you mean?"

"I went away for a while, a long while, and when I came back, some of these trees had sprung up naturally."

"Really? All of this?"

"No, not even close. Just a little. I guess the wild animals dispersed the seeds and a few shoots grew automatically. Come here; I'll show you something."

Leon closes the door to the stable and leads Wu through the orchard. He stops for a second at an orange tree, and he snaps off a few dead branches before walking on. At the end of the orchard, they step out to a bare patch where there are three large holes.

"I grow a few small plants in pots behind the house and, when

they're large enough, I add them to the orchard. They all start as seeds, and they grow, and they get a spot out on the boundary."

"Don't you have some kind of order? Why don't you plant them in rows?"

"I'm not too bothered with organisation. Some grow well, and others die off, and I just eat whatever is ripe. I've got three olive trees to plant out here; they're growing in pots near the shed. I'll have to fire up the ute to carry them this far."

"You have a ute?"

"Yeah, the keys are in it too. You can take it whenever you want."

"Why the horses?"

"I like the horses better. Don't know if horses like olives though, I'll need to ask someone."

"I love olives."

"I plan to brine and salt them myself, maybe add some chilli. If you stick around for a while, you can help."

"How long?"

"Probably a year."

"That's a long time to be sponging off you."

"You're not sponging; it's not like I have a stack of bills to pay."

Wu nods as Harrison begins to cry a little.

She says, "I think he's hungry."

"You're not sponging; it was great having you around to help with the work, and it's nice to have someone to talk to."

"I'm just going to feed him, OK?"

"Of course."

Wu turns to her side, and Leon moves away to pretend to survey a few of the nearby plants. Wu drops the top corner of her singlet and offers the meal to Harrison.

As Harrison suckles and Leon looks away, Wu asks, "How long have you been out here on your own?"

"On my own? Only a few years."

"Was there someone else here before?" Wu asks.

"Yes, of course, Maria. A beautiful woman. She was a nurse; she just hated seeing anyone in any pain," Leon says.

"Were you married?"

"Yeah, but I don't really want to talk about that."

"OK, sorry."

"No worries, where's Harrison's father?" he asks.

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Fair enough, we'll keep the chat to horses and olives."

WHEN THEY RETURN TO THE STABLE, THE HORSES ARE WAITING IN THE same spot. Leon runs his hands over each of the animals, whispering to them softly and calling them names like 'darling' and 'sweetheart'. He throws a woollen pad on Banana's back and then a red blanket on top of that and says, "She loves red." He gently places a saddle on her spine and moves the stirrup out of the way, onto the horses back, and aligns the synch strap a full palm behind her front leg. He wraps the leather strap through the D ring and pats her on the shoulder and whispers some more and pulls the strap tight. Leon slips a couple of fingers in between the strapping and the skin of the horse and asks her, "Is it too tight? No, you're all right." He finishes by loosely fastening a strap towards the back of the saddle, and he retrieves a bridle from where it hangs on the wall and says, "This is yours, darling, here's your favourite." Leon bridles Bananas and takes another fifteen minutes to repeat the steps with Apples.

He says, "I don't like rushing them."

"Take your time. I'm having fun."

"Have you ridden before?"

"Yeah, a few times."

"Great, I'll get the strawberries, and we can get moving."

LEON AND WU RIDE DOWN THE MAIN ROAD TOWARDS TOWN WITH THE dried strawberries in plastic bags inside the leather saddlebags. Leon is holding Harrison as Harrison stares down at the animal between his legs. He does not stop giggling and clapping his hands.

Cars slow as they pass, and Wu sees the excited faces of young

people in the back seats of their parents' vehicles. She sees people winding down their windows as they approach and then heads are stuck out of cars as they pass; all eyes on the riders.

They're riding single file, and Leon calls out, "We're going to see a friend of mine named Greeny."

Wu smells the pleasant, earthy stink of her steed. She listens to the noises of its hooves on the red dirt shoulder of the main road.

"All right," she calls back.

"He has a little shop, and I bring him fruits and whatever else for sale, sometimes whole plants, and he lets me pick up a few groceries. We trade, you see?"

"Yeah, I get it."

"I can make almost anything myself, almost, but there's one thing that I just cannot even attempt."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's my vice. Can you guess what it is?"

"Alcohol?"

"Nope, I can make booze out of any of the fruits I grow."

"Flour? For the bread?"

"No, wattleseed makes a great Aussie flower. I just choose to get normal flour at the shops sometimes because it's too much trouble to make myself, but I can make it. Same as milk. It's easy to produce your own milk, but it's too much trouble to keep a dairy cow."

"I don't know then. What's your vice?"

"I'm not going to ruin the surprise, you'll see."

They arrive at a small shop with a sign that says, 'General Store. All You Need', and Leon dismounts. He runs two ropes, one from the bottom of each horse's bridle, to a wooden fence and he lashes them to the top rung and winds the tethers around in complicated knots. Leon helps Wu down, and they enter the store with the strawberries in plastic bags as Leon calls out, "Greeny mate, delivery."

A man with a thin moustache appears, and he has round ears that stick straight out of the side of his head like the ears of a hippopotamus.

"What have you brought me today?" he asks. Leon carries the

strawberries around the shelves of pots and biscuits and bread, and he dumps them in two large, plastic tubs. The little station has a few different sized cups, a metal scoop and a sign saying, 'FRESH, LOCAL PRODUCE'.

"Dried strawberries. And these lovely people are Tina and Evan, my new helpers."

"Fantastic, lovely to meet you," Wu waves and says, "You too," and she holds Harrison's arm to make him pretend to wave as well.

"He doesn't make you live in that crazy house of his, does he?" Greeny asks.

"My crazy house? You should see where this nut-case lives," Leon says as he moves through the aisles selecting packs of flour and sugar.

"At least I have a bloody TV," Greeny says.

"Only because you can't read."

Wu can't help but laugh, and Leon adds, "Go on out there and show her, I'll watch the shop."

"You reckon?" Greeny asks, and Leon says, "Yeah, show her that house of yours, then she won't think mine is too bad."

"OK, come with me, Tina. I have something to show you."

Wu follows Greeny out through the storage room of the shop and into a small paddock out back. They walk through a patch of bush and Wu ducks to hold Harrison away from the eye-level branches.

"You see that?" Greeny asks as they emerge into a clearing and Greeny points to a shack.

"See what I made it out of?" He asks with a proud smile on his face. They approach the building, and Wu can see the walls are constructed with some sort of fibre and patches are overlapping like roofing tiles. They enter the building through a wooden door, the only wooden surface in sight and Greeny says, "It's roo skin."

"What?"

"Kangaroo skins."

The structure is lined, roof and walls, with the pelts of kangaroos. They're hanging, dried and stapled together, from a metal latticework that's a lot like a very, very high fence.

"This is really weird," Wu says and Greeny replies, "That's why they call me Greeny, for my love of animals."

"I'm not going to lie to you; this is creepy."

"People have been doing it for thousands of years."

"Yeah," Wu chuckles, "until everyone started making their houses out of absolutely anything else they could use."

"I'll tell you a story," Greeny begins as Wu looks around at the TV and the light globe hanging from the roof.

"When Leon and me were young fellas, we had a mate named Ray. Now, this is a while before electricity was a real essential. I mean, everyone had the option, but no one was in a huge hurry to get the power hooked up."

"OK."

"It wasn't like it was actually needed. The families out here had been living forever with wood fire ovens and long-drop toilets."

"Sure," Wu says as she looks at some photos of young faces on the walls.

"Ray lived in a bus, an old school bus, on his father's farm, I guess he just liked being on his own a bit, and I lived in this kangaroo house. Leon became a big hotshot, and he went to school in Perth, and he was accepted into university, and this was over forty years ago, back when no one went to university. Why would we? Life in the country was sweet. "

"Sure, sure."

"And Leon comes home with a girlfriend and a little money, and he builds his nice brick house down there by the river. Now he starts telling us that we need to upgrade. He says we can't just make our own houses and all this rubbish. He was a real pain in the arse."

"I'll bet he was," Wu says as she turns and faces Greeny to see that thin moustache is wagging up and down like a boat in a storm as he spits out the words of his tale.

"So, Ray finds himself a beautiful woman, and they get married, and she falls pregnant straight away, it was a real fairy-tale. Now Leon says that Ray can't raise a kid in a bus and, of course, I'm telling him that raising a kid in an old school bus will probably save him money

on transportation later, but he goes ahead and builds a big, magnificent place at the back end of the property. I mean, it's lovely, and it's going to last him forever."

"I can see Leon saying that about raising a child."

"Yeah, right?" Greeny asks.

"Yeah," Wu replies.

"Anyway, what does Ray do? He's boiling oil on the fancy gas stove to make some chips, and he steps out back for some reason, I don't know what, maybe he's watering the lawn, whatever, and his nice, fancy house catches on fire."

"No!"

"Yep. He tried to put it out, but he couldn't. No one got hurt, thank God, but the whole place burned down. It was a long time before we laughed at him for it, but it's pretty funny now."

"That's crazy."

"Yeah. I told myself the moment I heard the news that I was welcome to live in my crazy house as long as I liked."

"Yeah," Wu pats Greeny on the back and says, "you've got a good reason."

She's looking around at the photos on the walls, and Greeny says, "Here, this one here is a photo of the three of us when we were young."

He shows Wu an old black and white photo, and she says, "You were a handsome man."

"Were?"

"Sorry, I mean—"

"Relax, I'm just having a dig. This is the last photo we all have together before Leon went away."

"Went away? Where did he go?"

"Oh, nowhere. Don't worry about that. Let's get back up to the shop."

WHEN THEY RETURN TO THE STORE, THEY FIND THREE MEN IN LEATHER jackets standing in a triangle around Leon. The men all have tattoos

on their necks, and they're wearing sunglasses. One of them has a red beard in a plait, and another has a shaved head with some faded words tattooed over his scalp.

The man with the beard sees Greeny, and he says, "Mr Green. It's your favourite day of the month."

"Ye-yeah mate," Greeny stutters, "we're sweet."

Greeny produces a fat envelope from beside the cash register and hands it to the man.

"Always a pleasure," the man says and, as they're about to leave, the guy with the bald head barks, "I know you, where do I know you from?" at Leon.

"Me? No sir, I doubt it," Leon replies.

"Yes, I do." He steps back toward Leon. "I do."

"Have you ever lived up in Carnarvon?"

"No."

"Sorry mate, I've got an orchard here. I've always been here."

"I swear, I know you from somewhere. I don't forget faces."

"Sure, I'm not doubting that. I just think I'd remember you."

The bald man laughs and says, "Most people do."

"I'm in here pretty regularly, maybe we've bumped into each other."

He shrugs and says, "That's probably it."

One of the others asks, "We good?"

"Yeah, let's go," and they walk outside to sit on three motorcycles parked beside the horses and the horses neigh and buck as the bikers burn off down the road.

"What was that?" Wu asks.

Greeny says, "My son's in a little trouble. I pay them to leave him alone."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Wu answers.

Greeny looks down at Harrison and replies, "It's just money, if that's all your kids cost you, then you're laughing."

"This is the haul for today," Leon announces as he points to a few groceries on the counter.

He turns to Wu and asks, "Unless you want something?"



"No, I'm good."

"You sure? Milk for your tea?"

"Oh wait, baby formula."

"No problem," Greeny says, "and, Leon, aren't you forgetting something?"

"Yeah," Wu adds, "what's your vice? What did we really come down here for?"

"No, I never forget," Leon says as he moves to the back of the shop and peers inside a chest freezer. He slides the glass panel out of the way and reaches inside and comes back out with a cone-shaped ice cream.

"This," he says, "I cannot make."

"Ice cream? That's all?" Wu asks.

"What do you mean? That's all?"

"It's just ice cream."

"It's perfect. It's the best product that all of humankind has ever been able to produce."

"Are you serious?"

Greeny says, "Yes, he is as serious as a heart attack."

"It's perfect, just look at it. Think about it. Think about the science that has gone into the shape and the design and the texture and even the mass-produced nature of this thing. Think about the art, the love that went into the flavour."

"You've lost it."

"Think about the millions of other people who have tasted it and altered it and offered up their opinions. It's perfect. It's the absolute pinnacle of civilisation. No other creature in history, in all of time, has been able to achieve something as magical as ice cream."

"You've lost it."

Leon unwraps it and starts to lick the thing, releasing a teasing, "MMMMMMMMmmmmmmmm," into the shop as it trickles into his beard.

"You'd better get a couple more for yourself and Evan," Greeny says to Wu, "and some apples and bananas for the horses."

. . .

AS SOON AS THEY'RE HOME AND THE HORSES ARE BACK IN THE STABLE, they carry a bucket of food scraps to the animal pen. Leon tickles Harrison on the chest and says, "Watch this, mate."

He wanders over to the three half barrels and tips a third of the mess into each. The animals scramble for the scraps and feathers and dirt are kicked up all over. The flap of wings and snort of snuffling beasts rise in a choir of frantic feeding. The pigs charge like greedy children, the sheep run away in a single pack, and the chickens try to fly but end up no better off than the rest of the horde.

As Leon and Wu are walking away with Harrison, Wu notices something moving out of the corner of her eye. She points to the shaking, hairy thing at the edge of the tree line and asks, "What's that?"

Leon glimpses over at it and his smile instantly sinks into a concerned expression.

"Damn," he says, and they wander over to it. There's a section of old fence and a young Kangaroo is hanging in it upside down. The roo's back legs are twisted up in the wire, and there's blood running from a hidden wound somewhere on its bent belly.

"Damn it. Sometimes they land on the fence, rather than jumping over, and this is what you get. His legs are tangled and broken."

Wu pinches Harrison's nostrils against the smell and says, "So how can we help him?"

"You don't want to watch this."

"Why?"

"Just look away."

"Wait a second, what are you going to do?" Wu asks, but Leon is already entering a side door of the house.

"Leon?" she shouts at him as he returns, "What is that for?"

Leon is carrying a small, petrol-powered chainsaw with one hand and a hammer in the other.

"You're not going to—"

"I told you to look away. I warned you," he says as he places the chainsaw on the ground a few metres from the struggling, crippled kangaroo.

"Do you know what a fox will do to this poor little fella if we leave it here to suffer?"

"Wait—" Wu pleads, but Leon is already swinging the hammer. The animal stiffens in the wire, and Leon swings the weapon three times, mashing the skull of the young kangaroo like the chocolate surface of a hollow Easter egg. The animal's body convulses, and individual muscles on its back and hindquarters pulse until all life within it, conscious or otherwise, expires.

"We could have saved it," Wu says as she holds Harrison's face away from the killing.

Leon picks up the chainsaw and drops the hammer into the sand. He starts the roaring motor of the tool with three tugs on a cable and Diomedes appears behind him. The dog sits patiently and licks his lips as Leon points the spinning blade at the ribs of the kangaroo. In a storm of gore, Leon splits the hanging carcass in two. He uses the chainsaw to fully sever the hindquarters and tail of the creature, and the power tool catches for a moment as it chews through the bone of the animal's spine.

When the sound of the machine has died away, and Leon is taking a step back, he says, "Get in there, boy!"

Diomedes rushes up to bite at the carcass and Leon places the chainsaw beside the hammer. He steps forward again to join the dog at the body and Leon retrieves the head and ribcage of the kangaroo from where it lays on the ground.

Wu says, "We could have saved it," as Leon tosses the upper-body parts further off into the orchard.

"How?" he asks.

"We could have put it in the pen with the other animals. It would have been safe."

"There's nothing we could do for a young roo with two broken legs. How would it move around? Besides, the animals in the pen aren't safe."

"What do you mean?"

"My animals are my food, and now, that doomed animal is food. Someone was going to eat him eventually. Now his suffering is over."

"That was disgusting."

"More disgusting than roasting and carving a whole chicken?"

Wu watches Diomedes as he snaps at the soft, exposed meat of the dead kangaroo and birds have flown down to pick at the offal that has been projected across the clearing by the chainsaw. Insects have already begun to feast upon the top section of the kangaroo and foxes surely smell the iron musk of fresh blood on the breeze.

Wu shakes her head and says, "I'm going to take a bath."

"Hold on a sec," Leon urges, "should I show you where the ute is in case you want to drive anywhere?"

Wu sighs and turns away and adds, "Yes, please, thanks."

They walk back towards the house and Leon leads Wu to a large, corrugated iron shed beside the water tower, and he says, "That leaking tank is driving me up the wall. I've been trying to fix it for weeks."

"It looks so wasteful."

"Yeah, Diomedes stands under the water on hot days, but that's all it's good for."

Leon opens the shed and points to a white Holden ute and says, "It's on a slight downhill slope, so be sure you're ready to start driving when you take off the handbrake."

"Sure, and those are the olive trees?" Wu points to three small trees beside the shed.

"Yeah."

"I can't wait to try them."

Leon pauses and clears his throat.

"Try them? It'll be a while until they're ready to eat. You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sick of running. I want to stay; if that's all right?"

"Of course, that's fantastic."

Wu adds, "This is going to be great. Can you get the bath ready for me please?"

"Nope."

"What?"

"You're living here now," Leon says with a grin, "don't you want to learn?"

. . .

AS WU GETS OUT OF THE BATH AND DRIES HERSELF IN THE DARK ROOM, Leon calls out, "I'm going over to a friend's house to do some drinking, you want to come?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," Wu wraps the towel around herself and carries Harrison out. Leon turns to face her, and she adds, "I won't do much drinking, but it sounds like fun."

"Great. I'll be a few minutes in the bath today; don't laugh at me when I come out."

"What? Why?"

"Just don't."

Wu dresses, and she feeds Harrison before gently dressing him and taking him outside to play with Diomedes.

She tells the dog, "Be gentle," and it smiles at Harrison as Wu places him on the ground. The big dog lies on the ground in front of the child, and Harrison strokes its fur with hesitant fingers and wide, unbelieving eyes. When Diomedes licks Harrison's face, he smiles and puts his arms up in a goofy, flapping motion. Wu watches with a concerned stare, and she fiddles with her hair.

"How do I look?" Leon asks as he steps into the front yard. He's shaved his whole beard off and tied his hair back in a neat, long ponytail. His entire image seems somehow cleaner, and his massive nose has become so prominent that it looks like a tool someone might use to dig in the sand.

"Very nice," Wu says, "why the shave?"

"I've had it for a long time. I thought I could do with a change."

"I like it."

"Great. We'll walk to the party, no need for vehicles."

"Sounds good."

"You ready to go?" Leon asks.

"Yeah, do you need to lock up the house?"

"No. Why?"

Leon is walking away, and Wu picks up Harrison. She holds the soft, frowning boy to her chest, and she calls out, "Leon."

"What? Come on, we're going to be late."

"I don't want to lie to you."

"OK, that's good."

Wu says, "His name is Harrison."

"I know," Leon replies without turning.

"And my name is Taylor Wu. I'm in this country illegally."

Leon turns, and he scratches at his newly shaven chin as if he's still getting used to it. He says, "That's fine, I don't mind."

"That's not the worst of it."

"Don't tell me if you don't want to. It's fine, I understand if you don't want me to know."

"There are some people looking for me. They're going to kill me, and they'll kill you too if they know I'm here."

Leon pauses for a moment to let the information sink in, then he shrugs and says, "That's fine."

"Fine?"

"Yeah."

"How can that be fine?"

Leon shrugs again and says, "It's just fine. I don't mind. What about Harrison?"

"They'll take Harrison."

"Take him?"

"Yes." Leon walks back to the mother and child and Wu adds, "He has Downs Syndrome."

"I know, I get it."

"So, what do you think about that? I can't commit to staying until you tell me. What do you think of him? I can go. I can leave tomorrow, and you won't need to deal with any of this."

"I think," Leon begins as he places a gentle hand on Harrison's forehead. "I reckon this little man has never done anything wrong. Never. And I think it would be a shame to condemn him because he looks funny."

"It's not just the way he looks, it's medical, Harrison needs more help, more care, than other kids."

"I know. I understand. He is innocent, and we aren't. The people

who want to find you, are not innocent. No one around here is a good person, but maybe there is something that could change that. We can be bad people and still do good things. I don't know. All I know is that this kid should be protected, especially because he looks funny and needs more care." Leon glances around at the trees and the dog and the little house. He sighs and replies, "This house doesn't even have a driveway. You'll be safer here than anywhere else in the country. Now come on, let's go."

THEY STROLL AWAY FROM THE PROPERTY, AND DIOMEDES FOLLOWS FOR about a kilometre before turning and trotting back the way they've come with long, loping strides. Leon, Wu and Harrison arrive at the party at the edge of town after a twenty-minute walk. Harrison stays awake the whole walk, but he falls asleep as they stroll around the side of the home.

There are vines growing on all of the outside walls of the house, and there is a banana plantation stretching in all three directions that do not point to the road. Two little mongrel puppies with white, black and brown splotches are nipping at each other, and a tall grey goose waddles behind the pair wherever they tumble like a nanny. The sound of people chatting drifts on the air, only to be interrupted by laughter, and the trio reaches the rear of the house to find a ring of people standing around a small fire pit. The house has a back patio and a gazebo off to the right of the yard, but everyone is gathered around the fire.

Greeny waves at them and Leon calls out, "Guys, this is Tina and Evan."

A dozen people fire back their names and Wu waves. She follows Leon as he walks up to Greeny, and there's a red-haired girl in a long, black dress standing with them.

"I'm Tamara," she says.

"Tina."

"Nice to meet you," Tamara shakes Wu's hand and immediately asks, "So how did you meet Leon?"

Leon quickly announces, "She came around looking for work, and she'll be staying with me for a while."

"Poor girl, I hope you don't expect to be paid," someone shouts out, and a hail of laughter follows.

Greeny adds, "At least she got some eye-candy, look at this bloody supermodel," as he stokes Leon's clean-shaven chin.

They chat, and Leon is handed a bottle of rum and Wu takes a glass of it with lemon squash and some lime that one of the blokes pulls from his pocket to cut. There are three more women there, and another two arrive after an hour or so and Wu chats to them about the beaches and the national park in the area until Harrison wakes and starts crying. The women speak softly to him, except for Tamara who walks away as soon as she hears the wailing.

Leon walks over and says, "Do you want five minutes alone? I can take him for a while."

"No, thanks."

"It's no trouble."

"No, no, I want to keep him close."

"All right."

More people arrive, and some leave and Greeny is so drunk by the time it's fully dark that he falls asleep sitting up against a banana tree trunk in the red dirt.

"Bloody Greeny, what a mess," Tamara says to a ring of tipsy farmers.

Wu adds, "I saw his house today."

"Yeah? Silly bugger. All the work it took he could have a proper bloody brick home," a man in an Eagles football jersey says.

"I can't believe that's why you call him Greeny. That's so ironic."

"That's not why we call him Greeny," Tamara says, "Who told you that?"

"He did." The listeners all double over with mirth, giggling and chuckling and the man in the Eagles jersey has to wipe the back of his hand across his face to clear his eyes of tears.

Tamara says, "That's not why."

"Why then?"



"Because the idiot wanted to get a tattoo of a hundred dollar bill on his knob so he could watch his money grow."

"Whoa."

"Yeah, you get it? The growing?"

"Yeah, I get it. Damn."

Tamara says, "Well, it hurt too much, so he had to stop. Now there's just a green patch on him. Trust me; it isn't pretty!"

Wu puts a hand over her mouth as she snickers and the man in the Eagles jersey asks her, "Wu, do you like fishing?"

"Fishing? Sure."

"How about squidding?"

"I don't know. Is it the same as fishing?"

"Not exactly. We're going tomorrow night; you should come. We go at night, and you cast out a lure and reel it in slowly, so it looks like a fish that a squid wants to eat. It'll be fun. You should come."

"Sounds great, I'd love to."

"Just meet us at the pub on the fascine at 7:30."

"All right."

A new arrival comes and stands beside Wu. His teeth are so yellow that they're almost brown in the sparse firelight and he has white hairs dangling from his nose. Wu says, "I'm Wu, I'll be working for Leon for a while."

"Name's Gavin."

"And what do you do around here? Do you own one of these farms?"

"Nah. I'm a policeman," he replies with a smile and a jolt of panic fires up Wu's spine.

"Are you working with Leon in the orchard?" Gavin asks.

"Yeah, um," Wu fights back the anxiety and asks, "Do you know Leon well?"

"Yes. I met him a while ago. I know him through work."

"Through work? Was Leon a cop?"

"No, this is before I was a police officer. I knew Leon when I was a corrections officer."

"Oh, so you guys worked in a prison together?"

Gavin squints and tilts his head a little and says, "No. No, Leon was in prison."

Wu can feel her face drop and the muscles in her back tighten.

Gavin says, "Leon was in prison for half of his life. For twenty years."

"What? No, that can't be right."

Gavin nods and says, "Ask him."

Wu wanders over to where Leon is standing, and she grabs him by the elbow. She pulls him aside and asks, "Where did you go?"

"What? I just went for a piss."

"No, before. You told me you went away for a while. You said that you left Carnarvon. Where did you go?"

"I was just away, don't worry about it."

"Tell me."

"No. It's none of your business."

"I've brought my child into your house; this is my business."

"No, it's not. Just leave it."

"Leon I—"

"Just back off. You've got a free and safe place to live, isn't that enough? Damn it," Leon snaps, and his eyes narrow into irate slits that meet in a network of sharp wrinkles over his nose.

Wu turns and walks away with quick, half running steps, and she turns back to shout, "Sure, it's free, but is it safe?" She speeds up with Harrison pressed to her chest, and he starts to scream. She turns the corner of the house, and a man walking the other way bumps Wu with his shoulder. Wu stumbles and trips over her feet, but she manages to keep upright as the man shouts, "Stupid chink, watch where you're bloody going."

"What? What did you call me?" Wu asks, but before he can answer, Leon's voice is projected over the music and sounds of chatter, shouting, "You watch it, and you watch what you bloody call her."

Wu sees he's trudging over the dirt only a few metres behind her. Leon's face is twisted into a furious gaze, and Wu can hear his deep, deliberate breaths as he approaches.

The man turns to face Leon and says, "What's it got to do with you?"

"Don't talk to her like that."

"Or what?" he asks as he steps towards Leon. Leon puts his hands up with his palms facing the man, and he says, "No one wants any of that, just watch your language."

"Or what?" he repeats, and he throws a single punch into the side of Leon's head. The blow makes a dull flapping sound and Leon grunts as Wu shrieks. Leon steps back, then collapses on the ground for a moment before standing.

"What are you screaming at gook?"

"I said, don't talk to her like that," Leon orders.

"I'll talk however I bloody want to talk."

"Why? Does it make you feel tough? Huh? Superior?"

"Leon, just leave it," Wu implores, and the man grabs Leon by the collar with his left hand, then punches him with two more solid right jabs to his eye. Leon falls to the ground again, and a thin trickle of blood runs into the dirt.

"Come on then," the man jeers.

"Kick his bloody head in Leon!" a woman shouts, and Wu sees that the whole party has migrated to the side of the house in a mob to watch.

"Yeah, drop that prick!" another shout comes from the crowd.

"No," Leon replies as he gets to his knees and the man kicks him in the guts.

Leon is in the dirt, coughing, while the attacker swears down at him and Greeny sways out of the pack until Leon points at him and barks, "NO! Get back. Back!"

The man says, "I know who you are, don't pretend like you're taking the high road," and he turns to walk towards the party.

"Where do you think you're going?" Tamara asks him, and he laughs and walks back to the front. The tyres of his vehicle screech as he rips his car out of the driveway.

Wu steps up to where Leon is struggling to stand and says, "Let's go, come on."

"I'm not going anywhere. I want another drink."

"Come on. You don't want to stay here."

"Don't tell me what I want. You want to go? Then go."

WU STROLLS BETWEEN THE TREE TRUNKS, AND THE WHITE GLOW OF THE moon lights her face in thin strips as she moves through the shadows of the orchard. The bulbous forms of leaf canopies above hide whole sections of the bush's floor in patches of late-night shade and the sickly-sweet smell of dropped and rotting fruit fills the air. Small animals scurry and slither in the leaf litter on the ground as Wu's footsteps interrupt the evening ecosystem.

"Diomedes?" Wu calls out, "Diomedes?"

She waits for the sound of four certain and alert paws to come trotting out of the darkness, but they don't come.

Wu has been walking for a while now, and she looks over her shoulder at the ring of black around her.

"Diomedes?"

She continues on, and she alters her path, turning slightly to the left. After another ten minutes, Wu's legs are growing tired, and Harrison is fidgeting in the embrace upon Wu's chest.

"Diomedes?"

The three holes for the olive trees appear in front of Wu, and she knows that she's arrived at the outer perimeter of the property. She curses to herself and moves back into the thick of the orchard. A thin finger of wood reaches out to scrape along the side of Wu's head as she turns to get her bearings and she stumbles back away from the scratch. She pulls Harrison in closer and holds a forearm over his scalp. Wu begins to sing, and the agitated child settles as they step out into the clearing around the house.

"Diomedes?" Her voice erupts in the hushed clearing, and the little clicks and ticks of the insects stop momentarily as the sound frightens every living thing in attendance.

"Diomedes?" The dog is still missing as Wu feels her way up onto the front patio and gently pushes the door open. The wooden barrier

creeks out of the way and the blackness inside the home ahead is entirely blinding. Wu stomps over the floorboards, letting the thuds send out a little noise into the empty, silent building.

"Diomedes?" she calls again, but she knows the dog won't be inside. Wu feels along the walls until she finds her room, and she leaves her hand out in front of her as she steps into the centre of the space. She crawls into bed and listens to the air moving in and out of Harrison's lungs. She stirs, and Wu can hear him grumble a little, but he does not wake.

She lies in bed and listens to the silence of the house around her and the small, intrusive noises that invade from outside. Some kind of night bird cawks in the distance and there's the sound of scratching in the wall. A larger creature moves across the clearing beside the house, and the bounding pulses resonate in a, tum, tum, tum, until the animal halts.

The sound of the house's door being pushed open enters the bedroom and Wu doesn't know if she's been lying there for five or fifty minutes, but the sudden intrusion makes her heart beat as quickly as the flapping of a bird's wings.

"Hello?" she calls, but she doesn't get an answer. Footsteps approach in rapid, snapping thumps.

"Hello?" Wu calls out again as the arrival reaches the door to her room. She sits up as the door begins to open and, in the black hole of darkness that is the middle of the room, Leon asks, "Can I come in?"

"Sure, Jesus, you frightened me."

"Sorry."

"How was your night?"

"I had a wife once, do you mind if I sit?" he asks.

"Go ahead," Wu wiggles backwards until she's sitting up against the head of the bed.

Wu can feel his hands caressing the foot of the bed, searching for anything he might crush. The weight of him forces the top of the mattress to stiffen, and Wu tilts a little.

"I don't want to lie to you. I had a wife once," he repeats. "I think I mentioned her before."

"You did, Maria."

"I loved her more than I had ever thought possible, and I convinced her to marry me in December, just before Christmas. We had two kids in the early years after the wedding, James and Eloise."

"That's lovely."

"Yeah, it was. I knew she'd had a long-term thing with a man before me, his name was Gordon, and I knew she had loved him. They were together for the final couple of years of school, and they broke up when he and his family moved away."

"OK, sure," Wu answers to the thick darkness in front of her and she receives her replies without seeing the lips from which they fall as if she was conversing with a radio.

"I first saw them together in the supermarket. It was so stupid. I got jealous because Gordon just happened to be standing in the line beside ours."

"That's understandable."

"Then I saw them together at the park when I was supposed to be fishing with Greeny up at Exmouth. I figured they were friends and that they kept it a secret because I had been so unreasonable when I saw Gordon the first time."

"Oh, I understand."

"I saw them again about a week later, sitting on the fascine holding hands. Right there in public for everyone to see. I confronted her, and she admitted she slept with him and she said she didn't feel close to me anymore."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah well, so it goes, right?"

"I guess. Did you leave her?"

The silence stretches out in the darkness and Wu hears Leon snuffle.

"I didn't leave her. I said we could work things out. The kids were old enough so that we could get a babysitter and we promised each other we'd spend more time together. It's a cliché, I hate clichés, but I didn't want to split up before James and Eloise were old enough to enjoy our family. I mean, I didn't want to split up at all, but the

thought of the kids never remembering that their parents were once a happy couple, that's too much."

"You're right."

"And I still stand by that decision. How ridiculous would it have been for me to split the family up over a few nights of infidelity? Really? It's just a bloody root, after all."

"Yeah."

"But," Leon pauses to cough.

"Go on," Wu whispers.

"But I came home from the pub one night to find Gordon on the front step, that step right out there. It was the middle of the night, and we had electric lighting then, so he was standing in the yard in the glow from the front door and she was looking out at him as if he was trying to sell her something. I suppose he was. He wanted her to leave me, James and Eloise, and to go away with him to bloody Jerramungup or somewhere ridiculous like that."

"And you saw all this?"

"Yep and I'd been drinking. I came up behind him, and I told him I'd shoot him if I ever saw him around here again."

Wu swears in the blackness as Leon clears his throat and says, "Then I went inside and got my rifle. It was only a small thing, a .22 calibre rifle for hunting rabbits, and Gordon was almost all the way back to his car before I stepped out into the yard behind him."

"What did you do?"

"Maria asked me in the sweetest voice she could to come inside, and I said I'd join her in just a second. The kids were watching out of this window here, right here at the front of this room, watching all of this: the argument, and their drunken dad."

"What happened?"

"I don't remember exactly. I was very drunk." Leon pauses, and Wu can hear him breathing deeply in the darkness.

"What happened?"

"The bullet hit Gordon in the back as he was opening the car door. If I had hesitated, he would have been inside."

"Oh my God, what happened?"

"It missed his kidney and gave him a nasty scar on the side of his belly, but that's all. He was in the hospital for a while, not too long, but a while. I think it was a little over a week before they released him as an out-patient."

"And what happened to you?"

"I went away. My initial sentence was eight years. Gordon was really quite good about it. Obviously, I went to prison, but it could have been much worse."

"So that's why you went away?"

"Yeah, but that's the start. For the first year, Maria brought James and Eloise for regular visitation. That stopped after a while, as it usually does in those situations. I thought she was mad at me. I thought she was angry, and I could understand that. I'd screwed everything up, why wouldn't she be angry? Then I got a letter."

"Yeah?" Wu asks as Harrison wakes and starts to blubber. She lifts the child to her chest and whispers softly to him until Leon adds, "The letter said she missed Gordon more while he was in the hospital than she missed me in jail."

"That's terrible."

"It's not really. She loved him more, and I screwed it all up. Then the trouble started."

"What trouble?"

"There was a group of boys inside, a gang, and they'd hassled me a little. I was doing all right, but I was so upset about losing Maria and the kids that I lost my composure one day. I swore at one of them, and that was enough."

"Enough for what?" Wu asks.

"To become a target. We fought a little, and it was just fun for those animals. It was my whole life, I was panicking, and I thought I was going to be killed, and they all loved it."

Wu kisses Harrison on the top of his head and bounces him on her lap so that the bed wobbles. When she stops, Leon says, "One of them had hepatitis, and he used to chew on his lips until he had a mouthful of his own blood. Then he'd spit it into the eyes of some poor,



unsuspecting victim and that would be it. That was enough for the infection to spread.”

“Did they do that to you?”

“They started to make jokes. They asked stuff like, ‘How’s your eyesight?’ and ‘Do you wear a condom with your wife?’ and I knew they were coming for me next.”

Leon stands in the darkness, and now he talks down onto Wu, and his footsteps can be heard pacing back and forth in the little room.

“There were three of them, two to hold me and then that nasty bugger with a mouthful of disease. I could see them coming. He was chewing on his lips and smiling, so there was blood running over his chin. He was smiling like this was all some big game. I just lost it. I knew I was going to have to fight the men in there sometimes and I was OK with that, but I wasn’t leaving with a damn disease, no way.”

“Did you run?”

“I put both my thumbs into the eyes of the first animal who came for me, and I let loose on the second. I guess they didn’t expect it from me. That first boy has never been able to see out of his left eye since and the second was in the med bay for a week with a broken clavicle, but he’s fine now, unfortunately. That nasty bugger with the sickness inhaled every drop of blood he was holding in his mouth that day, and he swallowed three of his teeth too.”

“Three of his teeth?”

“Yeah, I hit him in the diaphragm, so his lungs automatically sucked in all that horrible filth. He was lying on his back coughing and spluttering, and I reckon he was drowning in it, and I needed to send a serious message, but I wasn’t touching him with any part of my body that wasn’t covered. No way was I touching him. I used my heels on his face.”

There is silence in the room except for Harrison’s little baby coos.

“What happened to him?”

“I jumped on his chest, as hard as I could. I jumped on him while he was choking.”

“What happened to him?”

"They left me alone after that, but I spent over twenty years in prison."

"Twenty years? That's incredible; you were defending yourself."

"I shot a man and another man died."

"Leon, you've been great to Harrison and me, I should have trusted you. I've known some bad people before, and I thought that maybe you were involved with something and that's how you afford this place when you don't have a job. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I get it, you don't have to be sorry. When I left this farm, the only electricity was electric lights. When I got out, I had no family. It was just me here, and some trees had grown naturally. I found Greeny and a few friends, and they helped me get back on my feet, but what was I going to do? Update my resume? The farm was, and is, inhabitable without electricity or anything. I can survive on my own produce. I don't need anything new. I'm not exactly building an investment portfolio, but why the hell would I?"

"I see."

"Most of the people on the planet live like me and subsist on their own property. It's just in our society that eating what you can grow seems strange."

"I'm sorry about your family."

"The truth is that I deserve everything I got. I hurt people, but do you know what the hardest part of it all is?"

"What?"

"I can't remember pulling that trigger; I was too drunk. I don't know if I was just trying to scare Gordon and I accidentally nicked him, or if I wanted him dead and I missed. I don't know. I'll never know if I'm a good man, deep down, or a murderer."

"I think you're a good man."

A short, sarcastic laugh is pronounced into the darkness and Leon says, "Tell that to James and Eloise. They watched their drunken father shoot a man; the man their mother spent the rest of her life with. But that's life, huh? So it goes. I'm going to bed; I'll see you in the morning."

. . .

IN THE MORNING, THEY ALL EAT EGGS AGAIN, AND WU WATCHES Harrison crawl through the house. After lunch, the trio moves up to the holes that have been dug for the olive trees, and they remove the thin sand that has fallen into the pits.

"We'll plant the trees tomorrow in the morning," Leon says, "before the heat of the day. I'm going to take a nap and then when the sun is setting, I'll climb up to the water tank and see if I can patch that leak."

"Do you want help?"

"Nah, I'll be fine."

"All right, I'm going squidding tonight."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, it should be fun."

"Take the ute; you don't want to walk all that way."

"Yeah, and I'll need the vehicle to help carry all the squid back."

THE PAIR RELAX FOR A FEW HOURS BEFORE LEON CLIMBS UP TO THE water tank with a tube of liquid nails and a small bag of cement powder as the horizon turns pink with the escaping sun. Wu dresses Harrison, and she carries the infant to the ute as he stares up at her with the fat balls of his cheeks sitting on the end of his smile.

"I love you, sunshine," she tells him, and she places the infant in the passenger side of the vehicle.

"Oh, your bassinet, I'm sorry. I'll be right back," Wu adds as she closes the door and runs back towards the house. She's breathing heavily as she steps up to the front door, and she opens it, and Harp is standing inside. Harp slashes a deep cut across Wu's throat before she can even scream.

## HARP



Harp looks down at Wu as she writhes around on the ground, spilling blood in a flood across the floor of the house. The puddle of crimson body fluid swells and grows, and the sharpness slowly fades away from Wu's terrified expression.

Harp paces through the house with the hiking stick tapping out a terrible rhythm as she calls "Harrison? Where are you, little man?" There are cuts and scratches on Harp's forehead, and her fingers are lined with deep, open lacerations. She's tucked her left elbow into her side like a wounded bird, and she carries the box cutter in that useless left hand while she relies on the hiking stick to move.

"Harrison?" she calls again as she enters a room with a bassinet sitting on a single bed.

"Harrison?" she repeats as she rapidly walks out of the house and into the yard. She finds a pen full of animals and a stable and there's a glass room to the side of the house, but Harrison is still nowhere to be seen.

Harp scrambles around the home, calling, "Harrison? Where are you hiding little man?"

She's walking underneath the scaffolding for a water tank, and

she's cursing to herself in Mandarin when she hears a peculiar sound. It's a single, very soft tap, and she feels the air around her move. Harp looks up to the origin of that insignificant noise, and she sees a man falling from the sky. In the single moment that she manages to glimpse upon him before he lands on top of her, she sees him kick at her, and she screams a terrible, hateful cry.

Harp moves, but the falling man's heel lands on her shoulder and her spine is whipped to one side as her upper body is crushed to the ground. She's wailing and screaming and the words of rage that leave her lips force Leon to stumble backwards and retreat in fear.

"ARRRRRGHHH!" She bellows, "You've killed me, URGGHHH, my legs. I can't move my legs."

Harp is clawing at the ground and dragging her crippled body over the red sand. She moves past her hiking stick, leaving the useless tool in the puddle under the water tank.

She screeches, "I CAN'T MOVE MY LEGS!"

Leon watches her as she squirms and growls and curses with splashes of Wu's blood decorating the front of her.

He says, "Your legs will be the least of your worries if you don't tell me where Wu is."

Harp chuckles and the movements of her ribs jerk her body around in agonising shunts.

"She's fine. Wu is fine. Just go see. She's in the house," she cackles in between screams of pain.

Leon sprints away, and Harp is still chuckling, still shuddering in agony, as he returns.

"Where is her son?" Leon asks as he stands over Harp.

"Who? Where is who?"

"Wu's son."

"You mean David? He's in a body bag in Queensland."

"David? What are you talking about?"

"Her son is dead."

"No, he was here. Harrison was here."

"That's not her kid."

"You're lying."

"Wu was my babysitter, my babysitter and a whore. She was taking care of my granddaughter and Wu's own son when my house burned down."

"I don't believe you."

"She burnt her son alive, and she stole my daughter's kid. Harrison wasn't Wu's child, you idiot. Harrison was abducted."

"I don't believe you."

"No?" Harp asks as she shifts onto her back and holds up the box cutter in her right hand, warning Leon away.

"Did you notice that they, OW! Jesus Christ," she screams as she starts to crawl away on her back. "Notice the kid looks nothing like Wu? Well, she looked nothing like him. I think Wu's skin will be a little paler now."

"Why are you here?"

"To get the boy."

"No, why are you here? Why are you here instead of your daughter?"

Leon is looking down on the snapped, crooked form of Harp with nothing but disdain oozing from his countenance.

"She's a fool," Harp chokes out through her cracked and bloody lips.

Leon shakes his head and says, "That's a long way to come for a kid that definitely isn't yours, might not be your daughters and, damn, your daughter doesn't even care enough to show up in person."

Harp shrieks, "HE'S NOT A KID, HE'S A SECOND CHANCE! Don't you see? You mongrel peasant, Harrison is an opportunity. He's another chance to get it right."

"To get it right?"

"Life, you moron, life. Harrison could be anything. He might not turn out to be a selfish whore. That one single life could become anything."

"Not with you."

"That kid," Harp groans, "he will be a validation. My validation."

"Maybe."

"He'll be a reason to live; he'll be the reason to live."

"Perhaps. You'll never know."

"What are you going to do? You can't keep him," Harp says. "Harrison needs doctors and a hospital. You live in a shack."

"I can take him to a doctor, and I reckon he's got a better chance at life with me here than with you. He needs care. He needs compassion. Not just doctors."

Harp is waving the box cutter around, and she says, "Come on then, boy."

"Don't tempt me."

"Do you think you're a man? Can you do this? Can you come down here and get me?"

"I'll tell you what, I'll visit your daughter. That's the best I can offer you. I'll visit her, and I'll ask if she'll raise Harrison. If I think she's going to do the right thing, she can take him. He will be raised as your granddaughter, but you're dead."

"Come down here then, little boy. I will not stop, ever. I will follow that child to the ends of the Earth. You will not walk away from this."

Leon steps out of Harp's sight and, when he returns, he's carrying the wood splitter.

"This is it," he says, "tell me where I'll find your daughter."

Harp's stare moves over the long-handled weapon, and a growl leaves her throat.

"Where?"

"Her name is Angela Harp, and you'll find her in room 1019 of Conrad Jupiter's Casino on The Gold Coast."

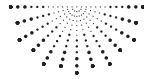
Leon nods and raises the weapon over his shoulder. The axe blade is pointing to the ground as he asks, "Where's my dog?" Harp smiles, and she sticks the point of the box cutter into the side of her neck with a quick stab and a shriek. Blood streams down over her shoulders and into the grass and Leon watches her choke for a moment before he rotates the wood splitter and brings down the blunt end on Harp's rib cage. The blow is so heavy that the ground around Harp pulses and the dirt flicks up a millimetre before settling around the slaughter.

The noise Harp makes is more of a squawk than a scream, and her arms clutch helplessly at her obliterated torso.

Harp is staring up into Leon's cold, remorseless eyes and she glances past the murderer to see a white Holden ute roll slowly out of a shed and gently move until it rests against a tree in the orchard.



## THE END?



That's the last page of the book at the moment, but we still need to decide on the ending for the publication in 2022.

What do you think, should Leon hand Harrison over to the cops?

Or should he return the infant to his derelict mother?

Head over to <https://www.surveypage.com/hspsurvey2> to help me with a little feedback, and you can read the sample epilogue I've already written.

This is a bonus chapter!

In this bonus epilogue, Leon takes Harrison back to Queensland for a big surprise.



## THE END

That's it! That's the end. Thanks for reading. Here's a couple of things you might find interesting.

The Journey: This novel can be classified as a journey novel (among other things) as the characters travel and make new friends and get up to all sorts of mischief. I love the way journey novels frame crime narratives, and you might agree that Australia is a pretty good setting. I've lived in Sydney, Perth and Carnarvon, and I've been to Bremer Bay more times than I can count. Everywhere else are locations that I scouted while driving around this massive country, and the little additions like fresh yabbies in Balranald and skimpy barmaids in a gold-mining town are true. By the way, can any of you Aussie readers guess the name of that gold mining town? There's also a moment in Carnarvon that's totally ridiculous. It might seem feasible, but it will make any country folks scoff. I considered altering it, but it's fun to leave a few little tricks in there.

Leon: I should note that Leon is quite well read. He's had few years to himself in the slammer. He says, so it goes, which is a quote from Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five." Leon and I are not discovering this poignant term; we're just quoting from a legend. In

THE END

regards to Leon's dog, do you know where the name Diomedes originates? Diomedes is the bomb.

Harp: Can you guess where this nasty-pasty's name first appeared? A harpy is a mythical creature that has been spoken of and written about by many different ancient cultures. Each of these cultures presents a different version of a similar concept: a female who (or that) is half bird and half human and usually enjoys swooping down from the sky to snatch valuables from villagers. In many extreme cases, these harpies are reported to steal children. Not a bad foundation for a villain, albeit an ironic one.

Check out my website for website stuff:

<http://www.danielnorrish.com>

Cheers, Dan.

## ALSO BY DANIEL NORRISH

*The Bodies We Won't Bury* is the original novel in the *Love is Dangerous* series. Detective Inspector Stephanie Saxon knows she's following one of Australia's most ruthless serial killers. A man who kidnaps young lovers and forces them to lure their soulmates into violent public traps around Sydney. However, Saxon does not know he's been watching her from the moment she uncovered the first burning body and he's planning a new, more devastating murder every night.

*The Imposter* was the second story written in the *Love is Dangerous* series.

While Saxon is battling the illusive serial killer in Sydney, Julian Lime's criminal empire is imploding on the other side of the country, in Western Australia. A vigilante is abducting and slaughtering the lieutenants of Lime's organisation and you, the reader, are the only witness to the final moments of each deviant. Who will you condemn? Julian Lime's gangsters and criminals that are finally feeling the poetic justice of an unpredictable assassin? Or the invisible murderer responsible for a dozen fresh killings? *The Imposter* can be read at any point in the series; the story is separate to the core narrative of Saxon hunting the serial killer.

*The Angels We Will Burn* is the direct sequel to *The Bodies We Won't Bury*. Detective Inspector Stephanie Saxon and crime lord Julian Lime form a tense and savage alliance to find a serial killer who is skulking from one nation to another. When this slaughterer of romance moves to a new country, he leaves behind all of the people who mean to bring him to justice, and he starts a new franchise of horror. Maybe the relentless pursuit of Saxon, the lawless detective, and the underhanded resources of Lime, the organiser of Australia's most epic crime syndicate, can finally uncover this roaming murderer.

*The Bodies We Won't Bury* should be read before *The Angels We Will Burn*. However, *The Imposter* can be read at any point in the series. *The Bodies We Won't Bury* and *The Angels We Will Burn* follow Saxon's hunt for Sydney's most notorious serial killer, while *The Imposter* details Saxon's ally's criminal past. You can read about Julian Lime's life in Western Australia in *The*

Imposter before you read about Saxon's travels or after, but you'll enjoy the series more if you read *The Bodies We Won't Bury* before *The Angels We Will Burn*.

Thanks for reading :)